

“Paul Ricoeur once declared, ‘The symbol gives rise to thought.’ He probably didn’t have Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* in mind, but he could have. Austin Freeman here proves the truth of Ricoeur’s adage, clarifying the system of theological thoughts that arise from trying to make sense of the symbols—people, places, things, events—that make up Tolkien’s famous trilogy and other fictions. Freeman loves the stories too much to kill them by dull paraphrase. He does not murder (the saga) to dissect the (system of) truths that support it. Instead, he mines the stories and other resources, especially Tolkien’s letters, in order to better understand the theological imagination of the man who created them. This is a well-researched, one-of-a-kind work that will appeal especially to those who have gone out the front door to engage in the dangerous business of walking the Way of Christ, pursuing their own adventures as inhabitants of the twenty-first century demystified Middle-West.”

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER,

research professor of systematic theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Among the many publications on Tolkien’s theology, Dr. Freeman’s study stands out since it provides a concise, comprehensive, and approachable primary-text based discussion of all important theological topics. His book is likely to become a standard text for interested laypeople and literary critics as well as professional theologians when discussing the theology of the maker of Middle-earth.”

THOMAS HONEGGER,

Friedrich-Schiller-University, Jena, Germany

“In this well-written, engaging, and theologically astute book, Austin Freeman, a clear-headed evangelical, has given us a sympathetic, thoughtful, and critical account of how Tolkien’s devout Roman Catholic theology plays out in his stories. Freeman has accomplished something remarkable: arranging his material by the classical theological loci, he helps us to enjoy Tolkien’s stories even more fully, while at the same time instructing us in traditional Christian theology. And as we see the theology and the stories intertwined, we gain a fresh admiration for that theology as it provides a comprehensive and appealing worldview.”

C. JOHN (“JACK”) COLLINS,
professor of Old Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

TOLKIEN

DOGMATICS

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*Theology through Mythology
with the Maker of Middle-earth*

AUSTIN M. FREEMAN



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Tolkien Dogmatics: Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-earth

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Prolegomena	1
I. GOD	19
II. REVELATION	40
III. CREATION	65
IV. HUMANITY	97
V. ANGELS	124
VI. THE FALL	155
VII. EVIL AND SIN	183
VIII. SATAN AND DEMONS	213
IX. CHRIST AND SALVATION	235
X. THE CHURCH	260
XI. THE CHRISTIAN LIFE	286
XII. LAST THINGS	309
Glossary of Names and Terms from Tolkien's Fiction	343
Bibliography	349
Notes	371
Name Index	455
Subject Index	461
Scripture Index	475

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My wife, Mandi, has been my chief advocate in this as in all things. My editor, Todd Hains, saw the potential in this book long before there was any reason to give me a chance to write it. The other scholars of Tolkien I've met, and with whom I've collaborated, also deserve thanks here, but there are too many to mention by name, aside from Carl Hostetter who probably helped the most. The staff at the Roling Library in Deerfield, Illinois, deserve mention for their assistance in obtaining scans of material I couldn't otherwise have used, primarily from the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton. Finally, thanks go to Christopher Tolkien for the Tulkasian effort of collating, editing, and publishing his father's manuscripts, without which this book would be substantially slimmer.

PROLEGOMENA

The task of this book is in many ways an impossible one. J. R. R. Tolkien was not a professionally trained theologian, nor did he seek to construct a coherent “theology” in any of his published writing. But, as every individual does, *he had a theology*, a way of looking at God and the world, and it manifests in his writings, even in his fiction, by his own admission. One cannot, as with the work of Tolkien’s good friend C. S. Lewis, simply read and digest a ready-made corpus of theological texts and provide a synthesis. It necessitates a thoroughgoing textual archaeology, in which interested parties must sift and sort through a variety of documents (letters, academic essays, poetry, fiction), with keen eye ready to discern telling phrases and connections. Tolkien’s explicit theological statements (by far most prevalent in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*) are not generally sustained arguments, but passing comments situated within specific life contexts.¹ Nevertheless, a coherent picture does emerge, and in fact we shall find that Tolkien has something to say about virtually every aspect of a traditionally structured systematic theology. This is the sense in which we shall explore Tolkien as a theologian.

Tolkien is somewhat self-conscious about expressing theological opinions. While he appears to hold his views firmly, he does not often do so publicly. Two of his most significant theological writings, a letter to C. S. Lewis sharply criticizing him on divorce and marital

ethics, and a lengthy apologia to a Catholic bookshop owner who calls him out on theological impropriety, are never sent.² But Tolkien's theology is not a background feature to his life. Even as a young man he claims religion as his moving force and foundation, along with love, patriotic duty, and nationalism.³ Lewis writes to a friend that when he and his brother meet Charles Williams and Tolkien at the pub, "the fun is often so fast and furious that the company probably thinks we're talking bawdy when in fact we're v[ery] likely talking Theology."⁴ Tolkien himself ranks his Christianity more significant than his historical context. Writing about the personal facts truly necessary to understanding his fiction, he explains that there are three tiers of importance to the facts of an author's life. After passing over lesser issues like personal foibles or moderate issues like his scholarship on language, he writes that the highest tier—those facts truly significant to understanding his work—include his birth in 1892 and experience of a pre-industrial age and, more importantly, his Christianity.⁵

Here he claims that his theology is both *the most important fact* in properly understanding his legendarium *and* clearly deducible from it. In point of fact, Tolkien comments that he will likely never write an ordered biography since such clear statement goes against his nature, which instead expresses itself about its deepest values in myths and stories.⁶ As his daughter Priscilla writes, Tolkien rarely if ever spoke of dogma or doctrine intellectually or abstractly. "In fact," she asserts, "I do not think it was ever in his heart to write or speak of religion didactically: his mode was to express religious themes and moral questions through the medium of storytelling."⁷

This, and not because he seeks to preserve Middle-earth from Christian influence, is why he famously asserts, "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work;

unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion,’ to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.”⁸ In other words, we should look for Christian theology not in the explicit elements of the tales (after all, they are set in a pre-Christian world) but in the deep structure of the story, in its metaphysics, ethics, and in the shape of its plot.

He claims that Middle-earth is meant after all to display the truth and encourage good morals in the real world, through the well-worn technique of clothing them in unfamiliar guises. After admitting that he could of course make errors, he nevertheless insists that he would have to be well and truly convinced that his fiction is harmful in itself (rather than merely misunderstood) before recanting any of it.⁹ But since this is likely to be the greatest objection to the project of this book, we should devote some space to the propriety of mining Tolkien’s texts theologically in the first place.

TOLKIEN: THE MONSTRANCE AND THE CRITICS

This introduction will be divided into three parts. First, in this section I will engage several objections to the propriety of the project—most importantly, whether Tolkien (or at least *The Lord of the Rings*) even ought to be read “Christianly.” Next, I will explicitly lay out what I do and do not aim to accomplish in this book. Finally, I will briefly outline the methodology I have employed in reconstructing Tolkien’s theology.

I have deliberately played upon Tolkien’s well-known work *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary* in titling this section.¹⁰ Tolkien’s interpreters can often fall into one of two equally unhelpful

extremes.¹¹ On the one hand, there are those who see in Tolkien's fiction only a thin apology for Catholicism, in which the teachings of the church take center stage and other literary concerns take a backseat. We may call this the "monstrance" view. A monstrance is an ornate vessel used to publicly display an object of piety, usually the eucharistic host. This is its primary purpose; the art exists for the sake of the exhibition. For these readers, Tolkien's actual *creation* is only important insofar as it highlights the truths of the faith.

On the other hand, there are those of the "critical" school who, perhaps in reaction to the overzealous appropriation of Tolkien by the monstrance camp or perhaps out of a personal distaste for Christianity, seek to downplay the religious strands of Tolkien's thought. Seeing Tolkien's work as Christian does violence to his attempt to recapture ancient Norse, English, or other pagan myths. The essentially godless world of *The Lord of the Rings* demonstrates, to them, that Tolkien's work ought to be evaluated on primarily literary or critical grounds, rather than religious ones.

This latter point was more trenchant prior to the release of *The Silmarillion* and later materials with a more decidedly prominent theological flavor. The gods and demons of the Elder Days, despite being mythologically cast, gave the lie to Middle-earth as a naturalistic paradise. Nevertheless, the debate has continued. We shall see that the push and pull surrounding this issue crystallize many of the dangers inherent in the project of this book. They may perhaps all be gathered under the heading of "oversimplification," though in different ways. First, and most extensively, we will look at the debate over whether Middle-earth is a Christian realm. Second, we will caution against drawing too direct a link between the theology of Middle-earth and the theology of Tolkien himself. Third, we will ask whether Tolkien's constantly changing views exclude a single cohesive

theological picture. Finally, we will relate the theology of Tolkien to the theology of Roman Catholicism.

CAN WE HAVE A CHRISTIAN TOLKIEN?

As previously stated, the legitimacy of an appeal to Tolkien's Christianity as a significant element in his fiction is often contested. The question here is largely moot. I am, after all, not talking about the legendarium as an isolated fact, but about the man—and the man was undoubtedly Catholic. I draw upon his fiction to illuminate his nonfictional statements and to demonstrate the way in which there is a continuity between the two. The emphasis here is on Tolkien as theologian, not on Middle-earth; this is distinct from offering yet another reading of Christian themes in *The Lord of the Rings*. But insofar as I will indeed be drawing on aspects of Middle-earth to paint the picture of Tolkien's theology, the issue must be addressed. Before we begin in earnest, we must therefore deal with the question: Why read Tolkien's fiction theologically?¹²

Literally dozens of books have touched on Tolkien's Christianity; some have made it their primary theme.¹³ Often, however, writers fall prey to the criticism leveled by Drout and Wynne: "Articles on religion and Tolkien have a tendency to rely upon Christian theology as a received truth, which is no doubt true for many Christians, but exceedingly unlikely to be persuasive to scholars, Christian or non-Christian, who would like to see arguments grounded in rigorous logic."¹⁴ Simply appealing to parallels between Aragorn and Christ, for example, will not convince anyone without argument as to why such a parallel is not merely circumstantial. Furthermore, an unreflectively Christian approach "totally ignores the vital epistemological fact that all texts must be interpreted. Finding a source merely defers the problem of interpretation; it cannot eliminate it."¹⁵ Many scholars

point out that making Tolkien into a purely Christian author writing unmixed Christian material is wrongheaded.¹⁶ It ignores his deliberate intention to draw upon pre-Christian material in the manner of the *Beowulf* author, and reduces his stories into strings of allegories and typologies.

Perhaps the best single work to present both sides of the coin and to seek to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's is Claudio Testi's 2013 essay.¹⁷ Again, as with all of the scholars mentioned above, Testi's focus is on whether Tolkien's legendarium can be considered a Christian work, not on Tolkien's personal theology. He presents a thesis ("Tolkien's work is Christian") and an antithesis ("Tolkien's work is pagan") and outlines the weaknesses of each. Reading Middle-earth as Christian (1) introduces truths into sub-creative reality that ought to remain in the primary world, (2) mistakes applicability for allegory and theorizes hidden meanings, (3) mistakes source for representation, (4) derives total identity from partial similarity while ignoring differences, and (5) diminishes the vastness of Tolkien's achievement.

Likewise, reading Middle-earth as pagan (1) diminishes the relevance of the texts that show the fundamental relation between Tolkien's work and Christianity, (2) considers some elements of the work as incompatible with Christianity when they are not, (3) creates contradictions between Tolkien's world and Christianity from what are only partial differences, (4) confuses historical paganism with "Tolkien" paganism, and (5) also diminishes the vastness of Tolkien's achievement.¹⁸

Testi synthesizes the two sides by proposing a distinction between "the plane of Nature" (that which is consciously available to the characters within the story, natural gifts) and "the plane of Grace" (that which is unknowingly available to the characters, supernatural gifts such as faith). He also distinguishes between an internal (pre-Christian) and

external (Christian) viewpoint to the work.¹⁹ Tolkien's characters live in a world that is chronologically pre-Christian but metaphysically Christian. That is, he has sub-created a fictional world in which Jesus Christ will one day become incarnate. Ultimately, Testi concludes that Tolkien is "a Christian author sub-creating a non-Christian world that is in harmony with the Revelation."²⁰ Middle-earth has a natural theology determined by the truths of grace. He theorizes that Tolkien's use of nature and grace within Middle-earth reflects his commitment to the theology of Thomas Aquinas, for whom this was a major principle.²¹

While very plausible, it might also be noted that the tension between natural and revealed religion was also the subject of a major essay by Cardinal Newman, Tolkien's grandfather in the faith.²² Newman's 1833 poem "Heathenism" finds God's grace extended to non-Christians in a way that borders upon inclusivism. To this we might compare Tolkien's response to the monk Alcuin's challenge, "What has Ingeld [a pagan hero] to do with Christ?" Here Tolkien responds that Christians can find many useful and edifying things in non-Christian myths and, because of their insight into the truth of God, can in fact ponder such myths more deeply.²³

Testi's essay has been well received. The subtleties in Tolkien's conception that he points out must be addressed by any scholar wishing to mine Christian truths from Tolkien's fiction. But Testi also demonstrates that such an attempt *can* be made, provided it is done carefully and critically.

TRUTH FROM FICTION:

THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION

What of the issue of interpreting the meaning of a text or, even worse, the author's intention for a text? Can it be known? Does it matter?

Such issues have dominated literary criticism since well before Tolkien's death. For a certain group of readers, the text is a free and independent object once it leaves Tolkien's pen, and whether he did or did not intend it to reflect his theology is irrelevant; what matters is what readers (and communities of readers) do with the text today. Standard practice in literary criticism nowadays further dictates that an author can be mistaken in interpreting her own text, ignorant of the subconscious impulses that actually shape her work. Unfortunately, space does not permit a defense of the now controversial view that an author's intent ought to be, well, authoritative. For a theological defense of authorial intent and meaning, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*²⁴ Vanhoozer's hermeneutical principles will implicitly undergird much of my own.

Certain principles of interpretation are more directly relevant. We must, for instance, distinguish between narrator and author, between what is true in Middle-earth and what is true in the primary world. Tolkien acts at times as an unreliable narrator. What Elves or Men or even Valar think are not necessarily what Tolkien thinks. His creations have independent belief systems, and not all are reliable, as he points out.²⁵ Despite the fact that Middle-earth was intended by Tolkien to be our own earth in the distant and mythical past, the metaphysical apparatus that Tolkien created does not therefore completely correspond with what Tolkien believed about primary reality. Many of the internal explanations he gives for elements within his work are retroactive, outside-the-text justifications for inconsistencies. Different manuscripts become different textual traditions. Certain stories may be told from a human perspective or from an Elvish perspective.²⁶

Tolkien explicitly denies specific metaphysical principles of Middle-earth, like a pre-creational fall of angels or Elvish reincarnation, as

elements of his real-world theology.²⁷ We should therefore be cognizant that some differences may also exist unacknowledged. But overall, while he recognizes the freedom of a sub-creator to differ from the ways in which God operates in the primary world, he also intends that his depiction should be overall in line with it. He does claim that his fiction corresponds to Christian belief.²⁸

What, though, of Tolkien's insistence that he is neither theologian nor preacher and that he is unqualified to speak theologically? He writes, for example, to W. H. Auden that he is not a sufficient enough theologian to assert whether his Orcs are heretical and that he feels no obligation to fit his world into formal Christian theology. He states elsewhere that his tale is built on religious ideas but does not mention them explicitly nor preach them since he is not fitted for theological inquiry.²⁹ At the same time, we have already seen that he is not at all reticent to defend his own views (informally, at least) and, immediately before the above passage, he claims that Middle-earth is theologically less dissonant from reality than many consider to be the truth.³⁰ Elsewhere, he admits that he is comforted by the fact that more learned theologians have given their approval to his stories.³¹ To Peter Hastings, he strenuously rebuts the charge of bad theology by appealing to a writer's freedom. Perhaps in the primary world, he answers; but imagination can still reveal truth.³² We can conclude, then, that while Tolkien claims no formal or professional theological training, he is a layman informed and opinionated enough to make theological judgments and implement them within his writing.

Not all ostensible theological analogues are valid. We should separate what is intended from what is manufactured by bad readers. Some would argue that it is precisely the *unconscious* elements of the work that reveal the most about the author, since such elements must by definition escape the desire for control with which

the author dominates his text. Perhaps. But when Tolkien shuts down reading Tom Bombadil as Yahweh just because Goldberry says “He is,” or denies any similarity between Moria and the Moriah on which Abraham begins the sacrifice of Isaac, we too should be cautious about seeing connections that are not truly there.³³

Nevertheless, Tolkien sees his fiction as intrinsically theological, an echo of divine creation.³⁴ As Clyde S. Kilby reports, “When I raised the question of motive, Professor Tolkien said simply ‘I am a Christian and of course what I write will be from that essential viewpoint.’”³⁵ He accepts (and intends!) theological readings and echoes when they are warranted by the text. *Lembas* is a prime example, as is the intercessory role of Galadriel or the threefold Christlike office of Gandalf, Aragorn, and Frodo.³⁶ In this book, however, Tolkien’s fiction plays only one role. Other volumes have explored the theology latent in the legendarium itself; I am more interested in Tolkien’s theology as a whole, and only consequently with how he illustrates this in his stories.

TOLKIEN: EARLY AND LATE

To the problem of interpretation we must add the problem of change. As anyone who has delved into the massive multivolume *History of Middle-earth* has realized, Tolkien’s creative impulses leaned toward the protean. While some elements of the legendarium appeared in the very first versions and remained until the end, other elements (especially names) could shift from the top of a page to the bottom. How then is it possible to construct a single, coherent picture of Tolkien’s theology? Should we not, as Christopher Tolkien did with his father’s manuscripts, be forced to lay out Tolkien’s thought in various stages of progression? In what sense is this project a compression and elision, a static presentation of a constantly evolving mind?

In one sense, this concern is of course completely valid. Tolkien's views on what a sub-creator may appropriately undertake altered over the course of his life. In *The Book of Lost Tales*, for instance, the Valar much more indebted to pagan mythologies. They have children; Morgoth sires a balrog son with an ogress. Ungoliant is an uncreated personification of Night. And the world begins as flat before being rounded at the fall of Númenor. By contrast, as Tolkien seeks to draw his sub-creation more into line with both Christian orthodoxy and the notion that Middle-earth is our own world, the idea that angels can have children drops away. Ungoliant is merely a rebel angel like Morgoth, not an independently existing evil. And if the Elves learn their astronomy from angels, they must have known the world was spherical from the beginning. If Middle-earth is our own world in a mythical past, then it must have the same metaphysical and cosmological history.

Nevertheless, the cast of his thought had already in large part been set by the time of the *Lost Tales*, so that while Tolkien's *fiction* may have been in constant flux, his own view of the world, which to greater or lesser degrees underlies that fiction, remained relatively constant. He cites specifically his reverence for the Eucharist, for instance, as one he has felt for his whole life.³⁷ His creation myth, written as a young man, remained virtually untouched until his death. As such, though I take effort to clarify Tolkien's developing views, and prioritize later writing over earlier, the idea that there can be no overarching consistency or unity at all is ill-founded.

MIDDLE-EARTH OR THE MAGISTERIUM?

If one asked Tolkien, as an ardent Roman Catholic, to outline his theology, he might simply point to the Catechism. Tolkien desired to be in line with the Magisterium—that is, with the official and divinely

bestowed teaching authority of the church. He never made any indication that he intended to depart from the doctrines and creeds of the church, so in what sense can Tolkien have a theology distinct from, say, the theology outlined in the Catechism or in a papal encyclical? Why is a book on Tolkien's theology not simply a book on Roman Catholic theology?

As any well-versed reader knows, being a Christian (even a Catholic one) does not entail mindless adherence to a static set of rules; rather, it entails a living and active engagement with a vibrant deposit of faith and practice.³⁸ While there is indeed a faith delivered once and for all to the saints, this faith is in itself very much akin to one of Tolkien's maps of Middle-earth. Certain boundaries and contours are definitively drawn, and yet there exist many spaces in which readers can imaginatively explore and create their own landscapes. We do not restrict ourselves merely to church teachings in interpreting Tolkien's theology for the same reason Catholics today do not simply content themselves with such documents. Alongside the Catechism comes the work of Newman, Ratzinger, de Lubac, and von Balthasar. Every thinker has a different contribution to make to the intellectual life of the church, which does not contradict or replace doctrine but complements and reflects it.

Theology is the truth of God applied to life—and not to life in the abstract, but to concrete and specific problems and contexts. Tolkien, living as he did within one of the most tumultuous times in the last several hundred years, and as an idiosyncratic and complex scholar of the highest caliber, used the tools provided for him by his faith to construct a grand answer to the problems, concerns, and opportunities of his time and place. And while very many of his contributions have been quite beneficially explored by others, he deserves a space in which his unique vision of theology can be examined.

At the same time, Tolkien would be the first to affirm that where he might depart from the boundaries of theological orthodoxy, he ought to be marked and warned rather than followed. This book, though intended to be descriptive and not evaluative, is also not a hagiography. There are areas in which, at least in the extant writings to which we have access, Tolkien may fall short of the robust articulation of doctrine offered by the faith. This in itself requires two caveats. First, as we noted above, Tolkien never attempted to set out a systematic theology, so we cannot fault him for not hitting all the headings. To do so would be to misunderstand and distort him. Second, and as a consequence of the former point, to equate Tolkien's beliefs to Tolkien's written work would be misguided. To say, for example, that Tolkien wrote little about the authority of Scripture does not demonstrate in the slightest what his beliefs on that score may have been. It only demonstrates what he wrote about. Added to this, we should remember that not even all of Tolkien's writings have been made publicly available.

As such, readers should be mindful that this book is neither a systematic theology in itself, nor a completely accurate interpretation of Tolkien's private theology. It is only what it can be: an orderly presentation of Tolkien's published thoughts on various theological subjects. I have found that such a presentation has not so far been provided and that interested seekers must piece together many disparate resources in order to gain a picture of Tolkien's contribution to Christian thought. This brings us to the scope of the current project.

THE SCOPE AND USE OF THIS BOOK

Of the making of books on Tolkien there is no end. Many of them cover the same ground from slightly different angles. This book seeks to fill a specific niche that has so far been neglected in the scholarship,

and it does not attempt to stray beyond that niche into a broader engagement with the field as a whole. *Reader, take note!* The fact that I leave aside much that was so central to Tolkien's thought must not be passed over. In seeking to understand the man, one must understand his relation to English history and literature, to linguistics and philology, to fantasy and myth, and much more. The very fact that Tom Shippey has not so far appeared in the footnotes should be evidence enough of this. This book will not, except when relevant, dip into any of these fields. I do not make any pretense at a comprehensive intellectual survey of Tolkien's thought. I do not even enter fully into the very fruitful discussions surrounding Tolkien and ethics or philosophy, despite their obvious connection to Tolkien's Christianity. This book is about Tolkien's theology—that is, about what Tolkien wrote regarding God, Jesus Christ, the church, and the other concomitant points that directly relate to God's relationship to his world.

A brief list, then, of what this book does not claim to do: This book is not a work of literary criticism, though literary criticism occurs. This book does not seek to evaluate or weigh the objective truth of Tolkien's theological claims, apart from noting where he departs from orthodox versions of them. This book does not trace sources, though it does sometimes comment on Tolkien's relation to other theological figures like Newman or Thomas Aquinas. This book does not claim that *The Lord of the Rings* or any other work in the legendarium is a Christian text, though it does claim that Tolkien's theology is apparent and many times even explicit in them. This book does not deny influences from other religious or cultural traditions, whether past or present; I am merely not examining them here. This book does not enter extensively into discussion of secondary literature or scholarly debates on Tolkien except when necessary. I have chosen instead to present Tolkien's theology as much

as possible in his own words, which means engaging primarily with the primary texts.

As a result, the book may be profitably read from cover to cover, but it can also be used as a reference work and consulted at will on specific subjects. Each chapter and section, by its nature, covers pretty much exhaustively any citations in Tolkien's writings to that particular subject, and so it can act as a jumping-off point for further research on any element of Tolkien's theology. I also append a "Further Reading" section at the end of each chapter, with a selection of some (by no means all) secondary literature on the subject. I do not include relevant entries in the standard Tolkien reference works such as those by Drout, Hammond, and Scull. The works in these sections do not necessarily represent my views on the subject but are rather important or sustained engagements with the topic under discussion with which anyone seeking further information should be familiar. More circumscribed secondary sources are mentioned in footnotes.

METHODOLOGY

As I have already intimated, creating a cohesive, static, and unified picture of Tolkien's theology from the rapidly developing and widely disparate strands of his work requires explicit ground rules. Not all of Tolkien's works can be set on the same level, nor can truth be drawn from every document in the same way. Other Tolkien scholars may disagree with the picture I believe emerges, and that is their right, since in any such undertaking some level of personal interpretation is inescapable. I do, however, believe that the method here employed is a reasonable one.

I give more weight to Tolkien's nonfiction, and especially to his letters, than to his fiction. I allow the nonfictional writing to shape and interpret the fictional. The *Letters* receive pride of place, not only

because in these Tolkien is more explicit than anywhere else about his theological commitments but because many of them are unguarded and personal. The *Letters* also provide authorial guides to the proper theological interpretations of much of his fictional world.³⁹ Some fiction, especially “Leaf by Niggle,” I have given a more dominant role; the work is intensely autobiographical and thus merits being read as such.

I have given more weight to later works than to earlier ones, especially in the texts of the *legendarium*, since any thinker develops and refines their thought over time and the standard practice in historical theology is to consider the mature version of a thinker the more authoritative one. But as Christopher Tolkien notes, simply because his father did not retain elements of his earlier writings in later revisions does not entail their rejection, and those ideas may have remained as implicit elements in Tolkien’s mind.⁴⁰ I have in general followed the principle that what is not explicitly rejected or replaced is implicitly maintained.

As Tolkien drafted and revisited his stories, he changed many elements. But much also remained the same. I do not feel bound to cite every variation from every parallel passage. On the other hand, sometimes even passages that have been struck out or altered can give insight. One need not restrict an examination to its final form. Clearly, Tolkien rejected these elements for some reason, but they remain evidence of his thought processes.

At places where the primary evidence has seemed thin, I have permitted myself to consult works of Roman Catholic theology roughly contemporary with Tolkien and especially aligned with the thought of John Henry Newman, that famous English Catholic who, indirectly, exerted considerable influence upon Tolkien’s life.⁴¹ I have tried to keep this to a minimum and, where such supplements are introduced, they are explicitly noted. Influence does not guarantee assent.

In the same vein, Tolkien undertook many translation projects throughout his career, virtually all of which are either directly theological (e.g., *Exodus*, *Pearl*) or theologically situated (*Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Beowulf*). Obviously, theological statements from these poets need not constitute Tolkien's own theological beliefs. I have therefore only borrowed from such texts when it seems fairly certain that Tolkien personally resonates with them (as, for example, his discussion of penance in *Gawain*). At the same time, much work could be done here. Why did he choose these particular texts? Not all were part of the Oxford curriculum. What of his choices in translating them? All translation is interpretation. But I am not a scholar of Old English and cannot comment on how an idiosyncratic rendering might illuminate Tolkien's theological understanding. Surely these texts are an influence on Tolkien's theology, but it is uncertain how.

Finally, this work is meant to be descriptive. I present Tolkien's views by and large without comment or evaluation, save for the exceptions noted above. I am a Protestant, and there are areas of Tolkien's theology with which I personally disagree. There are areas with which many Roman Catholics might disagree. Right or wrong, good or bad, weak or strong do not enter in here. I have sought only to set out as accurately as possible *what Tolkien thought*, without letting my or other people's views intrude upon the matter. As to authorial voice, it should be understood that any straightforward assertorial statements are from Tolkien's perspective, unless clearly indicated otherwise. The discussions that take place in the footnotes, in which I mostly engage with secondary literature, should be understood to be in my own voice.

Such are the preliminary issues we must address. If this task succeeds, then to the long litany of Tolkien's titles—twentieth-century English Catholic, survivor of two world wars, father, Oxford professor,

lover of words, medievalist, husband, humorist, author—we shall feel entitled to add one more: theologian. Rather than being an unreflective receiver of Christian tradition, Tolkien absorbed and added to that tradition, becoming an original thinker with things to say in his own right. Tolkien, ever one for ancestry, might now be able to say of those fathers of the faith who preceded him what King Théoden of Rohan said after a battle well fought: “In their mighty company I shall not now be ashamed.”⁴²



I

GOD

Theology is the study of God and all things in relation to God, so it is fitting that our study of Tolkien's theology begins with the doctrine of God proper. But, before moving into these topics, it is usual to address the issue of the knowledge of God—that is, whether and how humans can know him.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Within this section we include the questions of whether God exists, whether his existence can be demonstrated, and whether his existence is discoverable apart from the special revelation in Scripture and in Jesus Christ.

Tolkien does engage with the question of God's existence, but not for any doubt as to its answer.¹ Instead, he argues that the human mind looks to the universe and asks how it came to be. The appearance of design and pattern shifts the "how" to "why." But to him, such a question about purposes and motives can only be answered by appeal to a mind.² We are almost immediately, therefore, drawn to the question of God's existence by our contemplation of the universe around us. If one does not believe in a personal Creator God—a Mind—who has made ours and from which our own thought processes are derived—it is no

use asking about a purpose for life. There is nobody there to answer you. The best one could do is accept the brute fact of existence.³

But if this is the case, and in fact the gods do not exist at all, then we invented them, and their stories need explanations. The most common is that ancient humans ascribed personalities to natural phenomena that inspired awe and wonder. If all we have, then, are stories arrayed around objects such as stars and waterfalls, it remains the case that they can only be given personal significance by a person.⁴ So those personal figures that adorn the myths of every culture do not simply appear, but they originate from universal human impulses. This was the crux of the famous debate between Tolkien and C. S. Lewis on Addison's Walk. Lewis, at that time an ardent atheist, believed myths to be "lies breathed through silver."⁵ Not so, said Tolkien. This universal impulse toward mythmaking and the construction of gods and heroes instead illuminates the existence of the true God. In the poem he writes to Lewis to epitomize his argument, he declares that our hearts draw wisdom from God and still reflect him, despite our simple wish-fulfillments and attempts to escape the dull materialist universe. Whence did the wish we want fulfilled come, and why? Whence came our notion of beauty and ugliness, or our imaginative desires?⁶ Why, if materialism is truly the way things are, do we feel such a need for things to be otherwise—to be good and beautiful and personal as well? Yes, the gods may derive their glory from nature, but it was human beings who saw glory in nature in the first place and were able to abstract it from mere existence. This mental element, this intimation of divinity, comes not from the visible world but from the invisible and supernatural one.⁷ So it remains the case that, even if humans worship false gods and construct false mythologies, something higher about ultimate truth sometimes shines through these mythologies.

Tolkien, an avid disciple of the older myths and tales, refuses to believe that they are simple fabrications devoid of deeper meaning; he also refuses to believe that one must simply abandon myth in favor of Christianity. Christianity is rather the fulfillment of myth—the True Myth. In the well-told tale, the human being glimpses divinity—which Tolkien defines as not only the possession of power but the *right* to such power, and to worship. In fact, says Tolkien, this is a glimpse of religion as such.⁸ The great themes of sacrifice, heroism, love, and death affect us on a fundamental level because we are fundamentally storied creatures. We make according to the laws of our own making, Tolkien tells Lewis.⁹ The story of the resurrection affects us so deeply because it bears all the hallmarks of both truth and mythology. Because its source is God, the supreme Author and Artist, this myth is actually true in the real world under the sun.¹⁰ This is not surprising. Man, as storytellers, ought to be redeemed by a moving story; such a situation is most fitting to his nature.¹¹ Perhaps myth and religion, far from becoming slowly entangled with each other, were instead once the same thing, and only now begin to heal their deep fracture.¹² In what Tolkien calls the “Primary Miracle” of the resurrection (and in all other miracles) we can see not simply the truth that underlies the apparent vicissitudes of fate, but also a glimpse of light through the cracks of the visible universe.¹³

Sometimes, though, the knowledge of God is akin more to an immediate conviction than a process of reasoning. Tolkien describes the experience of once being bowled over with the obviousness of Christianity while riding his bicycle. Despite the sudden clarity of rational conviction, he could not reproduce a chain of argumentation. He theorizes that this may be due to a direct apprehension by the mind, standing momentarily outside of time. One perceives the

truth apart from the sequential form of argumentation we must adopt in our temporality.¹⁴

However one is convinced, the train of reasoning must stop with God himself. To answer otherwise would require a complete knowledge of God, something patently impossible.¹⁵ We cannot answer why God decided to create humanity, for example.¹⁶ But despite being unable to go further back than God's own will, we still have an answer to the meaning of life: God himself. According to Tolkien, the chief purpose of life is to increase our knowledge of God as much as possible, according to our individual capacities, and in turn to respond to this knowledge with praise and thanksgiving.¹⁷

MIDDLE-EARTH AS MONOTHEISTIC WORLD

Tolkien engaged more extensively with the question of the knowledge of God outside of the church and the Bible. Theologians, working from the early chapters of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, have held that all people possess a basic intuitive knowledge of God, though this knowledge is often suppressed by sin and self-deception. This "natural" (from nature alone) theology may demonstrate God's existence, power, and rulership over the world, but it cannot offer salvation. This requires a special grace of God over and above the common grace given to all humankind. Tolkien, too, separates God's general revelation in nature and a special revelation addressed both to universal humanity and to specific individuals.¹⁸ His views on the knowledge of God in the primal state of humanity, apart from the special revelation given in Scripture, may be gleaned from his fiction. He is very clear that Middle-earth is a monotheistic world in which the knowledge of God is limited to what can be gleaned by this natural theology.¹⁹

The decent and wholesome society of the Shire is based on a sort of natural law, and hobbits are examples of such natural philosophy

and theology, Tolkien writes.²⁰ God is known by the enlightened and occupies a central place in history but has no organized religion, worship, or holy site. Tolkien's monotheists deny worship to any creature and especially to the devil, but they have not advanced to any positive faith.²¹ The fact that only the supreme God Eru is worthy of worship, and monotheism is seen as the default state of humankind, is an insight that corresponds to the accounts in Genesis and Romans but which conflicts with much of modern anthropology and sociology.²² The standard tale has been that humans rose from a primitive superstitious animism and a multiplicity of gods into philosophical monotheism. Tolkien, when given free rein to invent a history, adopts the biblical view instead. Here, the true knowledge of God is attained immediately, and there is rather a fall away from true worship into idolatry and polytheism. "Good pagans" might retain a sense of the ultimacy of God but, due to their very reverence, remain distant from him and eventually succumb to the temptation to worship more visible powers as false gods.²³

THE BEING OF GOD

Tolkien's God is the supreme Being, which is to say that he is the only one to whom the term "Being" can be adequately and unreservedly applied. God has no cause or dependency but instead creates and sustains all other things. This is called by theologians the *aseity* of God, from the Latin *a se*, meaning "of itself." All other things depend on something else in order to exist, whether on their maker to bring them into existence, on their environment to sustain them, or on time to continue to endure. But God stands before all other makers, worlds, and times. At the back of everything is the single, ultimate fact of God. He is the "Prime Being."²⁴ Tolkien even notes that the Elvish word for

“exist” does not properly apply to God, since one must distinguish the Creator’s mode of existence from his creation’s.²⁵

God is so fundamental that of himself he can simply assert, “I AM THAT I AM” (Exod 3:14). When God identifies himself, he speaks in the first person, indicating his absolute oneness.²⁶ “The One” is the primary name of God in the legendarium. The oneness of God requires no special revelation but can be known to all. God *must* be one, not many, by definition. The old gods like Zeus and Odin show themselves not to have merited the term “God” because they lack this absolute supremacy.²⁷ Only One can be truly above all.

This self-naming of God demonstrates two further points. First, God is transcendent. He needs no predicate—he simply is. He is the only being without limits of any kind.²⁸ God’s transcendence of space is called his spirituality, while his transcendence of time is called his eternity.²⁹ One can only dimly perceive what it might mean for God to exist completely *apart* from all things, including space and time; this perception is most often expressed by saying that God is *beyond* the world, with no physical or localized manifestation or presence within creation.³⁰ Since humans are limited by space and time, the beyondness in which God exists can be symbolically represented as heaven.³¹ But God is not only apart from space and time; he is its ruler.³² No authority or power can constrain or compass God, for he was there before them and made them.³³ The God who is neither in the world nor of the world has brought it forth out of love.³⁴

Second, God’s self-naming demonstrates that he is a person, an “I” and not an “it.” We can face God, encounter him personally, as souls with free will.³⁵ Our relations to this person cannot be reduced to a relation with a mere object. As a person, God relates to each of his creatures in a unique and distinct way which can be pre-linguistic and non-cognitive. Tolkien insists that there is a fundamental

distinction between “what-ness” and “who-ness” that can often be ignored. What-ness derives from webs of relationships, usually implying states of affairs in the world, while who-ness—personhood—is a naked fact, unique but inexpressible. It is so ontologically basic that in order to be articulated, personhood must borrow analogous language from (and thus confuse itself with) objecthood. And yet to say of my friend that “he is,” conceived as a bare description of being, still does not approach the mystery of “I AM.”³⁶ Our relationship to the personhood of God is thus also distinct from our relationship to other finite creatures.

This is because the transcendent and utterly unique God is, so to speak, on another level of being than his creatures.³⁷ While all being derives from him, he himself is derived from nothing. For Tolkien there is indeed a hierarchy of being, one in which all of God’s creatures exist in a secondary and subordinate mode.³⁸ Unsurprisingly, Tolkien uses a literary analogy: God, as the author of reality, sits above and apart from it as the author of a story does.³⁹ God is more real than his creatures, just like an author is more real than his characters. They derive whatever existence they have from him. The difference in reality between ourselves and God is like the difference between an imagined world and the real world. But God actually brings his story *into* actuality, while remaining super-actual.

This distinction between the prime level of Being (God) and our level is known in theology as the archetype/ectype distinction. God is the archetype or universal model of all particular things, much like the platonic ideals stand behind their concrete instantiations. Rather than finding ultimate meaning in this level of reality, therefore, we each point upward toward the universal font of meaning that is God. For Tolkien, each person is an allegory embodying universal truth and everlasting life in the guise of particularity.⁴⁰

God is the maker of all things, in a genuine sense.⁴¹ He did not merely form, rearrange, or stitch together preexistent materials, but he truly brought new things into being from nothing through his thought and will alone.⁴² God bestows upon the world a real existence, though this existence derives from God rather than itself.⁴³ God accomplishes this by *sharing* being with the world. This does not mean that the world is God or that God and the world form some sort of unity. Rather, Tolkien draws again upon what he calls the mystery of authorship. An author at the same time stands outside of his work while also indwelling it. But the work exists on a lesser plane than the author does and depends upon the author for its own existence.⁴⁴

The whole world is not only created but also upheld by the word of God.⁴⁵ This ineffable principle of life is wholly and completely derived from the One, and its bringing forth is his sole prerogative.⁴⁶ Nor can creatures that now exist think themselves to be independent from their source of being: the entire world's continued existence may be likened to a burning fire at the heart of things, whose sole source and tender is the Lord.⁴⁷ He stands in an intimate relationship to his creation. He loves it, and it brings him joy.⁴⁸ He supports and nourishes us from behind, as it were.⁴⁹ For Tolkien, he can thus truly be called "All-Father,"⁵⁰ sanctifying that pagan title of Odin.

The world does not, however, merely exist, but it was created toward a specific purpose and end.⁵¹ God, therefore, may also be thought of as a maker in the sense that he is a fashioner of artistic and creative work meant to communicate meaning.⁵² As the originator of "Primary Art"—that is, of reality—God also intermediately authors the sub-creative imaginative works of his creatures.⁵³ Various creatures may possess fuller or more limited access to the mind of God in his purposes as author—for example, pre-Christian human beings might possess virtually no knowledge of God's story, while the higher angels might

possess a great deal of it.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the Writer of this story is not one of us, and he keeps his own counsel.⁵⁵ No creature can know the full extent of God's creative purpose, though we can know that creative work is a fundamental aspect of God's being.

THE TRINITY

The oneness of God's being is an element of natural theology. It requires no special revelation from God to discern but can be worked out from philosophical or observational principles. But the equally fundamental threeness of God cannot be so known. It requires special revelation. It could not have been known unless God himself were to reveal it. Tolkien realizes this. This is why God is only referred to as the One in the pre-Christian Middle-earth, and why the hints of Eru's activity within Middle-earth are so vague. The Trinity of God is a distinctly Christian concept, which cannot appear explicitly in Middle-earth, though Middle-earth must be made consistent with it. The Valar, for example, are presented as angelic powers rather than gods with the explicit purpose of harmonizing the legendarium with the doctrine of the Trinity.⁵⁶ This doctrine states that there is only one God, and that this God exists as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each is fully God, and each is not identical to the other, and yet there are not three Gods but one.

Tolkien's own remarks on the doctrine of the Trinity are quite limited.⁵⁷ He only mentions the Trinity as such in four places, the first of which is merely that mentioned above in Letter 131. The second occurs in *Morgoth's Ring*. In his commentary on the story "The Debate of Finrod and Andreth," Tolkien describes the Elf lord Finrod's theological beliefs. After discovering that Men believe the One will enter into creation, Finrod reasons that, like an author, God will have to be both inside and outside of creation. As such, God would exist in two distinct