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### Tolkien and Christian Concepts of Evil: Apocalypse and Privation

#### Abstract

Argues that Tolkien's conception of evil in Arda comes from two Christian sources: its personification (as in *Revelation*), and medieval concepts (primarily from Augustine through Aquinas) of evil as privation or corruption of initial good.

#### Additional Keywords

Evil in Christian theology—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Evil in medieval theology—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Concept of evil—Sources

# Tolkien and Christian Concepts of Evil:

## Apocalypse and Privation

John L. Treloar, S.J.

### I. Introduction

Sauron, Gollum, Nazgul, Orcs and many other evil beings plot and scheme in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In order to explain all of this wickedness, Richard P. Bullock in "The Importance of Free Will in *The Lord of the Rings*," claims that "The domination of will is considered to be the greatest of all evils."<sup>1</sup> That is, each of these evil characters forces submission of another's will to himself. On the other hand, W.H. Auden in "Good and Evil in *The Lord of the Rings*" relates moral choice and evil to a being's capacity for speech. This capacity Auden feels is explanatory of the evil characters.<sup>2</sup> While both authors have a legitimate point to make neither realizes that implicit in their treatment of Tolkien is a metaphysics of good and evil. This paper will be an investigation of the metaphysical sources for Tolkien's notion of evil. In Christianity we find a dual attitude toward evil. A scriptural, apocalyptic approach views the forces of evil as personal powers in the world. Once Christianity appropriates Greek philosophical thought, authors explain evil by claiming that it is nothing in itself but rather a privation or corruption of a good owed to a being. Tolkien exploits both apocalyptic and privative views to intensify the power of evil in his epic work.

Jared Lobdell in *England and Always: Tolkien's World of the Rings* shows that the Tolkien universe is essentially Christian. Tracing various dogmatic themes though the epic, allows Lobdell to claim that, "...*The Lord of the Rings* is not a theological tract, but it is the serious subcreation of a Catholic and Christian author, presenting an alternative – or supplementary – mythology to the myth of Eden."<sup>3</sup> We will take for granted that Lobdell's assertion is correct and develop a theory of Tolkienian evil based on this assumption.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to a specifically Christian context of *The Lord of the Rings*, we must also remember Tolkien's medieval scholarship. While it is almost a commonplace these days to trace one or other aspect of the epic to this background, only a few have focused his development of evil on his scholarly work in medieval studies.<sup>5</sup> Medieval thinkers especially try to provide an explanation for the existence of evil in a world created by an all good God. If God is really goodness itself how can we account for the obvious evil in the world? Since there can be no direct creation of evil, the evil in the world must be treated as a privation or corruption of an appropriate perfection. We will see that Tolkien exploits these medieval philosophical notions to intensify the presence of evil in *The Lord of the Rings*.

### II. Apocalypse and Privation

The Christian sources for Tolkien's metaphysical understanding of evil can be spelled out by looking at some selected passages of the book of *Revelation* and some material from Augustine. On the one hand, in the scriptures evil forces take on personality to explain the conflict of good and evil. On the other hand, medieval speculative authors move away from personification to a theoretical explanation for evil in the world. Tolkien's treatment of evil manifests both ontologies.<sup>6</sup>

If we go to the book of *Revelation* for our scriptural background we see that in the genre of apocalyptic literature personified forces of evil and good join in combat in order to save or to destroy the world. Since Tolkien is primarily writing literature and not philosophy, it is reasonable for him to turn to this literary form as a vehicle for his treatment of evil. Two passages in *Revelation* illustrate Tolkien's use of this approach – Chapter 6: 1-8, the description of the four horsemen, and Chapter 7:7-11, the conflict of Michael and the dragon.

In the first passage the author of *Revelation* describes four horsemen, who personify evils that beset humanity. The horseman on the white horse is a conquering king. The other three follow as a result of the conqueror's ascent. The red horse its rider bearing a sword, symbolizes bloody wars. The black horse, its rider bearing a scales, signifies famine. Finally, the green horse bears the name, death. The significance of this passage for our purposes is to illustrate that greater emotional impact occurs when one personifies essentially abstract evils. In *The Lord of the Rings* we first discover the ringwraiths as terror inspiring horsemen who bring these four evils into the world. They are bent on conquest, war, death, and the land they rule is non-productive. Although Tolkien employs these beings more extensively than the author of *Revelation* makes use of his horsemen, Tolkien's ringwraiths function like the scriptural beings. In both *Revelation* and *The Lord of the Rings* the horsemen are destructive forces bent on the conquest of humanity. The forces are personified for literary emphasis, but metaphysically they are expressions of destruction of reality.

The second scriptural passage we want to look at in terms of this notion of the personification of evil occurs in Chapter 7: 7-11. We read:

And now war broke out in heaven, when Michael with his angels attacked the dragon. The dragon fought back with his angels, but they were defeated and driven

out of heaven. The great dragon, the primeval serpent, known as the devil or Satan, who had deceived all the world, was hurled down to the earth and his angels were hurled down with him (Jerusalem Bible Translation).<sup>7</sup>

This passage exemplifies the same movement as the confrontation between Gandalf and Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*. In both instances good and evil are personified, there is a great conflict, and the forces of good are ultimately victorious.

The first aspect of a Christian metaphysical conception of evil is to mold abstract notions such as conquest, war, famine, death into evil personalities for the sake of literary exposition. Now, this is not unique to Christianity, but Tolkien does use his Christian background well to develop his story in this pattern. The second aspect of the scriptural approach symbolizes the struggle of good and evil as a great war. Once again, this illustrative device is not unique to Christianity, but it does show that *The Lord of the Rings* is part of a larger tradition used by Christianity.

When we turn to the medieval treatment of evil, we see a movement away from the personification of evil toward a more abstract approach. Because of his pervasive influence throughout the middle ages on Christian theology and philosophy, we will use Augustine's discussion of evil in *On Free Choice of the Will* as our example of a shift in emphasis for the treatment of evil. This new approach is a result of several presuppositions in natural theology. Augustine claims that God is all good and can create only good. He cannot, however, deny the presence of evil in the world. How can a concept of the all good God allow for evil? If we were to say that God creates evil, we reject his total goodness. In the search for an answer to this problem, he concludes that everything in creation is originally good. A being becomes evil only because it is deprived of perfections that are due to it.<sup>8</sup>

Paul A. Kocher in his book *Master of Middle-earth: the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien* notices this trend in *The Lord of the Rings* and attributes Tolkien's knowledge of this notion of deprivation of perfection to his background as a medievalist and as a Catholic. Our treatment differs from Kocher's in two ways. First, he shows that the idea is embedded in the metaphysical thought patterns of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>9</sup> Aquinas, however, picks up the idea from Augustine whose thought is more pervasive in the Middle Ages than that of Aquinas himself. Anguish over the nature of evil is more clearly evident in Augustine than in Aquinas. This anguish would attract a literary artist like Tolkien. Second, when Kocher was writing *The Silmarillion* had not yet been published. With the posthumous publication of this work we can now draw the lines of evil as deprivation for whole classes of characters. This shows that the notion of evil as deprivation is even more pervasive in Tolkien than Kocher realizes.

Evil as deprivation or corruption of perfection is a much more subtle idea than evil as personification but

Tolkien exploits this notion just as effectively as he does personification. He also uses it as explanatory for the wickedness of many of his characters. During the Council of Elrond, Elrond gives an almost classical summary of this medieval view of evil. "...nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so."<sup>10</sup> When we first meet Sauron in *The Hobbit* he is merely called the Necromancer; the dwarves talk about repaying him for the evils that have been perpetrated on their ancestors, and they are warned that his power is well beyond that of all the dwarves put together.<sup>11</sup> Only later, in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is the Necromancer identified with Sauron; we also learn that he was originally one of the Maiar or Aule -- the angelic beings of the Tolkienian universe. Sauron, having been corrupted by Melkor, becomes progressively evil causing additional corruption and chaos as displayed in *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>12</sup> If we were to quantify Tolkien's use of evil as deprivation, Sauron is the best example. He starts out as a perfect angelic being as his history progresses he loses more and more of his perfection until at the final confrontation in *The Return of the King* he is nothing more than a malevolent eye or a kind of shadow (III, 1190-91, 275, 279). In the case of Sauron, Tolkien does not create a new kind of being; he uses one of the good beings from the original creation and illustrates disintegration through the ages by progressive loss of perfections due to this being.<sup>13</sup>

The pattern of Sauron, original goodness, corruption, and deprivation of perfections, occurs with all the other evil characters of the book (Cf. S, 46-47). Gollum was originally a hobbit-like creature, "The most inquisitive and curious-minded of that family," (I, 82) through his desire for the ring and the murder of Deagol he became progressively more corrupt (I, 84-86 and II, 411) until he destroys both himself and the ring at Mount Doom. The ringwraiths are originally men who have been corrupted by Sauron. (I, 82). The orcs are corrupted elves (S, 50). Trolls seem to be corrupted ents (II, 83, 113).<sup>14</sup> All of this bears out Elrond's claim that everything is good at the beginning. It is only later as a result of corruption, taken as deprivation of perfections, that these characters become evil. Since the pattern is repeated with such consistency it is difficult to believe that Tolkien does not have the typical medieval background in mind as he develops these figures. Unlike many writers of fantasy, Tolkien does not create a series of evil beings without a history. Each of his beings has an origin in good and because of free will develops a career of evil. Just as the Christian God cannot create evil, so also the creator, Iluvatar, in Tolkien cannot create evil. The Ainur are the offspring of his thought; they are the initial holy ones. Evil begins to spread originally at the second level of being with Melkor and his followers.<sup>15</sup>

A serious difficulty with this approach to evil arises at this point. Augustine struggles with it; other medieval authors were vexed by it, and Tolkien is faced with the same question. If everything is good at the outset, how does evil originate in the first place? The solution traditionally employed to answer this question generally has to do

with the presence of free choice of the will in the world. It is at this point that we can insert Bullock's study on free will in *The Lord of the Rings*. What we have added is a metaphysical grounding for Bullock's work. Will is the power for good or evil. In Tolkien's universe, Melkor assumes the position of the origin of evil. Since he was the most gifted of all the Ainu in his origin, he tried to become like Iluvatar in creative ability. His first will act was to challenge the slow plan of creation; in this he goes against the good. As a result he is able to corrupt other beings who have power of will to resist but succumb to his schemes.<sup>16</sup> One of the earliest of his victims is Sauron; and as a consequence of Sauron's corruption and domination of other wills, we get all the other beings we know of in *The Lord of the Rings*.

We can also incorporate W.H. Auden's insights with respect to the place speech plays in the explanation of evil once we have this metaphysical background. One of the surest signs of rationality is the power of speech. In medieval thought systems intellect manifested by rational discourse and will evidenced by moral choice function as defining characteristics for rationality. Just as evil dominates other wills according to Bullock, so also with Auden rational discourse allows a being the possibility for corruption. When one chooses evil one is being irrational. Auden summarizes by saying, "One of Tolkien's most impressive achievements is that he succeeds in convincing the reader that the mistakes which Sauron makes to his own undoing are the kinds of mistake which Evil, however powerful, cannot help making, just because it is evil."<sup>17</sup>

The medieval and scriptural explanation of evil appears to work well until we come to the Balrog, Shelob, and the Ring itself. We have no indication that the Balrog or Shelob are corruptions of an originally good creation in the Third Age. Elrond, in *The Fellowship of the Ring* claims that, "We cannot use the Ruling Ring. That we know too well. It belongs to Sauron and was made by him alone, and is altogether evil. Its strength Boromir is too great for anyone to wield at will, save only those who have already a great power of their own." (I, 350). We have, then, at least three instances where Tolkien seems to be stepping outside of the medieval conception of evil.

At this point we have to call upon a distinction which is quite standard in medieval theological and philosophical thought. Creation differs from generation. For the medieval thinker creation always implies that the new being who comes into existence does not come about by reason of a previous matter. This is the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. This doctrine applies to the Ainu (S, 3-6), to the elves (the Firstborn of Iluvatar), and to men (the Followers) (S, 7). All of these beings arise solely from the thought of Iluvatar. Generation is the alternative manner in which things come to be; this always implies a previous matter. It is akin to making or crafting an item. This type of production explains the existence of ringwraiths, orcs and trolls. In each of these cases, as we have seen, either Melkor or

Sauron has a previously created being which they corrupt according to their aims, just as an artist takes a piece of clay and molds it into a statue in accord with his or her own idea. Melkor is a being of such a nature that whatever he molds to his purposes can then generate itself. Sauron, a lesser being than Melkor, can only mold the ringwraiths themselves; we have no indication that they were ever able to reproduce.

With distinction between creation and generation the Balrog and Shelob are fairly easy problems to handle. In both instances these creatures appear to be left over from the First Age. Having been caught in a kind of time-warp they find themselves in the Third Age, the period of our epic. When we trace the genealogy of the Balrog back into *The Silmarillion* we discover that it does fit the pattern outlined above. This creature is initially one of the Maiar or angels who rebelled. Admittedly the being is not of the same level as Melkor but does seem to be similar to Sauron himself. (S, 26, 46, 311). Once we make use of the whole epic, including *The Silmarillion*, we discover that in the case of the Balrog Tolkien is faithful to the medieval pattern of corruption of an original good to explain this demonic presence. Shelob presents an interesting problem; her genealogy is not immediately apparent. We do know that she, like the Balrog, is left over from the earlier age. When we trace her origins she appears to be a creature from Nan Dungorthëb who escaped the destruction of Beleriand.<sup>18</sup> She is a descendant of Ungoliant, (S, 80-84) again one of the Maiar corrupted by Melkor (II, 4233). In both of these cases, then, although the origin of their evil personalities is not known simply by reading *The Lord of the Rings* when we move back into the earlier age we discover that Tolkien is faithful to the pattern of original good corrupted by a will act leading to evil.

Finally, what about the One Ring of Power? As we have seen, Elrond claims that the ring is totally evil (I, 350). This would seem to indicate that in its very creation there was no good to be corrupted. When we trace the origin of the ring we discover that Sauron forged the ring in order to control all the other rings of power. Now, Tolkien is very careful in his use of language at this point. He talks of the ring being forged or being made by Sauron (S, 356-57). He does not talk of creation. Since Sauron himself is evil by the time of the forging and since he imparts some of his own power into the ring, it is an extension of his own personality. In this sense then the ring can be evil from the outset.

### III. Conclusion

This brief sketch of Tolkien's understanding of evil leads us now to several conclusions regarding his treatment of this subject. We have seen that from the Christian context he makes use of personification and the notion of a great war to enhance his portrayal of evil in *The Lord of the Rings*. We have also seen that he employs the medieval metaphysics of evil as a privation of perfection

or corruption of perfection in order to create the various evil characters in the work. His approach then is one of a committed Christian and a medievalist.

Above and beyond this obvious conclusion is something much more profound with respect to Tolkien's writing. It is almost a commonplace to emphasize the great care he has with respect to his use of language. Something that has not been immediately evident to Tolkien's critics up to this time is that he is just as careful with his theological and philosophical concepts as he is in the creation of language. This study of evil in *The Lord of the Rings* shows that once we get beyond the "good story" aspect of his writing, we find an extremely complex and carefully worked out philosophical system. Similar studies could be made with respect to his notions of God, of justice, of truth, and of being itself to name only a few possibilities. In each of these cases we would have to take into account both Tolkien's Christian background and his medieval scholarship.

Philosophers have tended to ignore Tolkien as serious philosophical literature because of its imaginative quality. It has taken a long time for linguistic scholars to take him seriously. Some of the theological ideas are easier to draw to the surface than are the philosophical ones. There is, however, a fruitful area of study available to philosophers who are interested in the interplay of philosophy and literature.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Richard P. Bullock, "The Importance of Free Will in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore*, Vol. XI, no. 3 (Winter, Spring 1985), 29.
- <sup>2</sup> W.H. Auden, "Good and Evil in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Tolkien Journal*, Vol III, no. 1 (1967), 5.
- <sup>3</sup> Jared Lobdell, *England and Always: Tolkien's World of the Rings* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), 62.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. Lobdell, *England and Always*. All of Chapter III, "The Timeless Moment in *The Lord of the Rings*: Christian Doctrine in a Pre-Christian Age," (pp. 49-70) analyzes these Christian influence on Tolkien. Lobdell shows that Tolkien is first and foremost writing literature. This means that from a theological viewpoint there are some systematically loose ends. For example, the place of Aragorn as Christ figure. Lobdell denies this attribution to Aragorn showing that no one character is a genuine Christ figure.
- <sup>5</sup> See Rose M. Zimbardo, "The Medieval Renaissance Vision of 'The Lord of the Rings,'" in Tolkien: *New Critical Perspectives*, eds: Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), pp. 63-71 and Jane Chance Nietzsche, Tolkien's Art: A 'Mythology for England' (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979).
- <sup>6</sup> Christopher Tolkien in his foreword to *The Silmarillion* points out that his father was immensely interested in philosophical and theological issues (Cf. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979), xi-xiv). I believe that he is correct in this claim and that especially Tolkien's interest in philosophical issues has been neglected up to the present. Further references to this work will appear in the text as S.-.
- <sup>7</sup> M. Hodgatt in "Kicking the Hobbit," *New York Review of Books* Vol. VIII, no. 8 (May 4, 1967) claims that "Somewhere in the background of the war between Gondor and Mordor is the war in heaven described in *Revelations*." (p. 11) I would agree with the assessment and want to say that it is probably stronger than Hodgatt acknowledges. This is especially true if we take Sauron and Gandalf as semi-angelic beings. Sauron fills the role of the dragon, and Gandalf fills the role of Michael. Hodgatt does not approve of this approach and his general evaluation of Tolkien's work states that, "This extreme polarization of good and evil which is so striking in the works of all three [Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien] is not only reminiscent

- of rigid medieval Christianity but is also, surely, rather infantile" (p. 11). It will be obvious from what follows in this paper that this author does not at all agree with Hodgatt's opinion.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Augustine, *The Problem of Free Choice*, trans. Dom M. Pontifex (Westminster, Md: The Newman Press, 1955), Books II and III. Cf. also Augustine, *The Retractions*, trans. St. Mary Inez Bogan, R.S.M. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968), Book I, ch. 9.
  - <sup>9</sup> Paul A. Kocher, *Master of Middle Earth: The Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1972), pp. 77-79.
  - <sup>10</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 3 Volumes [I. The Fellowship of the Ring; II. The Two Towers; III. The Return of the King] (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), I, 351. All future references to this work will appear in the text of the paper by simply noting the volume and page number of this edition.
  - <sup>11</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, Revised edition (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 37.
  - <sup>12</sup> Cf. Robert Foster, *The Complete Guide to Middle-Earth* (New York: Ballantine Books, "Sauron". Foster gives a complete history of Sauron in this entry together with page references to the various sections of the epic where he is mentioned.
  - <sup>13</sup> Kocher, *Master of Middle-earth*, pp. 77-79.
  - <sup>14</sup> The genealogy of corruption for Trolls is not as easy to trace as that of the nazgul and the orcs. In the references cited the initial description of Treebeard is that "It [his face] belonged to a large Man-like almost Troll-like figure, at least fourteen feet high, very sturdy, with a tall head and hardly any neck" (83). Treebeard gives his assessment of Trolls by claiming that even though they look like ents they are, "... only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, or Orcs were of Elves" (113). Based on this slight evidence the genealogy of both races seems to be similar. Some elves were captured and corrupted giving rise to the orcs; and some ents were captured and corrupted giving rise to trolls.
  - <sup>15</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979), 3ff.
  - <sup>16</sup> Foster, *Complete Guide*, "Melkor".
  - <sup>17</sup> Auden, "Good and Evil in LOTR", 7.
  - <sup>18</sup> Foster, *Complete Guide*, "Shelob".

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