

Series Review

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER, Season 2 (Amazon Studios, US 2024)

More than twenty years after the release of *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* (Peter Jackson, US/NZ 2001–2003), the most successful fantasy film trilogy of all time, we return to Middle-earth with two seasons of the series *LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER* (Amazon Studios, US 2022–present). Set well before the events of Peter Jackson’s films, the series tells the story of the rise of the Dark Lord Sauron and his plot to subjugate Middle-earth through Rings of Power.

The first season familiarises us with locations and protagonists of what is to be a five-season series. The kingdom of the humans of Númenor, the honourable realms of the elves and the underground halls of the dwarves are at the centre. The first season has thus set the stage for the great confrontation between these realms and the antagonist Sauron in the second season, the focus of this review.

The world of Middle-earth is a creation of J. R. R. Tolkien, who touched a wide audience of readers with numerous novels and sketches. His works are characterised by a deep religiosity and metaphysical questions.¹ An adaptation must inevitably relate to this – the way in which the series so far does so will be outlined below using key aspects. Three overarching religious themes are evident: the understanding of creation, apocalypticism, and the function of the religious practice of the peoples of Middle-earth.

THE RINGS OF POWER implicitly draws on an extensive creation mythology and cosmology that Tolkien developed in his complex work *The Silmarillion*. The beginning of creation is marked by the creation of the universe by a deistic god called Eru Ilúvatar. The universe includes angelic beings called

1 His approach can be described as “concealed christianity”, see Flieger 2005, 36–37.

Ainur, who in turn sing the world of Middle-earth into being. The complete future of the world is already contained in this music of creation, whereby the adversary of God – an Ainur named Melkor – also plays dissonances. But even these discords complete the harmony of Eru Ilúvatar's creation.²

This metaphysical framework is illustrated by the title track in the opening credits of *THE RINGS OF POWER*, Season 1 and 2. Key players in the series are symbolically depicted in sections of a painting made of sand – a metaphor for time – which is reminiscent of the opening credits of the fantasy series *THE WHEEL OF TIME* (Amazon Studios, US 2021). This visual impression is reinforced by the music. Its oscillation between the individual motifs, which are taken up in scenes of the protagonists, is a reflection of the music of the Ainur. The menacing-sounding Sauron motif has the clearest melody, in a horn line, but this melody also culminates in the epic main motif.

The interpretation of the figure of Sauron is the driving force behind *THE RINGS OF POWER* so far: the Valar (the elite of the Ainur angelic beings), who is in rebellion against Eru-God, sees himself not as an agent of evil but as a reformer and visionary of creation. His agenda is to eradicate discord through the elimination of ambivalence. The idea of creating a utopia by unleashing violence to overcome shades of grey is reminiscent of the motto of the 16th-century radical reformator Thomas Müntzer, “Make order in the world!”. However, Sauron is limited by a theologically important motif in Tolkien's world: only good can create something new, evil can only degenerate what already exists. This can be seen in the creation of the rings, the eponymous artefacts in *THE RINGS OF POWER*. Although Sauron assists the elves in their creation, neither the idea nor the material comes from him. He can only corrupt rings and deform them to his own ends in order to gain power over their bearers.

In the creation mythology of Tolkien's work, the craftsmanship of the Elves plays a special role: immortal, but bound to Middle-earth and more closely connected to the good, the true and the beautiful than other beings, the Elves harbour a desire to preserve and reproduce these values through art and culture. But the immortal Elves fade, fade, fade over the ages of Middle-earth. The first season of *THE RINGS OF POWER* summarises this process of fading, depicting it as an event that cannot be delayed. The solution: rings crafted with the magical metal mithril and the arcane knowledge of

2 The cosmology is reminiscent of, amongst others, Boethius, *De institutione musica*, see Wicher 2021.

their wisest blacksmith, Celebrimbor. He describes them as “pure, unadulterated beauty”. The three elven rings created in the last episode of the first season – without Sauron’s participation – initially fulfil their purpose. They stop the decay of the Elven world and heal the destroyed nature. But does this self-empowerment for *conservatio mundi* not violate the harmony of creation by Eru-God?

This leads to the second aspect that reveals the religious background of the second season of *THE RINGS OF POWER* – apocalypticism. The tradition of Christian-Jewish apocalypticism finds expression in the end-time visions of the protagonists and the appearance of an anti-Christ figure. As in the first season, Regent Miriel of Númenor, the mighty island kingdom of the people of Middle-earth, has visions of the collapse of her empire. The downfall of Númenor’s highly developed civilisation is reminiscent of Atlantis, Miriel herself of Cassandra and the equally blind seer Teiresias in Greek mythology. She has apocalyptic visions in dreams – often interpreted as a medium of religious revelation – or through a palantir, a magical object similar to a crystal ball, which also shows other actors Númenor’s clairvoyant visions. The extent to which this future can be prevented or is only made possible by these actions remains open to both the protagonist and the viewer.

From the perspective of Christian-Jewish apocalypticism, the interpretation of Sauron as a type of anti-Christ in *THE RINGS OF POWER* so far is striking. This religiously connoted interpretation is well established in Tolkien research.³ Several motifs evoke associations with Christian-Jewish traditions: Sauron is a fallen angelic being (Ainur), which is reminiscent of the angelic rebellion in Revelation 12:4–7. The series reinforces the seducer motif and portrays him as charismatic, attractive and (sexually) seductive. The figure of Sauron thus has echoes of John Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost*, while his behaviour corresponds to Iago in Shakespeare’s *Othello*. The series reinforces this impression with Sauron’s snake-like armour, in which he reveals himself to his followers and enemies in the eighth episode of the second season.

A scene from the second episode of *THE RINGS OF POWER*, Season 2, represents the climax of the series’ religious sensibility so far. The elven smith Celebrimbor doubts the identity of his partner in forging the rings, who the viewer already knows is Sauron. To rekindle his belief that he is a messenger of the gods, he reveals himself to the elf in a godlike form: a voice like the

3 For deeper insight into Tolkien, the most accessible work is still Shippey 2001.

one Moses heard in the burning bush is heard from the forge fire (Exod. 3:1-4:17). Like the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt. 17:1-13), Sauron emerges from the fire in fair form. Celebrimbor falls to his knees and worships the being, overwhelmed by this self-revelation of the holy figure. When he asks it for its name, Sauron utters in disguised form, “I have many names”, evoking traditions of name-mysticism. Only then does he introduce himself as An-natar, the Lord of Gifts, and ambassador of the Valar, who has chosen the elven smith to support him in his sub-creation of the rings. Like Faust, who is seduced by Mephisto, Celebrimbor ultimately falls victim to his own ambitions – not only he, but his entire kingdom is destroyed by Sauron in the final episode of the second season.

The island kingdom of Númenor is also threatened with destruction: a power-political tension leads to a split between the kingsmen and the faithful. The latter worship the Valar in continuity with the traditions of Númenor and are persecuted by the kingsmen. The way in which the second season of THE RINGS OF POWER shows this is reminiscent of scenes of the persecution of religious minorities such as the first Christians in the Roman Empire. Queen Miriel, leader of the faithful, even submits to a judgement by the Valar in the sixth episode of the second season: she steps into the sea near a monster, from which only the intervention of the Valar could save her. The act is reminiscent of Greek mythology, among other things. But she is saved: like Jonah, the fish spits her ashore, which the bystanders interpret as a sign from the gods.

Even religious practices of the orcs are depicted, in particular their ancestor worship and dignified treatment of their dead. This reinforces the series’ narrative that the orcs are more human and less animalistic than in Peter Jackson’s trilogy, a decision that raises questions about the future of the series. So far, feedback on Amazon’s adaptation has been very mixed among fans and critics, partly due to such controversial decisions that deviate from Tolkien’s work and thus the expectations of the fans. Three seasons of THE RINGS OF POWER remain to be seen. The greatest hope for the series is that it still has the potential to inspire viewers for the world of Tolkien.

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Filmography:

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER, Season 1 (Developed by: J. D. Payne and Patrick McKay, Amazon Studios, US 2022).

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER, Season 2 (Developed by: J. D. Payne and Patrick McKay, Amazon Studios, US 2024).

THE LORD OF THE RINGS (Peter Jackson, US/NZ 2001–2003).

THE WHEEL OF TIME (Developed by: Rafe Judkins, Amazon Studios, US 2021).