Natural Evil and the Mythology of J.R.R. Tolkien

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The Problem of Natural Evil and the Creative Imagination

• We must seriously engage the challenging theological questions that scripture raises. One of the most vexing of these is the problem of pain and natural evil.

• The pain and suffering embedded in Creation seems to be in irreconcilable conflict with a good and loving God.

• Application of our creative imagination may be a valuable God-given tool for addressing such apparently unresolvable questions.
The Need for Imagination in Addressing Theological Questions

• The mental categories and the words that we use to discuss challenging theological questions, may sometimes actually act as barriers to deeper insight.

• Any discussion of the character and will of God necessitates the use of symbols and analogies — of creative imagination.

• Imagination as expressed in myth and fantasy is one way that can enable us to see age old theological and moral questions in a new context.
In the Silmarillion, Tolkien provides an imaginative mythology that illuminates important biblical themes and provides valuable insights into the problem of natural evil.
“Fairy Stories” as a Illuminator of Truth

“Fairy stories” reflect the human condition and our desire for mystery, wonder, and a greater purpose and meaning in life.

• “For Tolkien ... the story itself is not a distortion of reality but a wonderful way of entering more fully into what was routinely regarded as ‘the real world’ before being creatively re-imagined in the arts of fantasy.” (Tony Kelly, 2002, “Faith Seeking Fantasy: Tolkien on Fairy-Stories.” Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies)

• “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.” (Damien Casey, 2004, “This gift of Iluvatar: Tolkien’s Theological Vision,” Australian Ejounral of Theology)
The Creation Mythology of the Sillmarillion

- Hierarchy of spiritual beings
  - Iluvatar — The source and end of all things, and the only one possessing the “Flame Imperishable.”
  - The Valar (Ainur) — The most powerful of the spiritual beings created by Illuvatar to carry out his will.
  - The Maiar — The servants and helpers of the Valar.
The Great Music

• Tolkien’s creation myth begins with a “great music” that Iluvar calls into being with the collaboration of the Valar.

• Iluvar’s creative power was mediated, yet the creative power rested only with Illuvar. The Valar were commanded to contribute their own thoughts to the song of creation.

  ▸ “… ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will.”

• “From the outset it seems as if freedom is woven in the very fabric of creation itself.” (Damien Casey, “The gift of Iluvar: Tolkien’s theological vision,” Australian Ejournal of Theology, February 2004, Issue 2)
Ainulindale: Music of the Ainur (Valar)
Artist Unknown
The Rebellion of Melkor

- Melkor was a Valar given great power and knowledge by Iluvatar. Melkor desired the “Flame Imperishable” to create for himself and rule the creation.

- Melkor introduced discordant notes and themes of his own devising into the original music of Iluvatar.

- Illuvator introduced new themes that incorporated the discordance of Melkor into a greater whole.

  - “And it (Melkor’s theme) 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”
The Great Music Made Visible

- Iluvatar commands that the music of the Valar be made visible.

- The attempt by Melkor to defy the music of Iluvatar had no creative power in itself, but was itself also part of Iluvatar’s larger creative will.

  - “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.”

- The discord of Melkor had in the end produced greater marvels in the creation.
Evil Has No Creative Power on its Own

- None can possess the “Flame Imperisable” but Iluvator alone, and none can thwart Iluvator’s will.

- Melkor, can only corrupt and distort, never create.
Creation of the "Children of Iluvatar"

- The Elves and Men are created by Iluvatar to dwell in the created world — Elves in the land of Valinor, and Men in Middle-Earth.

- To the Elves was given the gift of immortality, although they can be slain or die of grief.

- To Men was given the gift of mortality
Death and the Essential Goodness of Creation

• “The fact that life is shadowed by death does not make it evil. On the contrary, the omnipresence of death renders life immensely precious, even if it can never be the *summum bonum*, our highest good. Tolkien envisions the creation as a blessing and never a curse, just as Yahweh beholds his creation and declares it ‘very good.’” (Ralph Wood, 2003, The Gospel According to Tolkien)

• “…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.” (Damien Casey, 2004, “This gift of Iluvatar: Tolkien’s Theological Vision,” Australian Ejounral of Theology)
Melkor Corrupted Death

“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.” (J.R.R. Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring. The History of Middle Earth Volume 10*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, (London: Harper Collins, 1993)
The Free Nature of All Creation

- The will of Iluvatar is never coerced from his creations.
- The Valar were given freedom in the “Great Music”.
- All created things, whether the speaking children of Iluvatar, of the diverse living beings that inhabit Middle Earth, are given the freedom to move toward or away from Iluvatar’s will.
The Inherent Freedom of Creation

The entire creaturely hierarchy of Tolkien’s cosmology is invested with inherent freedom and consequential choices.

- Among the Valar — Aule grew impatient waiting for the Children of Iluvatar and so made the Dwarves. Melkor sought to obtain the power of Iluvatar and so set himself against him.
- Among the Maiar — Gandolph of the wizards faithfully carried out his mission to give strength to elves and mortals in their fight against Sauron, who was also a Maiar. Sauruman was seduced by the lust for knowledge and moved from obedience to disobedience.
- Among Elves — There were elves who were faithful to the will of Iluvatar, and those who rebelled.
The Inherent Freedom of Creation

• Among Humans — Aragorn represents a mortal whose desire was for the good, while the Ringwraiths were once noble kings who submitted to the will of Sauron.

• Among Hobbits — Bilbo and Frodo and their company willingly accepted their costly role in Iluvatar’s cosmic plan. Gollum was likewise a Hobbit who surrendered to lust and greed.

• Even the trees (and their shepherds the Ents) play a freely given role in the outcome of cosmic history.

• Animals also find themselves on the side of good or evil.
Freedom Never Diminishes Iluvatar’s Power or Will

- Despite the very real freedom given to creation, no action is ever outside of the ultimate will and purpose of Iluvatar.

- Freedom is itself a gift of Iluvatar and part of the good intended.

- The playing out of history is always under the knowing gaze of Iluvatar.
Iluvatar’s Final Vision for Creation is Never Thwarted

• There is a sense in the narrative of Tolkien that there is a power at work in events that transcends the knowledge or work of any created being.
• The will of Iluvatar is worked out providentially, and hidden, within the events of Middle-Earth.

“Behind (Gollum’s loss of the ring) there was something else at work beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it.” — Gandolf to Frodo
Pain, Suffering and Trial
Provide Opportunity for Virtue

The playing out of history is the context for the expression of moral virtues. Virtues such as wisdom, prudence, justice, mercy, courage, and self-denial are all central to the story of each character. Each character takes a trajectory toward or away from that which is good.

The Importance of the “Happy Ending”

• For Tolkien, an unexpected, drastic turn of events that results in deliverance is essential to “fairy-stories.”

• Tolkien called these “eucatastrophes” and saw them as reflecting the reality of the Gospel hope through Christ’s resurrection and second coming. (Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien*, (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2003)

• In Tolkien’s fantasy, the final accomplishment of Illuvatar’s good creative will is certain. The ultimate end will be more wonderful than even the Valar can imagine.
The Silmarillion Illuminates These Important Themes

• All creative power lies exclusively with God
  • All of creation has its ultimate source in God’s will and power

• The embodiment of God’s creative will into physical reality is mediated
  • God works through his creatures

• All of creation is given freedom
  • That freedom is part of God’s ultimate purpose

• God’s good will cannot be thwarted, and history will culminate in a “eucatastrophe”