

12/1/2014. *JRR Tolkien's Middle Earth: OK for Christians?*

J.R.R. Tolkien's three-volume work *The Lord of the Rings* has been voted Britain's best loved book, and has been made into a cycle of epic films. His prelude to it, *The Hobbit*, a quest on a lesser scale written for children, has now been padded out to another three films. There is magic in Tolkien's writings, and they deal with mythological themes. Should Christians welcome him in their homes?

In considering this question I am performing theological criticism on Tolkien; literary criticism below is in passing. The first step is to be clear what the Bible says about mythology. The enigmatic passage Genesis 6:1-4 tells us that, long ago, 'sons of God' (meaning angels) were having sexual relations with human women, producing a race of perverted giants who were the heroes of pagan mythology. That matches what we see in Greek and Norse and other mythology: 'gods' such as Zeus and Odin procreating with women to produce heroes of renown.

As a practising, traditional Roman Catholic, Tolkien believed that the Bible was truth. He was responsible for the English in the Book of Jonah in the 'Jerusalem' Bible. He was a university scholar of Anglo-Saxon and Old English who spent much of his life in Oxford. The Norse myths are a clear influence on 'Middle Earth,' as Tolkien named the world of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Tolkien's love of languages led him to invent several tongues, used by the various races in *The Lord of the Rings*. He had loved the rural England of his childhood, and he wished to create a mythology for it. (King Arthur is England's only major myth; Faust is Christianity's.) That is partly what his writings about Middle Earth are; Tolkien insisted that *The Lord of the Rings* was not allegory, although in a letter he called it a fundamentally Catholic work in which "the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism." Perhaps he also wished to Christianise the Norse myths. He died in 1973, late enough to see his books gain cult status, and he was not in sympathy with hippies who adopted his work ("my deplorable cultus"). There are hints at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* that the 'other races' in Middle Earth – hobbits, elves and dwarves – would fade away, leaving only men to move into today's world. In that case Tolkien was writing a fanciful prehistory. But Middle Earth can alternatively be seen as a parallel universe. It has a creation myth very similar to ours. In that case it is fiction on the grandest scale. The two views are not compatible, but neither are many myths. It is the reader's problem.

Underlying *The Lord of the Rings*, although mentioned in it only in passing, is the history of Middle Earth. This begins with Tolkien's creation story, which is set out in the first posthumous collection of his writings, *The Silmarillion*. (Tolkien's son Christopher went on to edit many such volumes.) An omnipotent God (known as Eru or Iluvatar) creates – and therefore owns – the world. His character is good. With him are his angels (*ainur*), some of whom rebel against him; their leader is Melkor. So far, so Biblical. There are several races of beings – hobbits, elves, dwarves, men. Elves are the oldest and fairest race on Middle Earth, and live indefinitely (unless killed). Dwarves are associated not with Iluvatar, but with one of the angels, Aulë the Smith. Men are created directly by Iluvatar (perhaps Tolkien's echo of the 'image of God'). Iluvatar gave humans the fate of death from the start; there is no Fall of a human ancestor which stains all men.

Melkor came to Middle Earth, where he became known as Morgoth, and he ravaged it. Elves and men could not stop him. Eventually an army of *ainur*, known as the Host of the Valar (another word for angel) put an end to Morgoth's evil deeds, casting him utterly beyond the skies. This event ended Middle Earth's 'First Age.' Morgoth had also stolen the *silmarils*, sacred jewels created by a renowned, if covetous, elven-smith. Carved by the names of Tolkien and his wife on their tombstone in Oxford are the names *Beren* and *Luthien*; Beren was a man who recovered a *silmaril* from Morgoth, and Luthien was his elven-beloved, who renounced immortality to be with him.

Morgoth had a subordinate called Sauron. He is one of the *Maiar* – angels junior to the Valar – and he is the enemy in *The Lord of the Rings*. Iluvatar-God intervened in his own creation once, to drown the human kingdom of Numenor (shades of Noah's flood) when, its pride kindled by Sauron, Numenor sent an invasion fleet west to the land of the Valar where death is unknown, and from which men were forbidden (clear parallels with the post-Fall decrees in Genesis 3). Tolkien throws into this outstanding piece of storytelling, which is included in *The Silmarillion*, an account of how sailors who seek Valinor now generally end up where they began, the world having been reconfigured as round. Apart from that incident, taking place late

in the Second Age, Iluvatar is remote from his creation: a 'deistic' view of the Creator. There are no Covenants, no Incarnation, no Trinity. There is no organised religion or priesthood, and characters do not pray or offer sacrifice before battle or at other key moments. (The work would probably not have been so popular if they had.) Once in *The Lord of the Rings* men observe a ritual silence before a meal (in the chapter *The Window on the West*). The races of Middle Earth look less to Iluvatar than to the Valar, as in the Elvish-language rhapsody *A! Elbereth Gilthoniel* to a female Vala, perhaps Middle Earth's 'Hail Mary.' (Also, the release from unrest of the Army of the Dead, who had broken their oath on earth, may echo Tolkien's Catholic belief in Purgatory.)

The Lord of the Rings tells of the events that close the Third Age of Middle Earth and finally bring Sauron down. It centres on an epic quest involving an alliance of the races of Middle Earth, to reach the one place, deep in Sauron's realm, where the Ring of power he is seeking can be destroyed. This ring, which he had forged to take power over the races of Middle Earth (via their own rings), has been rediscovered after a long period (in a subplot of *The Hobbit*). Frodo the hobbit has been bequeathed it and is chosen to carry it. Unless the ring is destroyed, Sauron will hunt it down and win total power.

There is a good wielder of magic in *The Lord of the Rings* called Gandalf, a 'wizard.' He is not in fact a man but one of the Maiar. (Angels do have supernatural powers.) The books never suggest that man has occult powers which should be developed. It is, admittedly, hard to discover these facts from *The Lord of the Rings* itself, since much of the cosmology of Middle Earth was not published until years later. Also, Tolkien's tale, like scripture and mythology, is full of the supernatural, of sacraments (such as the sustaining bread, *lembas*). It is, overall, a triumph of good over evil on the grand scale, written in a way which suggests this triumph is inevitable given sufficient valour and self-sacrifice – a Christian viewpoint that contrasts with the gloomy worldview of Norse and other pagan mythology. A theme common to *The Lord of the Rings* and Christianity is a diverse group called out of their normal lives to join together in the only way to fight evil. (In Christianity the world has already been redeemed by the Crucifixion, whereas in *The Lord of the Rings* the crucial action – destroying the Ring – *is* the quest.) Temptation is ever-present, to seek to use the Ring against Sauron – but anybody who tries will be bent to his will, for evil cannot be fought with evil (as Boromir's fate makes clear). Those with least interest in worldly power, the hobbits, are best suited to transport the ring; the small and the meek bring victory. Gandalf's comments in the scene-setting second chapter, about the consequences of the hobbit Bilbo having taken pity on the treacherous, ring-obsessed Gollum and shown him mercy, point to something like the Christian notion of grace. Gandalf is in effect crucified and resurrected (in the battle with the Balrog and after). Aragorn, like Christ, appears first to the world as a man of lowly rank with a mission against evil, but the reader finally comes to see him as the king of men. The final part of the trilogy, *The Return of the King*, echoes Christian eschatology in which Christ returns in power to put the world aright. One chapter covers the restoration of the hobbits' own land (the Shire), which was being industrialised (Tolkien obviously detested industrialisation, and had seen slaughter in World War I; Middle Earth's battles are fought with mediaeval weaponry, not bullets).

The Lord of the Rings is written largely from the perspective of the hobbits involved in it. Hobbits have the character of pre-mechanisation English agrarians, having simple pleasures and taking little interest in the wider world. (Tolkien's mild sentimentality shows in the minuscule number of good characters who perish fighting the great evil of their time. In particular, Frodo, for claiming the Ring at the moment he was charged to destroy it, might have been expected to fall to his doom together with Gollum and the ring in the fight that followed.) The book may safely be read and enjoyed by discerning Christians. But its supernatural aspects might cause your brother to stumble (as St Paul put it), so be cautious to whom you recommend it.

The Lord of the Rings is a long tale with a dark plot, lightened by the interplay between its characters. This is not true of Peter Jackson's films. Although Tolkien's storyline is strong, and the landscapes, battles and special effects are spectacular (I particularly enjoyed the mines of Moria), the characterisation is weak – and weak compared to other films, not only to the book. (For instance, the wooings of Eowyn by Faramir and of Arwen the elf-maid by Aragorn are banal and brief in the cinema version, although they are important and could have been lovely.) Without this lightening, and with the many supernatural happenings, these films are quite dark. Jackson had previously made several gory occult horror films and this unpleasantness shows in, for example, his depiction of the army of the dead. Likewise, the inn where the ring-bearers first meet Aragorn, in his disguise as 'Strider,' is portrayed by Jackson as a sinister place, whereas Tolkien wrote it as

a merrie English tavern with a few dark characters. We should be more wary of these films than of the books.

Perhaps the most developed of Tolkien's other tales of Middle Earth is the story, set much earlier, of the House of Hurin, and particularly of Hurin's son Turin Turambar who, cursed, unknowingly marries his sister. A powerful film could be made of this tale.