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explore the myths and themes of The Lord of the Rings

The Origins of Tolkien's Middle-earth

FOR

DUMMIES®

Greg Harvey

*Bestselling For Dummies author
and scholar of comparative philosophy
and religion*

*Foreword by Alfred Siewers
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***The Origins of Tolkien's
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by Greg Harvey



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About the Author

Greg Harvey was born in Harvey, Illinois, in 1949 and attended the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. There, he achieved the degree of Bachelor of Arts with a major in Classics and Greek and Latin, with a double minor in History and French. After graduation, he pursued a number of careers, including engineering and drafting, teaching (receiving accreditation as a History and Computer Education teacher in secondary and adult education from San Francisco State University), and computer training. He is the author of numerous technical books, including the best-selling *Excel 2003 For Dummies* and *Windows XP For Dummies Quick Reference*. Greg received his Master's Degree in the Humanities in the area of Philosophy and Religion with a concentration in Asian and Comparative Studies from the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco in 2000. Currently, he is working there on his Ph.D. in the same general area. His web site is at www.mindovermedia.com.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to all who've suffered loss and yet refuse to abandon hope.

“For such is the way of it: to find and lose, as it seems to those whose boat is on the running stream.”

—Legolas to Gimli upon saying farewell to Lothlórien:
The Fellowship of the Ring by J.R.R. Tolkien

The Light Within

*Oh Elbereth Gilthoniel, Who set the night-jewels over all,
To rend the darkness that over Middle-earth holds sway,
Till Eärendil's gem appears on high as herald of the day.*

*Rekindle now the sparks of love in every heart below, To
ignite a flame to guide us on each journey as we go, So
we may be a light to all “when all other lights go out,”
And worthy yet of a hero's tale before our lives are
naught.*

—Greg Harvey for Ophelia, February 27, 2003

Aiya Elenion Ancalima!

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Thanking everyone who helped make this project on Tolkien's Middle-earth a reality would leave little room for the text itself. Nevertheless, I will try to acknowledge as many as possible (and to those not mentioned by name who kept telling me this book was a good idea and not to give up on it, just know that you have my unending thanks).

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Introduction

This book is the result of serendipity — a happy accident. One day in 2002 as I was returning from a business trip to my publisher (Wiley) in Indianapolis, I happened to turn to an in-flight channel that was playing the National Geographic program *Beyond the Movie: The Lord of the Rings The Fellowship of the Ring*. The Lord of the Rings The Kalevala The Key to the Kalevala

Up to that time, I had been aware only of Tolkien's scholarly study of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* (another text I had been studying) and that it had influenced his Middle-earth mythology. This tie-in with *The Kalevala* sent me off on a new round of research and study, comparing my understanding of Tolkien's Middle-earth with my knowledge of language, mythology, philosophy, and religion. This book is the result of that endeavor.

As a student of comparative philosophy and religion, and not comparative literature, I want to make clear my approach to this material. In place of standard literary analysis, which often emphasizes the author and his or her relationship with the material, I employ *hermeneutics*, a fancy word that means analyzing a text (usually a religious one like the Bible) and figuring out its possible meanings solely from the text itself. Therefore, in this book I'm much more likely to be looking for the internal meaning in Tolkien's books —

The Silmarillion, The Hobbit, and The Lord of the Rings specifically — than for what Tolkien said about the meaning of his own works, although that's important, too.

Adopting this as the primary approach enables me to analyze the possible origins of Middle-earth or, at least, connections between it and other traditional mythologies and religions, without worrying exclusively about whether Tolkien himself was aware of these traditions or possible connections. *Hermeneutics* holds that the work stands apart from its author in such a way that it can be subjected to interpretations that the author neither deliberately intended nor was conscious of. If the work, taken as a whole, suggests a particular interpretation to an audience, then that interpretation is valid, even if the author would not necessarily agree with it. (Interestingly enough, Tolkien took a somewhat similar position in urging scholars to employ an organic rather than piecemeal interpretation of *Beowulf*.)

As mythology, Middle-earth and its lore are as real for me as the mythologies of the Greeks, Romans, Celts, Vikings, Germanic tribes, and Finnish peoples from whom Tolkien so heavily borrowed. I therefore analyze Tolkien's tales with the same eye for meaning that I employ when exploring the meaning of *The Kalevala* or a Taoist philosophical text. It's a testament to the tremendous talent and love that Tolkien poured into his work that it is so full of deep meaning, stands so well in

comparison to other mythologies, and is so relevant to our lives.

About This Book

This book is a basic guide to some of the possible linguistic and mythological origins of Tolkien's Middle-earth. It provides a rudimentary analysis of its many themes and lessons for our world. It is not — I repeat, *not* — an encyclopedia or quick guide to the diverse beings, languages, and history that make up Tolkien's Middle-earth. It is also not a set of outlines or notes of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. If your intention in buying this book is to be able to converse intelligently with your friends or pass a literature course about Middle-earth *without* actually bothering to read *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, you had best put this book back on the shelf right now.

If there's a higher purpose to this book, it is simply to entice you and prepare you to get more enjoyment from reading or re-reading *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and possibly even *The Silmarillion*. This book is intended to enrich your understanding of Tolkien's books on Middle-earth, but it is in no way a replacement for them. It's especially targeted at you *Lord of the Rings* moviegoers who intend to delve into the books.

The basic method I employ to enhance your reading experience of Tolkien is to look at his world's basic

components — geography, beings, history, and underlying themes — through the richness of their language and myth. Often, examining the language and myth exposes a little of the hidden structure of Tolkien's Middle-earth and provides a basis on which its meanings may be discussed and understood.

My final purpose in writing this book is to challenge you to think about the themes inherent in Tolkien's stories about Middle-earth and their implications in your own life. I don't really care whether you agree with any particular analysis I make. I will have reached my goal if I simply get you to start thinking about what you think and how you feel about it.

Foolish Assumptions

I have a few assumptions I make about you as a reader and I urge you to check them out before you check this book out at the cash register:

- ✓ You've read *The Lord of the Rings* at least once (even if it was 20 years ago) or have seen Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies.
- ✓ The basic storyline of the quest to destroy the One Ring of Power touched you at some level, even if you're not sure why.
- ✓ You're intrigued by the characters, cultures, and languages of Middle-earth, even though they confuse you and border on being overwhelming.

✓ You're curious about where this fantasy world came from and why it's so complex and intense, even if you're not sure that you really want to get involved with its detail.

If my first assumption fits, and you can agree with at least one of the other ones, then I think that you've come to the right book. If, on the other hand, you don't fit the profile outlined in the first point and are understandably hesitant to agree with any of the others, then you might want to hold off on this purchase (at least until you've seen the film version of *The Lord of the Rings*).

How to Use This Book

Tolkien's writings rely heavily on new vocabulary, and much of that comes from languages he invented for Middle-earth. Keeping these names straight can be overwhelming to all but the most avid Middle-earth lore masters. I encourage you to make liberal use of this book's index when you come up against an odd name and you're just not sure who or what it is.

Still, I do expect that many of you may feel snowed under by the sheer weight of unfamiliar terms bandied about in the book. For this, I apologize ahead of time. It seems to be the nature of Tolkien's beast to inundate the reader in complex storylines muddied by tons of Elvish names that are almost impossible to keep straight. I know that in my earlier days with *The Silmarillion*, I was fully convinced

that I'd never be able to remember the difference between the Kingdom of Gondolin and Doriath — let alone keep Fingolfin straight from Finarfin or tell the Teleri Elves from the Noldor. In time, though, I gained the ability to realize the larger back story without being overwhelmed by the particular names and places involved. Slowly but surely I was able to plug in these details.

I advise you to adopt a similar strategy in dealing with this book's material. As much as possible, don't worry about keeping the character names and place names straight. Just accept that you won't immediately understand all the references (and may not be able to keep them straight even after looking them up in the index). Instead, try to keep your focus on the larger point I'm making about the characters and places. In time, you may be surprised to find that you're beginning to understand who and what and where and, more importantly, how they all fit together into the tapestry of Middle-earth (and when that day comes, if you're like me, you'll be amazed at the intricacy of Tolkien's weaving).

How This Book Is Organized

This book is divided into six parts (so you get to enjoy six Rich Tennant cartoons). Each part addresses a different major component of Tolkien's Middle-earth, from its geography to the major themes and myths it teaches. Two components, the beings and themes of Middle-earth in Parts II and V, respectively, are more complicated than the rest and so contain multiple chapters that you can visit in any order. Three others are two-chapter affairs in which the first chapter gives a more general overview, and the second goes into a little more detail. The last part offers three handy top ten lists.

Part I: The Geography of Middle-earth

This part tries to make you feel at home in Middle-earth by introducing you to its geography. Chapter 1 gives you a general orientation to Tolkien's Middle-earth, including its possible linguistic origin and its existence as a world of fantasy, mythology, history, and language. Chapter 2 looks at specific lands of Middle-earth that feature prominently in Tolkien's tales.

Part II: The Beings of Middle-earth

The eight chapters in this part acquaint you with the many different types of beings that populate the lands of Middle-earth (only some of whom are human), pairing them up with the lands they inhabit and pointing out their place in Tolkien tales.