



Worlds Within the World

**How J.R.R. Tolkien Can Help Christians Write
Better Fiction**

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Anyone familiar with the works of J.R.R. Tolkien – *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* – knows that the concept of “subcreation” is a key to understanding Tolkien’s goals, methods, and finished masterpieces. In this talk, I want to explore the limits of subcreation, not just in terms of better grasping Tolkien’s own works, but for the more general purpose of determining some potentially helpful parameters for the general occupation of fiction writing done by Christians.

A word first about the “setting” of this talk. Everyone knows that Tolkien was a Roman Catholic. I am a Protestant, and I am talking predominately to a Protestant audience. There are Protestants who feel very uncomfortable with reading – let alone *enjoying* – Tolkien’s works for the precise reason that he was a Roman Catholic. I am not one of those Protestants; that is, Tolkien’s “Romanism,” to use the unfortunately polemical phrase colloquially employed by many, does not bother me over much, and does not at all detract from my enjoyment of and enrichment by his fantastic tales.¹

Nevertheless, because Tolkien is something of an “iffy” proposition for many Protestants, and because this talk originated in a course I took on Tolkien at a Protestant college, the overall tone of this talk is aimed at calming specifically Protestant anxieties that may arise regarding Tolkien’s works. There is no reason that Protestants need fear Tolkien’s fiction, and in fact, every reason why we should read it, enjoy it, and strive hard to learn from it.

¹ I am indebted for the genesis of this project to Douglas Wilson, whose class on the writings of Tolkien I took at New St. Andrews College in 2001.

As I said, the topic of this talk is “Worlds Within the World.”² I want to begin with remarks on the ontology of Tolkien’s myths, and then move to what I would call the epistemological ramifications of his ontological assumptions. That is, I want to move from the realm of *being*, or Tolkien’s ideas about what *is*, to the realm of *knowing*, or the ideas about how human beings know things that we may glean from Tolkien’s myths.

Ontology: The Nature of A Subcreated World

First, let us look at a brief quote from Tolkien that defines the term “subcreation:

...liberation ‘from the channels the creator is known to have used already’ is the fundamental function of ‘sub-creation’, a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety, one of the ways in which it indeed is exhibited, as indeed I said in the Essay. I am not a metaphysician; but I should have thought it a curious metaphysic—there is not one but many, indeed potentially innumerable ones—that declared the channels known (in such a finite corner as we have any inkling of) to have been used, are the only possible ones, or efficacious, or possibly acceptable to and by Him!³

When Tolkien speaks of “the fundamental function of subcreation” in terms of “liberation from the channels the

² Full credit for this title goes to my brother-in-law, Fred Tucker.

³ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, pp. 188-189.

creator is known to have used already,” what does he mean? Tolkien was a Trinitarian Christian. He was fully committed to the orthodox Christian belief in the Trinity, and all that this doctrine means for theology and life. This means that we know from the outset that whatever amazing heights to which he allowed his imagination to run, he did not feel free to let his imagination run wild, apart from all metaphysical, philosophical / theological, or moral constraints. Indeed, in a letter that has been numbered 153 by his editors, he explicitly denies that he did so: “The right to ‘freedom’ of the sub-creator is no guarantee that it will not be used wickedly as is Free Will. I am comforted by the fact that some, more pious and learned than I, have found nothing harmful in this Tale or its feignings as ‘myth’....”⁴

By contrast, as one example of subcreation gone awry, after being repeatedly referred by various people to Robert Jordan’s massive *Wheel of Time* series, I spent some time recently looking through the glossaries contained in those books to get a sense of Jordan’s worldview assumptions. What I found was basically a dualistic philosophy (where the highest good being is offset by an apparently equally powerful evil being), a cyclical view of time which apparently repeats a series of “Ages” over and over again with unpredictable variations each time, and a pagan conception of magic consisting of an impersonal “One Power” that permeates the whole world and which certain fortunate “adepts” can access, producing various magical abilities. While my acquaintance with Jordan is superficial (only so much can be gained from supplementary glossaries), but I found nothing to indicate that

⁴ *Letters*, pp. 194-195

he was operating within the moral and metaphysical constraints of theism proper, much less Christian theism.

A second example would be the “Mortal Kombat” films, based on the video games popular in the mid-nineties. These films blatantly preached a pagan view with a Great Chain of Being extending from the highest beings (vague, disinterested personifications of the four elements—Earth, Wind, Fire, Water) to lower divinities representing various natural forces, to still lower sorcerers, and finally to lowly mortal humans upon whose fickle free wills and ability to overcome all odds the fate of the entire universe depended. In such fantasy schemes, good and evil are arbitrary, and only implicit reliance upon Christian presuppositions in this regard even allows the stories to have the nominal sort of coherence they do have.

Tolkien’s subcreation, on the other hand, is as different from these as night and day. Even a cursory reading of *The Silmarillion*—the grander and broader mythology that lies behind *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*—reveals striking parallels with Holy Scripture, not only in basic motifs such as creation / fall / redemption, but also in the progression of the overall story. At the foundational level, Tolkien’s *subcreated* world is meant to be entirely in keeping with the *actual* world we know God has made, and the subcreated world’s most fundamental facts are entirely in keeping with Scripture.

Consider as one example some elementary points about Iluvatar, the name that Tolkien gives to God in his epic. I know of no biblical reason why a Christian could not, within the context of a self-conscious desire to submit to what God has revealed, posit that the one, true, living God might reveal Himself under different names to different peoples in different times and places. In the context of modern religious relativism,

this idea is often expressed by the phrase “one God, many faces” – a justification of the idea that all religions emanate from the same Divine source and so ultimately need not conflict. However, we need not imagine that Tolkien, in calling God by a different name than the Bible does, is giving anything away to modern relativism. God, in fact, has many names in the Bible itself – some have numbered them at over 100 – each of which reveals something about His character. Since God’s being and character are infinite, it would be impossible for a finite being to argue that the names given in the Bible are the *only* names God has, and quibbling about a mere human’s right to “give God a new name” (within the context of a story that otherwise is fully in keeping with what we know from Scripture) would seem to be a case of rationalistic prejudice.

The same is true of the actions and attitudes and even *spoken words* attributed by Tolkien to Iluvatar. To a mind steeped in the Bible, the opening pages of *The Silmarillion* (and indeed all that it says directly of Iluvatar) should sound strikingly familiar, and could not have been written by someone not steeped in and profoundly reverential of the Bible. Embellishments such as having creation occur by means of “the Music of the Ainur,” itself given existence by God’s own fiat should not concern us as “contradictions” of the Bible’s narrative for reasons I will set forth later when I talk about epistemology.

But what of some of the more “esoteric” elements of the saga—things that many Christians find *prima facie* unacceptable? What about its description by Tolkien as “mythology”? What about the dragons? The wizards? The

magic? What about the attribution of the title “gods” to the Valar? Let us look briefly at these in reverse order.

A hallmark of many systems of idolatry is an ontology and religious worship based around finite gods and goddesses. But in Tolkien’s hands, finite divinities aren’t just for pagans anymore, and indeed, it is pagan mythology that appears twisted when set next to Tolkien’s own. Tolkien explicitly states that his intention in speaking of “gods” was not to violate the constraints of the revealed Christian mysteries. Listen to these three quotes from his *Letters*:

The cycles begin with a cosmogonical myth: the *Music of the Ainur*. God and the Valar (or powers: Englished as gods) are revealed. These latter are as we should say angelic powers, whose function it is to exercise delegated authority in their spheres (of rule and government, *not* creation, making or re-making). They are ‘divine’, that is, were originally ‘outside’ and existed ‘before’ the making of the world. Their power and wisdom is derived from their Knowledge of the cosmogonical drama, which they perceived first as a drama (that is as in a fashion we perceive a story composed by some-one else), and later as a ‘reality’. On the side of mere narrative device, this is, of course, meant to provide beings of the same order of beauty, power, and majesty as the ‘gods’ of higher mythology, which can yet be accepted—well, shall we say baldly, by a mind that believes in the Blessed Trinity.⁵

The immediate authorities are the Valar (the Powers or Authorities): the ‘gods’. But they are

⁵ *Letters*, pg. 146 (emphasis mine).

only created spirits—of high angelic order we should say, with their attendant lesser angels—reverend, therefore, but not worshipful; and though potently ‘subcreative’, and resident on Earth to which they are bound by love, having assisted in its making and ordering, they cannot by their own will alter any fundamental provision.⁶

The Valar or ‘powers, rulers’ were the first ‘creation’: rational spirits or minds without incarnation, created *before* the physical world. (Strictly these *spirits* were called *Ainur*, the *Valar* being only those from among them who entered the world after its making, and the name is properly applied only to the great among them, who take the imaginative but not the theological place of ‘gods’.)⁷

Other elements, such as the existence and use of magic by various beings could not be farther from the sorts of pagan conceptions listed above. Tolkien also denies that “wizards,” such as Gandalf, Radagast, and Saruman, are what we normally understand as “magicians.” He states instead that these are angelic beings who live in direct submission to either Iluvatar (God) or to the Valar, God’s immediate deputies within the Circles of the World. He says:

Nowhere is the place or nature of ‘the Wizards’ made fully explicit. Their name, as related to Wise, is an Englishing of their Elvish name, and is used

⁶ Ibid., pp. 193-194 (emphasis mine)

⁷ Ibid., pg. 284 (emphasis mine)

throughout as utterly distinct from Sorcerer or Magician. It appears finally that they were as one might say the near equivalent in the mode of these tales of Angels, guardian Angels. Their powers are directed primarily to the encouragement of the enemies of evil, to cause them to use their own wits and valour, to unite and endure. They appear always as old men and sages, and though (sent by the powers of the True West) in the world they suffer themselves, their age and grey hairs increase only slowly. Gandalf, whose function is especially to watch human affairs (Men and Hobbits) goes on through all the tales.⁸

Gandalf is a ‘created’ person; though possibly a spirit that existed before the physical world. His function as a ‘wizard’ is an angelos or messenger from the Valar or Rulers: to assist the rational creatures of Middle-earth to resist Sauron, a power too great for them unaided.⁹

‘You cannot pass,’ [Gandalf] said [to the Balrog]. The orcs stood still and a silence fell. ‘I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the Flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udun. Go back to the Shadow! You cannot pass.’

As for the dragons and other monsters in Tolkien, in keeping with the Christian ontology that most frequently in Scripture identifies the symbol of “dragon” with Satan, dragons

⁸ Ibid., footnote on pg. 159 (emphasis mine).

⁹ Ibid., pg. 237.

in Tolkien are *always* incarnations of evil.¹⁰ Consider Glaurung, the first and most powerful of dragons, who in the *Unfinished Tales* is said to be “filled with the fell spirit of Morgoth his master” (Morgoth being Tolkien’s “Satan” figure). In *The Silmarillion*, likewise, Glaurung is said to speak to the hero Turin “by the evil spirit that was in him,” and his dying act is to curse Turin with a fate spawned from the depths of his own master’s hellish kingdom. This is very unlike non-Christian stories such as *Dragonheart*, *Eragon*, and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, in which the dragons, though outwardly evil-looking, are good “at heart” and even provide necessary help to the heroes.

But perhaps the biggest hurdle for many Christians is the fact that Tolkien freely admits that his entire subcreation is “mythology.”¹¹ Now in our supposedly rationally-enlightened age, we think that the word *myth* is simply a synonym for the word *falsehood*. Myths, we believe, are what our unenlightened and superstitious ancestors thought. They were primitive gropings in the cognitive darkness of not knowing “how things *really* work” in “the real world.” We know better, we smugly think to ourselves. We have space shuttles and microwave ovens and robots that can look at Jupiter up close and MP3 players and electron microscopes and automated teller machines – and let’s not even get started talking about our knowledge that the Earth is *round*. And oh yeah, we are *Christians*, too, in possession of the Only-One-Hundred-Percent-Correct-Worldview.

¹⁰ *Unfinished Tales*, pg. 124, and *The Silmarillion*, pg. 262.

¹¹ See numerous places in *The Letters*; pp. 230-231 is a representative example.

Douglas Wilson has suggested that it might be an interesting measure of our scientific rationalism to observe how we would react to someone seriously suggesting that gravity is the action of “graviton faeries,” personal beings, not impersonal particles. The idea of graviton particles is supposedly a “scientific” explanation of gravity – that is, an explanation based on empirical observation and rational theorizing rather than on fact-less mythology, yet, ironically, so far we can neither see or detect said particles by any means save for gravity itself, the thing they supposedly explain! Scientists thus stubbornly believe in invisible and unquantifiable *thingummies* the existence of which they merely infer from the truism “What goes up must come down” and some esoteric and very difficult to interpret results of bizarre experiments in particle colliders. Yet we all know that it was *Ancient people* who were “superstitious” and “irrational” and “didn’t know how the world works.”

More examples of the tomfoolery that passes for “rational science” in opposition to “mythology” could be given, but I don’t want to digress from the important point that the category of myth itself is not as easy to dismiss as we like to think. Indeed, it is inescapable. Jeremy Downey has written that a myth is “an invention that is a metaphor for some aspect of reality. A ‘mythology’ is an overarching system of myths that affects and helps define our understanding of the universe.”¹² Seen in this light, it should be plain that we Moderns have quite as many “myths” as any Ancient person.

¹² “The World Is Not Enough: Mankind, Myth, and the Pursuit of Elemental Desire,” an unpublished student paper at New St. Andrews College.