

Tolkien's Fantasy World Versus a Biblical Perspective on the Real World

J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings and the other associated stories of Middle-Earth have remained very popular for many years. The Lord of the Rings books have a long and rich background that is thousands of years of fantasy history. This makes the Middle-Earth stories possess a depth that is very engaging. Though the books The Hobbit and the three Lord of the Rings volumes may be considered finished since they were published during Tolkien's lifetime, the Silmarillion and other books published by Christopher Tolkien were not truly finished by J.R.R. Tolkien. The unfinished segments and multiple versions of some aspects of the stories have attracted much study from scholars.

J.R.R. Tolkien was Catholic and his faith certainly had some influence on his writing. Catholicism may not have great relevance to trying to relate the relevance of Tolkien's Middle Earth stories to Christianity, but I write as a non-Catholic protestant. I also write as a young-age Creationist and as such the view of nature from Tolkien's stories is notably different than the biblical concepts about Creation, the corruption of God's creation, and the biblical concept of God's plan of redemption. Explaining the differences between a biblical Christian worldview and Tolkien's stories is not intended as a criticism of Tolkien, but merely a useful comparison for the sake of understanding both. Tolkien's Middle-Earth Legendarium is after all, a great work of fiction. It is not intended to tell us reality. Yet, there are aspects that resonate with Christian values and beliefs. I will begin with some background on the rich fantasy world imagined by Tolkien.

The Powers of Arda

In Tolkien's stories the universe is referred to with the word "Ea," meaning "Let it be" or "the world that is." "Ea" is sometimes described as equivalent to our concept of "universe." I doubt that this was a direct correspondence in the mind of Tolkien but it may be a useful analogue. "Ea" was something spoken by Iluvator (Silmarillion, Ainulindale, p. 10) and is close to the Christian concept of creation by fiat command. However, Iluvatar does not do all the creative actions himself but leaves much of it to the Valar. Iluvatar is the all-powerful God in Tolkien's stories but he is left as very mysterious. His role seems often hidden and his influence indirect. The term "Arda" seems to refer to the created material world, which we might say is like us referring to planet Earth. (The name "Aman" refers to the undying lands in the West where the Valar and Maiar lived. The undying lands has been described as the dwelling place for immortals.) Tolkien's writings do sometimes use the term Earth, but not always in reference to the entire material world of the stories. "Earth" in Tolkien's writings can sometimes refer to "Middle-Earth" which is more like a continent, not like a planet. One of the complications of the Silmarillion is that due to the multiple languages invented by Tolkien for the peoples in his stories, there are multiple names for some peoples and places. For example, another name for Iluvatar is "Eru."

The Ainur are described as "the offspring of his [Iluvatar's] thought, and they were with him before aught else was made (Silmarillion, p 3)." In the beginning, it says Iluvatar spoke to them about themes of music and the Valar sang, each according what they knew from Iluvatar. It

indicates all the Valar comprehended a portion of all that Iluvatar was and the themes he taught them. Even Melkor, who turned to evil destructive purposes, was reflecting a portion of Iluvatar's nature. The term "Valar" tends to be used to refer to the entire group of all the Ainur, which were 14 in number. But it would be more correct to describe them as the Valar and Valier. The Ainur are beings that can choose their form and some chose a male-like form and others chose a female-like form. Thus, the "male" Valar have "Queens" who are of the female Valier, seven of each. The work of each of the male Valar and the corresponding Queen complement each other in nature. The Maiar are not numbered but the implication is they may be much more in number than the Valar. They serve the Valar. After Melkor went to war with the other Valar, he was no longer considered one of the Valar, but was renamed 'Morgoth' by the Noldor Elves, which means, "The Dark Enemy of the World." But from the creation of the Valar by Iluvatar, Melkor was described as the mightiest of the Valar in the beginning. See page 6 in the Silmarillion, where Iluvatar says "Mighty are the Ainur, and mightiest among them is Melkor." Iluvatar makes a very significant statement to Melkor right after this, he said "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." Melkor pronounced the material world as his domain. So whatever the Valar made of life or beauty in the world, Melkor worked to destroy it or alter it. Iluvatar seemed to foresee what Melkor would do and Iluvatar incorporated it into his purpose. This is not unlike God in reality using even Satan's actions to show His own ultimate plan of redemption.

To understand the Valar it is important to understand what came of the various lands of Arda. In the very beginning Iluvatur speaks "Ea" and this started existence. Exactly what this consisted of is not clear but it would seem to be roughly like our concept of "time and space." Then Iluvatar created the Valar, referred to as a group as the "Ainur." The created physical world is initially a flat world, not like a planet. The regions beyond the edge are described as "outer darkness." Initially it seems Arda was one continent, though this is not clear. But before there were any Elves or Men, the Valar had a kind of war with Melkor. The Valar had made two great towers that gave light. This time is called "the Spring of Arda" and in this time the Valar dwelled in what later became Middle-Earth. But Melkor destroyed the towers and changed much of the beauty the Valar had created. This was a sort of war of creation between Melkor and the other Valar. Melkor's actions worked to the opposite of what the Valar did. If the Valar made a beautiful green valley, Melkor would destroy it and turn it into a mountain, for example. The outcome of this war changed Arda greatly, seas formed, and after this the area in the far West called Valinor was made by the Valar to be their home and it was made as a place defensible against Melkor. Thus, it's important to understand that before Elves or Men were created, there had been a long conflict between the Valar and Melkor. Maiar were present in this period and some of them chose to serve Melkor. There were also sometimes servants of Melkor that secretly lived among the Valar to be spies for Melkor.

After the two towers (that gave light) were destroyed, the Valar created two Great Trees that gave off light. These Trees were named Telperion and Laurelin (and other names). They both had leaves that were green but one gave off a silver light and the other a golden light. As the

light of one of them was waxing the light of the other grew stronger in a daily cycle. They also dripped a dew that also had light. (This is somewhat reminiscent of the “living water” mentioned in the book of Revelation in the Bible, in the new Earth.) Melkor enlisted the help of a giant spider creature called Ungoliant. Ungoliant destroyed the two Trees and drank up their liquid, then Melkor and Ungoliant retreated to the distant Northeastern part of the world. After this Ungoliant turned against Melkor but Melkor called his Balrogs against Ungoliant to stop Ungoliant’s attack. The Elves first came to life during the time in which the two Trees existed. The Valar did not know when they would come. They were the creation of Iluvatar, the Elves are referred to sometimes as the Firstborn of Iluvatar, then Men came later. So the Valar controlled and made the physical aspects of the world, but they did not create the “Children of Iluvatar.” The Sun and Moon were created by the Valar after the two Trees were destroyed. The Sun and Moon, along with the day-night cycle were arranged as a means of providing light that Morgoth could not reach or alter. The daylight also provided light for living things and prepared for the time when men would be created. Only Iluvatar had what is called “The Flame Imperishable,” by which he could create life or give life. The Valar and Melkor did not have this power but it seems they had abilities to alter life apparently. Thus many aspects of the material world came about from conflicts between the Valar and Melkor. But the overarching principle is that this would serve Iluvatar’s purpose in the end.

Aman was for a long time a place that could be sailed to by sea. But after the Numenorean men attempted to attack Valinor, Aman was removed completely away into the heavens (where is not clear) so it could no longer be reached by sea. Morgoth (Melkor) could not subdue the sea and he could not reach or control things in the sky or the heavens. There was also a period in which Melkor was bound in a great chain and imprisoned. But after a long time locked away like this he was brought out for a judgment as to whether to let him go. In this he deceived Elves and some Valar and thus he was let free. Morgoth somehow made strange evil creatures (such as Balrogs and fire drakes) but this is understood as corrupting something Iluvatar made, such as Maiar spirits who served him. Sauron was also a Maiar who served Morgoth. This is summarizing thousands of years of history in the fantasy.

God, Angels, and Creation

How does all this compare to the Biblical concepts of God and Angels? It seems to me that the Valar in Tolkien’s fantasy are more than what the Bible describes as angels but less than gods. In the *Valequentia*, in the *Simarillion*, it says that Men often called the Valar gods. But this is not the same as making them “gods” in Tolkien’s concept. Only Iluvatar is all-powerful in Tolkien’s fantasy so there seems to be a clear analogy between Iluvatar and the God of the Bible. Yet, regarding the Valar and Maiar this correspondence breaks down when comparing to angels. The Valar and Maiar are described as being of similar spiritual natures but they could appear in different forms. So, a Maiar could live in the body of one individual, die in that body, and then come back again in another form. This is what Gandalf does after his battle with the Balrog of Moria. I think it is safe to say that actual angels as presented in the Bible can also appear in different forms as well. So, did Tolkien base his concept of the Valar and Maiar on Biblical angels? I suspect not but there are some similarities. Various literary fiction also informed Tolkien’s concepts but this is not something I am very familiar with.

One important distinction I think about Tolkien's fantasy versus a Biblical worldview is regarding God's relationship to his creation. In the Bible, it emphasizes strongly that all things in nature, from the heavens to the Earth and life, were created by God, not by anyone else. This is unlike in Tolkien where Iluvatar allows the Valar to create the physical world. But the Bible even stresses that God did it by himself. In the book of Job in chapters 38-41 we have an extraordinary presentation in God's own words that shows God's care over his Creation as well as his knowledge over it and sovereignty over it. See also the following passage from Isaiah 44.

23 Sing for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done this;
shout aloud, O earth beneath.
Burst into song, you mountains,
you forests and all your trees,
for the LORD has redeemed Jacob,
he displays his glory in Israel.

24 "This is what the LORD says—
your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:

I am the LORD,
who has made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who spread out the earth by myself,

25 who foils the signs of false prophets
and makes fools of diviners,
who overthrows the learning of the wise
and turns it into nonsense,

26 who carries out the words of his servants
and fulfills the predictions of his messengers

Then in the New Testament in Romans 1:20-21 it indicates that the physical creation displays God's nature and character to all people:

20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Thus, Biblically, the physical creation, including our own bodies, all living things and the physical universe all reveal God's nature in a general way and have a role in us understanding God's plan of redemption. The Bible also teaches that the sin of the first man and woman affected not only

all of their descendants but even affected nature itself. This aspect of the consequences of human sin are not in Tolkien. Rather, Tolkien's fiction deals more with the consequences in life that our moral choices have. But, biblically, our Creator can save us and our Creator wants a relationship with us. So in God's Creation not only is there design for good but it has a purpose in God's great plan of redemption. In Tolkien's fantasy there are a few hints of Iluvatar having a grand purpose but that purpose is left largely a mystery. The Silmarillion says the Valar each express a portion of Iluvatar's thought and power. Though some good and beautiful things the Valar create are marred or destroyed by Melkor, even Melkor's actions eventually serve Iluvatar's purpose. The Biblical view is that we human beings each reflect in a finite limited way God's character and nature, though God shows his attributes fully in what He creates and does in history. So as human beings we are imitative of God's attributes so as to be able to relate to our Maker. The Biblical emphasis on relating to our Maker is largely absent from Tolkien's fantasy. An exception to this would be in a few places where Eru is referred to in Tolkien. In Numenor Eru was worshipped and there was an annual festival of thanks to Eru. It seems to be Eru's purpose in the fantasy that it is men who bring about the ultimate defeat of Sauron, not Elves. But Elves held back the power of Morgoth for some periods and taught men important things. But eventually it is the smallest men, the Hobbits, who finally get the victory over Sauron.

Melkor and Sauron

Melkor was eventually defeated and imprisoned again by the Valar but with the help of many Elves from Aman and some from Middle Earth. Some men also fought in this battle. This was called the "Great Battle" and the "War of Wrath" in which the Valar themselves fought and captured Melkor. In this battle most of the balrogs and dragons of Morgoth were killed but a few escaped. This is likely where the dragon of Eribor and the balrog of Moria came from. The Northern regions of Middle Earth were altered in the battle and much of it sank below the sea. Melkor tried to hide in the deepest cavern and the Valar went in and captured him, cut off his feet, and turned his crown into a collar on his neck. The three Silmaril stones that Morgoth had remaining in his crown were also taken back by the Elves (which is another story). Then he was taken away in the same chain (called Angainor) that had held him before.

In Tolkien's fantasy there is the implication of an unseen spiritual reality. It strikes me that in our world today, where many influences take a philosophy of naturalism and push people toward an atheistic mindset, in this social context people seek for a supernatural reality that is beyond the material world. This shows up in popular movies and television programs a lot. In reality, the biblical concept is that we human beings are both spiritual and physical creatures. Being made in God's image means that we reflect aspects of God's nature and character but in a finite limited way. So this is similar to how the Silmarillion describes the Valar as expressing aspects of Iluvatar's vision. The real being Satan is described as a deceiver, a dragon, and as one who corrupts the good that God made, turning the good to evil oppressive purposes. So Melkor in some respects is similar to Satan; Sauron is also similar to Satan but not in everything. Melkor (or Morgoth) seems to emphasize the aspect of corrupting the physical world and ruling over the children of Iluvatar oppressively. Sauron is somewhat less in power than Morgoth because Sauron is a Maiar but Sauron in the Lord of the Rings and in the story of Numenor takes the role

of a deceiver and manipulator of others (called Anatar in Numenor), which is also like Satan. There are many good lessons in Tolkien's Legendarium on how evil can corrupt men and destroy good in the world. The "one ring" sometimes called the "ring of power" in Lord of the Rings is a vivid picture analogous to the corrupting power of sin that can manipulate and oppress.

However, Tolkien's fantasy world has no concept of salvation from sin but there are heroes in Tolkien that could be thought of as pictures of Christ, but in limited ways. In real life, Christ is the one who can break sin's power for any person who believes. And Christ will also be the perfect King one day in the future, after he returns. In Tolkien, Gandalf rises from death, and there are a few others who seem to rise from death, such as especially Beren and Luthien. Aragorn is the long awaited good King to return to reign over Gondor; somewhat like Christ returning to reign the world in the future and fulfill promises made to Israel.

Heroes

There are many great heroes in Tolkien's fantasy. There is Glorfindel who kills a balrog while fleeing Gondolin. There is Beren and Luthien who take a Silmaril from the crown of Morgoth and who are brought back to life (though Beren loses his hand). Both Beren and Luthien did extraordinary deeds in their tale, so women are not left out by Tolkien. But there is a rather traditional concept regarding marriage in Tolkien's writings. Also in Tolkien, though certain women can fight in battle and Galadriel has great powers from being a ring-bearer, women are never the ones leading armies to battle (neither Elves nor human). There are examples of powerful individuals who are corrupted and served evil, such as the ones involved in betraying the Elves of Gondolin or the wizard Saruman. The men and women of Numenor in Tolkien were rewarded for their valor in battle with long life and they were placed on the island of Numenor, which separated them some from the problems of Middle Earth in the East. But, the men of Numenor were corrupted and deceived by Sauron, who led them to their destruction (except for a few faithful ones who went to Middle Earth and escaped). Dwarves also had their good heroes but some dwarves were very corrupted either by greed or by the power of Melkor's servants. The greatest heroes of Middle Earth, to Tolkien, without doubt would have been the Hobbits. They were not great heroes because of their strength in battle. (The greatest warrior was also not an elf but was the man Turin, son of Hurin who lived before the War of Wrath.) In Tolkien's Middle Earth even the best of heroes may struggle with their own selfish or corrupt tendencies. But Tolkien's philosophy seems to be that the spiritual or moral victories are more important than material victories such as in battle. Thus we see that true heroes sacrifice for others' sakes. Hobbits were described as "heartly folk" in the Lord of the Rings movies. They resisted sickness and corruption (but not perfectly). They seemed to lack the selfish ambitions that led to the downfall of many men. They did not seek power, they just wanted to live in peace and they loved growing things. Tolkien seems to make the Hobbits the people most worthy of emulating.

Friendship is also a very important theme in Tolkien's stories of Arda and Middle-Earth. The 'Fellowship of the Ring' is an important example of a group of individuals from the different people groups that were committed to each other in their mission to destroy the One Ring. Events separated them but they remained true to their purpose. Frodo and Sam developed a great friendship in their quest to take the Ring to Mordor. Gollum becomes their guide and

Gollum very much comes between Frodo and Sam, yet the friendship between Sam and Frodo is not totally broken. Sam becomes the 'clear head' that Frodo needs but Gollum misleads Frodo and then eventually turns against Frodo to prevent him from destroying the Ring. The One Ring is a powerful evil influence and it also comes between Frodo and Sam. Yet, in the end when it is finally all over, Frodo and Sam are still together and still friends.

In real life we may experience things that strain friendships but the test of a friendship can be around the question of will it remain through difficulty? Tolkien's writings contain many good lessons about loyalty in friendships and the importance of not being deceived about friends. There can be wrong unhealthy influences of many kinds that can mislead us about our own friends. This happens to Frodo causing him to tell Sam to "go home." But Sam goes back to Frodo, even in Mordor, and prevents the ring from being found by the Orcs (though in the book this takes place differently than in the Peter Jackson movie). There is also a great example of friendship between the man Turin and the elf named Beleg. But Turin was influenced negatively by the hatred of Morgoth for his family and just by the hardships he experienced. While he was imprisoned by Orcs his friend Beleg finds him to rescue him but in the dark Turin thinks he is an Orc and so he kills his best friend. Other friendships in Tolkien are more like mentoring relationships, such as between Gandalf and Frodo for example. I like to think that friendships are very much brought about in God's sovereign plan to benefit us in life. But to keep a friendship is very much up to us.

There are also some good lessons in Tolkien regarding the kind of influences that can lead to divisions and hatred between people groups. The primary groups of people in Tolkien are Elves, Men, and Dwarves. Tolkien's stories have all three more at peace with each other earlier in the fantasy history than later. Elves seem more moral and honorable at first but Melkor's actions divide the Elves against each other, over Melkor taking the Silmarils and destroying the two Trees of Valinor. Then the Silmarils and other jewels become a trigger of hatred between different groups of Elves and between Elves and Dwarves. Two of the Silmaril jewels from Morgoth's crown are taken by two Noldor elves because of an oath which they felt bound by from long before. But the Silmarils had a kind of moral power to burn and inflict pain on someone who possessed them wrongly; this leads to the loss of both of these Silmarils. The power of riches and rare special jewels of the Elves or Dwarves to corrupt are a frequent theme in Tolkien. Then the One Ring is the ultimate example of a manipulative corrupting influence that can corrupt anyone. Even Frodo gave in to its evil influence in the mountain of Mordor. Only by Gollum's clumsiness was the Ring finally destroyed! Men, Elves, and Dwarves are all corruptible in Tolkien's fantasy. In this they are like us and are thus relatable to us. Thus the fantasy serves as a reminder of how we should resist our own selfish tendencies that can make us lose sight of what's most important and lead us to make bad choices in life. In real life, God has provided his Spirit inhabiting believers so that we are not limited by our own natural tendencies. With God's help by his grace we can overcome sin and our selfish nature.

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