



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 21 | Number 2 | Issue 80, Winter

Article 44

Winter 10-15-1996

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Recommended Citation

Olszański, Tadeusz Andrzej (1996) "Evil and the Evil One in Tolkien's Theology," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 21 : No. 2 , Article 44.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss2/44>

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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

Evil and the Evil One in Tolkien's Theology

Abstract

This paper analyses Tolkien's theological theory of evil: first its cosmological aspect (especially the relation between Eru and Melkor), then the place of evil in the structure of the world, the question of salvation, and finally, the question of the End and the second "Doom of Mandos" announcing Morgoth's fall.

Additional Keywords

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Tadeusz Andrzej Olszański

Translated from the Polish by Agnieszka Sylwanowicz

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What is the essence of evil and where does evil come from? Was evil first as one of the principles of the world, or was it the Evil One, the being consciously creating evil? Humankind has worried about these questions since its very beginnings. Inasmuch as the existence of God and His nature as a good entity is obvious – at least from a certain stage in civilizational and moral development, it is in relation to the existence of God that evil is a phenomenon difficult, if not impossible, to explain. Throughout the ages many ideas of theodicy were formed, however none of them is free from insoluble contradictions. This may be the proof that the answer to the question of evil does not lie within the possibilities of the human mind.

Tolkien knew about it when he wrote in "Mythopoeia": ". . . and of Evil this /alone is dreadly certain: Evil is." However, creating the world of Eä with its elaborate theological structure, he could not ignore the question of the origin of evil and its relation to God. I shall try to answer it today.

First of all let us sketch the necessary theological background. In European religious thought there are two clearly differing views on theodicy. The first one, Semitic, is consistently monistic and first agrees to the indifferent character of God capable both of good and evil (this is especially striking in the earlier books of the Old Testament) and then explains that evil is the result of resistance to God's will. It also introduces the person of the evil-doer, the Tempter, who, however, is a creature and thus implicitly subject to God. This line of reflection reached its limits in the Book of Job, the conclusion of which amounts to the lack of a comprehensible answer to the questions about evil.

The other tradition is Indo-European, dualistic, and it reached its final stages in Manichaeism. According to it there are two equal god-creators, the good and the evil one, and in some approaches they are the sons of the absolute seen as god, who limits himself to giving the world its first spark and leaves it for his demiurge sons, who are its proper creators.

Christianity emerged from the pool of Semitic ideas. Christ

is the answer to Job's question, but Christ does not give the answer. In Him evil is defeated, but not explained; on the contrary – the suffering of the Son of God (i.e. God Himself, which the Semites understood perfectly well) is a continuing insult to the human mind looking for the explanation, although this explanation is not necessary for belief. However, Christianity was in principle rejected by the Semitic peoples and developed by the Indo-Europeans, from whom it took over many elements of dualistic theodicy. Satan all too often grows to the rank of the adversary almost equivalent to the Son of God, who in turn is easily understood as different from God Himself. But this attempt at a synthesis of two opposing ideas is not satisfactory and forces one looking for a rational answer to new efforts.

The discussion of Tolkien's theodicy must start with cosmogony. Before the Ainur were created there was not only God, but also the Void. It was not merely an "absence" of God as the only being, but a nothingness existing in time and space, since Melkor could roam it before the music began. The Void was not created – it is impossible to create a nonentity – but it was real. Neither was it evil in its nature since nonentity as such cannot be evil. However, the fact of the Void's reality in some independence from God created a specific "space" where objection to God, a seed of evil, could appear and develop.

It is obvious to me that such an idea of the Void is rooted in the Bible, when in the Book of Genesis 1:4 we read that separating light from darkness God did not recognise darkness, as light is the only reality mentioned there as good ("And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness"). I think that this passage, extremely difficult to interpret, is the original source of the whole of Tolkien's theodicy.

The first creatures are the Ainur, the personified thoughts or rather features of Eru. It is not accidental that God's image emerging from the analysis of the Ainur's features is not univocal – God, being the original unity, must contain at least in the initial forms everything that is possible. And

everything also means evil. We cannot comprehend and even more so we cannot say how good can contain the seeds of evil. However, some approximation can be reached in common observation that, for example, creative passion not being evil in itself, all too often leads to evil, and so must contain its origins.

Among the Ainur Melkor is the first one. He is also endowed with the greatest gifts of them all. He is not evil in the beginning – if it were so, we would have to say that evil as such originates in God, and this is impossible. However, the omniscient God has the abstract knowledge of the possibility of evil as a possibility of an opposition to his own will. And it is this knowledge that Melkor must have taken over. From the beginning he was independent and conceited, which soon led him to impatience, disobedience and pride. Thus Melkor turns out to be prone to evil from the very beginning, i.e. he is prone to evil of his very own nature.

However, what does this mean? If Melkor, with his features, comes from the mind – i.e. from the essence – of Eru, it follows that the tendency to evil also comes from God. This is an unsettling conclusion, but it is confirmed by Ilúvatar himself when he says that in the end Melkor will turn out to be only a tool of his. Moreover, a disposition towards evil is not evil so long as it is not expressed in evil deeds. Are not other of the Valar proud? Do they not experience the passion of creation, exceeding the limits set to them? Do they not, in different ways, desire power?

Melkor, however, has not repented and humbled himself like Aulë or Ossë. Cherishing the Void – i.e. what is outside God – he has broken loose from Eru's control, at first unconsciously. Varda noticed future evil in him already at that point. Then he introduced discord into the Music, disturbing not only its development, but also the development of the future world. Most probably this was done in good faith, in pure competition with the others, which seems to be confirmed by Ilúvatar's words after the Music was finished – but it could already be in competition with God himself, an attempt at independent creation.

The further evolution of Melkor is a constant sliding into evil: envy of his brother, Manwë; rejection of Eru's rebuke (which probably was a decisive moment); destruction of the other Valars' work (although this was predetermined in the Music); refusal to mend his ways; the tempting of the Noldor; the destruction of the Trees; and finally the murder of Finwë – the point of no return. The disobedient, but still not evil, Melkor turned into Morgoth, evil to the roots and subject to fear. Nothing, however, justifies the view that Melkor's sin, rebellion and obduracy were inevitable or predetermined. If it were so, the Valar would not wonder at all if he repented, after having been imprisoned for centuries.

Evil therefore is unmistakably the work of the Evil One, introduced by him into an integrally good world. But once it happens, evil turns out to be irreversible. Admittedly, the Satanic forces cannot in the end be victorious and in every confrontation are defeated. However, the wounds inflicted on the world by evil and fighting itself can be healed only to a small extent and the victorious good is weakened. And no amount of victories is able to eradicate evil in Arda. This is

why the Last Battle, Dagor Dagorath, is necessary.

As Eru said after the finishing of the Music, all deeds, even Melkor's, will at the end turn to the One's glory. This does not mean that they are foreseen. And it follows from the very nature of God as an indivisibly good entity that everything that exists must be turned to good. When Melkor's discord, incompatible with Eru's plan, destroyed the first version of the Music, it was immediately incorporated into this plan and Ilúvatar derived the fruits of beauty and good even from this. Could the love of Beren and Lúthien, Finrod's dedication, and Frodo's sacrifice, exist without Melkor's rebellion?

The common, practical belief of all free peoples is the belief in the inevitability of fate, i.e. – let us note – in the fundamental sense of the world. But this fate does not represent doom, a curse that it is impossible and improper to resist. On the contrary – fate, although inevitable, remains unknown even to the Valar and is realised through the free actions of Men and – to a lesser extent – other creatures, more fully determined. That future events depend on such actions follows clearly from Gandalf's words at the Council of Elrond and Galadriel's words at the Mirror, as well as from the statement that if the first reply of Fëanor to Yavanna's request for the Silmarils had been different, the future course of events would also have differed in many respects.

Standing on Caras Galadon, Galadriel described the Elves' effort with the words: "we have fought the long defeat." A similar phrase was used by Tolkien in one of his letters (No. 195) when he said that from the Christian point of view history is a "long defeat", although it may contain glimpses of the final victory. The final victory does not, however, belong to Men, unable to defeat demonic evil – it belongs to God Himself.

Evil in the world is powerful, too powerful for the forces of the free peoples to resist it without supernatural assistance. Even Frodo breaks under the strain of temptation at the last moment and his whole mission would have been futile if not for Gollum, a wretched, deceitful creature saved for this hour perhaps by Eru himself.

Ilúvatar's children were helpless and were crying out for salvation, or more precisely – for a Saviour. They did not, however, have any Messianic hope and had to replace it with efforts of self-salvation. Thus in every age of the world we can see great missions aimed at obtaining supernatural help or reaching a supernatural goal. Eärendil's mission was first, then came Amandil, who could not succeed, and finally Frodo. It is characteristic that none of them were Elves (Eärendil chose the fate of a First-born under Elwing's influence, but he himself leaned rather towards the Younger Children).

We know the world will have an end that will be concurrent with the annihilation of evil. The only text on this is the Second Prophecy of Mandos, being a part of the *legendarium* from the very beginning, but omitted from the "canonical" version of *The Silmarillion*. I shall not discuss it here in detail and will only say that when both the world and the Valar grow old, Morgoth will return and on the fields of Valinor there will be fought Dagor Dagorath, the Last Battle.

In this battle immortal Morgoth the Vala will be slain by Túrin Turambar, which can only be understood as a special decree of Ilúvatar, as only he has the unlimited power of remaking everything that he has created. After this there will be the Renewal of the World, which will become flat again and steeped in the light of the Two Trees. Perhaps there will be no place for Men in this world since the Prophecy does not mention them – maybe the Last Battle will put an end to human life on earth.

How is it possible, however, for an immortal, pure spirit to be slain? In one of his letters (No. 211) Tolkien explained why Eru did not annihilate Sauron together with Numénor, and wrote about the indestructibility of spirits endowed with free will. However, omnipotence cannot have limits other than the self-imposed ones, and all rules of Creation are valid only within the created world. Thus when the Time of the End and Renewal, which is different from the Time of the World, comes, those old rules will lose their validity. It will be possible then for a mortal man slain a long time ago to kill an immortal angel, in this way to revenge all his brothers and finally to clear himself of his terrible guilt.

The reconciliation of Dagor Dagorath with the Second Music mentioned in “Ainulindalë” is possible, although difficult. The participation of Men in the Second Music does not mean that they have to be physically present on Arda or anywhere else. Moreover, this Music is to come after the end of Days and so it will not be as much the Music of the End as the Music of Duration, whose reality is different from the reality of Creation, perhaps fully independent from the fact of Arda’s existence. The Second Music is to be the completion of God’s plan, enriched with all the good that arose during the course of the World’s history. Therefore it cannot occur until this history comes to an end.

The fulfilment of God’s plan would be incomplete if any of the deeds were lost. We may be fairly sure that Morgoth’s servants will be forgiven. True, they were seduced and corrupted, but Orcs (after all, descendants of the First-born), Men and spirits healed of evil will find a place among the choirs of the Second Music.

But what about Morgoth, doer of all evil, once an Ainu closest to the One? Will he be healed and will his death – for no death is final to God – become his salvation and the gateway to forgiveness? Or, on the contrary, will he be thrown into the eternity of the “Second Death” and will he be the only entity in the world to really die? This we do not and shall never know.

The theory of final, universal salvation (*apokatastasis*) is centuries old, but it always remains in the not wholly orthodox margins of theological thought. Judging from Tolkien’s letters, he was not one of its followers. However, I think that the idea of the Remaking of the World and especially of the Second Music incorporates this ideal explicitly enough to accept it, regardless of the Author’s views expressed in the texts outside the *legendarium*. They (mainly the letters) may be treated as the Author’s comments and opinions on the reality of Sub-creation, not necessarily compatible with this reality contained in the texts which make up the *legendarium*.

What then is Tolkien’s answer to the question of evil? It is perhaps most fully contained in the fragment of “Mythopoeia” quoted at the beginning. And Arda’s theodicy has features of both systems previously discussed, with a marked domination of Manichaeic views. Eru is the One God, the only creator of all reality, but he is also “the distant God” (*Deus otiosus*) who after the act of creation stopped being interested in the world and turned it over to the demiurges in spite of the fact that the most powerful of them had already rebelled before the act of creation. The source of evil in the world is this Evil One, the fallen angel – but not a god – doing and instigating evil in the world, although from a certain time only indirectly. Evil results from resisting the Creator, from a desire for independence from Him, and especially from laying down one’s own laws for ruling the world, and also from conceit. Evil is always the result of a choice or a giving in to temptation, which is also a choice.

However, Men remain in a special relationship with Eru. After death they do not go to the immanent netherworld in the halls of the Valar, but to God’s halls beyond the Created World (Eä). And when the Númenóreans rebelled against the Valar, the Valar could not defeat the Men and God had to intervene directly. The consequences were dramatic: both cosmologically (the earth becomes spherical and the netherworld is separated from the world) and theological. For from this moment Eru is no longer a distant god. In the Third Age we witness not the actions of the Valar but of Providence gradually clearing the ground for the future Revelation mentioned in “Akallabëth”, which is to reveal to Men – and only to them – the secret of their final destiny. And knowing that Middle-earth represents the mystic past of the world we live in and knowing the religious opinions of Tolkien we cannot doubt that he meant the Christian Revelation.

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