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Theology and Tolkien: Practical Theology (2023), edited by Douglas Estes

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Theology and Tolkien: Practical Theology, edited by Douglas Estes. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books / Fortress Academic, 2023. x, 282 pp. \$95.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781978712669. Also available in ebook format.

Theology and Tolkien: Practical Theology, edited by Douglas Estes, is a brilliant compilation of essays by fourteen authors delineating different aspects of Tolkien's theology as it applies to the real world. This work is unequivocally successful. Having read extensively within the field of Tolkien Studies, I consider this work to rank well within its numbers.

The book, quite simply, is about Tolkien's practical theology, or the intersection of faith and life as informed by *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's Christian worldview, his love for the sacraments, and his knowledge of the scriptures informed his creative imagination. Estes explains that reading Tolkien's works enhances our imagination, providing a vision of reality as it was meant to be seen. It inspires us to apply this vision to our own lives, challenging us to transform ourselves and the world in which we live. As such, Estes's aim is to draw out Tolkien's theology as it relates directly to lived experiences.

Estes structures the book into three primary sections: *The Shire*, *Osgiliath*, and *The Greenway*. Each section presents a rich diversity of topics that span practical theology in Tolkien's world. *The Shire* focuses on the inner life, emphasizing themes of home, friendship, and self-renewal. *Osgiliath* explores action-oriented themes, such as the apostolic mission, creative power, and theodicy. *The Greenway* addresses the faith journey, touching on themes of hospitality, the spiritual senses, death and immortality, and power.

A true highlight is Phillip Ryken's "*Koinonia* in *The Lord of the Rings*," in which he explores the importance of community within the Fellowship, and its similarity to the Communion of Saints. This area of practical theology—fellowship and communion—is largely underemphasized in Christian theology. Yet Ryken beautifully demonstrates the centrality of friendship in Christian theology through Tolkien's portrayal. "What enables them to accomplish such heroic deeds is more than personal fortitude; it is also their capacity for collective action" (Ryken, 45). They share not only in a quest but also in each other's suffering, exemplifying self-sacrificial devotion, which ultimately leads to the defeat of Sauron.

Chris Bruno and Mark Brian's essay, "Love at the Burning Edge of Doom," similarly examines the Biblical nature of friendship, utilizing Sam and Frodo's relationship as a model of covenantal commitment and sacrificial love. Outlining

the progression of a servant-master relationship to that of true friendship, this essay underscores the transformative power of mutual self-sacrifice.

In Estes's own essay, "Gandalf the Grey, Apostle to Men and Elves," he makes the intriguing parallel of Gandalf's mission with that of the apostolic mission. Apostles are those who are *sent* by another, particularly God. Similarly, Gandalf is sent by the Valar to fulfill a particular mission. As Estes notes, Tolkien compares Gandalf's display of angelic power to that of the Apostle Peter in his escape from prison. For Estes, Gandalf is "a heroic emissary who is mighty in battle and who performs deeds of power—a true apostle in the Northern image" (91). While some liken Gandalf to a Christ figure, Estes offers an alternative: he is an emissary of Eru Ilúvatar with apostolic authority.

Trevor B. Williams's "Nazgûl and the Perversion of Spiritual Senses" provides a fascinating analysis of the Ringwraiths' diminished senses and the spiritual implications. He connects physical embodiment to spiritual perception, arguing that the Nazgûl's loss of corporeality and sensory perception represents a perversion of the natural order, contrasting sharply with the "incarnational logic of the Christian faith." Williams remarks that through sensory perception of the physical world, one perceives with their spiritual senses. For example, the incense of the Liturgy orientates the worshiper toward the sacraments, toward God himself. The Nazgûl are a direct perversion: they have lost their corporeality, and their senses have diminished. Their primary sense is smell—the smell of the Ring and the essence of their Master. "They have chosen to worship Sauron in an idolatrous liturgical dehumanization." They are thus "formed by the liturgical olfaction to Sauron" (203).

The essays within this work collectively demonstrate a strong understanding of theology within the context of Tolkien's work. One of the strengths of this compilation is its avoidance of simplistic allegory and clichéd parallels with Christian doctrine. The contributors handle their subjects with precision, exploring the deeper narrative structures and themes in Tolkien's work, offering original and thought-provoking insights. Even essays that explore less obvious connections, such as Jerome Van Kuiken's discussion of Karl Barth's theology in relation to Jackson's movie trilogy, are insightful and engaging. In my estimation, Estes and his contributors succeed in their goal of demonstrating how Tolkien's narratives can inspire real-world applications of theological principles.

Theology and Tolkien: Practical Theology is a valuable addition to Tolkien Studies. Its content is both original and perceptive, engaging with theology in a

knowledgeable manner and offering realistic applications to the real world. While scholarly in nature, the essays are accessible to non-scholars with an intellectual interest in Tolkien. This book provides a refreshing engagement with Tolkien's work and is a worthy contribution to the field.

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