

Appendix B

Unit Study FIFTEEN (optional)

Excerpt from Religious Elements Unit Study

What is the best story you have ever heard? Was it a story from your childhood? Was it the true story of a famous hero? Was it a fantasy story such as *The Lord of the Rings*? Tolkien (and many other great men) claimed that almost every story has a grain of truth in it, no matter how fantastic the story might appear. Even the old myths, though they were false, taught lessons about power, corruption, purity, faithfulness, friendship, compassion, and many other aspects of human existence. On the other hand, almost all human literature contains errors, even works that claim to be “true” such as biographies and histories. Even a “true” story may be slanted by the bias of the writer or the faulty memories of man. Even an “untrue” story, such as a fantasy, may teach universal truths about God or mankind.

Tolkien once explained what he considered to be the best story of all time: the true story of the redemption of man as found in the Gospels. In his famous lecture, “On Fairy- Stories,” Tolkien said that the “Christian Story” was like hearing the best Story ever told: a Story that told how a loving God sent his own Son to earth to pay the penalty for man’s sin, so that man could have the opportunity, through Christ, to live in Paradise with God. This Story, Tolkien said, is the Story that most men, when they hear it, wish were true. To know that the Story was written by the supreme “Author of Reality” and is actually the truest Story ever told, is the ultimate Joy, he explained (Letters 100).

You have learned from this curriculum that Tolkien coined the word “eucatastrophe” to mean the “sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with joy that brings tears” (Letters 100). The birth of Christ, Tolkien said, was the eucatastrophe of the human story: the fact that God himself came to dwell among us in human form. However, the eucatastrophe of the Christian Story is the resurrection of Christ after his ultimate sacrifice on the Cross. Just when things seemed darkest for mankind, when all hope was lost and the promised Messiah was slain, Christ arose and brought victory and joy to the human heart (Tolkien, Reader 87-90).

The Lord of the Rings is set in an imaginary time period before the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. Though J.R.R. Tolkien claimed to be a Christian, he never used his book to introduce this “greatest Story.” Part of the reason was that he felt that using “true” theology in a fantasy world not only limited his own invention, but was not appropriate. Would introducing the Christian Story in an imaginary world peopled by Elves and Hobbits really add credibility to the Christian Story? As Tolkien once explained to his American publisher, Houghton Mifflin, “I am in any case myself a Christian: but the Third Age was not a Christian world” (Letters 220).

Is *The Lord of the Rings* a Christian book? Tolkien, who was a Catholic, thought it would fit in with Christian culture. In a letter to poet W.H. Auden, Tolkien once wrote, “I don’t feel under any obligation to make my story fit with formalized Christian theology, though I actually intended it to be consonant with Christian thought and belief” (Letters 355). The book is filled with biblical imagery and concepts throughout. However, the gospel is never given and no religious system (Catholic or otherwise) is ever espoused in its pages. God is never mentioned, but hints at the power of a Higher Being in the universe are pervasive.

A man once wrote to Tolkien and said that he had always considered himself an unbeliever with very little “religious feeling.” However, he said of *The Lord of the Rings*, “You create a world in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without a visible source, like light from an invisible lamp” (Letters 413).

Part of the reason for this feeling is that Tolkien used many elements of his vast knowledge of Scripture in the telling of this tale. Many of the characters, images, diction, and themes of the book indicate that he was well-acquainted with the Bible. In fact, Tolkien was one of the general editors of the English version of the Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible. This work was translated from the French in the 1960’s. Tolkien himself translated the book of Jonah for that edition.....