



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

Volume 42
Number 1

Article 21

October 2023

***Tolkien Dogmatics: Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-earth* by Austin M. Freeman**

Alex (Oleksiy) Ostaltsev
University of Texas at Austin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tolkien's Middle-earth, traditionally interpreted in critical literature in the context of the two-world model, finds a slightly different discourse in Freeman's book, where it is presented as a carefully crafted literary mirror of the historical and cultural Christian space. The absolute distance between the imaginary Middle-earth and Christian civilization in Freeman's interpretation loses its absoluteness: Tolkien's mythological chronotope becomes an artistic representation, a postmodern simulacrum, a living literary image of what had never been presented in its entirety before Tolkien - the Christian world as it is.

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

Online MidSummer Seminar 2025

More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy

August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



Tolkien Dogmatics: Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-earth by Austin M. Freeman

Abstract

The powerful and highly informative definitions that Freeman applies to Tolkien's Middle-earth phenomenon in the title of his book create a productive interpretational framework. Myth and mythology in Inklings' writing were always understood, in an almost Jungian way, as a cultural paradigm flexible enough to embrace the free creativity of the playful human mind and a philosophical postulate, or credo, of the humanistic religious intuition of Christianity. In Freeman's interpretation, Tolkien's literary myth in some ways requires a theological background, which, in its turn, leads to inevitable dogma, a statement that reveals the sensitive mechanics of literary myth as it relates to Tolkien's religious views. According to Freeman, Tolkien builds his impressive mythological cosmos as a Christian universe, which can be studied scholastically, as it was in previous times.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, LOTR, Catholicism, Church, Christianity

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

TOLKIEN DOGMATICS: THEOLOGY THROUGH MYTHOLOGY WITH THE MAKER OF MIDDLE-EARTH. Austin M. Freeman. Bellingham WA: Lexham Press, 2022, 476 p. ISBN 9781683596677. \$26.99; Kindle \$15.49.

THE POWERFUL AND HIGHLY INFORMATIVE definitions that Freeman applies to Tolkien's Middle-earth phenomenon in the title of his book create a productive interpretational framework. Myth and mythology in Inklings' writing were always understood, in an almost Jungian way, as a cultural paradigm flexible enough to embrace the free creativity of the playful human mind and a philosophical postulate, or credo, of the humanistic religious intuition of Christianity. In Freeman's interpretation, Tolkien's literary myth in some ways requires a theological background, which, in its turn, leads to inevitable dogma, a statement that reveals the sensitive mechanics of literary myth as it relates to Tolkien's religious views. According to Freeman, Tolkien builds his impressive mythological cosmos as a Christian universe, which can be studied scholastically, as it was in previous times.

Writing about the dogmatics of a literary text, Freeman seems to enjoy a purely scholastic composition of his book, dividing the vast material of Tolkien's legendarium into a hierarchy of chapters that demonstrates a recognizable Thomistic approach. "God" and "Creation" (cosmos) as chapters and categories of Freeman's *summa theologiae* and Tolkien's Christianized mythology are followed by "Humanity," its "Fall," and "Sin" with subsequent conclusions such as "Christian life" in "Church" for the sake of "Salvation". Freeman admits that such a pure theological scheme that refers to a millennial intellectual tradition is a result of "textual archeology" (1) and scholarly reconstruction that took him half a decade to complete. Expecting a wave of criticism based on modern non-Christian interpretations of Tolkien's myth, Freeman touches on the very problem of cosmological backgrounds of Middle-earth proving that, despite the fact that the writer never demonstrates a coherent and cohesive theological picture, Tolkien's narrative is indeed consonant to Roman Catholicism. Freeman understands this proximity not only as a "way of looking at God and the world" (1) but as a way of writing, i.e. the rhetorical organization of narrative. Thus, the "scholastic" composition of Freeman's book as a deliberate stylistic decision correlates with Tolkien's deliberate evangelization of the literary myth of Middle-earth.

Speaking about his method, Freeman openly says that his book "is not a work of literary criticism" (14). Theology, perceived mostly within the context of Protestant tradition, plays a major role in the book and deals with the writings of Tolkien as if he were one of the doctors of the Church (or a heretic). In his analysis, Freeman does not limit himself to the famous *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy but often uses other sources, mostly letters, interviews, and minor

literary texts, to find the slightest hints that can be interpreted as, or even developed into, religious postulates of the writer. For example, in “God,” the opening chapter of the book, Freeman first presents the major views on Divinity in Christianity and then proves that Tolkien also shares or even delivers these views through his writings. Oneness and internal unity of God, Creator in his relations to the Universe, Trinity and trinitarian relations, names and attributes of God—these and other theological aspects are used as dogmatic criteria of analysis in Freeman’s book. One could suggest that such explications do not add much to the aesthetic value of Tolkien’s texts. However, they add a lot in terms of understanding the forms of manifestation of Christian ideas in diverse and challenging cultural landscape before and after World War II.

Dogmatism in Freeman’s book becomes an organizing principle. In his “Revelation” chapter, the unity of dogmatic approach is preferred to the unity of Tolkien’s analyzed heritage. Freeman scrupulously presents scholastic aspects of “revelation”—general and special ones, common and personal, prophetic and visionary, etc.—and looks for any evidence of them in the vast variety of Tolkien’s texts disregarding their genre. In such an approach, Merry and Pippin’s discussion of Aragorn’s involvement in Middle-earth’s metaphysics and, for instance, an excerpt from Tolkien’s letter or interview are of the same importance. In this way, Freeman successfully proves the presence of theological problematics in the writer’s life and writings, while his method—a genre-decentered exploration of Tolkien’s texts—may confuse some readers.

Tolkien the heretic is revealed in the “Creation” chapter. There Freeman raises the problem of Divine foreknowledge and claims that Tolkien departs from Catholic dogmatics by stating that creation has a little more freedom than orthodoxy allows. Freeman never overburdens his texts with references and quotes from theologians, preferring to present dogmatic views as if they are well-known background and can be easily formulated by Freeman himself. He does mention some authoritative names that were important for Tolkien’s development as a Catholic believer or were famous in his time—cardinal John Henry Newman, Henri-Marie de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar (12). However, the reader does not see how Tolkien’s views are juxtaposed with the ideas of professional theologians. Sometimes it seems that Freeman prefers to compare the Middle-earth legendarium with an anonymous catechesis book from the nearest parish.

Freeman keeps a slight distance not only from professional theology but from the texts of Tolkien as well, preferring to paraphrase or mention rather than cite them. Although each chapter is accompanied by numerous endnotes referring to the primary sources, the narrative of Freeman’s book is almost never interrupted by voices other than his own. In his “Humanity” chapter, the reader can genuinely hear the overtones of a sermon that sound like an emotional

generalization on religious values of Christianity and Tolkien's legendarium. Freeman's speculations on different races that dwell in Middle-earth in the light of Christian anthropology is a valuable comment in terms of Tolkien's concept of "humanity." Created as "children of God," races in some ways not only have common roots but a complicated history of interaction, the basis of which is their "humanity" that manifests itself in different ways. Freeman persuasively uses Christian anthropology to explore these differentiations.

In "Humanity," Freeman also speaks, in a descriptive rather than a polemical manner, of notions of human psychophysiological organization found in Tolkien's narratives, which are as well the epicenter of modern bodily oriented critical discourse. He admits that, in his understanding of human constitution, Tolkien again steps back from Catholicism toward earlier Christian fathers and, we can add, Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The writer prefers a tripartite concept of human being, which includes body, mind, and spirit, to a post-Augustinian bipartite concept (body and soul). Both concepts are critically juxtaposed to modern monopartite materialistic views of human as a rational animal. Such complexity of views can be found in Tolkien's "The Debate of Finrod and Andreth" and "On Fairy-stories." These sources are especially interesting in the context of modern studies on gender, race, sexuality and other aspects of human physiology that nowadays have attained features of absolute categories in the Humanities.

"Finrod and Andreth" is referred to again in "The Fall" chapter, where Freeman reveals Tolkien's understanding of the current corrupted state of the cosmos. "Finrod and Andreth" is the only account where Tolkien raises the problem of the coexistence of good and evil, first of all, as moral and spiritual states—and he does so outside of his major narratives. Freeman proves the presence of biblical myth in Tolkien's account on that major philosophical problem. At the same time, he clearly notices freedom of interpretation that the writer demonstrates in his approach to this major problem of Christian religion. Tolkien accepts the Adam and Eve story from the book of Genesis; however, he makes it a repeatable pattern: the good/original innocence—the deception—the temptation—the falling—the repentance/destruction. This pattern takes place not only among primary powerful creatures of Middle-earth (Morgoth) but is seen in the storylines of minor individuals (Gollum) as well.

The nature of evil and sin, as Freeman proves in an eponymous chapter, is presented by Tolkien in full concordance with the Augustinian model. Understood as absence rather than substance, evil is revealed in the Middle-earth legendarium as corruption of primary good, as deceit, or temptation. Freeman identifies Tolkien's practical morality as the one developed by Peter Abelard who speaks of the three "enemies" of the soul which the Christian should stand against: the flesh, the world, and the devil (187). All of

them, as Freeman shows, are embodied in Sauron and his ring. The storyline of Sauron also reveals the notion of idolatry, which, in Tolkien's universe, leads to a complete destruction of the state of Black Númenóreans and any other human community in general. The influence of evil and sin destroys not only societies but individuals as well (Saruman, Gollum) resulting in a complete loss of identity bestowed by God. Freeman continues his analysis of Sauron's storyline and his relation to Morgoth in the chapter on Satan and demons. He shows how Tolkien accurately elaborates a biblical theme of Satan's pride and its effects on the cosmos.

Christology and soteriology are somehow unable to find their proper place in Tolkien's legendarium. In "Christ and Salvation," Freeman speaks about Jesus-like figures or "echoes" of Christ in Middle-earth. However, neither Gandalf, who "arose" after his death, nor Aragorn, who embodies the Anglo-Saxon model of king-healer, nor even Frodo, who literally saves Middle-earth from Sauron's eternal darkness, completely fits the role of the Middle-earth's Savior. Freeman thinks this happens because Tolkien "would never take it upon himself to write a *fictional account*" of the foundational figure of Christian faith (236, emphasis in original).

The absence of the Savior makes it hard to trace an equivalent of the Church in Tolkien's legendarium. Freeman mostly speaks of how religion manifests itself through rituals in the different societies of Middle-earth; however, there is no religious institution that was founded in the historically observed period (the Third Age). Freeman provides some interesting facts about Tolkien's personal ideas about the Church that show him as a reverent Catholic believer who clearly understood the subject of his faith and implemented his beliefs in everyday religious practice.

Although there is no Christ in Tolkien's legendarium, there are many examples of Christian life in Middle-earth that Freeman presents in the penultimate chapter of his book. The struggle caused by the necessity to keep the balance of good and evil in the cosmos is the moral goal of Tolkien's characters—this applies, above all, to Frodo and Sam. Their common storyline demonstrates the ambivalence of the limited and weak human will and Divine grace, which leads the hobbits to a victorious end to their mission. Frodo and Sam naturally display Christian virtues—mercy, humility, prayer, repentance—as norms of everyday life, although the religious overtones of their actions and decisions become visible through the prism of Freeman's analysis.

Finally, the finitude of Middle-earth, as developed by Tolkien in accordance with Christian eschatology, is the last "dogmatic" concept discussed in Freeman's book. Indeed, Tolkien's world exists in time frames or time cycles, each leading to an inevitable apocalypse. The "last things" of Middle-earth include a recognizable Christian belief in the transformation of the universe,

which would mark the end of the separation between God and his creation and the beginning of eternity. Tolkien, in *The Silmarillion* and several minor texts, completes his myth of Middle-earth by drawing a chronotopic framework in which the characters live and die, choosing their eternal destiny. In his last chapter, Freeman speaks about *eucatastrophe*—a definition that Tolkien understands as a cosmological event and a compositional device which denotes a “sudden turn [of a plot, of events—A.O.] that brings a piercing joy,” according to Freeman (338). Eucatastrophe understood as a direct manifestation of God’s saving will in the current of events is at the epicenter of the Christian apocalypse as well as the literary, mythological, one.

Tolkien’s Middle-earth, traditionally interpreted in critical literature in the context of the two-world model, finds a slightly different discourse in Freeman’s book, where it is presented as a carefully crafted literary mirror of the historical and cultural Christian space. The absolute distance between the imaginary Middle-earth and Christian civilization in Freeman’s interpretation loses its absoluteness: Tolkien’s mythological chronotope becomes an artistic representation, a postmodern simulacrum, a living literary image of what had never been presented in its entirety before Tolkien—the Christian world as it is.

— Alex (Oleksiy) Ostaltsev



THE LION’S COUNTRY: C.S. LEWIS’S THEORY OF THE REAL. Charlie W. Starr. Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2022. xxiii + 132 p. ISBN 9781606354537. \$18.95.

DISCUSSING REALITY IN ANY CAPACITY is a daunting task considering our postmodern age constantly questions our perceptions of reality. As Toby F. Coley notes, “With the rise of post-Enlightenment epistemology and postmodernism, [...] objectivity is called into question and all perspectives become ‘interested’ perspectives” (414). And yet, our twenty-first century, post-Romantic world, however paradoxically, seems a perfect climate for Lewis’s thoughts to re-enter our conversations on reality. Dr. Charlie W. Starr, in his book *The Lion’s Country: C.S. Lewis’s Theory of the Real*, seeks to provide an “overview [of] C.S. Lewis’s theory of Reality” (xxi, emphasis in original). No doubt a high goal; yet Starr’s synthesis of Lewis’s writings offers a comprehensive, compact, and readable study of the Real, according to Lewis’s Christian worldview.

While Starr’s book has a humble page count, considering the gravity of such a topic as reality, the reader is advised to spend time carefully reading