

The Gift of Ilúvatar: Tolkien's Theological Vision

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Abstract: This article explores some of the principal theological themes underlying Tolkien's fiction through reference to Tolkien's own comments and observations expressed in his letters, lectures and other creative works. It is my contention in this article that Tolkien's work is explicitly theological and makes an important contribution to contemporary Christian theological discussion, especially with regards to the vocation of Christians and their role in the salvation of the world.

Key Words: theology and literature; Tolkien; *Lord of the Rings*; Catholic literature; fantasy literature; contemporary mythology

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.¹

Tolkien wrote this statement in response to a Jesuit friend, who had read proofs of *The Lord of the Rings* and commented that "the book left him with a strong sense of a 'positive compatibility with the order of grace'."²

Tolkien may not talk about God directly, but he does do so indirectly, in a manner consistent with an appreciation of revelation grounded in the idea of salvation history, according to which God is best revealed in and through the story. It is in terms of the grand scheme of salvation history that I will explore the theology expressed and explored by Tolkien in his fiction.

From an aesthetic standpoint, what gives *The Lord of the Rings* its narrative depth is Tolkien's other major creative work, the rich mythology of *The Silmarillion* that he had worked on throughout his life. This mythology provides a horizon and a texture for the story in a manner comparable, perhaps, to the role of the New Zealand landscape in Peter Jackson's films.

I would like to hazard the suggestion that the same applies from a theological perspective.³ Tolkien's Catholicism has done more than simply influence his work.

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, selected and edited by Humphrey Carpenter, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981) 172.

² Robert Murray S.J. Ibid, 171-2. Tolkien does describe the story as "a study of the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble". Ibid., 237.

³ There is a great deal of material that discusses Tolkien as a Christian writer, but less that deals with his work from a theological perspective. Ralph C. Wood's recent and excellent *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-Earth* and Tony Kelly's article "Faith Seeking Fantasy" are the only explicitly theological works by theologians of which I am aware. Readers may also be interested to note that Tolkien's name appears as one of the 27 principal collaborators in translation and literary revision of the Jerusalem Bible. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966).

Tolkien's creative world is also, at one level, a sustained reflection upon the Gospel. His imaginative world grants him a certain amount of creative freedom in grappling with the theological implications of the Christian understanding of creation, incarnation, and salvation, enabling him to find new ways to think through old problems. Tolkien has tried to subject his imaginative exercise to the discipline of theological consistency. But in doing so Tolkien has been able to theologise in a novel way with benefit of a certain creative and reflective distance.

"Mine is not an 'imaginary' world" Tolkien explains, "but an imaginary historical moment on 'Middle-earth' which is our habitation"⁴ Tolkien has not imagined another world different from our own, but rather an imagined history, a lost history, of our own world. It is a pre-Christian world, but it is pre-Christian in a chronological rather than theological sense.⁵ At its heart, Tolkien's imaginary world functions as a theological reflection on death and finitude in the light of Christian hope.⁶

Reflecting on the role of fantasy in his 1938 lecture "On Fairy Stories", Tolkien explicitly links fantasy with the Gospel. In response to the question of the truth of the storyteller's creation, Tolkien says:

"If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world". That is enough for the artist (or the artist part of the artist). But in the 'eucatastrophe' [happy ending] we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater – it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* [Gospel] in the real world.⁷

In the Gospel, Tolkien proclaims, "art has been verified."⁸

Fantasy is related to religious discourse to the extent that fantasy helps us to overcome the "the drab blur of triteness or familiarity."⁹ Religious discourse should break through the mundane in order to recover a sense of the wonder and mystery of the world. Both have a prophetic function. Gerard Hall has described both poetic and religious discourse in terms of their ability "to break-through the monotony of the mundane and the pathology of evil that destroy the human capacity to be scandalized by the imaginative vision of a radically different future."¹⁰ To be a poet *is* to be a creator; the words poet and poetry being derived from the Greek root meaning "to create."

Re-imagining the world creatively, enables us to appreciate this creation with fresh eyes, and brings us closer to an appreciation of the world as it is, not simply as a given, but as a gift in all its novelty and strangeness. To see the world as such should also help us to imagine the world in the light of faith, hope and love, and to shape it accordingly. Tolkien explains that,

the story-maker who allows himself to be 'free with' Nature can be her lover and not her slave. It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of words, and the

⁴ Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 244.

⁵ Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien. Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-Earth*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 5.

⁶ Tolkien is "concerned with Death as part of the nature, physical and spiritual, of Man, and with Hope without guarantees" *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 237.

⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories", *Tree and Leaf, Smith of Wooton Major, The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son*, (London: Unwin Books, 1975), 71.

⁸ "On Fairy Stories," 72. Tolkien continues, "The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the happy ending". Ibid.

⁹ "On Fairy Stories," 59.

¹⁰ Gerard Hall, *Raimon Panikkar's Hermeneutics of Religious Pluralism*, Ph.D. diss. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1993), 325.

wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.¹¹

These last two Eucharistic symbols evoke the sacramentality of Tolkien's imagination.

Tolkien has a strong dislike of allegory with its one dimensional correspondence of sign and signified.¹² Tolkien's imagination is thoroughly Catholic in this regards. Whereas C.S. Lewis thought allegorically, Tolkien thought symbolically. The Catholic understanding of symbol is not simply something that stands for or points to something else. This is no more than a sign, or in its narrative form, an allegory. Rather, the symbol both points beyond itself and makes present that to which it points. It is the nature of sacrament and symbol to bear within themselves the objects to which they refer. Hence Tolkien's imaginary world hopes in some sense to bear the true world within itself.

CREATION

We make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.¹³

Tolkien's theology begins and ends with creation. This is Tolkien's fundamental theme, for to be made in the image of God is for Tolkien to be made in the image of a creator. To be creative is to participate in some small way in the work of creation itself. Imagination is a fundamental part of what it is to be human. Imagination enables us to go beyond ourselves and orients us fundamentally towards transcendence. Tolkien's mythology holds to the Christian view of salvation history in which the origins of the world are recapitulated in its consummation. The heart of Tolkien's theology, therefore, is found within his creation myth, which I will now outline, although I would strongly encourage the reader to read this beautiful piece of prose for themselves.

Creation has its source in the one God, but from the beginning God seeks collaborators. From the outset it seems as if freedom is woven into the very fabric of creation itself. In this myth (called the *Ainulindalë*), creation itself is described as a great music, called the Music of the Ainur (the Ainur being the angelic spirits). God is the conductor of the cosmic choir, instructing the angels in their music and allowing and encouraging them to harmonise and to elaborate upon the themes that God (called Eru Ilúvatar meaning the One and the All) has propounded. With their great music the angels fill the void.

There is a great harmony, but also the first Fall as the greatest of the angelic spirits (called Melkor) takes it into his mind to introduce themes of his own devising and interrupts the harmony.

It was loud and vain, and endlessly repeated; and it had little harmony, but rather a clamorous unison as of many trumpets braying upon a few notes. And it was essayed to drown the other music by the violence of its voice, but it seemed that its most triumphant notes were taken by the other and woven into its own solemn pattern.¹⁴

¹¹ "On Fairy Stories," 60.

¹² In constructing his mythology Tolkien was concerned not to paralleled the Christian biblical story too closely lest his tale parody Christianity. Commenting upon an imaginative dialogue between an elf and a woman on the nature and destiny of human beings Tolkien questions whether it is already "(if inevitably) too like a parody of Christianity. Any legend of the Fall would make it completely so?" J.R.R. Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring. The History of Middle Earth*, Vol. 10, edited by Christopher Tolkien, (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 354.

¹³ "On Fairy Stories", 57.

¹⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1977), 17.

God, called Ilúvatar, intervenes at key moments adding new themes of his own. And the discord sown by the fallen – or perhaps more accurately, falling – angels is transformed by being taken up into new and more marvellous themes. And so Ilúvatar pronounces:

And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.¹⁵

That creation involves intermediaries does not imply creation by a demiurge as God remains the ultimate source of the music, not just as the first cause. It is God Ilúvatar who then gives the music form, bestowing upon it the “flame imperishable” or life, that only God can give. The music having received form became a Vision. And then the Vision is made a reality and the angels are invited, if they wish, to enter the World that they have helped to imagine, so that they might continue to participate in its unfolding.

An interesting tension emerges here between predestination and freedom. From the very outset the freedom of the Ainur is intrinsic to the process of creation. Even though Eru Ilúvatar remains the Lord of History in respecting the freedom of his creatures, God allows a space for what is other than God.

The music precedes the coming into being of the physical world and those who enter into it already know the outlines of the major themes or those parts of the Music with which they played some part. But the music is not finished. Not only because God remains free to introduce genuinely new themes, but because the Children of Ilúvatar who will people the world will also have a share in shaping it. With the coming of humanity we move from mythology into history, and predestination and fate gradually give way to freedom and providence. Of that first great music Tolkien's narrator writes:

Never since have the Ainur made any music like to this music, though it has been said that a greater still shall be made before Ilúvatar by the choirs of the Ainur and the Children of Ilúvatar after the end of days.¹⁶

This passage is the key to Tolkien's theology. We the children of the creator, made in the image of a creator, are called to be co-creators in this world, at whose consummation we will be able to offer to the creator our own contribution to God's creation. I will return to this theme in my conclusion.

INCARNATION AND REDEMPTION

After creation, one of the next major themes within Tolkien's work is incarnation. To be, in this world, is to become incarnate. Too often it seems, Christianity wears the incarnation too lightly as if it were simply a garment to be cast off after death. But the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body contradicts this presupposition. At the heart of the Christian revelation is the insight that our relationship to the material world is intrinsic to who we are and that there can be no fulfilment of the person without some relation to matter. It seems however as if we are unable to imagine the full implications of this. As Edward Schillebeeckx has said, “*extra mundum nulla salus*, there is no salvation outside the human world [in the sense that] the world of creation, our history within the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1977), 15.

environment of nature, is the sphere of God's saving action in and through human mediation."¹⁷

In his imaginative world Tolkien takes our incarnate nature seriously. In Tolkien's story there is evil incarnate, if not absolute evil. Within his mythology, the primeval Fall takes place before the creation of the world. There was no Golden prelapsarian age; sin and effects are part of the fabric of the world from the beginning. The effects of this Fall however will echo through history in the number of smaller falls as Morgoth, the great enemy of the world, attempts to impose his will by turning the course of creation away from intentions of the creator.

In *The Lord of the Rings* it is Sauron who is the great enemy. Sauron sought to dominate by concentrating all his power and will into the One Ring so that to destroy the ring was to destroy Sauron. Although Sauron is a fallen angel, to be in this world is to become incarnate. As his instrument, the One Ring is in effect the body of Sauron. But Sauron is not the chief of the fallen angels. He was in the beginning a lieutenant of Melkor, the greatest of the Angelic spirits. The differences between the careers of Sauron and Melkor are illuminating.

The angelic spirits were invited to enter into the world to participate more closely in its ordering and unfolding. Melkor, renamed Morgoth as the great enemy of the World, incarnated himself permanently within the world in the attempt to dominate and control matter. He impressed himself totally upon the world, and the world bears his imprint to the extent that he himself is dissipated in the process. Morgoth disseminated his vast power into the world itself with the result that "the whole of Middle-earth was Morgoth's Ring."¹⁸ This means that evil cannot simply be overcome by force without destroying creation, which is in effect to do evil's work. It is a constant theme throughout Tolkien's work that the end never justifies the means; fidelity is always to be valued above pragmatism as is amply demonstrated in *The Lord of the Rings*.

But if the world is fallen, it is also graced. The relationship between human frailty and grace is clearly encapsulated in the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is crucial to the theological logic of the story that Frodo ultimately fails in his quest.¹⁹ The quest succeeds, ultimately, because it is taken out of his hands. Success, and ultimately redemption, is not the result of strength but of forgiveness. Tolkien tells us that it is "the Pity of Bilbo and later Frodo that ultimately allows the Quest to be achieved."²⁰ Frodo and the Quest "were saved – by Mercy: by the supreme value and efficacy of Pity and forgiveness of injury."²¹ This is consistent with the absolute centrality of the Gospel virtue of "forgiveness". The consequence of our limitations and fallenness is that reliance solely upon our own merits will never be enough. It is forgiveness that overcomes pagan fate and allows genuine freedom, which is also the realm of grace. With forgiveness the vicious circle of history and of our own weakness is broken. With forgiveness comes the genuinely new which is the gift of God Ilúvatar, who retains the prerogative to introduce something new that cannot be derived from what went before.

¹⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden. (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 12.

¹⁸ Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 400.

¹⁹ "No, Frodo 'failed'. It is possible that once the ring was destroyed he had little recollection of the last scene. But one must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is not finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however good." *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 252.

²⁰ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 191.

²¹ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 252.

Consequently, repentance is also as important. As Richard Purtill observes, "Choices are not irrevocable: Gollum and Saruman and Denethor are offered chances to repent and refuse, whereas Galadriel, Boromir, and Theoden, all at some point repent and change."²² Tolkien does not believe in absolute evil. Nor does he believe that good intentions can ever justify the means. Even Sauron, Tolkien suggests, began with good intentions.²³

Freedom is an important theme in the work, but it is not for Tolkien the most important one. "In *The Lord of the Rings* the conflict is not basically about 'freedom', though that is naturally involved. It is about God, and His sole right to divine honour."²⁴ Sin and redemption are ultimately understood in terms of limits: their transgression and their transcendence.

THE GIFT OF DEATH: TOLKIEN'S THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The most intriguing, and original aspect of Tolkien's creative theologising is his treatment of death. It is here that I believe that the creative freedom that is made possible by Tolkien's imaginary world bears fruit in his theological anthropology.

Tolkien's world, peopled as it is not only by human beings but by Elves and Dwarves and Hobbits²⁵ and Ents and Wizards and Orcs may appear to resemble more closely a polytheistic or pagan cosmology rather than one that is specifically Christian. However, the various children of Ilúvatar are reflections upon humanity. Dividing humanity into Men and Elves enables Tolkien to reflect upon various aspects of the human condition in novel ways. Tolkien explains that,

the real theme for me is about something much more permanent and difficult: Death and Immortality: the mystery of the love of the world in hearts of a race 'doomed' to leave and seemingly lose it; the anguish in the hearts of a race 'doomed' not to leave it, until its whole evil-aroused story is complete.²⁶

²² Richard L. Purtill, J.R.R. Tolkien. *Myth, Morality, and Religion*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984) 115. Regarding Galadriel, Tolkien explains: "Galadriel was a penitent: in her youth a leader in the rebellion against the Valar (guardian angels). At the end of the First Age she proudly refused forgiveness or permission to return. She was pardoned because of her resistance to the final and overwhelming temptation to take the Ring for herself". *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 407.

²³ Tolkien explains:

In my story I do not deal in Absolute Evil. I do not think there is such a thing, since that is Zero. I do not think that at any rate any 'rational being' is wholly evil. Satan fell. In my myth Morgoth fell before the Creation of the physical world. In my story Sauron represents as near an approach to the wholly evil will as is possible. He had gone the way of all tyrants, beginning well, at least on the level that while desiring to order all things according to his own wisdom he still at first considered the (economic) well-being of other inhabitants of the Earth. But he went further than human tyrants in pride and lust for domination, being in origin and immortal (angelic) spirit.

The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, 243. Tolkien holds to neither absolute evil nor absolute goodness apart from God. Even the Valar, the powers of this world, it's "guardian angels" have their weaknesses and limitations. For example, the attempt of the Valar, the angelic powers of this world, to preserve at least part of the world free from corruption – the Blessed Realm, the undying lands of Valinor, a sort of garden of Eden, Tolkien suggests, appears to come near to rivalling the possessiveness of Melkor with a rival possessiveness. *Morgoth's Ring*, 401.

²⁴ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 243.

²⁵ Tolkien describes himself as a hobbit in all but size. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 288. I, for one, believe that I have known Elves.

²⁶ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 246. The story is "about Death and the desire for deathlessness. Which is hardly more than to say it is a tale written by a Man!" *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 262.

In other words, it is about the experience of finitude and limits and of our relation to the world as this is what fundamentally divides Men and Elves.²⁷ What specifically divides Men from Elves is death. Death only comes to Elves accidentally, but death is part of the nature of Man. The temptation therefore would seem to be to consider that Elves are somehow higher than humanity, as being immortal they are somehow also more divine. However, Tolkien turns this presupposition on its head.

It is in his treatment of death that Tolkien parts most substantially from the biblical myth in that in Tolkien's world, death is not a punishment, or the result of the Fall, but is in fact intrinsic to the nature of humanity and as such is a gift from God to humanity. To truly understand the divine plan for humanity will entail therefore an understanding of the nature of death.

Death is related to the Fall or to sin to the extent that sin has changed the nature of death in as far as our understanding of death is concerned. It is this misunderstanding, of our own nature, and of our limits that lay at the heart of the corruption of humanity. What was supposed to have been good, has become the enemy. Death, has become "the name that we give to something that he has tainted, and it sounds therefore evil; but untainted its name would be good."²⁸

The *confusion* is the work of the Enemy, and one of the chief causes of human disaster. Compare the death of Aragorn with a Ringwraith. The Elves call 'death' the Gift of God (to Men). Their temptation is different: towards a fainéant melancholy, burdened with Memory, leading to an attempt to halt time.²⁹

Reflecting upon this ultimate experience of limits, Tolkien describes Elves and Men as "just different aspects of the Humane, and represent the problem of Death as seen by a finite but willing and self-conscious person."³⁰ They are "different 'experiments', each of which has its own natural trend, and weakness."³¹

The Elves represent, as it were, the artistic, aesthetic, and purely scientific aspects of the Humane nature raised to a higher level than is actually seen in Men. That is: they have a devoted love of the physical world, and a desire to observe and understand it for its own sake and as 'other' - as a reality derived from God in the same degree as themselves - not as a material for use or as a power-platform.³²

The Elves are a metaphor for the immanence of the spirit and of the spiritual within the Humane. According to the Elvish languages of Tolkien's devising, the word "fairy" is derived from the word "fëa" meaning spirit.³³ The beauty of the Elves, their wisdom, skill and craft could be seen as the ideal wedding of spirit and matter in whom the immanence of spirit is most transparent. The Elves are deeply and thoroughly incarnate. The idea of a houseless spirit, the existence of the spirit without the body, is abhorrent to them.³⁴ But being bound within the world, they

²⁷ As Tolkien uses the term "Men" as a generic term to differentiate mortal humanity from Elves, it would seem that any attempt to render Tolkien's language more inclusive is doomed to failure or at least to appear ridiculous.

²⁸ "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth," *Morgoth's Ring*, 310.

²⁹ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 267.

³⁰ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 236.

³¹ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 236.

³² *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 236.

³³ Which might also be related to the Irish (Gaelic) word "fí" meaning "man."

³⁴ "[T]he thought of existence as fëar (spirit) only was revolting to them (the Elves)" "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth," *Morgoth's Ring*, 332.

do not move on but remain bound in memory, which as the shadows of time lengthen becomes more melancholy. The Sun never truly sets for the Elves, the shadows just get longer.

The principal temptation of Elves, while recognisably human, is for the most part, different to that of mortal humanity. The primary Elvish vice is nostalgia and the temptation to resist change. "Change as such . . . is the unfolding of the story and to refuse this is of course against the design of God."³⁵ The Elvish weakness is "to become unwilling to face change: as if a man were to hate a very long book still going on, and wished to settle down in a favourite chapter."³⁶

What then of Men, or mortal humanity? Tolkien explores the matter in depth through the literary device of a debate between Finrod, a high-Elven king, and Andreth, a human woman, set in the days of the first encounters between Men and Elves. The debate centres on the nature and destiny of humanity. Finrod explains to the human and mortal woman Andreth the puzzlement of the Elves at the tendency of Men to treat things as a means to an end and not an end in themselves:

the [Elves] say of Men that they look at no thing for itself; that if they study it, it is only (so it seems) because it reminds them of some other dearer thing? Yet with what is this comparison? Where are these other things?³⁷

Where are these other things indeed! Humanity is oriented towards transcendence, to seek beyond the confines of the world. This is described in the creation story, the *Ainulindale*:

There [God] willed that the hearts of Men should seek beyond the world and find no rest therein; but they should have a virtue to fashion their life, amid the powers and chances of the world, beyond the Music of the Ainur, which is as fate to all things else.³⁸

Humanity is uniquely free. If then the Elves are oriented towards immanence, mortal humanity is oriented towards transcendence. The natural limits of humanity are closely related to the very possibility of transcendence and freedom. But they are also the source of our weakness.³⁹ Men are easily seduced because it is our nature to look and go beyond. The gift of God to Humanity is also the root of our fall, our restlessness, our jealousy. The full meaning and significance of that gift however is yet to be realised.

Death is their fate, the gift of *Ilúvatar* unto them, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy. But Melkor hath cast his shadow upon it, and confounded it with darkness, and brought forth evil out of good, and fear out of hope. Yet it is said that they will join in the Second Music of the Ainur, whereas Ilúvatar has not revealed what he purposes for Elves and Valar after the World's end; and Melkor has not discovered it.⁴⁰

Our destiny is beyond this world, but not in a manner that simply echoes the platonic and Gnostic distaste for the world. Here we come to what Ralph C. Wood calls "a radically non-

³⁵ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 236.

³⁶ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 236.

³⁷ "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth," *Morgoth's Ring*, 316

³⁸ *Ainulindalë*, Versions C and D, *Morgoth's Ring*, 21, 36.

³⁹ "But Ilúvatar knew that Men, being set amid the turmoils of the world, would stray often, and would not use their gift in harmony; and he said: 'These too, in their time, shall find that all they do redounds at the end only to the glory of my work'. Yet the Elves say that Men are often a grief unto Manwe [akin to the Archangel Michael, chief of the Guardian Angels of the World], who knows most of the mind of Ilúvatar. For Men resemble Melkor most of all the Ainur." *Morgoth's Ring*, 21.

⁴⁰ *Morgoth's Ring*, 21-22.

platonic turn"⁴¹ The body and the world of matter are not something to be escaped or transcended as such. To separate the body from the spirit, the dweller from the house is considered to be a terrible thing. In this death is indeed terrible. But if death then is to be understood as a gift, and part of the fulfilment of the person, then it must follow then that in death, the relationship between the spirit and matter, the dweller and the house will be not only maintained but transformed through the return of the spirit to God.

And what can this mean unless it be that the feä [spirit] shall have the power to uplift the hröa [body], as its eternal spouse and companion, into an endurance everlasting beyond Eä [the Universe of that which is], and beyond time.⁴²

Here we touch upon what I believe one of the most important challenges for Christian theology; our Platonic heritage has meant that the radically incarnational insight that is at the heart of Christianity has remained underdeveloped or atrophied. The incarnation's radical affirmation of the material world, however, lies at the very heart of Tolkien's theological anthropology.

This then, I propound, was the errand of Men . . . [as] the heirs and fulfillers of all: to heal the Marring of *Arda* [the World], already foreshadowed before their devising; and to do more, as agents of the magnificence of Eru [the One]: to enlarge the Music and surpass the Vision of the World. For that [World] Healed shall not be [the World] Unmarred, but a third thing and a greater, and yet the same.⁴³

Salvation makes no sense unless it includes the world. Salvation from the world is no salvation as much as an attempted flight from the disease. But the healing of the world will not simply restore the world to what it was in some imagined prelapsarian dawn, but will be something genuinely new. As Saint Paul explained in his epistle to the Romans:

It is not for its own purposes that creation had frustration imposed on it, but for the purposes of him who imposed it – with the intention that the whole creation itself might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God.⁴⁴

The difficulty with the platonic flight from the world that is the more traditional path of sanctity is that it leaves Morgoth's ring intact. The salvation of the world entails that the ring of the world must also be taken up into God. And it is we who are to be the agents of the world's divinisation.

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⁴¹ Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-Earth*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 159.

⁴² Morgoth's Ring, 318.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Romans 8:21-22.