

The Power of Sam

BY JOHN HAMILTON

We revel in the power of the muscular, the vigorous, the reckless, the daring. Rarely do we discipline power by wisdom to refrain from things we can do: create armaments for Armageddon, clone human beings, or bulldoze unique ecosystems to build parking lots. In The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien imagines what little people, hobbits, might do if the ultimate power of evil came into their possession.

In our culture we like power, any and all kinds of power: political power, military power, intellectual power, financial power, spiritual power. We revel in the muscular, the vigorous, the reckless, the daring. Jesus, meek and mild, does not compute; we so much prefer Christ "the power of God" to Christ "the anything else" that we get him confused with Arnold Schwarzenegger.

We rarely demonstrate power disciplined by wisdom to refrain from things we can do: create armaments for Armageddon, clone human beings, or bulldoze unique ecosystems to build parking lots.

J. R. R. Tolkien's magnificent tale of power, *The Lord of the Rings* (1936-1949), imagines what little people, hobbits, might do if the ultimate power of evil came into their possession in the form of a plain gold Ring.[1] Guided by Gandalf the wizard, two hobbits—Frodo the Ring-Bearer and his gardener Sam—lead a courageous band to return the Ring to Mt. Doom, where the Dark Lord made it, and now the only place in Middle-earth where it can be unmade.

Gandalf advised that "having the Ring we may seek to destroy it" would not enter the Dark Lord's mind (262). Nor often ours.

CONTRASTING VISIONS OF POWER

The wizard Gandalf embodies the power of wisdom. Researching ancient records in the dusty libraries in the great city of Gondor, he resembles a professor (perhaps of Oxford) (246). His opposite is Saruman, chief of the wizards, who has kept his desire for the Ring secret and succumbed to its evil: "we must have power, power to order all things as we will," he says (252).

Boromir and Faramir, sons of the Steward of Gondor who rules the city until the return of the King, provide another study in contrasts. Boromir the elder, his father's favorite, is a warrior who fights the encroaching darkness with unflinching zeal. He chafes at being, not the son of the King, but only the son of the Steward (655). The lure of the Ring overcomes him briefly: "It is mad not to use it," Boromir urges, "to use the power of the Enemy against him" (389). His lapse forces Frodo to strike out on his own, accompanied only by Sam, to find the Crack of Doom.

Director Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) poignantly portrays Boromir's transformation in the uses of power. At the Council of Elrond, he dismisses King Aragorn as "a mere Ranger." "Gondor has no king!" Boromir cries, "Gondor needs no king!" At his death, however, he confides to Aragorn, "I would have followed you—my brother, my captain, my King!"

Like Boromir, all of us can be transformed from claiming that we have no king, from believing that we *need* no king, to professing that Jesus Christ is our brother, captain, and King. But doing so requires us to face that we are powerless to resist the will to power. Any of us, as individuals or in organizations, on finding a scrap of power within our grasp, face the danger that the Ring of Power represents.

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Followers of Christ, as Tolkien makes clear, cannot be conformed to the world in a quest for might and control, regardless of the justice of their cause. Rather, we seek the mind of Christ, which Philippians 2:5-11 describes in words and the Gospel of John depicts in symbol: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began

to wash the disciples' feet" (13:3-5).

Jesus, God from God, Light from Light, laid aside his robe of majesty and performed a kindness so lowly that none of the disciples had been willing to do it for themselves, much less for others. It was slaves' work—wiping stinking calloused feet, caked with the dirt of the fields and the stench of the streets; work that demeaned anyone who did it. You wouldn't catch a priest or a prince or a procurator doing it. Or a disciple.

Jesus!
kneeling in front of them one by one
taking their feet in hard carpenter's hands
cupping water in his palm
bathing each sore filthy foot
gently soothing cooling
drying with a soft warm towel.

Jesus' healthy self-fullness[2] freed him to empty himself, take the form of a slave, humble himself, and become obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. With abandon he threw away earthly life, position, riches, and power—the very things we grab for.

Christ-like power shines through humility and duty. Gandalf humbly identifies himself as "a servant of the Secret Fire" when confronting the ancient demon (322); when contending with the Steward of Gondor, he claims, "I also am a steward" (742). How unlike our tendency to downsize stewardship to dollars and cents, and conceive power only in terms of position and fame!

Faramir, the younger brother of Boromir, also illustrates Christ-likeness in relation to power. Meeting him in the wild, Frodo concludes he "was a man less self-regarding, both sterner and wiser" (650). Guessing that Boromir desires the Ring of Power, Faramir describes how his own view differs: "I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend" (656). When Sam in an unguarded moment reveals that Frodo is carrying the Ring, Faramir has a chance "to show his quality" by refusing the power that fortune has put in his grasp; he is "wise enough to know that there are some perils from which a man must flee" (665-666).

Faramir's powerful humility reminds us of the biblical Jonathan, son of King Saul. A mighty warrior, beloved of the people, next in line for the throne, Jonathan elevated David in public, saved his life from Saul's jealous rage, and acknowledged that David, not he, would be the next king (1 Samuel 18:1-4; 20:1-42; and 23:15-18).

THE POWER OF SIMPLE GOODNESS

Of all the characters in Tolkien's epic work, Sam owns the power—both plain for all to see and unknown to himself—that is most powerful. Sam re-

veals the invincibility of simple goodness. A trustworthy conspirator (103), he is a servant and friend who loves without limit. Sam shows his practical nature, for example, in the chapter "Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit" when he stews a couple of coneys and wishes for a few taters (634-647). Gazing at the sleeping Frodo, he perceives a light shining in him, suggesting to the reader (not Sam) that bearing the Ring is causing the spiritual purification of his master, which Sam's unfailing support has made possible. Despite their peril, Sam delights in seeing an "oliphaunt" (642, 646-647), his innocent joy marking an indomitable spirit.

Believing that Frodo is already dead and that he will die soon, Sam retrieves the Ring and carries on the quest. When someone says Frodo is still alive, Sam hears a warning deep inside: "Don't trust your head, Samwise, it is not the best part of you" (723). Trusting his heart instead, Sam searches for Frodo. When he cannot find him, like Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail (Acts 16:25f.), Sam begins to sing. Hearing the song, Frodo answers, and they put the quest back on track (887-888).

As their journey to Mt. Doom wears on, Frodo drops to the ground exhausted while Sam keeps watch. Here Tolkien pens one of the most exalted passages of the trilogy:

> ...the night sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for awhile. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach (901).

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Here we glimpse the power of hope in darkness, of overcoming evil with good, of beauty both within and beyond this world: "The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never mastered it" (John 1:5, NEB).[3]

Sam's power is not that of a great elf lord, as the servants of the Dark Lord of Mordor fear. Earlier, when he takes the Ring from Frodo's still body, the nature of his power becomes clear. In stark contrast to the arrogant earth-shattering powers storming about him, he is able to resist the

Ring's corrosive power, which has spun wild fantasies of "Samwise the Strong, Hero of the Age" (880). "In that hour of trial it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm; but also deep down in him lived still unconquered his plain hobbit-sense" (881). If only we would hold firm to the love of our Master and our plain hobbit-sense!

NOTES

1 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1994), xv. Page numbers in this edition are indicated in the text.

2 The word is Andrew Lester's, meaning a positive sense of self, neither selfish nor selfless.

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