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## God and Ilúvatar: Tolkien's Use of Biblical Parallels and Tropes in His Cosmogony

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I assume analysis of the creation accounts in Genesis is something many Tolkien fans and scholars have limited experience with. For this reason, I'll begin with a mini-Hebrew Bible lesson.

The Pentateuch is the name given to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, usually called the Old Testament by Christians. Critical Biblical scholars are in almost unanimous agreement that the Pentateuch is a composite text, which means that it's a compilation of independent sources rather than one independent composition. We almost all agree that the Pentateuch is a work of edited and compiled source documents. There is much less agreement, however, about just how to divide up these sources, and the manner in which they were edited and compiled. Nevertheless, there is general agreement that the early chapters of Genesis contain not one, but two creation accounts from two independent sources.

The first creation account, told in Genesis 1:1-2:3, is what is commonly referred to as the Seven-Day Creation Account. It's almost unanimously attributed to a source Biblical Scholars call "P", or the Priestly Source.<sup>1</sup>

The second creation account, told in Genesis 2:5-3:24, is commonly referred to as the Eden Narrative. It is most commonly attributed to a source Biblical Scholars refer to as "J", or

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<sup>1</sup> See any work on the Documentary Hypothesis for more information. I would recommend Richard Elliot Friedman's *Who Wrote the Bible?*

the Yahwist. The Yahwist is so-called because in J texts, the divine name, probably pronounced something like Yahweh, is the name used for God from the very beginning. In other sources, the divine name is also used, but only after it is revealed to Moses in Exodus 3. Before this point in other sources, God is referred to either as "God", or by variations or epithets.

So, from a Biblical Scholar's perspective, I am comparing Tolkien's work to two texts, one attributed to J and the other attributed to P. More of this paper will concern P, both because the J account does not describe Cosmogogenesis *per se*,<sup>2</sup> and because I find more compelling structural parallels between the P creation account and J.R.R. Tolkien's *Ainulindalë*.

Now let's consider Tolkien. It is unclear how well Tolkien knew scholarship of the Hebrew Bible, but as a devout Catholic, he was certainly acquainted with the Bible itself. He was also acquainted to some extent with Hebrew, although his knowledge of Hebrew was probably less excellent than his knowledge of Germanic and Classical languages. It is well-known that Tolkien modeled the Dwarvish language on Semitic language structure, with Hebrew probably as its primary inspiration.<sup>3</sup> Tolkien himself saw substantial parallels between the wandering Dwarves and the wandering the Jews in the Diaspora, both in exile from their homelands.<sup>4</sup>

Tolkien also contributed to the translation of the *Jerusalem Bible*, and especially the book of Jonah. How substantial Tolkien's contribution actually was, however, is much debated.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it is an established fact that Tolkien had some real knowledge of the Bible and of Hebrew.

Now that I've given a little background about the Bible and about Tolkien's knowledge of it, let's consider the Biblical text.

"In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth (Genesis 1:1)." Everyone knows this line, and it's how the first creation narrative begins. Interestingly, in Hebrew, the syntax of that verse doesn't make a lot of sense. It's probably best to think of this as a heading or some kind of temporal contextualization. The easily comprehensible P narrative really begins

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<sup>2</sup> Hensler, "A Limited Comparative Analysis of Understandings Regarding Cosmogogenesis," available *Academia.edu*, <https://cua.academia.edu/KevinHensler>, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Swain, 314.

<sup>4</sup> Swain, 314-315.

<sup>5</sup> Hammond and Anderson, 278-279.

with the next verse. I've done analysis of this narrative before, so allow me to quote myself from a paper I have presented previously, somewhat modified:

Th[e P] creation narrative [in Genesis 1] follows a distinctive pattern. On the first three days, attributes of . . . disordered chaos are separated [by God] into a coherent and ordered reality. [Over the course of these three days, three major separations structure the narrative.] First light was separated from darkness, then the ocean was separated from the sky, and finally, the land was separated from the water. In this way, the disordered chaos became the divinely intentioned order we call the Universe . . .

Once the domains themselves had been created in Genesis, God created the particular creatures of those domains over the course of the next three days. The creation on the fourth day of light-giving astral bodies, connected with the day and night skies, corresponds to three days earlier when the light and darkness were themselves divided into night and day. The creation on the fifth day of the various sea creatures as well as the birds of the sky corresponds to the creation of the ocean and the sky, in which they dwell respectively, also three days earlier. The creation of the land creatures, including humans, on the sixth day, corresponds to the creation of the dry land environment which they inhabit, also three days earlier (Coogan 32). . .

Overall the [P] cosmogenesis is one in which order is brought about by separating coherent realities from a preexisting chaos. The notion that this creation brought about order is reinforced by the overt systematization of the narrative. . .<sup>6</sup>

It should also be noted that, although the P creation account takes place in Genesis 1, P's flood narrative, which is interspersed with J's in Genesis 6-8, uses language that evokes the creation story. In fact, the P flood narrative seems not just to be describing a flood, but a systematic unmaking of creation.<sup>7</sup> From the P perspective, only in the postdiluvian world is creation complete.

Let us now compare the P creation narrative to the *Ainulindalë*. The structure of the *Ainulindalë* is substantially less rigid and ordered than the first Biblical creation narrative. More so than the P account, Tolkien's narrative has great depth even before once considers symbolism. Tolkien also writes, I believe, very intentionally to avoid any clear sense of Time. I would submit that this is because he is attempting to portray eternity, an idea beyond human

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<sup>6</sup> Hensler, 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Kraeling, 286, c.f. Hensler, 7.

comprehension. Eternity is not the sense we get from the P creation account, where the seven-day temporal structure is very much the backbone of the narrative.

Nevertheless, the structure of the P narrative is echoed in the *Ainulindalë*. As I noted above, creation in the P account is the result of three separations of orderly realities from a primordial chaos. In the *Ainulindalë*, creation is the result of three themes, the Third of which brings some degree of order to the chaos that is Melkor's vain discord by perfectly weaving that discord into its own sad and beautiful music. There is a second tripartite pattern of creation in the *Ainulindalë*. Creation occurs in three distinct phases: The Great Music, The Vision, and Eä.<sup>8</sup> The notion of separating order out of chaos so present in the Bible is not prominent here, although as I stated before, the Third Theme does impose some degree of order on Melkor's Chaotic Discord. The ordered creation of Eä is also set up in the "Abyss", a word which, to me, evokes chaos. The double parallel of the tripartite creation is certainly significant.

Also significant is the fact that in both pieces, the empty world is finished only about halfway through the narrative. In the Bible, God does the rest, creating the celestial and animal inhabitants of the various created domains. In the *Ainulindalë*, and continuing into the rest of the *Silmarillion*, it is up to the Ainur who enter into creation, the Valar and Maiar, to complete this task. In both narratives, though, the world itself is established before the recognizable landscapes with plants, animals, and heavenly bodies are set up. The Valar and Maiar entering into the world bring into being the various plants, heavenly bodies, and animals. Both creations culminate in the human species. In both, it is with the creation/awakening of humanity that the process of creation results in the world as we recognize it, inhabited by plants, by animals, and by us. Yet, in the Bible, that human creation is shown, but in Tolkien's works, it is, probably very intentionally, only hinted at.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to structural parallels, the *Ainulindalë* clearly, and I think intentionally, evokes Bible style and parallels specific Biblical passages. First, and most significant, is the very direct parallel between God in the Bible and Eru/Ilúvatar in the works of Tolkien. I believe Ilúvatar is *obviously* not just an invention of Tolkien's Legendarium, but is actually a presentation, relying heavily on metaphor, of the God in whom Tolkien actually believes. In

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<sup>8</sup> Whittingham, 212.

<sup>9</sup> Bims, 48-49, and Birzer, 188.

Ilúvatar and through the *Ainulindalë*, Tolkien treats certain theological concerns, and he does so in a very sophisticated manner. He treats such problems as the nature of evil through Melkor, his servants, and the results of their deeds. He also treats the apparent contradiction between free will and divine providence in creative action of the Ainur in their music. I doubt that Tolkien was a Biblical literalist to the extent that he believed the world to have been created in seven days as described in the P creation account.<sup>10</sup> I think he probably believed that the Bible was true, but at least in this case, not on the literal level. I feel there's a very good chance that he felt he was conveying something similarly true in the *Ainulindalë*, perhaps not true to the same extent or in the same manner as the Bible, but in a way at least analogous.

Another obvious parallel is between Ilúvatar's creation of the world via the command "Eä! Let these things Be!" and God's, using the phrase "Let there Be Light". In both instances, the new creation comes into being as it is commanded to "be": "And there was Light" in the Bible, and in the *Silmarillion*, "suddenly the Ainur saw afar off a light."<sup>11</sup>

The idea of a creation that remains in some way incomplete until after the flood is another parallel between the world of Tolkien and that of the Bible. I noted above that, according to P, creation is not really complete until after the flood. This might be said of Tolkienian floods, i.e. the ruin of Beleriand and the downfall of Numenor, both of which are lost forever beneath the waves. The world does not become the sphere we recognize until after Ilúvatar's intervention and removal of the Undying Lands from the Circles of the World at the same time that Ilúvatar destroys Numenor.<sup>12</sup>

Another notable biblical parallel, though not of the P creation account itself, is the first sentence of the *Ainulindalë*: "There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called is called Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they

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<sup>10</sup> To see this issue treated somewhat more extensively, see Helms (A), 32-33. Hints that Tolkien believed in the literal truth of Eden, and its repercussions are to be found in Walton, 63.

<sup>11</sup> *Ainulindalë*: paragraph 19 (in *The Silmarillion*). This is also noted by Helms (A), 44; Helms (B), 26; and Zimmer, 53.

<sup>12</sup> For more discussion of the Flat Earth in Tolkien, see Hammond (26) and Noad (59). For discussion of the Flood and parallels to the Bible, see Birns 50, 52, 61. He notes that Tolkien himself, in his letter to Milton Waldman, refers to Elendil as a "Noachian figure".

were with him before aught else was made."<sup>13</sup> This clearly parallels the first five verses of the Gospel of John:<sup>14</sup>

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

<sup>2</sup>The same was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. <sup>4</sup>In him was life; and the life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup>And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, the parallels are imperfect, largely because Tolkien seems not to be espousing a Trinitarian Theology<sup>16</sup> in the *Ainulindalë*, but the language used sounds a lot like the language in John. The practical parallels between the Logos (Greek for "Word") and the Ainur are substantial. The Ainur are said to have been "with [Ilúvatar]" practically in the beginning, although they are created beings rather than co-eternal ones. Yet, as I said above, I believe they do exist with Ilúvatar in eternity. The Logos is the *Word* of God, and the Ainur are the product of the thought of Ilúvatar. It is also through the song of the Ainur that everything is created, just as it is through the Logos that all things were made, without exception.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the *Ainulindalë* does give an exception to what was created through the Music of the Ainur: the Children of Ilúvatar. They are solely the creation of Ilúvatar. I don't believe, however, that this is a failure of the parallel, but rather a nuance intentionally added by Tolkien. It allows him to present a special and unique relationship within creation between us, the Children, and God.

It is also notable that the Ainur live because of the Flame Imperishable which Ilúvatar has kindled within each of them. This flame parallels the life in the Logos which made the Logos

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<sup>13</sup> *Ainulindalë*: paragraph 1.

<sup>14</sup> Helms (A) (44) observes a Biblical parallel here, but sees the parallel with Genesis 1 rather than John 1. I clearly do not disagree, but I think the Gospel of John, which itself parallels Genesis, is the more direct parallel, at least to the language of the first paragraph of the *Ainulindalë*. This is somewhat strange, because earlier in his paper (35), Helms (A) puts forward the idea that Tolkien is "strongly indebted to St. John in . . . the *Silmarillion* . . ." Walton Also notes strong parallels in the *Silmarillion* to Genesis and John (63). Helms (B) notes a strong parallel not between the beginning of the *Ainulindalë* and Genesis 1, but the first verse of Genesis 1 and the *Valaquenta* (26.)

<sup>15</sup> I use the King James Bible here because it was a work of art when it was completed and remains the most well-known English Language Bible. I have no doubt Tolkien would have known it, although whether he would have personally preferred it is unclear to me. It was a protestant translation and he was Catholic.

<sup>16</sup> Whether or not a Trinitarian Theology is actually espoused in John is open for debate, but John certainly does not suggest a simple monotheism.

<sup>17</sup> Cox (57) sees creation through the music of the Ainur as an allusion to Plato. He does not note John.

the "light of men".<sup>18</sup> In an interesting wrinkle in the parallel, when creation itself occurs, with its light, that is the first time the Ainur perceive the darkness. This evokes the fifth verse of John, but is almost its inverse. It is not that the darkness did not perceive of them, but rather that, prior to the creating act of Ilúvatar, the Ainur did not perceive the darkness.

Besides these strong parallels between the beginnings of the *Ainulindalë* and of the Gospel of John, other clear evocations of the Bible include the use of the word "Firmament", which has a long etymological history, but is derived originally from words used to translate the ambiguous Hebrew word "רָקִיעַ". It is rarely used in English except when translating the Bible, or when one is intentionally archaizing or imitating biblical style. I'm sure that Tolkien, the consummate philologist, knew and took advantage of this.<sup>19</sup>

Another evocation of Biblical Language is the use of the temporal phrase "And it came to pass" once in the *Ainulindalë* and occasionally throughout the remainder of the *Silmarillion*. This particular phrase is rare in English, but is the standard *King James Version* translation of the Hebrew "וַיְהִי", which occurs hundreds of times in the Biblical text. As a rarely used but recognizable phrase, "and it came to pass" may have entered English through translations of the Bible. Any Hebrew Bible scholar looking for allusions to the Bible in the *Ainulindalë* would recognize this almost immediately as a deliberate modeling of Biblical style.

Let's, finally, consider the much less rigidly structured J creation. The only strong hint of a parallel I detect in the J creation story with Tolkien is not in the *Ainulindalë* but is rather within the *Quenta Silmarillion*. Here, Laurelin and Telperion, the two trees of another Earthly paradise, Valinor, parallel the Trees of Life and of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Like the two trees in Eden, the two trees of Valinor are lost to us forever, remnants of an unattainable past.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Kocher (36-37) draws a clear parallel between the Secret Fire and the Holy Spirit, as does Helms (B) (26). This is completely reasonable. The Logos, with which I have drawn a parallel with the Secret Fire, is usually identified with the Son, not the Holy Spirit. The Parallel I am drawing is primarily based on what I see in the similarity between the beginnings of John and of the *Ainulindalë*. Throughout Tolkien's works, the Holy Spirit may well be a more apt parallel to the Secret Fire.

<sup>19</sup> This also parallels the later "Dome of Varda". For discussion of the Dome of Varda, see Noad, 57-59.

<sup>20</sup> Helms (A.) also makes this observation, 44-45. To see other discussion of allusions, though not parallels to the J account in the *Silmarillion*, and particularly to the Fall of Man, see Birns (48-49), which, among other works, suggests we consider Tolkien's *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*. See also Birzer (188).

The *Silmarillion*, and the *Ainulindalë* in particular, may be the most profound of Tolkien's incredible works. I feel that Tolkien's creation narrative is every bit as profound as the Biblical Creation stories. In this work, Tolkien dealt with the most complicated of theological themes, among these, the apparent contradiction between free will and divine providence, which he treats as expertly as I have ever seen. Tolkien reworked and incorporated ideas and tropes from the Bible and elsewhere in his composition. In this sub-creative act, he made something new but every bit as rich.

Thank You.

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<sup>21</sup> I generally considered other essays in the volumes listed in the "Works Cited" section. In the "Other Works Consulted" section are those volumes or individual pieces which I considered but did not specifically cite in this paper.

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