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The One Ring of King Solomon

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The One Ring of King Solomon

Abstract

Tolkien source criticism has long been looking for the source of the One Ring in the wrong places. Neither the historical inspiration from World War II and the Atomic Bomb nor the proposed literary influences such as the Ring of the Nibelungs, Wagner's Ring, or the several examples of invisibility rings found in world literature may suffice to explain the complexity of Tolkien's unique creation. Nonetheless, the same cannot be said so easily with regards to another possible source once we survey the richness of the related legends: it is the fabled signet ring of King Solomon.

Additional Keywords

Solomon; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Objects—The One Ring—Sources; Solomon, King of Israel; Jewish legends; Islamic legends

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THE ONE RING OF KING SOLOMON

GIOVANNI CARMINE COSTABILE

INTRODUCTION

IN A LETTER TO PROFESSOR L. FORSTER DATED 31 DECEMBER 1960, Tolkien dismissed a comparison of the One Ring to the atomic bomb by writing that "*The Lord of the Rings* was actually begun, as a separate thing, about 1937, and had reached the inn at Bree, before the shadow of the second war. Personally I do not think that either war (and of course not the atomic bomb) had any influence upon either the plot or the manner of its unfolding" (*Letters* 303, #226).

On 23 February 1961, Tolkien penned an equally famous dismissal of another proposed source for the One Ring in the Ring of the Nibelungs and especially Richard Wagner's version: "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases" (*Letters* 306, #229). A further attempt at identifying the inspiration for the Ruling Ring was made by relating it to Gyges's Ring in Plato's *Republic*, first by Robert E. Morse in "Rings of Power in Plato and Tolkien" in 1980, and later by F.A. De Armas, publishing "'Gyges' Ring': Invisibility in Plato, Tolkien, and Lope de Vega" in 1994.

All the attempts cited try to identify the source for the One Ring in something sharing a single feature of the Ruling Ring. If it is supposed to have been inspired by the Atomic Bomb, it is because both of them cannot be used for good purposes. If the source were the Ring of the Nibelungs, it would be because both of them entice desire to possess it and its wealth or power. If the influence was Gyges's Ring, it would be because both Rings endow their bearer with invisibility. In this last case, the matter is even more complicated since the Ring was already a ring of invisibility in *The Hobbit*, when it was still conceived as a simple magical ring instead of the Ruling One. But none of these attempts manages to identify an influence that may account for multiple aspects of Sauron's jewel, instead of just one. I propose to consider another source that may explain Tolkien's invention of the Ring on more than one level, even in specific details, as I endeavour to compare it to King Solomon's legendary signet-ring.

KING SOLOMON'S SIGNET RING

According to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*,

The legend that Solomon possessed a seal ring on which the name of God was engraved and by means of which he controlled the demons is related at length in [the Talmudic tract called *Gittin*]. This legend is especially developed by Arabic writers, who declare that the ring, on which was engraved "the Most Great Name of God," and which was given to Solomon from heaven, was partly brass and partly iron. With the brass part of the ring Solomon signed his written commands to the good genii, and with the iron part he signed his commands to the evil genii, or devils. ("Seal of Solomon")

Although the name of Eru is certainly not inscribed on the One Ring, it is still true that the title "the One" capitalized belongs to both Ring and God, and it is a common feature that both rings have inscriptions. Command over every mind in the case of the One Ring is different from power over djinns, even if we identified them with Valar and Maiar, over whom Sauron has no power *per se*, but still we have a ring with the power to subjugate other wills. Iron and

brass may not be gold, but they are still valuable metals. And the passage above cited serves only as an introduction to the wonders of Solomon's Ring.

In fact, in *Tales of King Solomon* by St. John D. Seymour, we read how angels brought to Solomon four precious stones granting him power over angels, beasts, heaven and earth, and demons. "Then the king caused these four stones to be set in a ring, which he wore always" (Seymour 63). Furthermore,

There is yet another tale of the coming of the ring. God called Gabriel and said to him: 'Go into Paradise, and take the ring of the Khalifs, and bear it to My servant Solomon.' Gabriel did as he was bidden and descended to earth with it. The ring sparkled like a star and gleamed like the lightning, so that its rays blinded the eyes, and there came from it a perfume like musk. It was graven on each of the four sides with texts praising the greatness of God. It had four stones, which were for the four divisions of living things. 'The first was the sovereignty of the rebellious Jinns; the second for creatures of the water, and frogs, and beasts of prey in deserts and prairies; the third of the kings of all the earth to the east and to the west; the fourth for trees and plants and dwellers in mountains and water. (Seymour 63-64)

The famous inscription on the One Ring reads: "Three Rings for the Elven Kings under the sky / Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone / Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die / One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne." In both cases there are four "realms," or "peoples," to be ruled, and by superimposing the two accounts of Solomon's Ring, one may get a correspondance of heaven with the Elves associated with the sky, earth with the Dwarves linked to stone, "the kings of all the earth" with Men, and "the rebellious Jinns" with Mordor.

Moreover, Solomon's Ring has a will of its own and is said to have abandoned Adam after he first sinned:

In the beginning God had given this ring to Adam when he was in Paradise and said to him: 'This is the ring of power, which I will give thee. As long as thou forgettest not My commandment, it shall be thine; but if thou forgettest it, I will take it from thee and give it to another, and he shall be thy successor.' And while Adam walked in Paradise the ring was his, but when he sinned it flew from his finger and hid under one of the pillars of the throne of God, and said to Him: 'Thou hast created me to obey, but behold, this Adam hath broken Thy covenant with him, and I am in a strait.' And God said: 'Trouble not thyself, for I will send to thee a prudent man who shall walk uprightly in My statutes.' (Seymour 64)

The phrase “it flew from his finger” is peculiarly reminiscent of the Ring’s slipping off Gollum’s finger in his cave in the Misty Mountains, as well as the Ring’s forsaking of Isildur on the Great River. Furthermore, the fact that Solomon’s Ring *speaks* reveals that it is endowed with a mind of its own, and is no mere jewel, however magical. The idea that it shares its mind with its creator is absent in Solomon’s case, but that also is due to the fact that the circumstances of its forging remain unknown. The handing over of both Rings is traceable through centuries and millennia, as a note to a key text in the tradition, *The Testament of Solomon*, clarifies:

The pilgrim of Bordeaux in the IV cent. was shown the ‘crypta ubi S[alomonis] daemones torquebat’ [“the crypt where Solomon’s demons suffered”] [...]. [In] St. Silvia’s *Peregrinatio* (IV cent.) [...] the ring was kept in the Church of St. James [...]. The tradition was that Vespasian took it to Rome, whence Constantine returned it [...]. (McCown 78n5)

What is important in understanding the connection between the two Rings, Solomon’s and Sauron’s, is that the first was stolen by the demon Asmodeus who used it to pretend he was King Solomon and so rule in his stead over Jerusalem. The deception enacted by Asmodeus resembles both Sauron’s deceiving of the Elves of Eregion and his travesty in Númenor:

Gittin [...] attributes the loss of the throne to [the demon] Asmodeus, who, after his capture by Benaiah, remained a prisoner with Solomon. One day the king asked Asmodeus wherein consisted the demons’ superiority over men; and Asmodeus replied that he would demonstrate it if Solomon would remove his chains and give him the magic ring. Solomon agreed; whereupon Asmodeus swallowed the king (or the ring, according to another version), then stood up with one wing touching heaven and the other extending to the earth, spat Solomon to a distance of 400 miles, and finally seated himself on the throne. Solomon’s persistent declaration that he was the king at length attracted the attention of the Sanhedrin. That body, discovering that it was not the real Solomon who occupied the throne, placed Solomon thereon and gave him another ring and chain on which the Holy Name was written. On seeing these Asmodeus flew away. (“Solomon and Asmodeus”)

The reason why at the Council of Elrond the idea of throwing the Ring into the sea is refused may be explained by the same story as narrated in “Emek ha-Melek”:

This legend is narrated in “Emek ha-Melek” [...] as follows: “Asmodeus threw the magic ring into the sea, where it was swallowed by a fish. Then he threw the king a distance of 400 miles. Solomon spent three years in exile as a punishment for transgressing the three prohibitive commandments [...]. He wandered from city to city till he arrived at Mashkemam, the capital of the Ammonites. [...] Naamah, the king’s daughter, fell in love with Solomon. Her family, supposing him to be simply a cook, expressed strong disapproval of the girl’s behavior; but she persisted in her wish to marry Solomon, and when she had done so the king resolved to kill them both. Accordingly at his orders one of his attendants took them to the desert and left them there that they might die of hunger. Solomon and his wife, however, escaped starvation; for they did not remain in the desert. They ultimately reached a maritime city, where they bought a fish for food. In it they found a ring on which was engraved the Holy Name and which was immediately recognized by Solomon as his own ring. He then returned to Jerusalem, drove Asmodeus away, and reoccupied his throne. (“Solomon and Asmodeus”)

The retrieval of the Ring through a fish also reminds one of Déagol and Sméagol fishing on the Great River Anduin. Discussing Gollum, it is certainly the case to briefly point out how, as an oath on Sauron’s Ring is said to be especially binding: “In the [*Arabian*] *Nights* an oath by the names on Solomon’s ring is peculiarly powerful” (McCown 81n5).

Another version of the exchange of persons between Solomon and Asmodeus (here Ashmodai) is even more centered on the corruption brought by lust for power and pride, as Solomon somehow has come to be substituted by the demon in his own heart even before being actually tricked into delivering his Ring:

The Temple [of Jerusalem, built through the help of demons] was completed, and Ashmodai still was held in bondage. Solomon rioted in his glory, and strength. What treasures did he gather, what palaces erect, what magnificent cities establish! The world was ransacked to add to his pleasures, yet he was never satisfied. His ambition, his pride, his love of grandeur and extravagance, were unquenchable.

“O King,” said Ashmodai, one day, as he noticed Solomon in a restless mood, “thou art become, thanks to my help, the mightiest of mortals. But, chained as I am, my powers are limited. Set me free; intrust to me a moment thy signet-ring, and I shall make thee still mightier.”

The King heard, and full of boastful pride, handed him the precious ring, and struck off the chain that bound him.

The air grew black without the palace hall. A huge hissing made Solomon turn pale. Ashmodai rose to an immense height. His feet

touched the earth, but his head reached the sky. He hurls the ring into the sea; he casts Solomon a thousand miles away. Then, with the utmost unconcern, he dons Solomon's robes and assumes the monarch's privilege. (Isaacs 22-23)

Ashmodai says that he has made Solomon the mightiest of mortals, but he could still be more: an immortal, a god. That is the final temptation of Solomon, and he fails, being condemned to exile for it. But it is also the same temptation to which Melkor and Sauron succumb, as Tolkien himself documents in a letter:

In *The Lord of the Rings* the conflict is not basically about 'freedom', though that is naturally involved. It is about God, and His sole right to divine honour. The Eldar and the Númenóreans believed in The One, the true God, and held worship of any other person an abomination. Sauron desired to be a God-King, and was held to be this by his servants; if he had been victorious he would have demanded divine honour from all rational creatures and absolute temporal power over the whole world (*Letters* 243-244, #183)

It takes but a little step from the original story to substitute the Ring of legitimate power issued by God with a Ring of illegitimate usurpation forged by treachery by a demonic tyrant such as Sauron. In making this change, Tolkien effectively underlines what is already in the original tale, i.e. the fact that no mortal may wield God's power without being corrupted by the same pride that brought about the original sin, a pride to which no human being, even the humblest and wisest, cannot be considered immune.

Recalling how the mention of Muhammad is due to the fact that the tales are often told by Arabian tellers, the monotheism of the legend which is shared with Tolkien's intention in writing *The Lord of the Rings* is evident in the following excerpt as well:

And when God had chosen Solomon He put power into the ring and sent Gabriel with it to the king. Now the king was in his palace among the chiefs of the tribes, the priests, the judges, and the doctors. The archangel said to him: 'O son of King David, receive this gift from God.' Then the king set it upon his finger and ascended his throne, and caused all the people to come before him. He lifted up his hand, and the ring gleamed like the lightning and they could not look at it. The king said: 'Behold, in this ring is all my strength and my majesty, for the Lord hath given it to me and hath separated me from all the rest of mankind, giving me rule over the rebellious Jinns.' Thereon he kneeled down, and the whole assembly with him, from early morning until late evening giving thanks

and praise to Almighty God. At last the king raised his head and sought to gaze at the ring, and the whole company with him, but they could not look at it because of its brightness. Then Solomon said: 'Say ye with me, "There is no god but God, and Mohammed is the Prophet of God." And when they had repeated this they were able to look upon the ring. (Seymour 64-65)

It is as if Tolkien is trying to say that only God can rightfully say: "One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all . . . ", but then a good God would add, instead of what Sauron says, ". . . and in the light make them free".

THE ESTHONIAN RING OF SOLOMON AND THE ONE RING

The legend of King Solomon and his Ring spread by and large in the Middle Ages and the Modern Age. In particular, there is one Esthonian tale that was collected by W.F. Kirby in the volume *The Hero of Esthonia* and was almost certainly known to Tolkien, being included in the *Yellow Fairy Book* by Andrew Lang.

A dragon, or, in the original, a frog, came from the north and laid everything waste. According to what they said, only a man who bore King Solomon's ring could defeat it, so a young man left on a quest to find it. A magician told him that the birds could help him, so he made a powerful spell to make him capable to understand their language. The magician also told the boy to bring him the ring once he found it, so that he could read the inscription on it. The birds told the boy that only the witch-maiden could help him, as soon as he met her by a spring on a night of full moon. He followed them there, and the maiden took him to her home. The youth heard a voice warn him to give her no blood. She asked him to marry her, and he asked to consider. She offered him King Solomon's ring in return for three drops of blood, and told him its powers. He said that he could not believe it, and she showed him it, and then let him try it. He escaped with the power of invisibility and flew off. He went to the magician, who read him the ring, and told him how to kill the dragon. He went to the kingdom where a king offered his daughter and half his kingdom to anyone who could kill the dragon, and the king got him the iron horse and spear the magician had indicated as necessary to perform the feat. With them, the youth followed the magician's instructions, moving the ring from a finger to another as needed, and so managed to kill the dragon. He married the princess. The vengeful witch-maiden attacked him as an eagle and took back the ring. She tied him in a cave, leaving him to die there, but several years later, the magician came to the king and told him the birds had guided him there. Then he freed the weakened prince and restored his health. The prince returned to his wife and lived happily ever after, but never knew about the ring anymore.

It is especially interesting to consider the section of the tale, in Kirby's version, when the maiden tells the boy of the secrets of the Ring, because readers of *The Lord of the Rings* will be immediately reminded of the fact that the Ring provides special powers to each of its bearers, as evidenced by Gandalf saying he would use it to compel others to act well, Galadriel to enforce her power, Boromir to save Gondor, and Sam to make a garden of Mordor:

No one living has been able to fathom the whole power of this ring, and no one can completely explain the secret signs engraved upon it. But, even with the imperfect knowledge of its properties which I possess, I can perform many wonders which no other creature can accomplish. If I put the ring on the little finger of my left hand, I can rise in the air like a bird and fly whithersoever I will. If I place the ring on the ring-finger of my left hand, I become invisible to all eyes, while I myself can see everything that passes around me. If I put the ring on the middle finger of my left hand, I become invulnerable to all weapons, and neither water nor fire can hurt me. If I place it on the index finger of my left hand, I can create all things which I desire with its aid; I can build houses in a moment, or produce other objects. As long as I wear it on the thumb of my left hand, my hand remains strong enough to break down rocks and walls. Moreover, the ring bears other secret inscriptions which, as I said before, no one has yet been able to explain; but it may readily be supposed that they contain many important secrets. In ancient times, the ring belonged to King Solomon, the wisest of kings, and in whose reign lived the wisest of men. At the present day it is unknown whether the ring was formed by divine power or by human hands; but it is supposed that an angel presented the ring to the wise king. (Kirby 248-249)

It has already been noted that this tale involves a ring with a power of invisibility, but the scholar forgot to mention that it is a ring obtained through a trick, as Bilbo with Gollum, and that the fact that it is used in a quest to vanquish a powerful dragon (although, as I said, in the original it is a frog) also reminds of Bilbo and Smaug. Ruth Berman in fact wrote: "An Estonian story, 'The Dragon of the North' [...] presents yet another ring of invisibility too powerful to be kept, King Solomon's magic ring. The prince is taught how to use it by a wise magician, who is able to read the secret writing engraved on the ring (as Gandalf does with Bilbo's ring), and in the end the prince gives it back to the witch-maiden after he has used it to help him slay the dragon" (130-131). Another point that is essential to make is that Solomon's Ring, like Sauron's, is not an invisibility ring, but a Ring of Power that among its various effects also imparts invisibility. It is pointless, therefore, to identify all invisibility rings in legends worldwide as possible sources, like Berman does, unless one has only

The Hobbit in mind, before Tolkien conceived the idea of the Rings of Power and made Bilbo's ring into the One Ring. It is worth to mention instead the idea of the "external soul," as discussed by Tolkien himself in "On Fairy-stories" and by R.G. Collingwood in *The Philosophy of Enchantment* (see Costabile 56-58), as the missing piece completing the picture of Tolkien's inspiration for the Ring.

SOLOMON'S RING AND THE EXTERNAL SOUL

The occasion for the discussion of the external soul is another of Andrew Lang's tales, "The Monkey's Heart," a Swahili tale included in *The Lilac Fairy Book*. Tolkien identifies it as a beast-fable, since the whole plot is about a dialogue between a shark and a monkey. The shark abducted the monkey to give her heart to his King, so to heal him, and the monkey tricks the shark into returning her to the mainland, so she can retrieve her heart she feigns to have left in a bag hanging from a tree (OFS 36). Tolkien observes how the reason for the story's inclusion in Lang's *Lilac Fairy Book* amid Fairy-stories is only the monkey's heart:

[I]ts inclusion in a 'Fairy Book' is due not primarily to its entertaining quality, but precisely to the monkey's heart supposed to have been left behind in a bag. That was significant to Lang, the student of folk-lore, even though this curious idea is here used only as a joke; for, in this tale, the monkey's heart was in fact quite normal and in his breast. None the less this detail is plainly only a secondary use of an ancient and very widespread folk-lore notion, which does occur in fairy-stories; the notion that the life or strength of a man or creature may reside in some other place or thing; or in some part of the body (especially the heart) that can be detached and hidden in a bag, or under a stone, or in an egg. At one end of recorded folk-lore history this idea was used by George MacDonald in his fairy-story *The Giant's Heart*, which derives this central motive (as well as many other details) from well-known traditional tales. At the other end, indeed in what is probably one of the oldest stories in writing, it occurs in *The Tale of the Two Brothers* on the Egyptian D'Orsigny papyrus. (OFS 37)

I cannot avoid noticing that seldom it has been pointed out that Sauron's One Ring is based precisely on the same notion. Indeed, Gandalf says to Frodo that Sauron "only needs the One [Ring]; for he made that Ring himself, it is his, and he let a great part of his own former power pass into it, so that he could rule all the others. If he recovers it, then he will command them all again, wherever they be, even the Three, and all that has been wrought with them will be laid bare, and he will be stronger than ever" (*LotR* I.2.51-52).

One may indeed wonder what might the connection with Solomon's Ring be, but the answer is easily found once we take the figure of the Golem into account. Golem is a word that in the *Bible* means 'embryo,' but in medieval times a new legend arose out of the idea that Adam himself had been a Golem in the sense of a man still unfulfilled:

In the Middle Ages arose the belief in the possibility of infusing life into a clay or wooden figure of a human being, which figure was termed "golem" by writers of the eighteenth century. The golem grew in size, and could carry any message or obey mechanically any order of its master. It was supposed to be created by the aid of the "Sefer Yezirah," that is, by a combination of letters forming a "Shem" (any one of the names of God). The Shem was written on a piece of paper and inserted either in the mouth or in the forehead of the Golem, thus bringing it into life and action. ("Golem")

In other words, it is the inscription with the names of God that bestows its power both to Solomon's Ring and the Shem, paralleling the One Ring that was infused with a part of Sauron's soul, his will to dominate all races, transcribed in the Black Speech formula in Elvish characters. In a sense, Solomon's Ring is God's Golem, whereas the One Ring is Sauron's Golem.

TOLKIEN AND SOLOMON'S RING

But was Tolkien provably aware of the legend of King Solomon? Undoubtedly, yes. Lines 625-626 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* point out that the pentangle on Gawain's shield "is a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle / In bytoknyng of trawþe." In the note to line 620 of their 1925 edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Tolkien and Eric Valentine Gordon wrote: "Solomon's seal was a pentangle in a circle [...] which is supposed to have had its beginning in the building of the temple by Solomon." In and by itself, this proves acquaintance with the legend. Furthermore, in the 1967 revision by Norman Davis, which the Professor surely checked, one reads: "The figure is said to have been used by the Pythagoreans as a symbol of health, and also by the neo-Platonists and Gnostics to signify perfection; but it was known to the Jews as well, thus coming to be called 'Solomon's seal', and is obviously related to the similar figure, the hexagram, in which two equilateral triangles interlock to form a six-pointed star—this, inscribed in a circle, was eventually adopted as the symbol of Judaism (the *Magen David*, 'Shield of David'). The pentangle was long used as a magic sign, believed to give power over evil spirits" (Tolkien and Gordon 1967, 93).

Furthermore, it is widely known that Tolkien was well acquainted not only with Biblical lore, but also with the four Old English works collectively

titled *Solomon and Saturn*, staging a wisdom contest between the two characters not unlike the riddle contest between Bilbo and Gollum. Tolkien's long-term fascination with H. Rider Haggard's adventure novel *King Solomon's Mines* never escaped critics, and it is a story about retrieving Solomon's lost treasures. Finally, Tolkien may easily have read either Kirby's or Lang's version of *The Dragon of the North*, or even both, as he was an expert on Lang who delivered the Andrew Lang lecture "On Fairy-stories" in 1939, and knew well Kirby as a translator of the Finnish *Kalevala*. There is no expressed indication that he read *The Testament of Solomon*, but he might well have been interested in the works of an Irish priest who was then proclaimed a Catholic Saint such as Seymour, and especially since his volume on Solomon was published by Oxford University Press.

Concerning Golems, we are certain that Charles Williams knew about their legend, as he replicates a fictional attempt to animate one in his novel *All Hallows' Eve*. We lack such a proof in Tolkien's case, although it has been suggested (first by Ryan 1982) that the name 'Gollum' may be an alteration of 'Golem.' Anyway, I doubt that Tolkien might have been unaware of the legend, the popularity of which throughout the West was greatly heightened first by Gustav Meyrink's 1915 novel *The Golem*, then by Paul Wegener's 1920 film *Der Golem*.

CONCLUSION

Tolkien is known to have been elusive concerning his Ring of Power. In my opinion, it seems quite likely that Tolkien derived many of the characteristics of his One Ring from the Ring of King Solomon in its connection with the legend of the Golem, and I think this to have been a conscious inspiration, motivated by the same monotheistic message he expresses in Letter 183 to be the core of *The Lord of the Rings*, and a message he shares with all Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

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THE DRAGON AND THE RAILWAY STATION

VERLYN FLIEGER

J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S ESSAY "ON FAIRY-STORIES" is an *omnium gatherum* of his knowledge of and opinions about fairy-stories, primitive societies, children, tale-telling, the origin of language, King Arthur, Charlemagne's mother, and banana-skins. An odd collection; but perhaps the oddest of all are his subsequent comments on dragons, motor-cars, clouds, railway stations, and rainbows. For example, his statement that "[t]he notion that motor-cars are more