

TOLKIEN AND THEOLOGY: BELIEVING IN FAIRY-STORIES

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Lord of the Rings devotees gathered recently at New College to explore a theological perspective on Tolkien's trilogy and the recent film treatments. Three papers were presented—two of them are printed here; the third paper, by Dr Kirsten Birkett, is available in the subscriber-only Associate Access section of the CASE website.

Let's be clear from the start: I don't consider the Lord of the Rings to be a work of theology. Theo=god, logos=word: this novel is not full of words about God. There are other books, and in particular, another Book, that offer words about God.

LOTR was not written to defend a particular view of God. It wasn't written to examine God's nature, nor to justify the ways of God to human beings (cf. Milton's famous explanation of the purpose of *Paradise Lost*). Nor was it written as an allegory of God's relations with the world, as was Spenser's great poem, *The Faerie Queene*. In fact, it is known that Tolkien detested allegory, as Diane will explain.

LOTR is not about theology, it is about a particular world—the world of Middle-earth, somewhere between heaven and the underworld—and its history, its struggles, its natural features, its legends and fables. One of the astonishing features of Middle-earth is how *real* it seems. It has an extensive history and a cultural complexity that matches or surpasses that of actual nations. The names are real: Mordor, Galadriel, Smeagol and Deagol, Lothlórien. They seem to derive from actual lineages, real genealogies. And yet, we know that they sprang from the mind of one man: J.R.R. Tolkien.

Tolkien received 'wounds' in his childhood, something which Australian poet Les Murray considers a source of creative energy.¹ It is astonishing how many creative people lost a parent while very young. Tolkien's father died when he was 4, his mother when he was 12 after she had

ostracised the family by converting to Roman Catholicism. He also lost all but one of his best childhood friends to the trenches of WWI. As a child, he held grief in one hand and imagination in the other. They are two potent forces, which came together for Tolkien in ancient mythology and language.²

Tolkien's childhood was spent learning ancient languages: he had mastered Greek and Latin by age 12, at which point he began to add Gothic, Welsh, Finnish, Old English. After reading English Language and Literature at Oxford, he was employed by the New English Dictionary where he worked on words beginning with 'W'. He absorbed mythology and the stories of medieval England, and felt a strong contrast between them and the developments of history in his time.

War encroached, taking away friendship, domesticity, comfort and human kindness. Industrialisation irritated Tolkien endlessly, and he contrasted the 'reality' of what he read in stories—people in love, the beauty of nature, virtues expressed via adventure, moral struggle—with the 'unreality' of factories, mechanics, cars, machines. What seemed most real to others—the hard metals of production—seemed unreal to Tolkien. And what seemed real to him—clouds, joyous creatures, great secret beasts, has come to be known as 'fantasy'. He wrote: "The notion that motor-cars are more 'alive' than, say, centaurs or dragons is curious; that they are more 'real' than, say, horses is pathetically absurd".³

So a great conflict, a wound, a loss, developed in Tolkien, a gap between the reality he saw and the reality he knew. It was this dissonance that lay behind his work on LOTR.

The real world of faerie

In 1947, Tolkien published a very significant and revealing essay, 'On fairy-stories'. In the essay, he explores the meaning of a way of thinking called 'faerie', commonly expressed in fairy tales. Tolkien is at pains to point out that most people have a very narrow and mistaken view of what such a tale is—that it is a simple made-up story containing small unreal creatures. Tolkien's own definition is more metaphysical: a fairy-story contains events, words and ideas that are magical or fantastical, but in a serious way such that it seems real. Such a tale is marked especially by *the attempt to recover from a loss*. Fairy-stories could achieve at least three things: recovery, escape and consolation.

By **recovery**, Tolkien meant the regaining of a clear perspective, a return to health, and renewal of what has been tainted. The fairy-story, far from a move away from reality, is supposed to be a journey back to reality, to the way things are when the dust is swept away and the window pane polished.

By **escape**, Tolkien did *not* mean escapism. He wasn't referring to fleeing from reality, but escaping its accursedness, escaping from the imprisonments of the world—moral, personal, physical, mortal imprisonments. Accursed things worth escaping from include hunger, poverty, pain, sorrow and injustice. And the Great Escape, as Tolkien names it, is from death. These are the very subjects which fairy-stories address: the quest for paradise, a place of feasting and no sorrow and pain, a place where right is done and wrong is done away with, a place where death is not the victor.

If elves were to write fairy-stories, they would write ‘human-stories’, claims Tolkien: “The Human-stories of the elves are doubtless full of the Escape from Deathlessness”. We write stories which help us to escape our prisons.

And by **consolation**, Tolkien refers to what happens after escape, what happens at the end, when all is counted and assessed and completed. Consolation is drawn from the deep human desire for completion, for finality, for resolution. It is our ‘sense of an ending’.

Tolkien has a sophisticated literary understanding of what is going on here, and it is largely theological in shape, as expressed in this rather complex quote from ‘On Fairy-stories’:

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous “turn” (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially “escapist,” nor “fugitive.” In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.

Tolkien viewed drama as essentially tragic—a slice of life in which human beings were under a curse and destined for failure and disaster. Tragedy is the highest and truest form of drama for Tolkien. However, the opposite is true for fairy-stories: the Happy Ending is the highest form of the fairy tale. Tolkien coined a word for this: ‘eucatastrophe’, the good catastrophe. He wrote, “The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function”.

The introduction of the word ‘evangelium’ reveals Tolkien’s hand at last. It is a now obsolete 16th Century word, harking back to the Greek word of the New Testament for ‘gospel’. ‘Evangelium’ means proclaiming the gospel, declaring the victory of Christ over

death, sin and the devil in his crucifixion and resurrection from the dead.

The proclamation of a fairy-story like LOTR—its evangelium—is the great news that evil will not triumph, even if it looks like doing so at certain points. Evil has a use-by date; it will expire; good will outlast it; there will be life beyond the eye of Sauron.⁴ This is the Great Consolation, which Tolkien says is the source of joy: ‘joy beyond the walls of the world’. I found that notion very powerful—we might call it the eschatological shape of experience. The fact that the end will be OK causes joy to break out in the present.

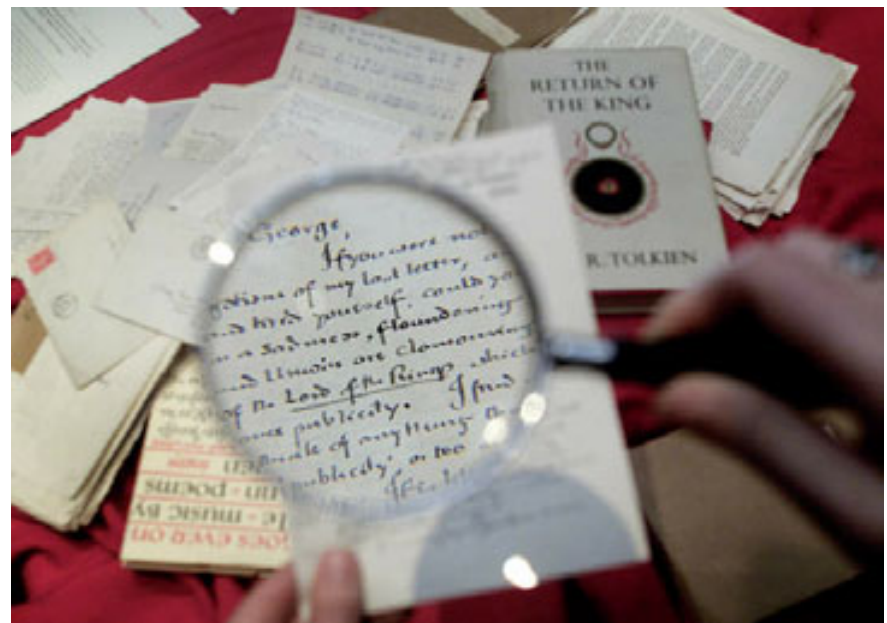


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True fantasy

These are among the weighty ideas which a fairy-story is powerful enough to carry. Each of these notions of what fairy-stories can do matches rather well with some ideas in theology. Recovery might be compared with conversion or enlightenment—seeing clearly as if for the first time; escape has a parallel in salvation/redemption and resurrection—not escapism which would pretend that evil and death are not real, but spiritual escape from those wrongs; and consolation compares with justification, peace with God and the recreation of the world. The Happy Ending, which the Bible declares in the words of the Lamb on the throne in Revelation 21: “Behold, I am making all things anew”.

Lord of the Rings is not a work of theology, but it would be untrue to Tolkien’s own view of fairy tales—of which LOTR

must be one of the most wonderful—if we were not to think about it theologically. Because, in the strange sense of fairy-stories, LOTR is true. It tells us the truth using the genre of fairy-tale, using fantasy, using the imagination. And it is a strange, strange truth about human knowledge that it often lodges inside our imaginations. Aragorn is no real King; Gandalf is no real saviour; and lovely Sam Gamgee is no real suffering servant. But, amazingly, we can say that each of those descriptions of them is true and teaches us something that is worth knowing in the world outside of the story.

With this framework, let’s think

theologically about two doctrines—creation and redemption—in LOTR. Diane Speed’s article addressing the first doctrine follows; Kirsten Birkett’s article on redemption is available to associates on the CASE website. ©

ENDNOTES

- 1 “Creativity is the wound you receive in childhood that never heals.”
- 2 I owe this idea of the shape of Tolkien’s childhood to Timothy Keller, *The Significance of J.R.R. Tolkien*, International Arts Movement lecture, May 2002.
- 3 “On Fairy-Stories”, In *Essays presented to Charles Williams*. A. O. Barfield, Gervase Mathew, W. H. Lewis. London: Oxford University Press, 1947.
- 4 As both Diane and Kirsten point out, in LOTR another evil will replace that brought by Sauron. However, there is still in LOTR a sense of a coming time of peace, a haven that will be reached. The fact that this does not line up neatly with New Testament eschatology further emphasizes Tolkien’s hatred of allegory.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN: CREATION AND ETERNITY IN TOLKIEN

DIANE SPEED



Diane Speed is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Sydney.

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations ... I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.¹

Scholars might want to argue with Tolkien about his specific understanding of the term 'allegory'—but it's certain that we can't talk about precise correspondences between characters and events in LOTR and in the Christian story as set out in the Bible. But, as Greg's paper outlined, we can consider some ways in which we may find our reading of LOTR enriched by certain resonances with the Bible, especially in relation to the biblical world view.

Salvation History

The central theme of the Bible, its world view, has been described as Salvation History (Redemption/Redemptive History). In other words, the narrative overall is seen as the tracing of God's relationship with his creation, particularly humankind—from (1) the beginning, in which that relationship was good and life on earth was good, to (2) the spoiling of both through the disobedience of the human beings, to (3) the salvation of both human beings and the fallen world through Christ—in Tolkienian terms, recovery of what was lost.

The part of this pattern I'd like us to

consider is what humanity and the world have fallen away *from*. If there's loss and an impulse for recovery in LOTR, what is it that has been lost, and why will it be desirable to regain it? A precise answer is difficult to formulate, not least because I don't think Tolkien himself is finally clear on the subject. I would, however, like to suggest some areas of LOTR in which we can find traces of a pristine past that still exists in Frodo's present, a reminder that there has been, and can be/should be, a better world than the present, which will be in some measure at least due to the efforts of the 'good guys'.

One issue in attempting to read LOTR with reference to the Bible is that there's no explicit Christian machinery at all in this book—no mention of the Christian God or the individual persons of the Trinity, no explicit mention of heaven or hell. Arguably, however, this absence is what allows us to bring our own awareness of the Christian story to bear on the literary text without prior limitation.

Without the explicit presence of God himself, the dimension of *eternity* is missing from LOTR. Reference to *The Silmarillion* would alert us to the original and originating figure of Eru, 'the One',² an approximation to God, but Eru is not mentioned in LOTR. Classical philosophy would have spoken of the created world's nearest approximation to eternity—its imitation or *mimesis*—as infinity. I'd suggest that LOTR offers two of its own pale imitations of eternity: recurrence and longevity.

Recurrence

Recurrence is present in LOTR not only in replays of individual incidents, like Bilbo's and Frodo's birthday parties, but in the larger patterns of the ages. LOTR itself is situated, we're told, in the third age of Middle-earth. One age comes along, has its

crises, ends; and another age begins. But there's no clear, ultimate sense of an ending.

In an Apocalyptic view of the Bible, looking back at the history of the world from the vision of its end in the Book of Revelation, we see the ending of one world and the beginning of another; but the biblical new world has a status completely different from that of the old world. Even if, as some might argue, we should read Revelation and its patterns of sevens as suggesting the recurrence of evil in the world rather than a steadily downhill progress on the part of the world, Christians have generally understood this book as, in some way, pointing ultimately to an end of this world and the beginning of another of a completely different kind, free of evil; and this is almost certainly the assumption most of Tolkien's readers bring to the text. LOTR, on the other hand, emphasizes the ongoing struggle between good and evil. Gandalf, for instance, comments that behind Sauron lies other evil that will recur, and this is what LOTR leaves with us. There is brief reference to 'the end of the world' (two.II.281), but just what this may mean is left open. In *The Silmarillion*, although Morgoth, the bringer of evil and mentor of Sauron, is cast into the outer Void and cannot return to the world, the evil he has set in train continues; it does so 'unto the latest days'—but even here it is not made clear what this means.³ *Recurrence*, then, is suggestive of eternity, but falls short of it.

Longevity

The subject of longevity arises in relation to various figures and groups in LOTR. We know from *The Silmarillion* that *wizards and Elves* appeared from the far west late in the second millennium, as messengers sent to contest the power of Sauron and to unite the Elves and others to resist him.⁴ If we regard them as messengers—though this is not found in LOTR—they might be likened

to angels. The Fall of Saruman, which does feature in LOTR, certainly seems to draw on the fall of the angels through the pride of Lucifer (Luke 10:8; Revelation 12:9; Isaiah 14:12); both falls involve transition from light to dark. In *The Silmarillion*, Melkor himself has such a fall. Sauron, the source of all evil, is a fallen member of the very race from which the five wizards came. As a self-styled ruler of the world, he parallels the Devil, especially as presented in Revelation 12, which interprets the serpent of Genesis 3 (cf. the ‘Saur’ in ‘Sauron’). Structurally, Saruman is the weaker double of Sauron—just as medieval drama has two devil figures, Lucifer and his offside Lightborn. Gandalf may perhaps be likened to the archangel Michael, but there are also some clear parallels with Christ himself, if not in his apparent preparedness to give life for others, at least in his depiction as the White Rider of Revelation 19:11 (three.V.509ff.). This illustrates the difficulty of attempting to make absolute identifications.

So much for wizards. As for Elves, not many now remain in the Middle-earth, east of the Great Sea (one.III.93). We might compare the early understanding of the earthly paradise as a place in the far east, as distinct from heaven itself. Their ancient origins are merely hinted at in LOTR. They were the first speaking beings, the inventors of speech (three.IV.486; cf. *Quenta Silmarillion* III.49). They are immortal—created, but not subject to ordinary death from old age, only destruction by external forces. As well as longevity, the Elves are possessed of something approaching agelessness: remember that Galadriel is Arwen’s grandmother. The human Aragorn, in contrast, appears to age slowly, but he will eventually die of old age. Their places of refuge hint at this longevity: Rivendell is a “deep valley where many of the fair folk dwelt in peace” (one.III.79); Lothlorien is a place of peace and safety. But neither is guaranteed to stand against Mordor.

Two other kinds of creature are important to our understanding of longevity and eternity in LOTR.

The *Ents* are the oldest of all races, from when the world was young, predating the awakening of the Elves in Middle-earth,

though they learnt to speak from the Elves (three.IV.489). They were created to be the Shepherds of the Trees, to protect them. They have aged slowly, and along the way lost their Entwives, so that there are no Entwives to carry on. They have become rather neutral to the world outside, but regroup to take sides for the right—principally because of destruction being wrought on the trees they are supposed to be protecting. They are extremely strong physically. Treebeard/Fangorn is master of the ancient forest of Fangorn. He is the oldest of the Ents, “the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the sun upon this Middle-earth” (three.V.520). The Ents show some loss of activeness and clear moral fibre, but these things are recoverable. Their quality has something of the pristine about it, but they are not quite pristine, since they are not unaltered.

Tom Bombadil and Goldberry are surely a key to understanding Tolkien’s notion of the world that could and should have been.

Tom Bombadil and *Goldberry* are perhaps the most fascinating characters in relation to eternity. Surely they are a key to understanding Tolkien’s notion of the world that could/should have been.

Tom is neither hobbit nor man (one.VI.135). He has power over other created things, such as Old Man Willow and the barrow-wights, and power to help Frodo. Goldberry says of him that he is “Master of wood, water and hill” (one.III.139). He is under no law but his own (two.II.283). Putting the Ring of Power on doesn’t affect him; in this he is superior to both Gandalf and Galadriel, both of whom fear their own corruption. Tom is not a figure of power to defeat evil, rather to withstand it. Although the Ring has no power over him, “power to defy our enemy is not in him, unless it is in the earth itself” (two.II.283).

Tom says his name is Eldest. He has been in the world before the river and the trees (hence before the Ents), before the Elves or Sauron arrived, he is older than the first rain (one.VII.146). Goldberry’s own voice is both young and ancient (one.III.137). Both of them have agelessness as well as having existed a long time; and we hear nothing

about their going through any change in themselves. Tom is the oldest of the old, long forgotten by Elrond, who notes that he is the very oldest of all speaking peoples and fatherless, older than the Elves (two.II.282).

There are certain ‘first man’ activities Tom undertakes. Tom’s domain since the beginning has been the primaevae Old Forest, and he has stayed on in it as it shrank. Their home area is neatly tended, the lawn cut: Adam tilling Eden. It is a cleared spot in the midst of the wilderness: Eden in relation to the world outside it. Tom gives the ponies the names they have for the rest of their lives (one.VIII.157): Adam naming animals. Tom uses a language unknown to the hobbits, sounding like nonsense (one.VIII.162): perhaps, by inversion, a reference to language before

Babel, which was another stage in the fall of humanity (Genesis 11).

There is harmony in his clothing: blue, yellow, and green. There is harmony between the sexes, and a hospitable home. The table of Tom and Goldberry has cream (milk) and honey: perhaps suggestive of the Promised Land, itself a kind of recapitulation of Eden.

Goldberry is unexplained, she seems just to be some kind of extension of Tom: Eve.

Both Tom and Treebeard are called ‘Eldest’, presumably in relation to different constituencies. Perhaps Treebeard is a figure for Nature itself, Tom for the social world—both reminders of the unfallen world, the world that might have been. ©

ENDNOTES

1 References to the text are to J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1968. Subsequent references are to book, chapter, and page of this edition.

2 See J. R. R. Tolkien, *Ainulindalë*, in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, London: Allen and Unwin, Boston and Sydney, 1977.

3 J. R. R. Tolkien, *Quenta Silmarillion*, XXIV, in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, London: Allen and Unwin, 1977, p. 255. Subsequent references are to chapter and page of this edition.

4 J. R. R. Tolkien, *Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age*, in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, London: Allen and Unwin, 1977, pp. 299–300.