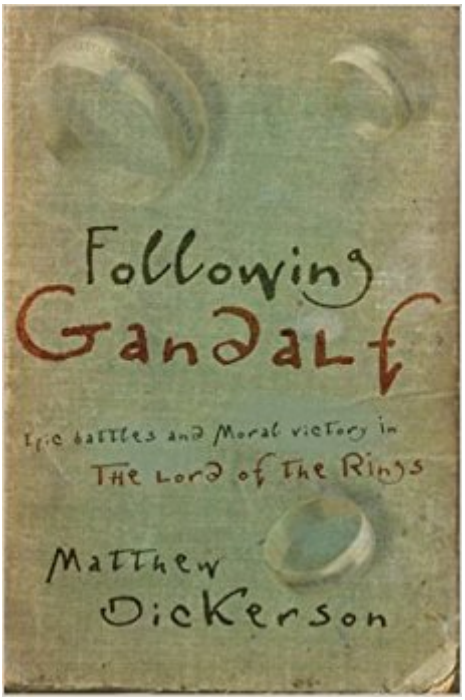
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Following Gandalf: Epic Battles And Moral Victory In The Lord Of The Rings



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Synopsis

While the success of J. R. R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings is remarkable, it’s certainly no mystery. In a culture where truth is relative and morality is viewed as "old-fashioned," we eagerly welcome the message of these tales: we have free will, our choices matter, and truth can be known. Matthew Dickerson investigates the importance of free will and moral choices in Tolkien’s Middle Earth, where moral victory, rather than military success, is the "real" story. He explores Christian themes throughout, including salvation, grace, and judgment. Following Gandalf will delight veteran Tolkien fans and offer new fans an impressive introduction to his major works. Engaging and theologically thought-provoking, it will interest pastors, students, seminarians, and layreaders.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Dickerson, a teacher at Middlebury College in Vermont and devoted student of Tolkien, begins his work with a strong thematic link to the very popular The Lord of the Rings movies: epic battles. Against the criticism that The Lord of the Rings glorifies war, he argues cogently that Tolkien’s original written treatment of these battles provides a very different picture than the films or spin-off video games. He demonstrates how Tolkien offers a deeply nuanced understanding of the nature of war, and how the trilogy criticizes self-aggrandizing glory in battle. As Dickerson moves into the more central, philosophical themes of the books-free will, moral responsibility and ethical absolutes-readers may lose interest, especially when he punctuates discussion of very basic concepts with obscure references from Tolkien’s Silmarillion, a work that few will have read: "In

contrast to subjective morality, or moral relativism, objective morality is independent of the individual subject.... Feanor's evil deeds, for example, especially the tragic Kinslaying at Alqualonde, are going to be judged." Dickerson's exploration of the nature of the ring's evil power and his final conclusions about the pervasive theological structure behind these stories are engaging, but the verbosity and academic trivia of other sections may alienate some readers. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Matthew Dickerson is a computer science professor at Middlebury College. He is the author of The Finnsburg Encounter and Hammers and Nails. He lives with his wife and children in Bristol, Vermont.

Thoroughly enjoyed it! Mr Dickerson does a wonderful job demonstrating the moral issues woven through The Lord of the Rings. I marked a few passages that stood out to me when I read the LOTR series for the first time only a few years ago, but he quoted many more that I didn't notice or appreciate at the time.I especially enjoyed his exploration of how the morality of LOTR related to the Christian faith, since so much of the series seems to show characters in a Christian sort of good vs evil contest yet there is virtually no explicit religion in it.I bought the book as a gift, but had to read it before giving it away. It made me want to read the LOTR series again.

Matthew Dickerson's book is an insightful exploration of the moral issues Tolkien deals with in The Lord of the Rings and other writings on Middle-earth. Dickerson sees free will as the central concern of Tolkien's creations, and by extension, all that free will implies about moral responsibility. Dickerson examines this thesis primarily by analyzing Tolkien's depiction of war and battle in Middle-earth, contrasting military victory and moral victory and showing how they are often at odds. This duality reinforces Tolkien's depiction of characters who live in two worlds -- the physical world, where military victory is a vital concern, and the more important spiritual plane, where the moral dimensions of one's actions are shown to be far more important than any physical battle. In our current world situation, an examination of the moral issues in war, and how and why one can act morally in such a situation, are highly apposite. Dickerson does an excellent job throughout, and has a fine touch in delineating the moral issues behind the characters' choices and actions, and what they can mean for the reader. One quibble -- in his early discussion of the major battles in The Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings, he writes that seeing battle through the eyes of the hobbits (as we do in all cases except the Battle of Helm's Deep and the Defense of Laketown) de-glorifies it. I

wanted to see what he would say about the battles of the Scouring of the Shire, which are seen exclusively through the eyes of the Hobbits and seem to me distinctly de-glorified, but he does not analyze these actions in this chapter. He does, however, devote much thought to the Scouring other places in the book. I also lament the lack of an index. Perhaps, now that we have seen the third of Peter Jackson's movies (not yet released when this book was written) and are seeing more biographical information becoming available on Tolkien's own war experiences (Tolkien and the Great War, War in the Works of JRR Tolkien, and the forthcoming Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull two-volume reference), we may hope for a second, expanded edition with a thorough index. I know I look forward to reading more of Dickerson's insights.

I've read all of Tolkien's works concerning the world of Hobbits and the like, and I can say that this book sifts through the lore and provides insight into the metaphors and Christian principles encompassing the work. This is a great work to further understand the mind of Tokien and his works.

I have been reading as many of the recently published short works about Tolkien as I can find, and although Mr. Dickerson's has been one of many, I would have to categorize it as one of a kind.I'm sure we'll be seeing many "spin-off" books on the market, as more and more publishers take advantage of the interest in Lord of the Rings that has been generated by the films. However, it is quite apparent that this author's presentation is no last-minute thesis, cobbled together to jump on the LOTR bandwagon. His attitude toward the source material is thoughtful and respectful, growing out of a deep understanding of both Tolkien's work and his own Christian faith, and he manages to present a thoroughly Christian viewpoint without preachiness or jargon.While short and easy to read, the coverage of themes such as "moral victory versus military victory," "the relationship between free will and human creativity," and the contrast of "hope and despair"---although perhaps mentioned in some other recent works---is here explained clearly and discussed thoroughly by a knowledgable author. Dickerson's references to the films maintains an appreciative neutral approach to what has been accomplished in the first two movies, and his book has enough new and original material to make it worth reading even for those who are steeped in Tolkien-related writings.

Covers some good points. I got it used for cheap and I think it is a fair enough read for Tolkien fans. I'm glad that I read it

This is a very well written book that really gets to what is at the heart of the story. The military battles that take place, though necessary, are not where the real victory comes. It is the spiritual battlefield that the soul fights on that determines failure or success in the war against the Enemy. The bitterest of those battles is the one going on within Frodo's soul, but it is also going on inside everyone else's, especially those who have had contact with Evil, either through the Ring or the palantirs, and how each dealt with the temptation of the Ring as it came to them. It speaks of Gandalf's hope in a bright future even as he awaits the battle of Minas Tirith and Denethor's despair at the same. It shows Faramir and Galadriel's wisdom that saving one's soul is more important than saving one's land. Both realize the latter should not be saved at the cost of the former. This warfare of the soul is the same battle that we are all engaged in and this book has much more to say about it than I report here. Highly recommended if you wish to be enlightened by the story going on beneath the surface, where battles are not decided with armies, but with individual wills and the infusion and acceptance or denial of grace and redemption. One of the better books out there on the subject.

An excellent read!

This was a gift for my husband. He was disappointed in Lord of the Rings and Philosophy because it didn't have enough Gandalf, so I bought him this for his Gandalf Fix!

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