

hey there fellow Travelers welcome to the Tolkien Road episode 319. how do the rings of power work what powers do they convey that's the topic we'll be diving into on this episode before we get started I'd like to give a double up air 5 to our patrons and get those hands up there patrons three two one very nice felt that love coming through thank you very much special thanks to this episode's executive producers John R Caitlin of t with Tolkien Jacob lockham John H scotchey Bobo and arrow 27 eru27. become a patron by visiting [patreon.com Tolkien Road](https://www.patreon.com/TolkienRoad) your financial support helps the Tolkien road to keep on evering on and land you some cool perks along the way learn more at [patreon.com Tolkien Road](https://www.patreon.com/TolkienRoad) also check out [truemistress.com](https://www.truemistress.com) for Tolkien Road merch like t-shirts signed copies of my book books and the Glorious two trees camper mug use promo code Rings 319 to get 10 off your order that's [truemithspress.com](https://www.truemithspress.com) myths like mythology check out the show notes for the link YouTube hit that like button don't forget to subscribe and let us know what's on your mind in the comments below all right so have you ever asked your have you ever asked yourself how the rings of power work in other words why did sauron's ring bring him Mastery over the other Rings what sorts of powers did the Rings convey this is a crucial question for the Middle Earth legendarium but it's one that in a sense sits in the background of the Lord of the Rings we all know the ring verse and it does and it does bear a sort of magical gravitas all its own but we only rarely see the ring at work so is the ring Justin McGuffin a mysterious plot device that only exists to serve the story and motivate the actions of the characters is there anything there in short it's much more than a MacGuffin in fact I'd argue that the idea of the MacGuffin first made Popular by Alfred Hitchcock runs counter to Tolkien's whole theory of Storytelling for Tolkien it was important that the Ring's power be substantiated to some degree we get some sense of this in The Lord of the Rings for starters the ring makes both Bilbo and Frodo invisible however the ring also causes Frodo to enter into an overlapping dimension of reality and allows him to be seen by both Sauron and the ring wraiths so there's like a give and take of powers there we get other hints that the ring somehow commands the respect and even Obedience of others this is a somewhat more abstract concept but we get this sense from the reactions of characters such as Galadriel and Gandalf to being offered the ring and the rain grants long life even immortality but something like conditional immortality take Gollum for example he's able to live in a naturally long life but not a normal life by any means in fact not really a life that any of us would want to live forever uh immortally so and Bilbo after possessing it for many years appears younger than expected but feels like butter scraped over too much bread I know exactly what he's talking about there when he says that I feel that sometimes myself I'm sure many of you do as well so while Tolkien doesn't give a nice tidy list of the powers that the ring conveys we know some of the powers it confers and we know that in the hands of certain actors of high stature it would be a catastrophically powerful weapon so the ring is much more than a McGuffin this sort of plot device that doesn't really matter however as we seek to understand what Tolkien was getting at with the ring we need to realize one very important thing the ring for Tolkien is simply that sauron's ring it's not meant to represent or symbolize anything else this is something Tolkien insists upon in his frequent rebuff frequent rebuffs of allegory so you know it's not like an allegory for Atomic power or something like that right that was something Tolkien addresses in one of his letters now the ring is the thing it is in the book right that's what it is in the book now whether it has um uh ways in which it overlaps with other aspects of our reality right with aspects of our reality yeah those things are entirely possible but that would be more of a case of applicability as Tolkien would put it not allegory

um so it doesn't mean it's unrelated to whatever things it might bear relation to for whatever reason and I do think Tolkien had certain ideas very strongly in mind when he wrote The Lord of the Rings in fact I know he did for Tolkien the ring is indeed a magical device but he had something very clearly in mind when he spoke of it in such a way as a magical thing for him magic was not something meaningless in terms of the primary World in fact by the term magic he very clearly meant what we in the modern world would call the machine in the Waldman letter he said by magic or machine I intend all use of external plans or devices of development of instead of development of the inherent inner powers or talents let me try that again by magic or machine I intend all use of external plans or devices instead of development instead of development of the inherent inner powers or talents or even the use of these talents with the with the corrupted motive of dominating bulldozing the real world or coercing other Wills the machine is our more obvious modern form though more closely related to magic than is usually recognized make use my machine here that I'm working on and make uh make my my text a little larger so I'm not messing up so much all right for Tolkien magic is not some pretty modern thing that no longer has anything significance for us but it's exactly the machine or in other words technology that thing that we moderns like to believe makes us so happy right go back to that definition he just used the machine so uh it's uh using the uh these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating okay um and Oh I thought I thought I had this quote in there but he also says very close to this in the same letter he says for making the will more effective right they're powerful the machines are things that are powerful making the will more effective but for him it's magic a machine or the same thing right so like an ancient sorcerer in Tolkien's mind is doing the same thing that a uh you know a powerful person with a you know a powerful machine is doing nowadays right there they have something that's useful for making their will more effective more efficient more effective foreign magic and machine are pitted against Art which the elves by Nature tend to employ art is the development of the natural potential of something to bring out more of its inherent Beauty and possibility as opposed to Magic and machine which seek to exploit natural faculties in order to achieve greater domination or power if you want to know the fruits of these two different perspectives consider the Elvish Realms of Rivendell or Iothlorian versus the ring obsessed Realms of ice and guard or Mordor right picture those places in your mind okay uh Mordor versus Rivendell or Iothlorian okay I'd much rather be in Rivendell or Iothlorian beautiful places the you know these people that abide there they've used their natural talents to beautify these places to make them these like Wonders on Earth these places do you truly want to visit Mordor Eisengard lands of slavery right lands of slavery lands of Ash and dust right just horrible places so how does this all play out in the legendarium and specifically as it relates to the rings of power in other words how does Sauron's ring work its magic so um you know I I'd have a I have so many thoughts on this you guys but the thing that I brought up when I was watching the rings of power on one of the episodes we were watching the rings of power as it struck me for the first time that a really a really good analogy for the way that the rings of power work are something that's very familiar to all of us in fact it's something you may be using right at this moment as you watch this video it's our smartphones right our smartphones um now how how does that work remember let's start from let's start from what Tolkien said about magic and machine right magic it's kind of the ancient term we think oh well we don't really believe in magic we don't even have magic now right and machine but for Tolkien

they're the same thing right it's just different terms for the same thing it's this uh you know these devices these methods these schemes we construct in order to make our Wills more effective especially for Domination but I really like the example of the smartphone and hopefully that's going to really illustrate this you and this for you and bring home exactly how the rings of power work right how they work within the legendarium well let's look at the ring verse though let's look at the ring verse because this is a very familiar passage for most of us and it can be easy to gloss over it but I think there's more there when you read it closely than you realize three rings for the Elven Kings under the sky seven for the dwarf Lords in their Halls of stone nine for Mortal men doomed to die one for the dark lord on his dark throne in the land of Mordor where the Shadows lie one ring to rule them all one ring to find them one ring to bring them all and in the darkness behind them in the land of Mordor where the Shadows lie in summary the ring is really more like a ring scheme right that's that's where its real power lies now I think there is some truth to it you know to that there is some truth to the device right so it's not just this uh ethereal thing it's not just this abstract thing but because the ring is an actual thing within the world of Middle Earth right uh it is an actual device but it's kind of like the master device right it's the master device over all these other devices okay um three rings for the Elven Kings under the sky Tolkien spoke of the Elven rings as the first to be made in fact the Rings seemed to have been the elves idea originally whilst with Sauron serving as something like a consultant to make the Rings more effective and it worked but effective for what the elves of middle earth's greatest desire in the second age was actually their natural one to beautify it even to preserve it from Decay to make it something like valinor the Blessed realm itself right they'd been summoned to valinor many of them had come back and they were kind of summoned to valinor again but they wanted to stay in Middle Earth right they wanted to stay in Middle Earth they wanted to kind of have their own dominion over there but make it like valinor all right so they wanted to be in valinor but they wanted to stay in Middle Earth at the same time wanted to have their cake and eat it too right um and in a way that's something the elves were probably capable of achieving right to make this beautiful these beautiful Realms uh within Middle Earth and we think of Rivendell we think of Iothalorian really they did right and and you know in certain ways so they wanted to make Middle Earth more like the Blessed Realm so I don't think it's any coincidence then that the Elven Rings correspond to the Realms of the three greatest Valar manwe right that's he's corresponds to Villa which was the Ring of air right omo he's he's the the Lord of waters he corresponds to Nina the Ring of uh the Ring of waters and awale uh corresponds to fire like kind of the the maker right allay is the maker um he's of the Earth but you know you think of that as like the fires of the earth and like forming you know using fire to form things from the earth he's narya right so these three rings allowed those who possess them to ward off the decays of time and postpone the weariness of the world now before we go any further on this ring verse let's just revisit let's revisit this concept of the smartphone right so your smartphone what does it do for you well it gives you all these Powers right it gives you all these powers and again I'm picking on smartphones specifically because it really hits home for us and I think they're a certain Revolution that really corresponds extremely well to the ring scheme but it's not like smartphones are the Rings right they're not that that's not necessarily what I'm saying but I'm saying like pay attention to what is going on in Middle Earth what's going on in these stories because they are applicable to what's going on with us and these things right so um what what do I mean by that um you know we think of the smartphone as this great machine a Marvel of

modern technology but its potency lies not just in the device itself but its connectedness we can do things with our smartphones now that would Astound people even 50 years ago I mean 20 years ago quite honestly right we can communicate directly with anyone anywhere in the world at any time that's just mind-blowing for most of human human history right the the 99.9 percent of human history couldn't even conceive of that we can list off a whole lot of other powers too but that's the thing when you put on the smartphone I'm putting it on right now okay holding it in my hand keeping it close by you gain many great Powers but you're suddenly visible in ways that should be truly frightening to you okay um I'm not being sensationalist about that either who's on the other end who's looking in on your conversations we trust that the actors are benevolent but we better realize that they might not be okay this is just the fact of the technology right we don't know who has access to these things at the end of the day you know for all you know and we you know we point to other what's our solution right our solution is often more technology right well we'll just build better encryption to ensure that those people can't but give me a break there's always going to be some answer to that at the technology level right at the end of the day you know we won't really get into like how do you beat how do you beat the ring scheme um but I think the only the best answer is probably just what the elves end up doing right as opposed to the you know to the uh to men right the elves take their rings off and hide them right they they stop using them and hide them um now I I don't I don't know what the answer is for um you know for example uh Gandalf and uh Galadriel um you know are able to uh you know have some use of the Rings later on the Elven Rings um that's an interesting question of itself not really one I'm prepared to dive into here uh it could be that they kind of found their own their hacks for these devices because at the end of the day the Elven rings in particular were rings that were not actually ever touched by Sauron right he gave them the technology he told he kind of instructed the uh Elvish uh ring makers how to make these rings but at the end of the day uh he did not um he did not ever touch them himself okay um now so so that could be one possible answer to why you know they're uh Gandalf and galadriel are able to wear them use them to some degree later on um now here's something really interesting Tolkien said about the three Elvish Rings therefore the three remained unsullied for they were forged by kellebrimbor alone and the Hand of Sauron had never touched them yet they were also subject to the one how can they be subject to the one if Sauron had never touched them because Sauron created that technology and the scheme that made them so powerful and made sure he could dominate that technology and scheme from the outset he didn't have to touch them only invent the technology and teach it to others right so he invented the greater technology right he invented if you will uh the internet right and and then everybody and then was like Hey this this new invention just make sure they're plugged into this thing and they'll be great they'll allow you to do so many powerful things okay um so let's move on to the Dwarven Rings seven for the dwarf Lords in their Halls of stone um so you know the dwarves are an interesting case all right um they you know what what can we learn from The Ring verse about them well they dwelt in their Halls of stone not much there but what was their real goal well their real goal was to amass great Treasures um Tolkien says the dwarves indeed prove tough and hard to tame they ill endure the domination of others and the thoughts of their hearts are hard to Fathom nor they can they be turned to Shadows they use their rings only for the getting of wealth but wrath and an overmastering greed of gold were kindled in their hearts of which evil enough after came to the prophet of Sauron it is said that the foundation of each of the seven

hordes of the dwarf Kings of old was a golden ring all right so um you know I I kind of think about this in this way um dwarves if you've ever seen Parks and Rec dwarves are kind of like Ron Swanson they don't want to be seen and there is a Simplicity of intent with them if you've ever met someone like this you know what I'm talking about they can seem impenetrable okay so um the dwarves even though they kept their Rings they they really weren't that that easy for uh Sauron to see them right not as easy as it was for like men later on okay so um you know so that's the the dwarves were a frustration for Sauron in a different way than the elves were a frustration for him all right um but nevertheless they granted the dwarf certain powers Sauron just didn't get as much back from them as he wanted right and what does sour I want he wants he wants to be able to see what's going on he wants to be able to surveil them he wants to be able to um to to look into to to look deeper into their Spirits into their souls right so that's what Sauron uh you know that's what Sauron gains when he gives these Powers right remember what's uh anatar right that was one of his names in the second age he's The Giver of gifts right hey I'm giving you a gift but this gift comes with strings attached almost very literally right like strings that allow me to look into you right that led me to look into your motives that allow me to have some control over you but men is where it really becomes the the most significant right so let's go back and read what does the ring verse say about men nine from Mortal men doomed to die okay and that's a really good line there because it speaks to the motivation of men what do men want more than anything else well we know from the story of numenor that men want immortality right the men of numenor given a very long life compared to other men but it's not immortality and towards the end of numenor's History they start they start seeking immortality this thing that is not intended for them okay so they want immortality but it also seems that they want the ability to see more deeply into the spiritual world but that doesn't always lead to happiness either right you know and many of us can probably understand this right we want to know perhaps uh what's happened to loved ones who have passed on um we want to know you know uh be able to be able to access deeper secrets that maybe we can't access on a normal natural level um we want maybe Supernatural Powers okay and so we see you know we have kind of an idea of how the nazcool how the ring race became who they are right they are granted this long life but what are they you know thousands of years later I mean they're basically these walking Shadows these walking powerful they're still powerful in certain ways they're still alive after all this time way past when a man should be alive but they're wraiths right you know they've they've been stretched so thin right over time their their bodily existence has been stretched so so thin but they're still powerful they're powerful how to do sauron's will right that's what they chiefly exist for in this time he's able he's able to see through them to see the things they see um he's able to exercise even when he doesn't have a body he's able to ex carry out his own will through them right so we see how the Rings operate with them the trade-off initially was hey I and I don't know actually if it ever says this anywhere and anything that Tolkien wrote but we see that that it doesn't say it directly but we see that right and how he names it here nine for Mortal men doomed to die nine for Mortal men doomed to die this will save you from dying I didn't say it would make you happy and be in being saved from dying I just said it would save you from dying right there he gets his power over them okay all right so and in the end how does that one ring kind of work over them all well it binds them all right it it calls them all to Mordor right to the left to the land of Mordor where the Shadows lie okay and why there because that's where Mount Doom is right it's forged in the fires of Mount Doom okay

one ring to rule them all one ring to find them all right so it's ruling them wherever they are it's finding them wherever they are and and it brings them right it brings them back okay it calls them back and then it binds them into slavery all right that's what we see going on with the power of the One Ring over the rest of the Rings again there's the interesting question of the elves and why and Gandalf and why they're sort of impervious to the to the operations of the One Ring much later on in history and again I think that's probably explainable in some different ways I'm sure Tolkien had his own ideas for that and guys as I go through all of this there's so much more that could be said about any one of these topics this is really one of those is I got it just did the research on it getting more and more into it I was like wow there's way too much to cover here in one episode um so you know this is one where I'm really really looking forward to your all's comments on uh because you know there's just so much more that needs to be said so many interesting like sort of so much so much uh thinking that needs to happen as regards to uh to the Rings right to the rings of power but here's something I find really really interesting who haven't we considered yet we haven't considered Hobbits okay now we all know the role that Hobbits play in this story right in the in the greater story um and and Hobbit and uh in the Waldman letter right where a lot of this stuff comes from Tolkien even speaks of Hobbits um let me see if I can find this because I've actually I think I've got the um the Waldman letter pulled up here on my on my computer let me see if I can find the specific quote I'm looking for that would be pretty sweet oh no I'm not looking the right thing um let's see here

up well okay I'm gonna get it I'm gonna get it you guys don't go anywhere here we go all right uh

if you never like just again if you've never read the Waldman letter you gotta do it um okay I don't know if I've got this one highlighted well enough

uh yeah I don't see it okay basically what I was looking for you guys was um this quote where uh Tolkien talks about um the hobbit's kind of representing this this important theme in his work and an important theme in history this idea that like it's the unknown people of the world that are actually the truly powerful ones right that actually that actually can have the power uh that matters most in the end okay it's not the Lords and the governors right but it's the power but it's the seemingly unknown and the weak right uh that that in the end are the most important and the most powerful which should make you feel good if like most of us you're kind of insignificant and not that powerful right um so here's what he says I I was reading through um the prologue to Lord of the Rings recently and I found this and I just found it really interesting because of certain words he says they do not and did not understand or like machines machines they possessed from the first the art of Disappearing swiftly and silently when large folk whom they don't do not wish to meet come blundering by and this art they have developed until two men it may seem magical but Hobbits have never in fact studied magic of any kind we have it all right there right he's speaking about Hobbits and he's not even speaking in the same context as what he was telling to Milton Waldman in the in that 1951 letter where we talk about magic in the machine but he talks about both of those things right here okay the hobbits do not and did not understand or like machines they're very simple right so they don't they you know they don't like these this idea of like these tools that make the will more effective now they're probably not thinking of of it on that level and they probably um you know they don't uh necessarily that's not

why they would say they dislike machines okay but they have an inherent distrustfulness of them okay so they're not powerful they're not looking to become more powerful that's that says something about Hobbits in general and they possess the art of Disappearing swiftly and silently which is interesting because whenever Bilbo and Frodo put on the ring what happens is they immediately disappear okay now Tolkien says this is a property of the Rings of power in general that they they confer uh invisibility right but um you know we see we we see this happening specifically with the hobbits and we can see how that's a very alluring thing for them so if you were going to get power over them with any of the Rings uh giving them any of the Rings it would be to you know by this virtue of invisibility because they don't like being seen um but they've never in fact studied magic of any kind so anyway I thought that was interesting uh to speak about the hobbits here because they aren't listed in the ring verse they're overlooked but that's the whole point of the hobbits in the end right is that they're overlooked by Sauron they're not thought of um and and probably to some degree because they don't like machines okay and then there's the whole question of Tom Bombadil why is he impervious to the power of the Ring I think it's probably something very uh similar it could be because he's art completely actualized right that he's art fully developed and completely actualized that he's that he sort of represents that in a way um and I don't think that's a stretch right um he basically is this walking artwork that kind of just is odd in the rest of the in the rest of the story okay um so you know there's so much more that I want to say on this topic and um you know I I really there's so much more the Tolkien said on it but this this question of how the rings of power work has just been one that has been haunting me for a little while and I wanted to do some initial research on it and share that with you guys so I hope you found this viable I hope this you know the whole smartphone analogy really helps you understand that better I think there's a lot I I think that really makes a lot of sense of what we see going on with the rings of power okay um you know again it's not that they are smartphones themselves it's that uh it it's that they confer power while while requiring you to sacrifice something of your Independence right something of uh your ability to not be seen right um it you know the the now I could go on but the analogies uh you know the analogies are there so all right well let's um let's look at a little bit of Correspondence here so we have a note from Jake on August 2nd Jake on August 2nd

Jake said Hey brother I wish I could post this somewhere more public but this podcast is an incredible Class Act I started at episode one and now I'm on 20 and Counting it's great banter and easy listening it's inspiring and gives hope during the other doldrum work days the often doldrum work days I'm a father of three small ones and I commend you and your wife for your excellent work I will continue to share keep going this is awesome Jake thank you so much I hope you've continued on the Tolkien Road this one was sent a little bit a couple months ago been behind on catching up with my mail so really appreciate you um you know taking the time to comment on episode 300 and hope you continue to listen would love to hear from you again and continue the conversation hey everybody else drop us a line you can correspond with us in a number of ways check out the show notes to learn more and we'll do our best to respond to you somehow at some point all right thank you to our amazing patrons especially the following John R Caitlin of t with Tolkien Jacob blockham John H scotchy Bobo aru27 Ms Anonymous Andrew T Red Hawk Shannon S Brian o Emilio P Zeke F James a James L Chris L Chuck F Aja V issue of the hammer Teresa C David of pints with Jack Jonathan D Eric B Johanna T Mike m

Robert H Paul D Julia wurti Matthew W Joe bagelman Chris K Jacob S Richard K Matt R Garrett P John W Eugene D Chris B and Daniel S as well as those celebrating their patreon anniversary in December of 2022 Zeke F Shannon S Emilio P Brian o Andrew T and Amy H all right everybody thank you all so much for watching and or listening we will talk at you next time bye-bye