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## Tolkien Dogmatics: Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-earth (2022) by Austin M. Freeman

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*Tolkien Dogmatics: Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-earth*, by Austin M. Freeman. Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2022. x, 476 pp. \$26.99 (trade paperback) ISBN 9781683596677. Also available in ebook format.

It is a widely observed phenomenon that Tolkien's epic *The Lord of the Rings* does something to its readers. Among other things, it entertains, thrills, and opens up the door into a secondary world acclaimed to be one of the most carefully sub-created literary worlds to date. Yet it seems to do more than that, since I know people who ritually re-read *The Lord of the Rings* every year. They do so not because they suffer from a special form of literary amnesia that makes them forget plot, setting, and protagonists, but because they want to participate once more in the effects of this epic fairy story, which Tolkien aptly characterized as Escape, Recovery, and Consolation – a phenomenon discussed in depth by Christopher Garbowski in his monograph *Recovery and Transcendence for the Contemporary Mythmaker. The Spiritual Dimension in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2004).

As Garbowski and others have shown, this 'therapeutic' effect of reading Tolkien's work is largely due to its underlying message of hope and trust in a providential universe. Any reader of George R.R. Martin's equally epic *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996- ) will immediately understand by way of contrast what I am talking about. Martin may be better at keeping the reader on his or her toes and surprising us with unexpected twists of plot and events, but I have yet to meet the reader who enjoys Martin's books for Consolation in the Tolkienian meaning of the word. Martin's world, in contrast to Tolkien's, is ruled by an existentialist philosophy, and though Martin does not present this reality as a 'tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing' (*Macbeth*, V.5.26-28), the underlying picture we get is not one of coherence and meaningfulness. With Tolkien, on the other hand, you always have the feeling that his universe 'signifies' something and that the 'ultimate narrator' is very much sane.

Freeman is obviously aware of this peculiar quality of Tolkien's work, yet he does not intend to repeat what Garbowski and others have already said, nor does he want to provide yet another religious (Christian) interpretation of Tolkien's epic. His aim is rather to collect, order, categorise, and discuss Tolkien's publicly accessible statements concerning key-concepts of (mostly) Catholic Christianity, such as 'God', 'Revelation', 'Creation', 'The Fall', 'Evil and Sin', 'Angels', 'Satan and Demons' etc. Gathering and combining all of Tolkien's statements relevant for each topic poses a double challenge, which Freeman acknowledges in his introductory 'Prolegomena': First, Tolkien was no systematic thinker in matters of theology. He was an interested, devout, and practising Catholic and deeply involved in questions of faith, yet no theologian, and his thoughts may not always reflect the official orthodox view. Linked to this first caveat is the second challenge, namely that we often don't have any explicit statements by Tolkien on a given topic and have therefore to try and

extrapolate (or, worse, guess) his stance from other sources. This necessitates an interpretative effort that brings us once more dangerously close to those authors whose aim it is to provide a Christian interpretation of Tolkien's fiction. Freeman manages to avoid this latter pitfall most of the time, yet there are, as I will argue, some instances where it leads to a deviation from the main line of the book, namely to let Tolkien himself comment on a topic in his own voice. For this, Freeman relies heavily on Tolkien's published letters, texts, and other publicly accessible sources such as interviews.

Consequently, *Tolkien Dogmatics* is not a book written to be read cover to cover in one go. Rather it is intended and should be used as a source for people interested in one of the theological topics treated. It gives the reader a view of the nuts and bolts that hold together Tolkien's narrative theology. If you are a reader interested in the question of theodicy, for example, you can find information (with a little help of the Index) in the chapters 'Creation' and 'Evil and Sin', with useful suggestions for 'Further Reading' at the end of each chapter. Or you can simply read the chapter on 'Angels' if you want to know what Tolkien thought about these spiritual beings. If you are an old hand at Tolkien studies, most of the information will be familiar to you although it is unlikely that you had the chance to study all the relevant passages on a topic in such a concentrated form. Thus, Freeman's book primarily functions as a resource-tool for those who are looking for information on a specific topic, yet it also invites you to browse and to read paragraphs and chapters for fun.

I mentioned earlier that some topics are less explicitly covered by Tolkien's published statements and non-fiction texts so that Freeman has to rely on the results of interpreting potentially relevant passages from Tolkien's fiction. This is, per se, an acceptable procedure yet should come only in combination with and after the discussion of primary evidence in the form of explicit statements. The dangers of having to rely solely on the results of an interpretative process can be illustrated by means of the discussion of a passage from Tolkien's short-story 'Leaf by Niggle' as evidence for his view of the Trinity (mostly pp. 28-35). There Niggle, after having been fetched by the thinly disguised Death-figure called 'the Driver', finds himself in a purgatory-style Workhouse, where he undergoes re-education in order to help him overcome his shortcomings. After some time, he overhears two voices debating with each other about how to proceed further. One voice advocates the continuation of the workhouse training, while the other proposes a change to Gentle Treatment. These two voices have been identified by critics such as Jane Chance (2001: 96-97) as God the Father (or the stern God of the Old Testament) and Christ (or the merciful God of the New Testament). I have objected to this identification (Honegger 2005: 52-53) and its concomitant consequences for Tolkien's view of the trinitarian God, and proposed an alternative reading of the two voices as Justice and Mercy, two of the Four Daughters of God, arguing with each other – a motif Tolkien would have been familiar with from various medieval texts. Although Freeman acknowledges my interpretation, he takes Chance's (in my opinion misguided) identification as a central element for his discussion of Tolkien's

understanding of the Trinity and, logically, arrives at the conclusion that Tolkien's alleged conception of the Trinity must have been either somewhat muddled or at least not very orthodox (cf. Freeman 2022: 29, 31).

I selected this one instance for closer inspection not because I am an interested party, but rather since it illustrates the dangers of reconstructing Tolkien's views on the basis of 'interpretative evidence' and not by means of explicit statements. As said, this is the exception to Freeman's usual approach of relying on information directly from the horse's mouth – and it therefore illustrates his usual wisdom of not straying into interpretative badlands.

Although Freeman's book, with over 400 pages of text, covers a wide range of topics, there exist avenues for further research. Thus, Tolkien's work on the Middle English religious texts of the *Ancrene Riwe* tradition (mentioned in footnote 38 on page 380) may shed additional light on some of the theological themes, as would an investigation of his discussion of such important pagan concepts as Northern Courage.

In the end, I can only repeat what I have written as an endorsement for the manuscript text since it also applies to the published book: "Among the many publications on Tolkien's theology, Dr. Freeman's study stands out since it provides a concise, comprehensive and approachable primary-text based discussion of all important theological topics. His book is likely to become a standard text for interested laypeople and literary critics as well as professional theologians when discussing the theology of the maker of Middle-earth."

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## References

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