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But Where Shall Wisdom be Found? *The Lord of the Rings* and the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract

Wisdom literature is a kind of writing that evolved in the ancient world as soon as mankind began to explore the meaning of life and sought understanding and insight. The Hebrew Bible contains three canonical books that scholars consistently identify as Wisdom Literature – Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. This paper explores the connections (common content, shared plot elements and structure, similar characters with similar struggles and perspectives, and even themes and outlooks), between this body of wisdom and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Specifically, this essay will define wisdom literature, and then compare wisdom literature to Tolkien's work in three ways:

generally – looking at shared overall characteristics

individually – looking at Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes separately and comparing each to *The Lord of the Rings*

cumulatively – proposing that the three wisdom books, when taken together, offer a complex and nuanced overall theme, and demonstrating that this theme is also present in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Additional Keywords

Mythlore; But Where Shall Wisdom be Found? *The Lord of the Rings* and the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible; Hebrew Bible, Wisdom Literature, Religion



BUT WHERE SHALL WISDOM BE FOUND?
THE LORD OF THE RINGS AND
THE WISDOM LITERATURE OF
THE HEBREW BIBLE

MATTIE E. GUSTAFSON

TOLKIEN SNUCK UP ON ME. DURING MY JUNIOR YEAR in college, in order to de-stress during mid-terms, I decided to try a new fantasy book a friend had recommended. Thus, a casual wish for relaxation and diversion in the midst of exams soon became an almost frantic, late-night search for volume two and then three of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. (I had only purchased volume one initially—my mistake.) Exam week is not the time to develop a passion for a “simple,” three-part fantasy series, but it was (thank goodness in an era when bookstores were plentiful and often open 24 hours. (eBooks were not an option yet.) I devoured Tolkien, passed my exams (luckily), and my enthusiasm for Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* had begun.

You could say that the Hebrew Bible and wisdom literature also snuck up on me. Years later I attended Boston University School of Theology—not in search of ordination, but simply to learn more about my (Christian) faith, and fell in love with Judaism and the Hebrew scriptures. Genesis spoke to me deeply and a course entitled *Introduction to Wisdom Literature*, offered by Professor Harrel Beck, captured my imagination. Both of these passions—for Tolkien and the Hebrew Bible—have lasted through a professional career as a librarian and on into retirement, making both the career and retirement endlessly richer and more challenging.

This essay is an attempt to bring these two interests together. It is my personal belief that there are intriguing and illuminating parallels to be drawn between Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. And I propose that being aware of the correlations and connections that these works evince can result in a new and richer appreciation of them both.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS AND THE BIBLE

The link between *The Lord of the Rings*, the New Testament, and Christian (Catholic) ideas and ideals has been acknowledged by many. Included in a long list of authors who have focused on Tolkien, the Bible, and religion are “Stones and the Book” by Nicolas Birns (in *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources*, edited by

Jason Fisher), *Tolkien and the Silmarils* by Randel Helms, *JRRT: Myth, Morality, and Religion* by James Purtill, and *Following Gandalf* by Matthew Dickerson. There are many, many more. Most deal with Tolkien and the New Testament. Birns focuses on Tolkien and the book of Genesis.

Tolkien himself wrote, “*The Lord of The Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision” (*Letters* 172, #142). This essay will examine *The Lord of the Rings* and its connection to the *Old Testament* (Hebrew Scriptures), and more specifically its relationship to wisdom literature as represented by three wisdom books: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.

First, I will situate wisdom literature within the Hebrew Bible and explore some definitions of wisdom literature itself. Second, I’ll offer several general characteristics that wisdom literature and *The Lord of the Rings* share. Third, I’ll consider each of these three wisdom literature books individually, illustrating parallels and connections with *The Lord of the Rings*. Finally, I’ll propose that these three wisdom books, when taken together, reveal a cumulative message that is shared by Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.

HEBREW BIBLE AND WISDOM LITERATURE 101

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections: the law (*Torah* or the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures), the Prophets (*Nevi'im* or all the prophetic texts, early and late, long and short), and the Writings (*Kethubim*, which include various and sundry diverse texts not found in the *Torah* or *Nevi'im*).¹ Wisdom literature is found in the Writings, and the three books that are considered books of wisdom literature by most scholars, and that we will be looking at in this paper are Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes (Anderson 4, 5 and 570).

Other books of the Bible have been called wisdom literature, including The Song of Songs, the Wisdom of Solomon, and The Book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus). Even some psalms (Psalm 51 for example) have been categorized as “wisdom” psalms. I am concentrating in this essay on three key books that, by consensus, are always designated wisdom literature (Anderson 570).

Wisdom and wisdom literature are difficult terms to nail down. There are almost as many scholarly definitions of wisdom literature as there are scholars. Kathleen M. O’Connor recognizes this difficulty when she says, in her

¹ The section of the Hebrew Bible designated The Prophets includes the Former Prophets (primarily history books—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 12 Minor Prophets). The section designated The Writings includes not only the three wisdom books mentioned above, but also such diverse texts as Song of Solomon, Chronicles and Nehemiah, Psalms, and the prophecy of Daniel, etc.

book on wisdom literature, “wisdom is fluid, mercurial, difficult to pin down or to contain within set parameters” (23). She defines wisdom literature as an “approach to reality” (23). In his article “Introduction to Wisdom Literature,” in the *New Interpreter’s Bible*, R.L. Clifford calls wisdom and wisdom literature a kind of writing focused on wisdom. Clifford actually counts² the number of times the word “wisdom” appears in each of these texts (2). William P. Brown in *Wisdom’s Wonder* calls wisdom literature a “constantly moving target” (24).

For our purposes here, a fundamental definition will do. Wisdom literature is a kind of writing that explores the human condition and attempts to answer some fundamental questions about that condition. Wisdom literature is many faceted and complex. It deals with issues that are timeless and universal, while also offering practical advice and guidance on how to live. It shows the path to success. It is a search for meaning and perspective (Goeser).

Ancient wisdom literature is not confined to the Hebrew Bible. It is a kind of writing that evolved throughout the ancient world in Mesopotamia and Egypt many years prior to the texts we are going to be looking at in this essay (Clifford 3-4). But all wisdom literature grapples with the same difficult questions humankind has always been asking: What is “the good life” and how do I live it? How shall I choose? Why do bad things happen to good people? Where is God in the midst of tragedy? Where is meaning to be found?

Perhaps mankind has not always searched for wisdom, but certainly the search for wisdom—clarity, understanding, meaning—is an ancient one. Bernhard W. Anderson, a well-known biblical scholar, says “the quest for wisdom is the quest for the meaning of life. And this quest is the basic interest of every human being” (568).

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Scholars do a better job when assigning basic *characteristics* to wisdom literature. Marcus Borg says that “the focus of this literature is [...] on the individual and the world of the everyday” (145). O’Connor also points to wisdom literature’s focus on individual human concerns and experience, and notes that wisdom literature accepts ambiguity and paradox (19). Clifford observes that most wisdom literature “shares a strong didactic tone” (2). William P. Brown, in *Wisdom’s Wonder*, refers to a certain “diversity of perspective” within wisdom literature, and sums it up when he says, “If the wisdom corpus were a choir, melodious harmony would not be its forte” (2).

² Proverbs, 42; Job, 18; Ecclesiastes, 28. Clifford says the numbers would be much higher if synonyms were counted as well. The word “wisdom” appears in *The Lord of the Rings* 57 times.

I have identified three general characteristics that *The Lord of the Rings* and wisdom literature share.

1. NOT RELIGIOUS

One of the most interesting shared characteristics between wisdom literature and *The Lord of the Rings* is the lack of religion in these texts. It may be surprising to discover, but neither the three wisdom books, officially and canonically part of the Hebrew Bible, nor *The Lord of the Rings*, written by a devoutly religious man, are overtly religious.

Other books in the Hebrew Bible take as their central theme the story of the formation of Israel and the twists and turns of Israel's relationship to its God. The key cultic event, Moses leading his people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, which is present or referred to in some form or other in the other books of the Old Testament, is absent from these three wisdom texts. There is no mention of Israel's religious heritage or its sacred story.

Wisdom literature transcends cultic practices of individual religions and focuses on the big picture—humankind's quest for meaning and morality. Wisdom literature does not claim to be revealed truth (Borg 148). "Righteousness [...] is not linked to observance of the law and covenant or to performance of rituals as it is elsewhere in the Bible" (Clifford 2).

Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, says that not surrounding these wisdom writings with the traditional Judaic covenant beliefs was a deliberate attempt to make Israel's faith "credible to a larger, quite sophisticated intellectual environment" (307).

Is it possible that Tolkien was doing something similar, consciously or unconsciously? Tolkien was deeply religious and devoutly Catholic but there are no overt references to Catholicism, the church, or Christianity throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. As Brian Rosebury says in *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon*, Tolkien's Middle-earth is a "world without churches or organized piety" (43). In the letter quoted above, Tolkien continues, "That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism" (*Letters* 172, #142).

I like to think of religion and religious references in both *The Lord of the Rings* and Hebraic wisdom literature as something akin to the Force in *Star Wars*. Religion surrounds these texts, penetrates them, and binds them together (*Star Wars IV*). Religion provides the foundation and power for the entire story but, like the Force, it is invisible.

2. TIMELESSNESS

A second mutual characteristic is endurance—that is, both wisdom literature and *The Lord of the Rings* are remarkably relevant and meaningful across the centuries or decades. How often have we heard that one of the reasons for Tolkien's tremendous popularity is his timelessness? He had an uncanny ability to create a story, characters, and plot that, when put together, carried with them threads of meaning and message that ring tirelessly true. Tom Shippey refers to Tolkien's work as having a mythic timelessness, with an ability to reach out "beyond contemporary relevance and beyond archaism to something which governs both" (*Author of the Century* xxxii). Matthew Dickerson, when justifying writing *yet another* book on Tolkien, explains that "these [Tolkien's] works are as relevant to today's issues and culture as they were roughly a century ago" (*A Hobbit Journey* 10).

Wisdom literature demonstrates this same kind of timeless appeal. Marcus Borg calls Ecclesiastes one of the most "user-friendly" books of the Bible, with a message and context that "fit the modern spirit" (161). Anderson believes that wisdom literature has "a timeless quality" and that the sages who wrote this genre seem to "transcend the limitations of their time and culture" (569).

The book of Job, written around the 10th century BCE, was made into a contemporary play—*J.B.* by Archibald MacLeish—in 1958. Verses from Ecclesiastes form the basis of "Turn, Turn, Turn," a song written in the 1960's by Pete Seeger and recorded and made popular by The Byrds. Proverbs pop up everywhere—from dishtowels to coloring books.

Maybe the timelessness of both wisdom literature and *The Lord of the Rings* is because these works are all less grounded in specific cultural references? Maybe because they seek to explore questions fundamental to all ages? Whatever the reason, all of these texts, like a good cheese, age well.

3. BOTH ARE INFLUENCED BY OTHER CIVILIZATIONS OR CULTURES

A third common characteristic is that both the wisdom writings in the Hebrew Bible and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* have influences that are multicultural. Wisdom literature is found in several ancient cultures. Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt had a body of works that were considered wisdom writings, and the Hebrews were aware of and inherited these other cultures' thoughts on this topic. The "wisdom movement was in essence international" (Anderson 569).

Tolkien—widely-read scholar, linguist, and student of mythology that he was—was also influenced by cultures beyond Britain, including Icelandic and Norse. Verlyn Flieger goes on to include Celtic, Finnish, and even French as ingredients in the soup of story (*There Would Always Be a Fairy Tale* 181).

To summarize, the lack of formal religious references, their timeless appeal, and their multicultural roots begin to illustrate how these works are linked. Now I propose to examine how Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes are related individually to *The Lord of the Rings*.

PROVERBS

Proverbs are “short, memorable sayings” (Borg 149). The book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible is a collection of sayings, arranged in sections of varying lengths, sometimes loosely thematic. The book of Proverbs is often attributed to King Solomon, but in actuality the book itself was compiled over a number of years, hence the variety of formats and headings and the difficulty with pinning down dates of origin or compilation (Anderson 575).

Generally, proverbs give simple, direct answers to important questions, such as “How shall I live?” and “What is the good life and how do I obtain it?” Proverbs are grounded in common sense and practicality; they reflect conventional answers to difficult questions.

There is nothing more evident than the fact that the book of Proverbs and *The Lord of the Rings* both contain—proverbs. And these sayings are quite similar and share similar objectives. Tom Shippey has written a delightful essay on proverbs in *The Lord of the Rings*, entitled “A Fund of Wise Sayings: Proverbiality in Tolkien” [“Fund”]. In it he calls works such as fairy tales and nursery rhymes “survivor genres,” because they are both very old but still with us today (304). Shippey includes proverbs in this “survivor genre” category.

A closer look at some individual proverbs in both books yields some interesting parallels. Biblical proverbs dispense:

Simple instructions and admonitions:

- “Do not quarrel with anyone without cause, when no harm has been done to you.” (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Prov. 3:30)
- “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing personal opinion.” (Prov. 18:2)

Advice on how to live and what kinds of choices lead to a good life:

- “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth – a stranger, and not your own lips.” (Prov. 27:2)
- “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.” (Prov. 22:1)

And many sayings about the nature and value of wisdom:

- “Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold.” (Prov. 3:13-14)
- “Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom for the future.” (Prov. 19:20)

The hobbits of Middle-earth, steeped as they are in common sense and practicality, have many proverbs. Elves, Dwarves, and wizards share and rely on proverbs as well. As with biblical proverbs, these Middle-earth proverbs dispense:

Simple instructions and admonitions:

- “Make it short, and then you won’t have to cut it short before you can use it.” (Sam quoting his beloved Gaffer, *LotR* VI.9.1026)
- “Go not to the Elves for counsel, for they will say both yes and no.” (Frodo to Gildor, I.3.84)
- “Valour needs first strength, and then a weapon.” (Boromir, talking during the Council of Elrond, II.2.267)

Advice on how to live and what kinds of choices lead to a good life:

- “[T]hings will go as they will; and there is no need to hurry to meet them.” (Treebeard, to Legolas, Gimli, and Gandalf, as they prepare to leave Orthanc, III.10.586)
- “One who cannot cast away a treasure at need is in fetters.” (Aragon to Pippin, III.9.564)

And many sayings about the nature and value of wisdom.

- “[H]e that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom.” (Gandalf, recounting what he said to Saruman, II.2.259)
- “It is wisdom to recognize necessity, when all other courses have been weighed.” (Gandalf talking during the Council of Elrond, II.2.269)

Shippey discusses the various cultures in Middle-earth and says that each has a distinct “proverbial style” (“Fund” 312). As an example of something Shippey calls a “saying exchange game” (313) he mentions a proverbial dialogue that occurs between Gandalf and Théoden:

Théoden: “Faithful heart may have froward tongue.”

Gandalf: “Say also, that to crooked eyes truth may wear a wry face.”
(*LotR* III.6.521-522)

One of my favorite examples of a “saying exchange game” (which Shippey also mentions) is the dialog between Gimli and Elrond—which I have always referred to as “dueling proverbs.” The company is about to leave Rivendell and Elrond is telling its members that Frodo alone is responsible for the mission’s goal. His companions are traveling with him of their own volition and are free to turn aside at any time. Gimli takes exception and Elrond responds in kind:

Gimli: Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens.

Elrond: But let him not vow to walk in the dark, who has not seen the nightfall.

Gimli: Yet sworn word may strengthen quaking heart.

Elrond: Or break it! Look not too far ahead! (LotR II.3.281)

This is proverbial one-upmanship at its best. But for the urgent nature of the quest Gimli is about to join, I can imagine these two dueling proverbially for quite a while!

By creating proverbs, quoting proverbs, and relying on proverbs, the people of Middle Earth and the people of the Bible share the same goal. They are trying to give meaning and manageability to their lives. The book of Proverbs is perhaps the easiest book of canonical wisdom literature to understand and define. It is also simple to draw a relatively straightforward parallel between Proverbs and *The Lord of The Rings*. Both books have proverbs and sayings and use them in similar ways—to introduce some humor and lightheartedness into serious situations, or to propose simple, uncomplicated answers to some of life’s most basic questions.

JOB

The book of Job is very different. Job is both a compelling story of a man in trouble and an intense philosophical dispute.

The plot is simple. Job is an upright, honest man who has made good, moral choices and has been rewarded with wealth and progeny. But then he loses everything—income, children, and even his health. The bulk of the text in this wisdom book is occupied with Job at first questioning and then railing against this injustice.

Job’s three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, and even a visiting stranger, Elihu, offer him a variety of stock answers to his “Why me? I’ve done nothing wrong,” query. Eliphaz’s traditional worldview does not allow him to see Job as blameless. “Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off” (Job 4:7-8)? Bildad assures Job that God can’t make a mistake, and he (Job) should repent and accept his just punishments. “Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? [...] If you will seek God and make supplication to the Almighty [...] surely then he will rouse himself for you” (Job 8: 3, 5-6).

Zophar is even more direct and insists that Job’s constant denial of guilt makes him even more sinful. “Should a multitude of words go unanswered, and should one full of talk be vindicated? Should your babble put others to silence, and when you mock shall no one shame you” (Job 11:2-3)? Elihu, a younger man, gets angry and insists that Job merits punishment simply because of his

attitude. “Would that Job were tried to the limit, because his answers are those of the wicked. For he adds rebellion to his sin; he claps his hands among us, and multiplies his words against God” (Job 34:36-37).

But Job is adamant in his refusal to admit guilt. He insists he has done nothing wrong—or at least nothing to merit such catastrophes. Finally, in Chapter 38, God speaks to Job (“out of the storm.” Job 38:1) But God shows up, not with answers, but with declarations and interrogations of God’s own. (“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation” Job 38:4)? It is only God’s dramatic appearance and unanswerable cross-examination that finally manage to shut Job up, if not totally answered, then at least satisfied and silent.

My purpose here is not to present a discussion of the theological issues that Job and his companions struggle with. I want simply to look at Job and *The Lord of The Rings* and discover any parallels.

A FOLKTALE FRAME

One such parallel is that both Job and *The Lord of The Rings* begin and end with a folktale. In the opening of Job (Chapters 1 and 2, written in *prose*), which seems to take place in some kind of ideal “heavenly” surroundings, God and Satan are discussing various weighty issues, and God says, “Consider my servant, Job,” as an example of a human being living an upright life. Satan does consider Job and counters, “What if things weren’t so good with Job? Then what?” And, if the folktale is to be believed, God allows Satan to destroy everything Job has in an attempt to prove Job only a fair-weather believer (Job 1:8-12—paraphrase is mine).

After all the discussion and theorizing (39 chapters worth, written in *verse*), Job and the reader reach a resolution of sorts, and the text returns to a folktale setting. Toward the end of chapter 42 (verses 7-17, again in *prose*), Job is restored to health; he has money again and regains a family. “Normalcy” is recaptured.

Tolkien, too, starts and ends *The Lord of The Rings* with a folktale, beginning and ending in the “folksy” Shire. The Shire is beautifully described as a picturesque, peaceful, “heaven-like” country. This “folktale frame” also depicts the upright, conventional lives being lived by most Hobbits, and lays the groundwork for a departure from the folktale surroundings (“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door” I.3.74) and the difficult journey that follows.

And although Frodo and Sam’s journey is a more physical one, both they and Job come out on the other side of this journey changed people. Job winds up back where he started, as do Frodo and Sam. And in between lie the very questions that Job (and all wisdom literature) and Frodo (and *The Lord of The Rings*) are wrestling with: How shall I choose? Why do bad things happen

to good people, i.e., why me? Where is God (or Fate) in the midst of tragedy? Where is meaning to be found?

The folksy framework in both is from the “proverbial” world—simple, credulous and almost predictable. What Frodo, the Fellowship, and Job are thrown into is a different world all together. But at the end, despite a return to the simpler framework, neither Job nor Frodo emerge unchanged. Both have experienced great loss and gained deeper understanding. They have found, if not answers, then perhaps wisdom?

A JOURNEY IN COMMON

Frodo and Job have more in common than a beginning and an end.

- Both are on a journey: Frodo’s is a physical journey—Job’s a psychological or mental journey
- Both are on a quest that was thrust upon them by forces beyond their control
- Both journeys are regarded by friends and companions as hopeless
- Both persevere anyway
- Both “fail” in the end—Frodo doesn’t destroy the Ring; Job doesn’t find definitive answers
- After some kind of resolution, both wind up back where they started—but they are different.

“NOT SO HAPPY” ENDINGS

And both have “not-so-happy” endings. Michael Swanwick, in his essay “A Changeling Returns,” calls the brief, non-conclusive ending when Sam says, “Well, I’m back,” the “most heartbreaking line in all of modern fantasy” (45).

Often people uncritically categorize *The Lord of The Rings* as a fantasy and read into it, as a specimen of that often “happily-ever-after” genre, a traditional fairy tale ending. But all is *not* well. Frodo failed and ultimately has to leave Middle-earth. Gandalf and the rest of the elves are on their way out, too. Merry and Pippin are off on their own local adventures and Sam is alone—domesticated and nostalgic. And Tolkien assures us the “dark” will come again.

Job is also back in his fairy-tale “ordinary” life, but we are still left with some discomfort and many questions. As Walter Brueggemann says, Job receives back his children and wealth, but they are not the same children, and Job is not the same person, and never will be again (301).

THEMATIC SIMILARITIES

Which brings us to a fourth connection. Job and *The Lord of the Rings* treat the same overall themes, specifically, steadfast perseverance in the face of overwhelming opposition, and placing one's trust in a power beyond oneself, even if one doesn't quite understand that power and its purposes.

Job faces many obstacles in his journey, but these obstacles tend to take the form of heavy discussion, argument, and dialogue, rather than a physical tilting at windmills (or orcs or trolls). Nonetheless, Job perseveres. And resolution comes, not with success or achievement, but with the realization that God is God—is present and in charge. In truth, as Curtis and Brugeletta say, “Many things exist that people will never understand” (183). Job ultimately puts his trust and his life in the hands of a power beyond himself—accepting his limitations and his fate.

The characters in *The Lord of The Rings* face more concrete obstacles—mountains, mines, monsters—but they also are determined and steadfast. Job emerges from his despair after he realizes that, despite the horror of his situation, God is there with him and is in charge. This same kind of realization is what brings hope to Gandalf and Aragorn—that some kind of power is in charge and is working with them for a positive resolution. Gandalf directs our attention to this behind-the-scenes presence at the very outset, as he explains the Ring and its significance to Frodo. “Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case, you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought” (*LotR* I.2.56).

Brueggemann describes the book of Job as a “large, imaginative drama” that “is endlessly contemporary” (302-303). Certainly, this is a description easily applied to *The Lord of The Rings* as well. Job and Frodo live in similar worlds, face similar challenges, and ask the same questions. And they both achieve, for their pains, not answers but acceptance and some measure of peace.

ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes is officially designated part of the wisdom canon, but it is a book unlike any other in the Hebrew Bible. It is only 12 chapters long, and contains a variety of writings—poetry, prose, even some proverbs—authored primarily by one person. The Hebrew name for this book is Qoheleth, which means teacher, and “Q” is generally how one refers to the author, who has an attitude toward life that, at first glance, seems out of place in any kind of religious tract. Roland E. Murphy, referring to Q's writings, says that they “did not sing in tune” with the other books of the Bible (55).

Ecclesiastes is a philosophical treatise on the nature of life, and—to say the least—Q's take on life is a bit jaundiced. The central question of the book is

essentially “How shall I live?—given all is vanity?—given that the wicked prosper and the righteous fail?—given the fact of death?” And on the surface, it seems that Q offers no solutions, no answers that could be satisfactory or positive.

It is surprising, then, that Ecclesiastes was included in the canon, and you might think that one would be hard-pressed to find any fundamental thematic connections to *The Lord of the Rings*. But there are several intriguing links that arise when you look closely.

ECCLESIASTES-LIKE MOMENTS

“Ecclesiastes-like” moments occur. These are moments when characters in *The Lord of the Rings* express thoughts and opinions quite similar to those expressed by Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes. Elrond, referring to the “many defeats, and many fruitless victories” of old (*LotR* II.2.243), seems very close to Q’s affirmation that “all is vanity” (Eccles. 1:2). Another such moment is the dialogue between Legolas and Gimli in the chapter “The Last Debate.” Legolas and Gimli are heading into Minas Tirith after the major victory on the Pelennor Fields, and are on their way to see the wounded Merry and Pippin:

Gimli: It is ever so with the things that Men begin: there is a frost in Spring, or a blight in Summer, and they fail of their promise.

Legolas: Yet seldom do they fail of their seed. And that will lie in the dust and rot to spring up again in times and places unlooked for. *The deeds of Men will outlast us, Gimli.*

Gimli: *And yet come to naught in the end but might-have-beens, I guess.*

Legolas: To that the Elves know not the answer. (*LotR* V.9.873; my emphasis)

Compare the above to this passage from Ecclesiastes: “All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know. *Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all*” (9:1-2; my emphasis).

The *Lord of the Rings* passage, quoted above, begins with Legolas and Gimli discussing stonework and gardens. Then they veer toward bigger issues. Q is also grappling with these bigger issues—the uncertainties of life, the certainty of death, the deeds of men outlasting them and yet still coming to naught. Elf, dwarf, and teacher seem to be without any definitive resolution.

Legolas and his thoughts on the plight of the elves leads to yet another Ecclesiastes-like moment. One might assume that the immortal elves would be the least likely to share any of Q’s frustrations with the futility and inevitability of life and death, but Legolas, as the fellowship paddles down the Anduin,

seems very Qoheteth-like in envisioning whatever the future holds. “The passing seasons are but ripples ever repeated in the long long stream. Yet beneath the Sun all things must wear to an end at last” (*LotR* II.9.388).

These words are almost a mirror image of Q’s outlook in Ecclesiastes: “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles. 1:9).

KINDRED SPIRITS

And then there is the simple realization that Q and Gandalf are kindred spirits. Both are wise men. Bernhard Anderson defines the sage, i.e., wise man, as one who gives “counsel, with the insight derived from keen observation of life, from years of experience, and from wide acquaintance with the fund of ancient wisdom” (572).

This is a fitting description of both Qoheth, our Ecclesiastes author, and Gandalf, our Middle-earth wizard. Roland Murphy calls Q a wise man engaged in a search for wisdom (55). Gandalf is the eldest and wisest of the Fellowship—a wise man in practice and by definition.³

Both are realists. There is no sugar-coating the situation for either of them. Q “simply accepts God on God’s terms. That is his faith” (Murphy 58). Q recognizes that we seldom can predict with certainty the outcome of our efforts. He might believe that all is vanity, but he also believes that the appropriate response to life’s difficulties is to refuse to give up and to work hard despite the improbability of success. He advises us to continue efforts at sowing and reaping (or whatever the task at hand is), “for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good” (Eccles. 11:6).

Gandalf also displays a blunt realism. He is fully conscious of the hopelessness of the situation, acknowledges a lack of control and offers advice to Aragorn and the sons of Elrond that could, with little dissonance, be inserted directly into the book of Ecclesiastes:

Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule. (*LotR* V.9.879)

Despair and discouragement for both Q and Gandalf are part of the human condition—a “hard reality” (Kidner 80) that cannot be avoided. They

³ The online version of the Merriam Webster Dictionary offers an archaic definition of the word “wizard” as sage or wise man.

will not give in to despair. The “keep punching, fella” spirit that Shippey says is a major thrust of Tolkien’s message (“Fund” 316) is also reflected in Ecclesiastes.

CUMULATIVE MESSAGE

I said at the beginning of this essay that wisdom literature tackles the tough questions—the questions that mankind has been wrestling with since Adam and Eve got kicked out of the garden.

Marcus Borg points to the “dialogue and conflict within ancient Israel’s wisdom tradition” (179) and that conflict he refers to can be seen clearly in the three very different responses that Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes make to the questions presented at the beginning of this paper.

- Proverbs is all about choice. In the book of Proverbs, we are urged to make the correct choice; we are assured that there *is* a correct choice to be made and making that correct choice almost inevitably results in a good life, success, and even happiness.
- Job questions this outlook. Job insists he made all the right choices. And bad things still happened to him. The book of Job is all about Job struggling with that very issue.
- Q, in Ecclesiastes, seems to have given up all together. All is vanity; choice is an illusion.

What’s fascinating, I believe, is that the “answers” these three books offer, though divergent, build on and complement each other. Taken together they present a nuanced and complex approach to the dilemma of the human condition. All three books present different, “conflicting” answers, but all three of these “answers” are valid and necessary to life in the real world. By including these three disparate and unusual books in the biblical canon, the compilers of the Hebrew (and Christian) bible leave the way open for the reader to grapple with issues and answers that are timeless, open-ended, and complicated.

J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*, through his characters, plot elements, themes and even narrative descriptions, asks and answers these same questions and presents us with the same kind of divergent layers and conflicting “answers” that we discovered in the wisdom books discussed above.

The Gaffer and the wonderfully rustic hobbits of the Shire live comfortably and certain within their world and culture. Correct choices exist and will produce the desired, i.e., good results. The Gaffer knows his business, knows his Shire, and dispenses wisdom and advice to all who will listen.

Frodo, like Job, has led an upright and relatively blameless life; he has made all the right choices. But danger, hardship, and certain doom are thrust upon him with little choice to say yay or nay. Frodo struggles with the “why

me” question as much as Job. He cries to Gandalf, after he learns what the ring is, “I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?” The ‘answer’ that Gandalf offers—“Such questions cannot be answered [...]. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have” (*LotR* I.2.61), satisfies Frodo as little as Job’s ultimate ‘answer’ pleases him.

There are even times when members of the Fellowship and other characters in *The Lord of the Rings* give in to despair, acknowledge their powerlessness, and resign themselves to not knowing why or how things are the way they are. Théoden, at the Battle of Helm’s Deep, asks “How shall any tower withstand such numbers and such reckless hate?” (*LotR* III.7.539). Denethor throws himself and his still living son, Faramir, on the funeral pyre, such is his despair and defeat. He has given up and ultimately comes to believe any choice he makes will be futile.

Verlyn Flieger discusses the complexities and contradictions within Tolkien’s works in her courses on Tolkien. She begins these courses, Flieger explains, by having students read and discuss two of Tolkien’s major non-fiction essays, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” and “*On Fairy-Stories*.” These essays illustrate, according to Flieger, “the opposite poles of Tolkien’s creative imagination” (“*Eucatastrophe*” 50). The *Beowulf* essay presents us with the inevitable doom of life, i.e., all people will suffer and die; evil is real and will always come back. Conversely, “*On Fairy-Stories*” establishes the idea of the happy ending—the eucatastrophe. Just when everything is heading inexorably toward collapse, the day is saved—“the eagles are coming!”—and the sudden turn toward salvation occurs. Flieger’s point is that throughout his corpus, Tolkien holds both of these two approaches, inevitable defeat and unexpected victory, in creative tension (“*Eucatastrophe*” 50-55).

She develops this argument further in her recent essay, “*The Arch and the Keystone*.” Flieger says the goal of this essay is to “explore some examples of contradiction [in Tolkien] to see if we can find a way to allow them to live together” (7). In this essay she offers further examples of the contradictions within Tolkien’s works. She begins by once again mentioning “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” and “*On Fairy-Stories*,” and then expands her survey to include some of Tolkien’s correspondence (Letter 142), some of his short stories (*Leaf by Niggle* and *Smith of Wootan Major*), and then, lastly, she references *The Lord of the Rings*. Her conclusion is that, just as Tolkien had to learn to wrestle with these divergent ideas, we, too, have to live with a similar tension, both in his works and in our lives as well. “These oppositions,” says Flieger, “are the sources of Tolkien’s power and the tension between them is the energy that unites it” (“*The Arch and the Keystone*” 16).

The three books of wisdom literature offer the reader a similar tension. Wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible is an exploration, an inquiry, and an action. The discoveries made and questions arrived at are not settled issues, but rather a springboard for further exploration and more questions. Wisdom literature, as Job discovered, does not grant a person certainty, control, and invulnerability, but leads inevitably to more questions; in short, to vulnerability. And it is in this contrast between certainty and uncertainty, vulnerability and invulnerability that the insight and significance of wisdom literature lies. Both the power and glory of wisdom literature and *The Lord of the Rings* lies in their wrestling with and acceptance of all the inconsistencies and vicissitudes of life.

CONCLUSION

Harrell Beck was a professor of Hebrew Scripture at Boston University School of Theology in the 1970's. Professor Beck was one of those incredible college professors—part educator, part academic, part minister, part orator—a well-read, charismatic teacher and spinner of tales, who opened the wonder and depth of the Hebrew Scriptures to many students. Professor Beck's direct connection with *this* presentation is his course on wisdom literature. One major tenet of this course was his insistence that the canon of wisdom literature was not closed, and that literature, plays, and novels that we consider modern and non-biblical, should in fact be considered, if not biblically canonical, then at the very least, an adjunct part of a body of wisdom literature that continues to challenge and teach in new and different ways today. Wisdom literature, Beck said, raises up universal questions and concerns that appear in other forms of literature throughout the ages.

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has been called many things since its publication in 1954-55: a "giant Period Piece" (Bloom 1), "epic poetry and [an] heroic saga" (Caldecott 17); "a remarkable defense of Western civilization" (West 15); "balderdash" (compliments of Edmund "Bunny" Wilson in a now infamous review in *Nation* entitled "Ooh, those awful Orcs" (312).

In this essay, I am calling *The Lord of The Rings* wisdom literature. As I have tried to demonstrate, the three books of wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* share some overall characteristics, and when you compare each wisdom book individually to *The Lord of the Rings*, there are even more links—common content, shared plot elements and structure, similar characters with similar struggles and perspectives, and even themes and outlooks.

Far from being balderdash, black and white, or simplistic, *The Lord of the Rings*, as wisdom literature, is nuanced, complex, at times upsetting, at times comforting, but always timeless and thought provoking.

Comparing *The Lord of the Rings* to wisdom literature is a mutually illuminating exercise. Looking at *The Lord of the Rings* and comparing it to wisdom literature helps one understand the depth of that work and why its appeal is timeless; and looking at wisdom literature and comparing it to *The Lord of the Rings* helps bring relevance and modern understanding to what are some very difficult biblical texts. These works shed light on one another. Standing in that light and being aware of and understanding these connections helps us to appreciate them all a bit more.

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