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Neues Testament und Märchen: Tolkien, Fairy Stories, and the Gospel

Cover Page Footnote

I gave an earlier version of this paper at the 45th International Congress on Medieval Studies (May, 2010). My thanks to Neal K. Keese, Ph.D., and anonymous reviewers from JTR for their assistance in the revision process; any errors that remain are, of course, my own.

The Gospels contain a fairystory, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: “mythical” in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation. [. . .] This story is supreme; and it is true. [. . .] Legend and history have met and fused. (Tolkien *OFS*, 77-78, ¶104-105)

It is precisely its immunity from proof which secures the Christian proclamation against the charge of being mythological. The transcendence of God is not as in myth reduced to immanence. Instead, we have the paradox of a transcendent God present and active in history: “The Word became flesh.” (Bultmann 1941, 44)

In their magisterial edition of Tolkien’s *On Fairy-stories*, Verlyn Flieger and Douglas Anderson draw attention to the problem of the ending of Tolkien’s seminal essay (*OFS*, 130; 135). The evidence suggests that the lecture as delivered ended, not with the discussion of the gospels which concludes the published essay, but with something much like what is now Note H, the discussion of the artificial verbal ending of Fairy-stories. Tolkien seems to have added the material about the gospels in 1943, as he turned the lecture into an essay for the Charles Williams memorial volume, and that date brings with it a certain synchronicity: Tolkien’s 1943 remarks that “the story has entered history”—the idea, as C. S. Lewis would phrase it, that myth has become fact—take almost precisely the opposite tack from Rudolph Bultmann’s claim (in his landmark 1941 essay on demythologizing the gospels, “Neues Testament und Mythologie”) that the Christian proclamation does *not* involve a God mythologically “reduced to immanence.” Where Tolkien would see “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14) as literally true and straightforwardly historical—indeed as “the eucatastrophe of man’s history” (*OFS*, 78, ¶104), Bultmann sees that formula strictly as a figurative way of expressing “the paradox of a transcendent God present and active in history” (44).

There is *almost* no way Tolkien in 1943 could have known about Bultmann’s essay, which originally circulated in Germany in cyclostyled form (Barsch 1961, vii)—though it is just barely possible someone among his

acquaintances, perhaps the Inkling Adam Fox or Austin Farrer,¹ might have heard about it and mentioned it to him. Nevertheless, Tolkien's ideas—appearing in conversation as early as 1931, and set out in “On Fairy-stories”—typify what became something of a standard response from the Inklings' circle to the German's theological ideas once they did gain wide circulation.²

1. Liberal Theology: the Nineteenth Century Background

Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) was Professor of New Testament in the University of Marburg. In his 1941 essay, he is concerned that Liberal Protestant theology and biblical criticism of the 19th century failed to preserve the kerygma, which he defines as “the proclamation of the decisive act of God in Christ” (13); he also feels that more recent decades have “witnessed a movement away from criticism and a return to a naïve acceptance of the kerygma” (12)—a movement he regards as equally regrettable.

Bultmann is arguing, then, for an Existentialist strand of what historians of theology call Neo-Orthodoxy, a radical re-consideration of the Liberal position. In that context, it is worth noting just *how* liberal 19th Century Liberal Protestantism actually was, particularly in Europe, and how its message spread. To illustrate the first point with a quick comparison: In 1832, toward the end of America's Second Great Awakening, the 29-year-old Reverend Ralph Waldo Emerson resigned the Unitarian ministry in Boston because of his scruples about Holy Communion and public prayer; he went on, of course, to a long career as a secular public sage and philosopher. By contrast, in 1787, sixteen years before Emerson's birth, the 19-year-old Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote to his father, a Reformed pastor:

Alas! dearest father, if you believe that without this faith no one can attain to salvation in the next world, nor to tranquility in this—and such, I know, is your belief—oh! then pray to God to grant it to me, for to me it is now lost. I cannot believe that he who called himself the Son of Man was the true, eternal God; I

1 Austin Farrer (1904-1968), Chaplain of Trinity College and later Warden of Keble, was not himself an Inkling, but was a friend of Lewis and Tolkien. He is the dedicatee of Lewis's 1958 *Reflections on the Psalms*, and several of Tolkien's published letters are addressed to Katharine Farrer, Austin's wife, who had a career of her own as a mystery novelist.

2 For Tolkien's much-noted conversation with Dyson and Lewis on this subject on Saturday, September 19, 1931, see Christopher Tolkien's “Introduction” (Tolkien 1989, 7-8) and Carpenter (1977, 146-148, and 1981, 42-45). For discussion of Tolkien's trope as “myth became fact” in C. S. Lewis, see Duriez (2007) and Medcalf (1981); for Lewis and Bultman, see Bayne (forthcoming; I am indebted to Prof. Bayne for permission to read a version of her essay while it was in preparation). For the idea as a lens through which to survey recent Christian theology, see Dorrien (1997, with remarks on Lewis but not on Tolkien, 236-238).

cannot believe that his death was a vicarious atonement. (Gerrish 1984, 25)

Unlike Emerson, Schleiermacher went on to a religious career as a pastor and professor, becoming the father of modern Protestant theology: and the key point, for our purposes, is that he did so on precisely the grounds which he had staked out in that letter to his father. Nor did this necessarily seem hypocritical in Schleiermacher's setting. No less an ethicist than Immanuel Kant had written, in the 1784 manifesto, "What is Enlightenment?":

Similarly a clergyman is obligated to make his sermon to his pupils in catechism and his congregation conform to the symbol of the church which he serves, for he has been accepted on this condition. But as a scholar he has complete freedom, even the calling, to communicate to the public all his carefully tested and well meaning thoughts on that which is erroneous in the symbol and to make suggestions for the better organization of the religious body and church. In doing this there is nothing that could be laid as a burden on his conscience. For what he teaches as a consequence of his office as a representative of the church, this he considers something about which he has not freedom to teach according to his own lights; it is something which he is appointed to propound at the dictation of and in the name of another. He will say, "Our church teaches this or that; those are the proofs which it adduces." He thus extracts all practical uses for his congregation from statutes to which he himself would not subscribe with full conviction but to the enunciation of which he can very well pledge himself because it is not impossible that truth lies hidden in them, and, in any case, there is at least nothing in them contradictory to inner religion. For if he believed he had found such in them, he could not conscientiously discharge the duties of his office; he would have to give it up. (§7)

The Liberal Protestant tradition which Bultmann meant to answer was a version of Christianity which earnestly intended to preserve "inner religion," but, in order to act "conscientiously," had to abandon the traditional sense of such doctrines as the Incarnation or the Atonement, redefining them in terms acceptable to the rational and scientific modern mind.

These issues raised by Liberal Theology did not remain within the lecture halls and refectories of seminaries: long before Bultmann, they had been broadly

disseminated. Amongst English readers, this popularization came about in part through the novel of ideas. One influential example is *Robert Elsmere*, an 1888 novel by Mrs. Humphry Ward.³ The book's eponymous hero falls someplace between Emerson and Schleiermacher—he abandons traditional Christianity and the ministry of the Established Church, but eventually creates a new religion on rational grounds. A runaway hit in both Britain and the United States,⁴ the book attracted a lengthy review—“*Robert Elsmere and the Battle of Belief*”⁵—by the former (and future) Liberal Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone, helping to guarantee wide public discussion of the modern religious ideas it championed (ideas taken not only from Liberal Theology in itself, strictly construed, but also from some of its intellectual offspring).

In one significant scene of the novel, after his wife (a devout but unsophisticated Christian, still recuperating from the birth of their daughter) laments “*the pain of the world*” (Bk. III, Chap. 19: 275, italics in original) and immediately goes on to question how, in the face of such pain, anyone “dare” live without believing in Christ, Elsmere goes for a walk. Reflecting on the multiple failures of the Christian religion, he remembers key teachings of one of his wisest and most appealing Oxford mentors.

‘*The fairy-tale of Christianity*’—‘*The origins of Christian Mythology*.’ He could recall, as the words rose in his memory, the simplicity of the rugged face, and the melancholy mingled with fire which had always marked the great tutor’s sayings about religion.

“*Fairy Tale!*” Could any reasonable man watch a life like Catherine’s and believe that nothing but a delusion lay at the heart of it? And as he asked the question, he seemed to hear Mr. Grey’s answer: “All religions are true and all are false. In them all, more or less visibly, man grasps at the one thing needful—self forsaken, God laid hold of. The spirit in them all is the same, answers eternally to reality; it is but the letter, the fashion, the imagery, that are relative and changing.” (III,19: 277-8)

3 Mary Augusta Ward (1851-1920) was the daughter of Tom Arnold, niece of the poet Matthew Arnold, and granddaughter of Thomas Arnold the iconic headmaster of Rugby; by her sister Julia’s 1885 marriage to Leonard Huxley (son of “Darwin’s bulldog,” Thomas Henry Huxley), she was aunt of Julian and Aldous. She was eminently well-positioned to hear (as her uncle put it in “Dover Beach,” written in the year of her birth) the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of the “sea of faith.”

4 Sutherland (1989) calls it “probably the best selling ‘quality’ novel of the century” (539).

5 Ward (2013), 619-623; originally published in *Nineteenth Century*, May, 1888.

Fairy tales and mythology—associated with each other in accordance with the understandings of 19th century philology—first come to Elsmere’s mind as self-evidently false, ways of saying that the Christian Gospel is “nothing but a delusion”; his more detailed memory of Grey’s teaching is that fairy tale, myth and gospel are all false and changing imagery used to communicate the true and immutable message that human beings must forsake self and lay hold of God (in some rational, non-mythological, sense of “God”). Whether or not Tolkien read this novel from four years before his birth, his understanding of fairy tale and gospel is virtually a direct reversal of the one Elsmere here remembers from his days at Oxford.

Later, after leaving the ministry, Elsmere gives a lecture to a society of atheist London workers, setting out his new beliefs at some length:

Then, while the room hung on his words, he entered on a brief exposition of the text, “Miracles do not happen,” restating Hume’s old argument, and adding to it some of the most cogent of those modern arguments drawn from literature, from history, from the comparative study of religions and religious evidence, which were not practically at Hume’s disposal, but which are now affecting the popular mind as Hume’s reasoning could never have affected it. “We are now able to show how miracle, or the belief in it, which is the same thing, comes into being. The study of miracle in all nations, and under all conditions, yields everywhere the same results. Miracle may be the child of imagination, of love, nay, of a passionate sincerity, but invariably it lives with ignorance and is withered by knowledge! [. . .]

“But do not let yourselves imagine for an instant that, because in a rational view of history there is no place for a Resurrection and Ascension, therefore you may profitably allow yourself a mean and miserable mirth of this sort over the past! [. . .] Do not imagine for an instant that what is binding, adorable, beautiful in that past is done away with when miracle is given up!” (VI, 40: 494).

In these and other passages of *Elsmere*, Ward helps to make the ideas of Liberal Theology part of the intellectual currency of the English speaking world, presenting to late-nineteenth century Britain and America a picture of Christianity as one more world religion which has lamentably obscured brief but profound glimpses of spiritual truth with superstitious cult and unbelievable myth.

2. Bultmann's Project: *Kerygma* and *Mythos*

Bultmann chooses to build on the key assumptions of this Liberal position, rather than refute them: that is, he takes it as axiomatic that modern people cannot accept any part of the pre-scientific worldview which the New Testament documents share. It is not simply that the modern mind has discarded the ancient world's cosmology (to take one obvious example), but that such a mind insists on "the view of the world which has been moulded by modern science and the modern conception of human nature as a self-subsistent entity immune from the interference of supernatural powers" (7). "It is impossible," Bultmann asserts, "to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles" (5).

Given that basic principle, Bultmann's Neo-Orthodox question is whether one can demythologize the New Testament accounts while preserving the kerygma: can one "proclaim a decisive act of God in Christ" free of the first century mythology, or will there be no act of God left after the miracles have been taken away? On his reading, there have been three previous attempts at demythologizing. The first of these is the ancient and venerable practice of allegorical interpretation, which Bultmann sees as leaving the unbelievable mythological language in place, but giving it a spiritual meaning for each "individual believer" (13).

The second wave of demythologizing was that of the nineteenth century Liberals, whom Bultmann tackles in the person of a relatively late representative, Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930). Harnack and his predecessors, Bultmann feels, certainly discarded all of the first century mythology from the New Testament, but in doing so reduced Jesus to a teacher of religion and ethics. This is, Bultmann in effect insists, to throw out the bathwater without even checking for a potential baby⁶: instruction in religion and ethics is a different thing entirely from the kerygma, and the New Testament documents actually have very little interest, overall, in Jesus as a teacher.

The third wave of demythologizing, on Bultmann's account, is that of the History of Religions School. The *religions-geschichtliche Schule*, itself begun in Göttingen in the late 19th Century in part as a reaction to the earlier Liberal Protestant tradition, considered religion anthropologically, as something which developed along with the other elements, social and political, of a culture. This school of thought was naturally particularly aware of mythology, and indeed Bultmann praises its members for recognizing the way mythology permeates the New Testament. On the other hand, though, the History of Religions School also

6 "They threw away not only the mythology but also the kerygma itself" (12).

had a natural interest in the cultus, in the *performance* of religion as a way of transcending the world, and its members saw Christ and the Church in almost exclusively cultic terms: while that view is, for Bultmann, an advance over the purely educational Jesus of the Liberal Protestants, it ignores the eschatological character of the New Testament, the insistence (on Bultmann's view) that Jesus is himself the archetypal event of the end time. Nor does the school do any better than the Liberals at showing a decisive redemptive act of God in Christ.

The fourth approach, then, and the only adequate one, is Bultmann's own, the Existentialist approach of demythologizing by interpretation. The New Testament mind, he says, could picture the world as enslaved to demonic powers: but that is simply a particular way of putting a certain claim about the nature of human existence. If we can express that underlying claim without the mythological trappings, will it speak to the modern human situation? "We have to discover," Bultmann says, "whether the New Testament offers man an understanding of himself which will challenge him to a genuine existential decision" (16).

Demonic powers, the pre-existence of the Son of God, the Atonement, the Resurrection—all of these are the sorts of things which Bultmann takes to be mythological, for which a deeper interpretation in other terms will have to be found. Alongside such specific examples of mythology, he does offer a general definition:

Myth [he writes] is used here in the sense popularized by the 'History of Religions School.' Mythology is use of imagery to express the other worldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side. For instance, divine transcendence is expressed as spatial distance. (10)

And, a bit farther along in the same discussion:

Thus myth contains elements which demand its own criticism—namely, its imagery with its apparent claim to objective validity. The real purpose of myth is to speak of a transcendent power which controls the world and man, but that purpose is impeded and obscured by the terms in which it is expressed. (11)

As we have seen, Bultmann points to allegorical interpretation as the earliest form of demythologizing, and I think it is fair to say that mythology by his definition is in fact a subset of allegory or metaphor: myth is that special form of metaphorical

narrative in which divine things are the ground and things of this world are taken as the figures; and the weakness of this form of expression is that the narrative claims to be true.

3. Tolkien and True Myth

The Tolkien of “On Fairy-stories” would, to a certain extent, agree. He feels that discussion of mythology too often focuses on its function of “representation or symbolic interpretation” rather than on its character as “subcreation”—the essentially human activity in which we, being made in the image of God the Creator, create new worlds of our own (42, ¶28).⁷ This may, he says, be a result of the fact that we see subcreation more clearly in the low-status fairy stories than in the high-status myths of the Olympians. Thus, following Andrew Lang, Tolkien wants to say that folk-tales and myths, the lower and higher mythologies, are actually all the same sort of thing. In the course of making that point, he summarizes (and rejects) Max Müller’s position that folk tales are the worn-down nubs of old nature myths. For Müller, Tolkien says,

The Olympians were personifications of the sun, of dawn, of night, and so on, and all the stories told about them were originally *myths* (*allegories* would have been a better word) of the greater elemental changes and processes of nature [. . . but t]hat would seem to be the truth almost upside down. The nearer the so-called ‘nature myth’, or allegory of the large processes of nature, is to its supposed archetype, the less interesting it is, and indeed the less it is of a myth capable of throwing any illumination whatever on the world. (42, ¶ 29-30)

So some myths—the less interesting ones—may at least approach being allegories fitting Bultmann’s definition. But, to use Tolkien’s example, Thórr, whose very name is merely thunder with a capital T, has some personality traits which *do*, and others which *do not*, fit with his allegorical role, while some of the stories told about him are simply fairy-tales. Yet there are no historical grounds for taking either the personality or the fairy-tale stories as later additions to an underlying allegory. If we traced them back, Tolkien says, “there would always be a ‘fairy-tale’ as long as there was any Thórr. When the fairy-tale ceased, there would be just thunder, which no human ear had yet heard” (44, ¶32). Having preserved this place for the lower mythology, however, Tolkien hastens to add that it does occasionally happen that mythology allows a glimpse of Divinity—and he

7 We will return to this key concept later in the essay.

implicitly rebukes Lang for having said that “mythology and religion are two distinct things that have become inextricably entangled” (44, ¶33). Even fairy-tales may turn a face toward the mystery of the Divine (should the story-teller so choose), just as they can also turn a face of scorn and pity toward humankind: but their “essential face” is the Magical, turned toward Nature (44, ¶34).

But even with the “lower mythology,” Bultmann’s problem of the claim of objective validity remains. Tolkien cites, and dissects at some length, Lang’s statement that “the great question children ask” about a fairy-story is “Is it true?” (51-56, ¶48-55) A subcreation is true, Tolkien concludes, when the story fits in with the rules of the Secondary World in which the subcreator has set it. Bultmann would presumably say that the problem with the New Testament documents, or with any other supernaturalist myths, is that they claim to take place in our Primary World while violating what science and experience tell us about the rules of that world and ourselves. Like Lang’s child reader, Bultmann’s modern people look at the mythology on the surface of the gospels and ask “Is it true?”—and everything in the world around them says “No, of course not.”

In what I take to be the original form of the lecture, Tolkien would have no particular response to this rationalist “No.” The epilogue to the printed essay, however, circles back to the question of truth: while a subcreation may be true in the sense of following the rules of its own Secondary World, “every sub-creator,” Tolkien says, “hopes he is drawing on reality” (77, ¶103). “Joy,” then, provides a link between every fairy-story and the Primary World: it gives the fairy story “the very taste of primary truth” because “eucatastrophe” ties the story to the “*evangelium*,” the good news of the Christian Gospel.

So the lower mythology of the Fairy Story is true, in a solipsistic sense, if it conforms to the rules of its Secondary World, and true in a broader sense if its structure faithfully reproduces the traditional turn toward joy which ties it to the gospel narrative of the Primary World. But this seems to create a “turtles all the way down” problem: the broad truth of the fairy-story derives from its connection to the Gospel. Yet if the Gospel itself is myth, high or low, Olympian allegory or fairy-story, how can it be the anchor in reality of the Secondary Worlds of other fairy-stories and other myths? Tolkien’s answer, in the face of 19th century Liberal Theology and all its descendants, Bultmann included, is that the Gospel *is* true. The claim of objective validity which Bultmann dismisses out of hand is in fact valid.

Substantively, of course, this is just a matter of “I say yes, you say no.” But formally, Tolkien has tried a neat trick: Bultmann says, “These things are mythological; they violate the scientific worldview, and thus have no objective validity; hence, the modern mind cannot believe them.” Tolkien unexpectedly accepts the first premise: “These things are, indeed, mythological,” he says, “but they also *have* objective validity. The modern mind can believe them and gain a

deeper understanding of other myths, to boot.” Tolkien grants that the Christian Gospel is myth, but asserts that this is the singular case in which myth is “true” in the garden variety sense: “This story is supreme, and it is true. Art has been verified [. . .] Legend and History have met and fused” (78, ¶105).

Now this response, as I have phrased it, says nothing about the scientific *Weltanschauung* which lies at the root of the whole Liberal theological project,⁸ but I think the long section in Tolkien’s talk on “Recovery, Escape, Consolation” is as much of an answer as he would have been likely to give:

I cannot convince myself that the roof of Bletchley station is more ‘real’ than the clouds. And as an artifact I find it less inspiring than the dome of heaven. [. . .] It is, after all, possible for a rational man, after reflection [. . .], to arrive at the condemnation [. . .] of progressive things like factories, or the machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say ‘inexorable’, products. (71, ¶91,93)

There is a fundamental arrogance in the Liberal claim to know what one can or cannot believe while using electric light and the wireless, and Tolkien would surely be among the first to reject it.

4. Influence and Sources

I say “among the first” advisedly, for, as I have already suggested, the claim that “myth became fact” itself became something of a commonplace amongst the Inklings and their friends, and began to do so a decade before the publication of “On Fairy-stories,” not later than September 19, 1931. In the essays cited earlier, Medcalf and Duriez discuss Lewis’s conversation with Tolkien and Dyson that night, and mention the role that the discussion and Tolkien’s follow-up poem “Mythopoeia” played in Lewis’ return to Christianity. Lewis wrote to his friend Greeves on October 18, 1931, that the gospel story is “God’s myth, where the others are men’s myths” (Medcalf 1981, 57)—though it is worth noting that “Mythopoeia” speaks about God’s act of creation only generally, without specific reference to the Christian Good News. In *Perelandra*, published in 1943, Ransom (a character everyone but Tolkien seems to have seen as modeled on Tolkien⁹)

8 Bultmann wrote: “The only relevant question for the theologian is the basic assumption on which the adoption of a biological as of every other *Weltanschauung* rests, and that assumption is the view of the world which has been moulded by modern science and the modern conception of human nature as a self-subsistent entity immune from the interference of supernatural powers” (7).

9 For instance, the 12 year old Priscilla Tolkien: JRRT writes to Christopher on July 31, 1941, that “She’s just read *Out of the S. Planet* and *Perelandra*; and with good taste preferred the

realizes that the distinction between myth, truth and fact is simply a result of the Fall and that its end began with the Incarnation:

Long since on Mars, and more since he came to Perelandra, Ransom had been perceiving that the triple distinction of truth from myth and of both from fact was purely terrestrial—was part and parcel of that unhappy division between soul and body which resulted from the Fall. Even on earth the sacraments existed as a permanent reminder that the division was neither wholesome nor final. The Incarnation had been the beginning of its disappearance. In Perelandra it would have no meaning at all. Whatever happened here would be of such a nature that earthmen would call it mythological. (Lewis 2003, 143-144)

Lewis made similar points in the essays “Miracles” (1942)¹⁰ and “Myth Became Fact” (1944),¹¹ among other places.

The idea confronts Bultmann directly in the writing of Austin Farrer. Farrer has a 1945 essay “Can Myth Become Fact?” (of which more below), originally delivered at Oxford’s Socratic Club, then under Lewis’s presidency, and expresses similar ideas in “An English Appreciation,” a 1953 article published in a collection along with Bultmann’s original essay. In “Appreciation,” Farrer begins by distinguishing between various “refusals of the modern mind”—“necessary,” e.g., not believing that sun stood still for Joshua; “accidental,” e.g.,

latter. But she finds it hard to realize that Ransom is not meant to be a portrait of me (though as a philologist I may have some part in him, and recognize some of my opinions Lewisified in him) (Tolkien 1981, 89). See also Letter 24, to Sir Stanley Unwin, February 18, 1938: “It is only by odd accident that the hero is a philologist (one point in which he resembles me) and has your name” (29). In a note, Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien take this to mean that the character was originally named “Unwin” rather than “Ransom” (435), though the published text *might* also refer to Christian names. In any case, at some point Lewis gave the character the Christian name “Elwin” (i.e., Ælfwine, “elf-friend”), giving a yet-more Tolkienian resonance.

10 “When He created the vegetable world He knew already what dreams the annual death and resurrection of the corn would cause to stir in pious Pagan minds, He knew already that He Himself must so die and live again and in what sense, including and far transcending the old religion of the Corn King. He would say, “This is my Body.” Common bread, miraculous bread, sacramental bread—these three are distinct, but not to be separated” (Lewis 1970, 37).

11 “Now as myth transcends thought, Incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle” (Lewis 1970, 66-67).

not understanding images drawn from ancient agriculture; “lamentable,” the special case of accidental refusal resulting from having lost some valuable ability, such as a sense of poetry; and “factitious,” refusal arising from a modern ideology such as Communism or materialism (214-215).

The theological issue of “demythification” (as Farrer renders the key term) arises only in the area of “necessary refusal,” and the first question here will be to distinguish between cases in which New Testament authors are consciously using as literary symbols images which they themselves know not to be true (John the Divine did not actually think that New Jerusalem would be built with a foundation of precious stones, cf. Rev. 21) and ones in which they actually believed something we now know not to be true (Luke accepts the genealogy of Jesus, Lk. 3:23-38). But (on the one hand) even Patristic authors, such as Augustine, were aware of the need to make such distinctions, and (on the other) Bultmann has *failed* to make them, simply for “the pleasures of rhetorical effect” (216). There do remain, however, some “subtle” cases in which modern scholars allege necessary refusal, such as miracle and transcendence (216). He goes on:

The problem of miracles is this. Are alleged historical events like the virginal conception of our Saviour in Mary’s womb examples of myth in the sense we have just defined, or are they not? Bultmann appears to beg the question. He writes as though he knew that God never bends physical fact into special conformity with divine intention; the Word never becomes flesh by making physical fact as immediately pliable to his expression as spoken symbols are. Bultmann seems to be convinced that he knows this, but I am not convinced that I know it, and I cannot be made to agree by the authority of the truism that symbolism ought not to be mistaken for physical fact. *For it still ought to be taken for physical fact, if and where God has made it into physical fact.* (216, emphasis added)

It is tempting to see Tolkien as the fountainhead of all this, and he may in fact have introduced the meme of true myth to his circle, though Owen Barfield is another possibility;¹² but there are certainly more distant springs. Ultimately, the

12 Carpenter (1981) discusses Lewis’s reading of Barfield’s *Poetic Diction* (1928) before turning to the 1931 conversation with Tolkien and Dyson (41-42). However, Duriez (2007) writes that “It was Tolkien, rather than Barfield, who persuaded [Lewis] that myth could be become fact, even though this notion, Barfield believed, was to be found in Steiner’s anthroposophy” (88-89). Steiner taught (so far as I understand it) that myths reflect cosmic events while fairy tales report the “astral events” that lie in the common past of human experience—cf. Steiner (1908). See also Pearce (2014): “It is, however, clear that [Lewis] owed his initial inspiration to Tolkien’s philosophy of myth” (224).

concept comes (as Farrer suggests) from the claim, in the prologue of the Gospel according to John, that “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (1:14). Then, too, to the extent that the idea is a response to Liberal Theology as well as to Bultmann, both the earlier academic literature and novels like *Robert Elsmere* may have served as sources in the indirect sense of being provocations.

In the more direct sense, however, Medcalf (1981) suggests a different contemporary source for Lewis, in the person of G. K. Chesterton (76). The first chapter of the second part of Chesterton’s 1925 *The Everlasting Man*, entitled “The God in the Cave” (with deliberate reference back to Plato’s allegory from Book VI of the *Republic*), is an extended reflection on the story of Bethlehem. All philosophers, Chesterton says, would find in that stable the completion of their philosophy, and all mythologists would find their dreams come true. Thinking of Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue, “Sicelides Musae,” in which late antique and medieval Christians found anticipations of the birth of Christ (earning it the soubriquet “Messianic”), Chesterton writes that Virgilian shepherds “would be justified in rejoicings that the event had fulfilled not merely the mysticism but the materialism of mythology. Mythology had many sins; but it had not been wrong in being as carnal as the Incarnation” (110). So Chesterton is a possible source; but Farrer’s 1945 Socratic Club speech points to another, older and more authoritative, especially for Tolkien as a Roman Catholic: St. Thomas Aquinas.¹³

In the talk, Farrer paraphrases Question 1, Article 10, of the first part of the *Summa Theologica*, in which Thomas asks “Whether in Holy Scripture a word may have several senses?” In the objections which begin the article, Thomas summarizes from a tradition reaching back to John Cassian four levels of interpretation: “historical or literal, allegorical, tropological or moral, and anagogical.”¹⁴ Then, after citing as his authority Gregory the Great’s statement that “Holy Writ by the manner of its speech transcends every science, because in one and the same sentence, while it describes a fact, it reveals a mystery,”¹⁵ Thomas, beginning his own response, says: “The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words only (as man also can do),

13 Tolkien owned a copy of the *Summa*, now in the possession of Claudio Testi (Manni and Shippey 2014, 28, n. 14). Not that other Inklings were ignorant of St. Thomas: Lewis also had a *Summa* (Carpenter 1981, 128), and Dr. R. E. Havard reports that his first invitation to an Inklings meeting grew out of a 25 minute conversation about Aquinas with Lewis during a house call (Hooper 1982, 87).

14 “Videtur quod sacra Scriptura sub una littera non habeat plures sensus, qui sunt historicus vel litteralis, allegoricus, tropologicus sive moralis, et anagogicus” (I^a.q1.a10). Cf. Cassian, *Conferences*, 14.8.

15 “Sed contra est quod dicit Gregorius, XX Moralium, sacra Scriptura omnes scientias ipso locutionis suae more transcendit, quia uno eodemque sermone, dum narrat gestum, prodit mysterium” (I^a.q1.a10, citing *Moralia in Job* xx, 1).

but also by things themselves.”¹⁶ Farrer interprets this for the Club in Tolkienian terms: “Men may construct a myth expressive of divine truths as they conceive them, and the stuff of that myth will be words. God has constructed a myth expressive of the living truths he intends to convey, and the stuff of the myth is facts” (1945, 167).

Bultmann, as we have seen, considers non-literal meanings like those enumerated by Thomas to be an early form of demythologizing. But whereas the modern position assumed to be true by both the Liberals and Bultmann is that allegorical reading is a strategy for dealing with an unbelievable text (that is, a text which cannot possibly refer to real historical events and yet claims to be true) by interpreting its words in an intellectually acceptable manner, Gregory and Aquinas see such reading (in the first instance) as a strategy for dealing with a *world* which contains events that are true *even though* they seem historically impossible. On this view, the world itself is a text, the product of an author, and its most improbable events are, as John’s gospel persistently calls the miracles of Jesus, “signs,” *semeia*, precisely because they are charged with that supreme Author’s meaning. And this idea, that all human artistic creation is merely a microcosm of the world as a (meaningful) artifact whose maker is God, is a central theme in what Tolkien, as “Philomythus,” wrote to Lewis, “Misomythus,” in 1931, for instance in this oft-quoted passage:

The heart of man is not compound of lies,
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,
man is not wholly lost or wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
and keeps the rags of lordship on[c]e he owned,
his world-dominion by creative act:
not his to worship the great Artefact,
man, sub-creator, the refracted light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
[. . .] The right has not decayed.
We make still by the law in which we’re made. (1989, 98-99)

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16 “Respondeo dicendum quod auctor sacrae Scripturae est Deus, in cuius potestate est ut non solum voces ad significandum accommodet (quod etiam homo facere potest), sed etiam res ipsas” (I^a.q1.a10).

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