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The Silmarillion: Tolkien's Guise for Christian Realism

Lori Braman

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The Silmarillion: Tolkien's Guise for Christian Realism

Lori Braman

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*Myth and fairy-story must, as all art,
reflect and contain in solution
elements of moral and religious truth (or error),
but not explicit,
not in the known form of the primary 'real' world.
—Tolkien, Letters 144*

Introduction

Once upon a time, before the life of so-and-so, high on a mountain, there lived . . . So might begin a myth or legend, which are among the oldest of story forms. Almost every people on earth have created myths and legends to tell about and explain their history, culture, and beliefs. These myths and legends have become the source of some of our greatest romance and adventure stories. In this last century scholars and authors have begun creating their own such stories. One of these, J.R.R.Tolkien, has been hailed by writer and fellow professor Tom Shippey as “author of the century” for his outstanding work in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Throughout the trilogy, Tolkien weaves a foundation of Christian parallels and truths. Standing behind the trilogy, *The Silmarillion*, his history of Middle-earth, presents Christian ideas and truths on a universal level. Although Tolkien writes *The Silmarillion* as a romance, he is a realist demonstrating Christianity in the guise of myth and legend.

Tolkien is not the only person to see Christianity in the light of romance. In his book *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton discusses his views of the romance of Christianity. He

especially praises fairy tales for the perspective they gave him of life and for the universal truths they hold. He writes, "I am concerned with a certain way of looking at life, which was created in me by the fairy tales, but has since been meekly ratified by the mere facts" (55). Tolkien critics connect Chesterton's ideas with Tolkien's works. R. J. Reilly refers to Chesterton to point out that "Tolkien's Christian romanticism is not unique". (130). Reilly also mentions C. S. Lewis as another example of a Christian romantic writer. These authors all agree on the usefulness of fantasy and fairy tales to expound upon Christian truths through symbolism and parallels.

Lewis defends the significance of Christian symbols and ideas found in Tolkien's works, writing that "the real life of men is of that mythical and heroic quality" (15). Like Chesterton, Lewis views life from the perspective of romance seeing the adventure in life and Christianity and believing the realities of life can also be depicted in fictional adventures. He states, "The value of the myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by 'the veil of familiarity'" (15). Lewis believes Tolkien's fantasy can give us a fresh perspective on life, letting us see the romantic side of life we might otherwise miss in the mundane of everyday sameness. This goes back to Chesterton's point on fairy tales giving us a certain way of looking at life. The back cover of an early Ballentine edition of *The Two Towers* quotes Lewis as saying, "No imaginary world has been projected . . . so relevant to the actual human situation yet so free." Lewis and other critics see Tolkien's works as directly relating to the Christian perspective of life here on earth and to the cosmic battles being fought throughout time.

Yet critic Edmond Wilson finds in Tolkien's works "no relevance to the human situation." He does not see how adults can take Tolkien's works as serious literature (Reilly 133). These critics are wrong, as I will show in my study of *The Silmarillion*. Tolkien's works do have relevance to the human situation as Lewis says and as I will point out through Christian symbolism. This relevance, along with Tolkien's excellent writing abilities, places his works among the greatest literary pieces of the twentieth century.

While some people try to see Tolkien's works as allegory, Tolkien claims his works are not allegorical. In answer to questions on *The Hobbit*, he says, "It is not an 'allegory'" (*Letters* 41). This is where the critic may become confused. We must draw a line between allegory and symbols or parallels. Tolkien dislikes "the conscious and intentional allegory" but admits that "any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language" (*Letters* 145). An allegory intentionally parallels a true story, sticking as close to actual happenings as possible. Tolkien's myths, on the other hand, use Christian parallels and symbols, but his purpose is not to rewrite the Christian story. *The Silmarillion* is not an allegorical work with a story line directly following that of the Bible or of Salvation, but is based on the Biblical account of the history of the universe, using many Biblical parallels, symbols, and Christian truths.

Despite a strong distaste for allegory, Tolkien admits to the Christian parallels found in his works. He writes of his passion "for myth (not allegory!) and for fairy-story, and above all for heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history" (*Letter* 144). Speaking specifically of *The Lord of the Rings*, he writes that it "is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in

the revision” (*Letters* 172). Tolkien was a religious man who let his faith flow over into his writings. He says, “the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism” (*Letters* 172).

These Biblical parallels and Christian truths, as we will see, turn Tolkien’s fantastical myths into works of reality. As Reilly points out, “most of the criticism . . . comes down to the questions of whether the book [specifically *The Lord of the Rings*] is relevant to life, whether . . . there is a bridge between its invented reality and the accepted reality of our world” (136). Does Tolkien’s history of Middle-earth relate to our history of earth? The answer is yes. But more than relating, it is a reality, the reality of the world. This is not how Tolkien wishes the world and spiritual forces to be, but how he perceives them to be based on his knowledge of the Bible. Trusting the Bible to be true, we will take a look at the realism in Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* and see how romance weds reality.

In the Beginning

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. John 1:1*

*In the beginning God created
the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1*

Ilúvatar

As God was in the beginning of time, so Tolkien has placed Ilúvatar at the beginning as supreme being and creator. The *Ainulindalë*, Tolkien's short work of the beginning of time, begins with these words: "There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar" (*Silmarillion* 3). Ilúvatar shares many of the characteristics of God. He is the god of the universe where Middle-earth lies, paralleling the true God in power, presence, and thought.

At the beginning of the Bible, God created the earth. Yet the Bible suggests in Revelation 12 with the conflict between Satan and God and in Genesis 3 with the fall of man that before this He created the angels. Ilúvatar begins his creation, with the Ainur, which in many ways parallel the angels of the Christian world. Just as God spoke the world into existence, Ilúvatar also creates from nothing but his own power. The *Ainulindalë* says the Ainur "were the offspring of his thought" (*Silmarillion* 3). He does not use existing matter to create but, like the God of heaven, uses the power within him to produce intelligent beings.

“In the beginning Eru, the One, who in the Elvish tongue is named Ilúvatar, made the Ainur of his thought; and they made a great Music before him. In this Music the World was begun” (*Silmarillion* 15). So begins the creation of Tolkien’s Middle-earth, not too unlike the creation of our own earth. With the music of the Ainur, Ilúvatar first makes light. Similarly God spoke the words “Let there be light” on the first day of creation to bring light to the void where earth now exists (Genesis 1:3). Tolkien does not provide an allegorical day by day account of creation, but Ilúvatar creates. He creates with music and thought, and he begins with light. Last of all he creates man.

Like the Christian God, Ilúvatar possesses timeless existence. “There was Eru” (*Silmarillion* 3). He was not created; he simply was. “In the beginning was the Word,” which is God (John 1:1). Both Gods always existed. Here too we see Tolkien patterning his supreme being after the God he knew to be One and True.

One of the greatest characteristics of God is that He knows all; He is omniscient. Both David and Job attested to the knowledge of God. “For there is not a word on my tongue, But behold, O Lord, You know it altogether” (Psalm 139: 4). “But He knows the way that I take” (Job 23:10). Jesus also reminded us that God knows all. When teaching the crowds about prayer, He instructed them to pray in secret, and “the Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Matt. 6:6). Then He stated that “your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him” (Matt. 6:8). God sees all and knows all. No other being has this power.

Ilúvatar too knows and sees all. Although he shares much with the Ainur, his first created beings, “to none but himself has Ilúvatar revealed all” (*Silmarillion* 6).

Throughout *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien continues to make reference to the thought of

Ilúvatar. He is the only one to know all of “what was, and is, and is to come,” directly quoting Revelation 1:4, 8 (*Silmarillion* 6). Here Tolkien takes a verse from the Bible in direct reference to Jesus Christ as God and applies it to the god of Middle-earth, drawing the parallel between Ilúvatar and God even closer.

As we can see, Tolkien draws from many characteristics of the real God in creating his mythological god Ilúvatar. Not only does Ilúvatar possess creative powers like God, but he also exists in all time and knows all. Through Ilúvatar, Tolkien shows the power and might of the real God of the universe.

The Ainur and the Valar

In the beginning, Ilúvatar creates the Ainur, representative of the angels God created as messengers of the universe. Into these creatures, Tolkien pours many of the characteristics the Bible shares with us about angels. The Ainur worship Ilúvatar as supreme being, are created highest of all creation, are immortal, can take on various forms, are given the power of choice, yet also take on godlike characteristics in their influence on Middle-earth.

Through music the Ainur worship Ilúvatar as the angels of heaven worship God Almighty. Nehemiah reminds us in words directed to God, “The host of heaven worships You” (Nehemiah 9:6). Also, in his letter to the Hebrews, Paul quotes the Old Testament saying, “Let all the angels of God worship Him” (Hebrews 1:6). Just as the angels worship God, Tolkien has the Ainur singing before Ilúvatar and bowing down to him in worship. He writes of the beauty of their song, of it filling the Void before creation, and of the music to be sung by “the Ainur and the Children of Ilúvatar after the end of days” (*Silmarillion* 4). This all parallels directly with Revelation 5 where all creatures in

heaven and earth worship before God. Isaiah also writes that “All flesh shall come to worship” before God when the heavens and earth are made new (Isaiah 66:23). Here we see distinctive parallels between the worship of the Ainur and the angels of heaven.

The Ainur, first of all created beings, are also made highest of all created beings. Like the angels of God, the Ainur enjoy the highest position possible without being God. The Bible tells us that we were created “a little lower than the angels” (Psalm 8:5). In Tolkien, like in the universe we live in, we find a hierarchy of created beings with some having more power and knowledge than others.

On earth we know only mortality. The laws of nature state that everything that lives must someday die. As Christians, we know this was not God’s original intent. Looking at Genesis 3 and the fall of man, we see he intended for us to be immortal beings whose lives never cease. Tolkien draws this into his creation. The Ainur, like the angels of heaven, are immortal beings, never dying. This is an important characteristic for them as the men whom Ilúvatar later creates do not possess immortality.

Another shared characteristic of the Valar, highest of the Ainur, is that they can take on different physical forms. In the Bible when angels appeared before man as they did to Abraham and Joshua, they usually appeared in the form of man. In Genesis 3, we see Satan appearing before Eve as a serpent. Possessing this same trait as the angels of God, “the Valar may walk, if they will, unclad” so that none may see them (*Silmarillion* 11). Yet at other times they may choose to clothe themselves in various forms.

The Ainur also share the power of choice with angels. They can choose to follow Ilúvatar or to rebel and make their own way. This characteristic is also very important as we will see further on with the rebellion of the highest of the Valar.

While the Valar share characteristics mostly with the angels of heaven, there are times they take on characteristics of the Godhead. Here it is especially important to remember that this work is not an allegory. Until this point, it has been easy to view it as such. Here we have beings symbolic of more than one group of beings in the Christian world. Tolkien points out that "Men have often called [the Valar] gods" (*Silmarillion* 15). That is true of angels as well, but Ilúvatar plays only a small role in the *Quenta Silmarillion*. The Valar often act as godhead of Arda or earth, protecting, judging, and summoning much as God does with His people here on earth. Yet, as for protecting and summoning, that is a job God often gives to His angels as messengers for Him.

Like the angels of heaven, the Ainur worship a higher power who created them. This god creates them immortal and higher than other created beings. They are granted the power to take on different physical forms, the power to choose whom to follow, and to carry out the judgements and wishes of Ilúvatar on earth. Through the Ainur, Tolkien reminds us of the angels who worship God and watch out for us. Through these mythological creatures, he shows us the angels who are very real in our lives.

The Beginning of Evil

*How you are fallen from heaven,
O Lucifer, son of the morning!
How you are cut down to the ground,
You who weakened the nations!
For you have said in your heart:
'I will ascend into heaven,
I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;
I will also sit on the mount of the congregation
On the farthest sides of the north;
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,
I will be like the Most High.'*
Isaiah 14:12-14

*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood,
But against principalities, against powers,
against the rulers of the darkness of this age,
against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*
Ephesians 6:12

The Coming of Evil to the Universe

The most obvious parallel between Tolkien's universe and ours is the role of evil. While forces of good battle forces of evil, it is more than the stereotypical battle of good versus evil found in most of today's science fiction and fantasy. Tolkien's good and evil forces are more tightly knit with the Christian worldview of the role of evil in this universe, reminding us of the very real and powerful forces of evil present in our universe today.

The Bible tells us evil entered the universe with the fall of Lucifer, chief among the angels. Ezekiel calls him *the* covering cherub (Ezekiel 28:16). He held the highest position possible next to God. Yet he was not satisfied. He wanted more. He wanted to be God (Ezekiel 28:2). He wished to make the decisions of God and to have the honor and glory of God.

Tolkien brings evil into his fictional universe in a similar fashion. Melkor, created by Ilúvatar, is "the mightiest of those Ainur who came into the World" (*Silmarillion* 16). Like Lucifer, he is the highest of all created beings and wishes to do

things his own way and to exercise his own powers. As the Ainur sing their theme, he begins “to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar . . . for desire grew hot within him to bring into Being things of his own” (*Silmarillion* 4). Yet the power to create comes from Ilúvatar alone. In a similar fashion, Lucifer too felt the desire for more power. Isaiah 14:14 declares Lucifer as wishing to “be like the Most High.” Like Lucifer, Melkor’s desire brings him to act on his own. And “discord arose about him” (*Silmarillion* 4).

The result of that discord is war, both in the real life account and in Tolkien’s creation. The Bible says, “war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought” (Rev. 12:7). Like Lucifer, Melkor manages to draw many “to his splendor in the days of his greatness” (*Silmarillion* 23). The result is “a war of sound,” which Ilúvatar calls an end to (*Silmarillion* 5). Melkor then deeply desires to “subdue to his will both the Elves and Men,” which Ilúvatar has revealed he will create (*Silmarillion* 8).

With Melkor no longer in favor with Ilúvatar, Manwë moves into place as head of the Valar. Melkor has lost his position as highest of all creation. He is now evil—an enemy. In the same way, when Lucifer fell and was thrown out of heaven, Gabriel, the only other angel mentioned by name in the Bible, took his place as angel of high honor below God. When Zacharias questions the angel in Luke 1, he replies, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God.” These words show he holds a very honorable position in heaven. In both the Biblical account of angels and in Tolkien’s creation of Middle-earth, we find another being of honor moving up to take the place of the one that fell.

Along with his loss of position, Melkor loses his name. The name Melkor means “He who arises in Might,” but later the elves come to call him Morgoth, meaning “the Dark Enemy” (*Silmarillion* 23). This parallels directly with the change of the devil’s name from Lucifer, meaning ‘son of the morning,’ to Satan, which means opponent or accuser. Language and meaning meant much to Tolkien, so he took Melkor’s name and changed it, after the Biblical fashion begun with the changing of Lucifer’s name.

The presence of evil in Tolkien’s works well illustrates the presence of evil in our universe. Like the real account, evil enters the universe when a created being of high power chooses not to follow his creator. His desire for more power causes him to fall, and his name is later changed to show the change in him. Through Melkor, Tolkien presents the realities of the entrance and growth of evil in our universe.

The Fall of Other Beings

Like Satan, Morgoth is not the only created being to fall. He brings down other created beings of all levels. Some of these beings become quite powerful in their evil doing and, as we will see later, share many of Satan's characteristics with Morgoth.

We know that Satan brought many angels with him out of heaven. Revelation 12:9 tells us that when God cast Satan out of heaven, He cast Satan's angels out with him. In verse four, the Bible uses symbolic language with Satan portrayed as a dragon drawing a third of the stars out of heaven and throwing them to the earth. In a similar fashion, Morgoth drew many of the Maiar, the lesser Ainur, away from Ilúvatar. These he draws with his splendor and might, while "others he corrupted afterwards to his service with lies and treacherous gifts" (*Silmarillion* 23). From these come the Balrogs and Sauron, both of whom appear in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien actually uses the word *demons* to describe "those spirits who first adhered to [Melkor] in the days of his splendor (*Silmarillion* 43). Not only does Melkor draw them away from Ilúvatar, but he also changes them into hideous beasts with evil as their only intent.

As pointed out earlier, Morgoth wishes to bring both elves and men to his own will. These he has wanted to share in the creation of, and these he is not permitted to bring into Being. In the same way, Satan wished for the downfall of man and succeeded in it. In Genesis 3, Satan disguised himself as a splendid serpent and tricked Eve with lies to disobey God. Throughout all the history of mankind the battle has raged. Some people continue being loyal to God, and some turn away to follow their own paths. Yet some turn back to God and ask for forgiveness. In Tolkien's saga of elves and of men, we see the same turning to evil while others carry on in goodness. Others still turn and do evil, but come back and seek forgiveness. Near the beginning, some of the elves become ensnared by Morgoth. These he corrupts and treats cruelly, eventually changing them into the ugly orcs who serve the evil lords as warriors. Satan too can change and corrupt us if we let him so we no longer resemble the creatures God intended us to be.

Morgoth's corruption does not stop with the Maiar and the elves. Tolkien writes: "Green things fell sick and rotted, and rivers were choked with weeds and slime, and fens were made, rank and poisonous, the breeding place of flies; and forests grew dark and perilous, the haunts of fear; and beasts became monsters of horn and ivory and dyed the earth with blood" (*Silmarillion* 29). That is what happens when sin enters a perfect world. Genesis 3:18 tells us that in the aftermath of the fall, thorns and thistles began to grow. We also know that animals became wild and began to prey upon one another for food. With sin, death entered into the world.

Via Morgoth's influence, Tolkien shows the deceit and corruption of sin. Like Satan, Morgoth brought about the fall and corruption of beings from the higher created to

the lesser created. He manages to corrupt all of creation within his reach. All this expresses the realities found in our universe.

The Darkness and the Light

In many cultures darkness represents evil and light represents good. From a Christian standpoint, it is quite obvious that all people should think so as God is light and Satan is darkness, and no matter what one believes, the truth of God's light and of Satan's darkness will prevail. Man did not create the ideas of darkness representing evil and light representing good. These are reality, not just idea. Tolkien makes quite prevalent the use of light for good and darkness for evil.

In the Bible we see many representations of darkness and light. Light directly represents God. In John 9:5, Jesus states, "I am the light of the world." Those who follow God are called "the sons of light" (Luke 16:8). Then in Psalm 119:105 David says "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Here light also represents truth, which is connected to life. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). In John 1:4 we also read that "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." In the Bible we find that light is used to represent God, truth, and life, and that God is truth and life. He is the light.

Darkness on the other hand represents evil and death. Job speaks of those who “rebel against the light” (Job 24:13). These are those who sin, who follow Satan and his ways rather than God. Solomon compares wickedness to darkness in Proverbs 4:19 when he says, “The way of the wicked is like darkness.” If the way of the wicked is darkness, then the righteous need light; they need God. When Jesus died on the cross, He delivered us from death, providing us with light. In Colossians 1:13, Paul writes, “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.” The Bible associates darkness with evil and death but light with truth and life.

Tolkien also uses darkness and light to represent the difference between good and evil. The first thing Ilúvatar creates after the Ainur is light. Valinor is light in *The Silmarillion*. Whenever farsighted elves look toward Valinor in later years, they see the light of Valinor untainted by evil. The Valar live in Valinor, and in Valinor there once grew two trees of light. These trees are not unlike the trees in the garden of Eden. The main difference is that both trees provide light and are essentially good. Like the tree of life in the garden of Eden, they provide life represented by the light. Also, like the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they indirectly bring about much evil as we will see in the section on the Silmarils. While they grow, they provided light for all as the sun and moon later do. However, Morgoth manages to destroy the light of the trees, using Ungoliant to suck the life from them. In this way, Morgoth brings darkness to the whole world for a time, much like Satan brought darkness to the whole world until Jesus came to redeem us. Just as God did not leave us in total darkness after sin, Tolkien brings light to the world in the form of the sun and the moon. So the darkness of evil shall always be conquered by light.

We associate darkness with the evil characters in Tolkien. Morgoth uses darkness “most in his evil works upon Arda, and filled it with fear for all living things” (*Silmarillion* 23). When Morgoth sets up his kingdom in the North (where Lucifer to wanted to rule from; see Isaiah 14:14), the whole area becomes covered in shadow. Those who travel too near “became enmeshed in shadows” (*Silmarillion* 153). Wherever Morgoth and other evil beings go, darkness follows. The goal: to destroy the light.

In the reality of our universe, Satan’s goal is also to destroy the light of God on this planet. He caused the fall of man, but Jesus came to bring light back into the world. Even Tolkien’s use of light and darkness parallels the truths of Christianity. Through the fiction of the Valar’s light and Morgoth’s darkness, he shows us the truth of God’s good and Satan’s evil.

Ungoliant

The darkest of all creatures in *The Silmarillion* is Ungoliant, an evil spider-like creature with many parallels to Satan. Ungoliant destroys the trees of light. Both hungering for light and hating it, she has an unquenchable thirst for light. Morgoth uses this for vengeful purposes. Her evil darkness, her tangling webs, and her unquenchable thirst and lust make her the perfect depiction of complete evilness and destruction.

About Ungoliant rides a cloud of darkness. When she and Morgoth set out for Valinor to destroy the trees of light, she weaves about them “a cloak of darkness” (*Silmarillion* 78). When they arrive to destroy the trees, Tolkien says that “the Unlight of Ungoliant rose up even to the roots of the Trees” (*Silmarillion* 81). This is a darkness that surpasses all other darknesses, even that of Morgoth. When the trees are destroyed, there exists “a Darkness beyond dark” (*Silmarillion* 81). Later when Ungoliant flees to other parts of the world, she strangles life and light wherever she goes, spreading a “deadly gloom” and defiling the waters (*Silmarillion* 106, 140). If amount of evilness

determines the degree of darkness, then Ungoliant is by far the vilest creature Tolkien created.

Even worse are Ungoliant's webs of destruction. The Bible uses the weaving of a spider's web as representative of those who "trust in empty words and speak lies" and of those who "conceive evil and bring forth iniquity" (Isaiah 59:4-5). In English we use the phrase 'webs of deceit' to describe lies and untruths into which one may become entangled and trapped. Through Ungoliant, Tolkien uses this same visual imagery to show how one can become entangled in evil. In *The Hobbit*, the dwarves become captives of many of her offspring, becoming so wound in webbing they can do nothing for themselves (Hobbit ch 8). Their only hope then lies in outside help to come and break their bonds. In the same way, we must rely on the outside help of Jesus to break our bonds from the webs that Satan wraps about us.

Satan also uses our appetites to bring about our own destruction. Speaking of a life filled with sin, Paul writes of those who conduct themselves "in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind" (Ephesians 2:3). Ungoliant has an unquenchable thirst and lust. "She sucked up all light that she could find, and spun it forth again in dark nets of strangling gloom" (*Silmarillion* 78). She is never satisfied. Thinking to use this unquenchable thirst for his own desires, Morgoth brings her to the two trees of light and has her suck the life out of them. She is still not satisfied. She then empties the Wells of Varda. She is still not satisfied. Later, she devours the gems Morgoth took from Valinor. She would have taken the Silmarils too had it not been for the intervention of the Balrogs. The rumor of her ending is that she "devoured herself at

last” (*Silmarillion* 87). So are the appetites of the world. Nothing worldly will quench them. In the end, they will devour us if we do not turn to God for our needs.

To emphasize the darkness, imprisonment, and unquenchable hunger of sin, Tolkien creates Ungoliant. Through this creature, he depicts the darkest realities of evil in this world. This is not pretty. It is real.

Biblical Conventions

*Then He spoke many things to them in parables . . .
Matthew 13:3*

Minor Conventions

Tolkien's writing style sets him apart from other twentieth century writers. He writes in a much more formal and even sophisticated style than other fiction authors of this past century. Within his writing style, I see parallels to that used in the Bible, most notably that of the King James Version. Especially in *The Silmarillion* one will find similarities in his grammar, writing style, word choice, and choice of numbers.

For the most part, Tolkien uses the grammatical structures of current English. But when Ilúvatar, the Valar, or other beings of power speak, they use the grammar of the King James Bible. For example, when Ilúvatar chastens Aulë, he says, "Why hast thou done this? Why dost thou attempt a thing which thou knowest is beyond thy power and thy authority?" (*Silmarillion* 37). Here we find the thy's and thou's and different verb forms of seventeenth century English. When God found Adam and Even after they sinned, He asked, "What is this that thou hast done?" (Genesis 3:13, KJV). Notice both the language similarities and the use of the question in rebuking the wrong doer.

Another great example of Tolkien's use of Biblical language comes a few pages later when Yavanna, one of the Valar, makes a pronouncement to Aulë much like one God might make to His erring people.

Yet because thou hidest this thought from me until its achievement, thy children will have little love for the things of my love. They will love first the things made by their own hands, as doth their father. They will delve in the earth, and the things that grow and live upon the earth they will not heed. Many a tree shall feel the bite of their iron without pity.

(Silmarillion 39)

Again we should notice not only the similarity here to the King James Version English but also that to what God has said to His people. Many a time when God chastens someone in the Bible, He says, 'Because of this, I will do this, or this will happen.' For example, through Jeremiah the prophet God speaks to His people saying, "Because ye have not heard My words, Behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, . . . and will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof, and against all these nations round about, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, and an hissing, and perpetual desolations" (Jeremiah 25:8-9, KJV). Again and again God pronounces similar judgements on those who do not hearken to His word, just as a judgement is placed upon the work of Aulë.

Besides using the older grammatical structures and writing styles found in the King James Version, Tolkien uses specific words and phrases found in the Bible that further connect his writings to the Bible. In Genesis 2:2 when God finished his creation of the world, "He rested . . . from all His work which He had done." In the same way, the

Valar “rested from their labours” of their work in the formation of nature (*Silmarillion* 28). Also, just as God gave man *dominion* over all living creatures, Tolkien grants the elves and men *dominion* over all lesser living things (*Silmarillion* 40). Another example of a single word used to connect writing styles comes when Morgoth *smote* the two trees of light. This is not a word that pops up very often in twentieth century literature, but the Bible uses this word 228 times. Another such word is *bore* to show that someone has had a baby. I would never call up a friend and say, ‘So-and-so bore a fine young male last night.’ But the Bible uses this verb dozens of times (usually in the form *bare*) to describe the bringing of children into the world. Throughout all *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien places dozens of words and phrases that bring to mind words and phrases used in the Bible.

Other than grammar, style, and word choice, Tolkien uses specific numbers related to the Bible. In the Bible, certain numbers carry a lot of significance. Some of these numbers include three, seven, ten, and twelve. There are three in the Godhead, and Christ rested in the tomb for three days. God created the world in seven days, and seven continually appears in the Bible—seven lamps in the lampstand, seven churches in Revelation, and seven seals also in Revelation. In Exodus God gave ten commandments to the twelve tribes of Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus chose twelve disciples. Tolkien makes use of these special numbers. For instance, Fëanor crafted three Silmarils. Tolkien most uses the number seven though. There are seven mighty stars, seven sons of Fëanor, seven fathers of the Dwarves, seven years between battles, seven rivers, and seven of the Valar. In most cases when Tolkien wanted a number of significance, he chose seven, a number of perfection, a number God chose.

Even in his use of grammar, style, word choice, and numbers, Tolkien brings us closer to the reality of life. For centuries, the King James Version of the Bible has been the Bible studied in the English-speaking world. By making his writing sound Biblical, Tolkien points us to the truths found in the Bible. He shows us that, yes, he wants us to see reality in his fiction.

The Parable of the Elves

When Jesus walked upon the earth, He taught many spiritual truths in the form of parables. Although parables are similar to allegory, I see that Tolkien set up some of the stories within *The Silmarillion* much like extended parables. The most obvious of these I call 'The Parable of the Elves,' for it reads much like the parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22) and the parable of the sower and the seed (Luke 8). Tolkien uses parable-like stories to illustrate spiritual truths and further connect his writing to the realities of Biblical truth.

First of all, Tolkien employs a summons, like God calling us. When Ilúvatar first creates the elves, he places them in Middle-earth. Yet Morgoth and his evil forces also dwell there. The Valar send a *summons* to the elves, inviting them to come to Valinor and live there in a land free from evil. This symbolizes God calling us to live with Him in His kingdom. In the parable of the wedding feast, Jesus uses the invitation to the wedding as a symbol of God's calling us. Another such parable is the sower and the seed. The sower goes out and plants his seed. This too is a type of summons, calling us

to be with God. In *The Silmarillion*, Oromë, one of the Valar, is sent to call the elves to come to Valinor. In many ways he represents the prophets God has sent throughout all of time to bring His people back to Him.

Just as the responses of humans to God's call vary, so the responses of the elves vary. In the parable of the wedding feast, those initially invited refuse the invitation. Then among those who come at the second invitation, not all are willing to comply with the rules of the feast. In the parable of the sower and the seed, we see the seed react differently in different places. Some of the seedlings are scorched and withered away; others spring up, but are choked by thorns; still others grow strong and yield a good crop (Matt. 13:5-7). Tolkien's elves also react differently to the summons.

Before Oromë comes to summon the elves to Valinor, Morgoth and his evil followers plant many seeds of doubt among the elves. When Oromë comes with his message, many of the elves "refused the summons, preferring the starlight and the wide spaces of Middle-earth to the rumour of the Trees" (*Silmarillion* 50). Just as what we know and see dims in comparison to the light and glory of God, so the elves know only starlight and not the light of the Trees. These elves must take what Oromë tells them in faith. Some of them do not have faith in what he tells them, and choose to remain forever in Middle-earth.

Other of the elves are "willing to depart and follow Oromë" (*Silmarillion* 50). Yet even among these, there are various reactions and consequences along the way. The first group of elves to leave for Valinor goes straight there and never sees Middle-earth again. These represent those who decide to follow God and never look back again on

their old life of sin. They focus completely on God, and nothing deters them from being with Him.

The next group of elves does not have an easy time getting to Valinor. Tolkien says, “they fought and laboured long and grievously in the northern lands of old” (*Silmarillion* 51). These represent those whom Satan tries desperately to bring away from God. They begin the *journey* toward God and salvation, but Satan finds many ways to deter them, hoping they will lose their faith and relinquish the *journey*.

The last set of elves who actually go to Valinor “tarried on the road, for they were not wholly of a mind to pass from the dusk to the light of Valinor” (*Silmarillion* 51). This third set of elves represents those who would like to follow God, but still want to cling to the ways of this world. They are afraid of what they will lose in following God and do not clearly see that what they will gain is much better than anything they will lose. Just as this group of elves contains the largest number, so this group of people is the largest of the three we have discussed. They desire to follow God, but they also desire the treasures and dim light of this world.

A final group of elves sets out for Valinor but never arrive. They become lost or turn aside or linger at the edge of Middle-earth. Tolkien says, “they never beheld the Light” (*Silmarillion* 51). These elves symbolize those humans who at some point in life decide to follow God but later turn away. They desire salvation but become lost, turn aside from God, or linger too long in the pleasures of this world. These shall never behold the light of heaven.

In this story of the elves, Tolkien parallels different aspects of the Christian walk with God. Many are they who refuse God’s call. Yet even among those who accept, the

response varies. Some follow God no matter what, never looking back. Others must go through many trials in their *journey*. Still other tarry, undecided on whether or not to cut all ties with sin. Sadly many never find God.

The Wandering and Death of Aredhel

Another parable-like story is that of Aredhel, an elf maiden from the Hidden Kingdom of Gondolin. All who live in the heavily guarded, hidden city of Gondolin need not fear Morgoth or his evil followers. Yet Aredhel is not satisfied with her life within the walls of Gondolin. Like the prodigal son, she wants more. In this aspect she relates to those who have grown up in Christian homes well protected from the evils of the world, yet must go out and try things for themselves before they long for the life God has planned for them. Tolkien uses the story of Aredhel to show the realities of what happens to many of those who wander from God's fold.

First we see parallels to the desire to go our own way, which leads to entrapment in sin. Aredhel desires to wander beyond the walls of the city, to be free of all confinement. Finally Turgon, her brother and ruler of Gondolin, relents to her going out. He sends her on her journey like the father of the prodigal son in Luke 15 sends out his son—with many provisions. Aredhel takes the dangerous road, becoming “enmeshed in shadows” and losing her companions (*Silmarillion* 153). Later she becomes lost in the

forest of Nan Elmoth. These experiences of Aredhel correspond to the experiences of many of those who choose paths in life away from God. Such people become trapped in Satan's ways, picking up bad habits, addictions, and ways of life. While only looking for some form of satisfaction in life, they become ensnared in Satan's traps.

Next Tolkien shows us how one may become wed to sin. Eventually Aredhel is discovered by Eöl, the Dark Elf, who lives in these unlit forests of Nan Elmoth. He "set his enchantments about her so that she could not find her way out" (*Silmarillion* 155). Aredhel later marries Eöl, and the two live in his dark forest. However, Eöl commands Aredhel to shun sunlight and will not allow her to seek her kindred. With him she must remain. In life Satan would have us wed with things that keep us in his darkness. These may be addictions to alcohol or drugs; they may be marriages to or other relationships with people who keep us from seeking God; they may be much simpler distractions. They keep us from God, from the light.

Yet we can also see in Aredhel's story the innate desire humans possess for the light of God. Aredhel at one time knew the light, and so within her grows a desire to see that light again and be free of the bondage of her husband. With her son Maeglin, she flees the dark forest and comes once more to the light of Gondolin. So it is with those of us who leave God's light. Somewhere deep inside us we long for the light and freedom God gives us. Like the prodigal son we remember the goodness of the life we led with our Father. The decision is ours—to turn or to stay. We have only to flee the darkness of Satan, as Aredhel and Maeglin do, and come toward Jesus. Just as the father of the prodigal son comes running to his son, God will come to us once we turn our faces back

toward Him. He will welcome us with open arms, rejoicing in our return as does Turgon the brother of Aredhel.

It would be nice if the story of Aredhel ended here, but like many a human story, it does not stop when all is good and well again. Eöl follows his wife and son to Gondolin. There he is given the choice “to abide here, or to die here” (*Silmarillion* 160). For the safety of Gondolin, few are allowed to come and go. They may not enjoy both the safety of their city and the adventures of the world outside. Similarly, we cannot choose both God and the world. We must choose to abide in God or die. In John 15:6, Jesus compares us to a grape vine saying, “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.” We receive the same two choices as Eöl. We may choose life abiding in Christ, or we may choose death as Eöl does.

At the end of Aredhel’s story, Tolkien reminds us that we are not the only ones affected by our choices and that Satan makes many small triumphs. While Eöl chooses death for himself, he also chooses death for his son. In the process though, it is Aredhel who becomes fatally wounded. Although a tragic ending, it is unfortunately the ending of many a human. Many become ensnared by Satan’s workers. All too often they are destroyed in the spiritual battles fought on this planet.

Throughout the story of Aredhel, we see many Christian parallels, many of which directly relate to the parable of the prodigal son. Like the prodigal son, Aredhel sets off into the world because she desires more. After becoming ensnared in darkness, she finally returns home where there is much rejoicing. However, Tolkien also shows the negative side of spiritual battles. Not all are saved. Some deliberately choose death over

life and God, while others are brought down by those choosing death. Here we find both the reality of being saved and the reality of being lost.

Of the Silmarils

I am the way, the truth, and the life. John 14:6

The Rebellion of Fëanor

Although written as the history of Middle-earth, *The Silmarillion*, more specifically the *Quenta Silmarillion*, tells the story of the Silmarils. These three great jewels symbolize much, but most importantly they symbolize truth and life and show the greed and evil that can arise from insisting upon that which God does not intend for us to have for ourselves only. Through the story of the Silmarils, Tolkien demonstrates realities of the war of good and evil as seen from the Christian worldview.

In the Bible as we have seen, light represents both life and truth. Speaking of Jesus, John wrote, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4) Here light directly symbolizes Jesus as our only hope of life. Later Jesus reiterates this metaphor with His own words saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8:12). In the Old Testament, the Psalms also use this metaphor of light, likening light to the word of God. Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path." In His prayer to the Father on behalf of the disciples, Jesus states, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

The Bible clearly uses light as a symbol of life and truth. This all in turn relates directly to Jesus as He claims, "I am the way, the truth, and the light" (John 14:6). In the *Quenta Silmarillion*, Tolkien uses the Silmarils to represent both truth and life.

The story of Fëanor, creator of the Silmarils, demonstrates the evils of not sharing God's light and holding back what God has requested of us. During the time many of the elves live in Valinor, the elf Fëanor captures some of the light of the trees within three great jewels he fashions. After Morgoth destroys the light of the trees, the light within the Silmarils is all that remains of the light that once lit the world. Similarly, after Satan brought sin into the world, the hope of salvation was all that remained to light a world marred by sin. One small hope exists, and Tolkien places it in the hands of an elf. The Valar request Fëanor to give them the Silmarils. With the light from them, Yavanna hopes to bring life back to the trees. In a similar fashion, God gives us the light of the gospel and tells us to share it with the world, bringing back life eternal. In Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus says, "You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Fëanor, however, refuses to pass the Silmarils on to the Valar, thereby keeping the light from shining for the benefit of all. In this way, he is both like those who do not share the light of the gospel and like those who keep something from God. How much more could God bless us and the world if only we would give our all to Him, if we would not hold back even our most precious possessions?

While Fëanor refuses the Valar his most prized possession, Morgoth breaks into Fëanor's stronghold and steals the jewels. Morgoth's taking of the jewels also parallels Satan bringing sin into the world. By causing Adam and Eve to sin, he took away their

mortality. He took away for a time the glory of God on this planet and brought only death.

Like in the Christian world, what Fëanor refuses to share he loses. God expects us to share His light, to give. “Give and it will be given to you” (Luke 6:38). Yet God will take away from those who do not invest what He has given as in the parable of the minas found in Luke 19. In Fëanor’s case, the good thing he possesses finds its way into the possession of the vilest power of the world. Because he does not share the light, it is hidden for many years, much like the truth of the gospel was hidden for many years during the middle ages. Here the story of the Silmarils parallels both Christian truths applicable to our own lives and history itself.

In Fëanor we also see the rebellion of man against God. After Morgoth takes the Silmarils, Fëanor “rebelled against the Valar” (*Silmarillion* 88). He spreads lies Morgoth has told, telling the other elves that once they have regained the Silmarils from Morgoth, they will become “lords of the unsullied Light” (*Silmarillion* 90). This statement echoes the lies of the garden of Eden when the serpent told Eve that if she ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, she would become like God (Genesis 3:5). Fëanor also charges the Valar with evil intent toward the elves (*Silmarillion* 91). Blame toward God for the evil that befalls us happens over and over again during all times in history and still today. Yet despite the lies and rebellion, God still leaves us with the freedom to choose. The Valar too leave Fëanor and his followers with the freedom of choice. They send messengers to warn and dissuade the rebels, but do not force them to remain in Valinor when they desire to return to Middle-earth to regain the lost Silmarils.

Tolkien tightens his parallel of Fëanor with Christianity by using Biblical conventions and style. When Fëanor and his disciples leave Valinor, he makes an oath for himself and his sons to retrieve the Silmarils. The Valar then put a curse upon them that they might never return to Valinor, that they might never again possess the Silmarils, and that their quest only result in evil with elves betraying and killing one another.

Tolkien styles this curse much like such curses in the Bible both in language and content. As discussed earlier, Tolkien then turns to the English of the King James Version of the Bible. He also includes elements that parallel Adam and Eve not being allowed to return to the garden of Eden and that parallel warnings God gave the Israelites when they rebelled against Him during the reigns of their kings. Indeed these elves never returned to Valinor. None of Fëanor's sons ever again possess any of the Silmarils, and later elf betrays elf and some even kill each other over the oath.

Through the story of Fëanor, we see Christian parallels of refusing to share what God has given us, the loss we experience when we sin, rebellion against God, and the consequences of sin. In each of these Tolkien reveals what it means to live life without God.

Beren and the Retrieval of a Silmaril

Continuing the story of the Silmarils, Tolkien brings us a story of courage and love, demonstrating the human desire for truth, the earthly loss experienced by many of God's followers, and truth's resistance of evil. Through Beren, Tolkien further reveals the truths of Christianity.

Tolkien begins with the desire for truth. Now the man Beren loves Lúthien daughter of Thingol, elven ruler Doriath. Thinking to rid himself of Beren as future son-in-law, Thingol sends him on a quest to retrieve a Silmaril as payment for his daughter's hand in marriage. The courageous Beren sets out on this seemingly impossible quest to bring back one of the great jewels of light. God sends each of us on a quest for truth, though not with evil intent. Many are the perils in following God and seeking for His truth, but greater is that which we shall receive if we continue to follow God's guidance in our quest for truth and eternal life.

In the quest for eternal life with God, many Christians initially lose much here on earth. Beren risks all and initially loses all in his quest for the Silmaril. When he finally

has the Silmaril in hand, Morgoth's wolf Carcharoth bites his hand off. Later Beren dies in the fighting that comes about because of this one Silmaril, yet the Valar grant him life again at Lúthien's request. The Christian too needs courage and willingness to die in the fight for truth and light. Jesus says, "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." Beren loses his life in his quest, but his life is restored to him as our lives will be restored to us in the world made new if we stay true to God.

Although Satan wishes to take God's light and truth from us, evil cannot bear it. When Carcharoth swallows the Silmaril, it burns in his stomach, driving him mad. Later when anyone with evil intent tries to touch the Silmaril, it burns their hand. In a similar fashion, the light and truth of God destroys those who do not serve Him. Isaiah makes reference to this: "So the Light of Israel will be for a fire, And his Holy One for a flame; It will burn and devour (Isaiah 10:17). It brings pain and destruction to those who are evil as did Tolkien's Silmaril.

From desire for truth to loss of life to light's resistance of evil, Beren's story illustrates several truths of the Christian worldview. Again Tolkien brings to light God's truths through the medium of myth.

The End of the Age

The end of the story of the Silmarils reminds us to call on God for help. At the end of the age the Valar come to Middle-earth and fight against Morgoth. By now many of the kingdoms of the elves and of men have fallen under Morgoth's evil forces. Men and elves are unable to conquer Morgoth of their own forces. So we are unable to conquer sin of our own strength. We must call on God to help us as the elves called on the Valar. We must learn not to rely on our own strength but on the strength of Him who says, "Fear not for I am with you; Be not dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yea, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

Tolkien patterns the overthrow of Morgoth after that of Satan. Once Morgoth is overthrown from his northern kingdom, the Valar chain him and thrust him "into the Timeless Void" (*Silmarillion* 306). At the end of time, Satan will also be chained and thrown into a "bottomless pit" for one thousand years (Rev. 20:1). He will then be unable to harm anyone. Although Tolkien does not place this event at the end of the world and of evil, he clearly bases it on the Biblical prophecies of the end of time.

Even in the fate of the Silmarils, Tolkien reminds us of valuable Christian truths. Each Silmaril ends up in a different place, unavailable to those who might wish to misuse them as before. The Silmaril retrieved by Beren and Lúthien ends up with Eärendil who was allowed to take his ship into the sky. There the Silmaril shines as a star for all to see. The second Silmaril is cast deep into “a gaping chasm filled with fire” (*Silmarillion* 305). The third Silmaril finds its resting place deep in the uttermost depths of the ocean where none might recover it. So each Silmaril rests at last, and they “could not be found or brought together again unless the earth be broken and remade” (*Silmarillion* 305). Just so in real life, sin can not be completely eradicated from this planet and truth and life cannot again reign eternal until this earth is destroyed and remade and for that to happen, the body of Christ, the light and life of this world, had to be destroyed and remade.

In concluding the story of the Silmarils, Tolkien both illustrates our need for God and reveals end time events and truths. Even though the whole story of the Silmarils does not parallel to that of the Bible as it would if it were an allegory, Tolkien still uses this story to demonstrate many Christian parallels and truths. Once more in the guise of myth and legend, he shows reality from the Christian worldview.

Conclusion

Throughout his created history of Middle-earth, Tolkien places parallels to real life from a Christian world view in the form of story line, writing style, and spiritual truths. Tolkien begins his history with a creation and fall much like that supported by the Bible. Throughout his writing he uses grammar, writing styles, word choices, and number choices that give the reader the impression of reading a Biblical history. Other parts of *The Silmarillion* demonstrate spiritual ideas and lessons. Tolkien also uses symbols such as the Silmarils, light, and dark to represent real life truths. In all of this, Tolkien uses myth and legend to point to reality.

In the universe, there exists very real forces of evil battling against God's forces of good. This is the reality of life. We read about this in the Bible, but how many of us fully realize the extent of this battle or Satan's powers? Tolkien does. He not only realizes the evil within this universe, but he demonstrates this evil through fantastical elements. Tolkien lets us see reality through the guise of fictional myth.

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SOUTHERN SCHOLARS SENIOR PROJECT

Name: Lee Brannen Date: Dec Major: Music Ed / English (minor)

SENIOR PROJECT

A significant scholarly project, involving research, writing, or special performance, appropriate to the major in question, is ordinarily completed the senior year. The project is expected to be of sufficiently high quality to warrant a grade of A and to justify public presentation.

Under the guidance of a faculty advisor, the Senior Project should be an original work, should use primary sources when applicable, should have a table of contents and works cited page, should give convincing evidence to support a strong thesis, and should use the methods and writing style appropriate to the discipline.

The completed project to be turned in in duplicate, must be approved by the Honors Committee in consultation with the student's supervising professor three weeks prior to graduation. Please include the advisor's name on the title page. The 2-3 hours of credit for this project is done as directed study or in a research class.

Keeping in mind the above senior project description, please describe in as much detail as you can the project you will undertake. You may attach a separate sheet if you wish:

I want to take an in depth look at spiritual/Christian parallels + truths found in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Silmarillion and the Lord of the Rings trilogy. I also want to look at Tolkien's own life and spiritual journey and see how it relates to his writing. I will also look at historical parallels I find + see how Tolkien has tied all this in.

Signature of faculty advisor [Signature] Expected date of completion 1 April 03

Approval to be signed by faculty advisor when completed:

This project has been completed as planned: [Signature]

This in an "A" project: [Signature]

This project is worth 2-3 hours of credit: [Signature]

Advisor's Final Signature [Signature]

Chair, Honors Committee _____ Date Approved: _____

Dear Advisor, please write your final evaluation on the project on the reverse side of this page. Comment on the characteristics that make this "A" quality work.