



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Tolkien & Lewis

*How Tolkien and Lewis present their
religion in their writings.*

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* are two classics in the fantasy genre profoundly influenced by the Christian religion. The two authors were differently brought up in the Christian faith. Lewis had a rather dull Christian upbringing which resulted in his conversion to atheism. Tolkien lost his mother as a young boy. He blamed the religious oppression resulting from his mother's conversion to Catholicism for her death. This made Tolkien into a devout Catholic. Later in their lives, when both had become professors in Oxford, Lewis converted back to Christianity. Lewis's conversion had largely to do with his friendship with Tolkien and their conversation about Christianity and myths.

Their different approaches to the Christian religion influenced how they expressed it. After Tolkien lost his mother, his religion was mostly kept to himself and his closest acquaintances. Although his work *The Lord of the Rings* is influenced by his religion, it is hidden and unclear.

After Lewis's conversion back to Christianity he became a famous apologist of the Christian faith. His novels *The Chronicles of Narnia* reveal clearly Christian doctrine. This will be evident as we take a look at the characters in *Narnia* and their connection to Biblical Characters. We will also see that characters in *The Lord of the Rings* are also influenced by characters in *The Bible*.

It will also be evident that Tolkien's characters are influenced, rather than purposely crafted to fit, biblical roles as in the case of characters in *Narnia*. This is done by Lewis as he wanted the reader to experience biblical doctrine, while Tolkien wanted no clear references to his religion in his trilogy.

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Introduction

Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* has sold an estimated 150 million copies worldwide (Fitzpatrick). It is estimated that Lewis has sold over 100 million copies of *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Fitzpatrick). Together the two friends have sold over a quarter of a billion copies worldwide. The two Oxford professors shared a friendship beneficial to both. The stories of their lives served as an important backbone to their artwork. Early on in their lives they experienced the Christian faith differently, which later on made them develop into two Christian thinkers with very different approaches on how the present Christianity. Tolkien's mother was thought by him to be a martyr, which made Tolkien a devoted, although slightly muted, Catholic. Lewis experienced the presence of God as a young boy and he called this experience 'Joy'. As Lewis grew older he lost his faith in God and became an atheist.

Their paths crossed in Oxford, when Lewis started to teach in the English department where Tolkien was a professor. Through their friendship Lewis converted back to Christianity and his new religion served as a crucial foundation to *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which he later wrote. In their religion the two friends found ideas that helped them form fictional characters both good and bad, mirroring characters that are known in *The Bible*. This will be shown in characters mirroring both Jesus and Lucifer. Although they were both Christians, they became very different in how they represent their religion. Lewis became a well-known apologist for the Christian faith, famous for his radio speeches on the BBC during the World War II. Tolkien, on the other hand, kept his religion to himself and his close friends. Lewis and Tolkien's artwork are similar in the respect that they are founded on Christian doctrine but different in how their artworks manifest Christianity. *The Chronicles of Narnia* by Lewis is extrovert regarding the Christian religion, while Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is introvert.

1. Biographical Background

1.1 Tolkien

The life of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was one of the biggest influences on the story *The Lord of the Rings*. His parents Arthur and Mabel were both from England and moved to South Africa when his father was offered a manager's position in a bank (White 21). During their stay in Africa, Mabel conceived two children, John and Hilary. When John was just a child, he was bitten by a spider. After that he was often sick during his stay in Africa, along with his mother who suffered from depression (White 23). The two boys moved with their mother to Birmingham, England in 1895 when John was three (White 24). The move to Birmingham was the first of many in Tolkien's youth. The family had a hard time getting their roots down after Arthur passed away in 1896, a year after Mabel and her two sons had moved to England. Arthur had invested in a mine, which was not enough to sustain the family financially, so they had to rely on their relatives. The financial problems made it hard for the family to settle down. This influenced Tolkien's travel theme in his novel *The Lord of the Rings*.

A few years later Tolkien lost his mother, after years of struggling to survive. In a letter from Tolkien to his son, he expresses that he believed his mother was a martyr (White 37). A few years after Mabel had returned to England she became a faithful Catholic believer, despite the fact that her whole family was protestant. They disliked her new beliefs and therefore ceased supporting her financially. Prior to her death, Mabel had arranged Fr. Francis, her friend and the parish priest, to take care of her boys, as he had become a father figure before Mabel's death. He was a good influence on the two boys. Both Francis' kindness and Mabel's death and suffering, which were indirectly caused by her devout Catholic belief, made Tolkien into a firm Catholic believer. His mother's martyrdom sheds light on why Tolkien became introverted regarding his religion. His religion was more on a personal level as he kept it for himself and his closest friends. Although Tolkien was an introvert regarding his religion he was never ashamed of it, and if asked about it he would certainly answer, as demonstrated in *The Letters of J.R.R Tolkien*.

Tolkien's religion had a major influence on his life as well as his writing. His devout belief insisted that his wife-to-be, Edith, become a Catholic too. Although Edith

converted to Catholicism, she never shared Tolkien's religious enthusiasm and later when she became ill, she refused to go to church 6 o'clock in the morning with her husband or participate in fasting which Tolkien did (White 56). Tolkien did well in school and was very good in languages. He got a grant to go to Exeter College, Oxford. He started out studying Classics but changed his course and graduated in English Language and Literature in 1915. Immediately after he finished his degree, he enlisted to fight for England in the First World War. The experience he received at the battlefield can be seen in his novel in the vivid descriptions of the battle between good and evil. The Second World War also influenced his book as the world entered the atomic age and an apocalypse seemed as real as ever.

1.2 C.S.Lewis

The life of Clive Staples Lewis also provided the backbone to *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lewis's life was quite different to Tolkien's early on, for example he was born to a wealthy family in Belfast. Prior to his birth his parents had two servants, which Lewis' mother believed was not enough and after his birth his mother hired three more servants (Sayer 36). Lewis also went on holidays in France and was taught by private tutors. His parents thought that Lewis had a weak chest and kept him inside as much as possible. Inside, Lewis learned to play the piano and spent much time reading literature (Sayer 40). This hastened his intellectual maturity and by the age of nine he had read a long list of books, some for advanced reading, which consisted of titles like *Paradise Lost* (Sayer 51). Before Lewis could even write he had started making up stories which his father wrote down for him. It was his father that encouraged Lewis in art and literature later on. He formed a strong relationship with his brother Warren, who stayed inside with him because of their mother's fear of them becoming sick, and they became best friends.

Lewis's religious experience was also very different to Tolkien's, as the religious motivation of Lewis's parents seemed rather dull compared to Tolkien's. Lewis and his brother Warren were raised as Christians, although it only seemed so only on the surface, as their parents seemed to neglect the religious upbringing of their children by not teaching them how to pray (Sayer 61). Even though Lewis's parents seemed to neglect his spiritual upbringing, he had very interesting experiences as a

young boy which he called 'joy'. "These were mystical experiences of the presence of God," he wrote in his journal (Sayer 52). Later in his life these experiences influenced him to write a book which he called *Surprised by Joy*.

1908 was a hard and important year in Lewis's life, as on his Father's birthday, Lewis lost his mother Florence. Albert, his father, felt he wasn't capable of providing a decent home for his two sons, so he sent them to Wynyard School. In Wynyard, Lewis converted to Christianity where he learned to pray "seriously" and study the Bible (Sayer 62). His faith didn't last long and by the age of fifteen he had rejected Christianity. He felt burdened by religious law and questions regarding his faith. What bothered him the most was the cruelty and evil in the world that an all-good God had created. Later Lewis described himself as "being angry with god for not existing" (Sayer 68). Lewis's childhood experience regarding the Christian religion became one of the foundations to why he wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which will be discussed later in the essay. Lewis remained an atheist for the next 18 years. During that time he participated in World War I and got his degree from Oxford, where he also became a professor. In Oxford he taught in the English faculty, where he for the first time met Tolkien.

1.3 The friendship of Tolkien and Lewis

Tolkien and Lewis became good friends during the time they worked in Oxford. The first time C.S. Lewis met Tolkien he describes him in his diary by saying: "Tolkien thinks "all literature is written for the amusement of men between thirty and forty". He concludes "No harm in him: only needs a snack or two." (Duriez 26) Although the start of their meeting seems rather hostile, he was drawn to Tolkien straight away. He describes the other as a pale character without a life (White 121). Tolkien and Lewis soon started to meet outside of work in a literary group called the Coalbiters, in which they would meet once a week with a few other men to read and discuss the Icelandic myths, language and sagas. In a few years the Coalbiters had covered the material and soon splintered. Lewis and Tolkien became members of another literary group, the Inklings. In the Inklings members read from their works and they criticized each other. Tolkien read chapters of the *Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* for the group and Lewis read chapters from *The Chronicles of Narnia* and other material he was writing. The

Inklings did not only discuss literature they also talked much about theology. During Lewis' time in the Inklings he converted from atheism to Christianity in several steps during a five year period (1926-1931). Lewis always had a hard time understanding how Tolkien, one of the most intelligent man he knew, believed so wholeheartedly in Christ and Christian teachings. It was on in September 1931 that Tolkien and Dyson, a Christian friend of Tolkien, went on a long night walk with Lewis. C.S. Lewis's argument was that the story of Christ was only a myth and should not be regarded as true. Tolkien's view of myths was different, and he replied:

Myths originate in God, that they preserve something of God's truth, although often in a distorted form. Furthermore, he said that, in presenting a myth, in writing stories full of mythical creatures, one may be doing God's work. As Tolkien talked, a mysterious rush of wind came through the trees that Jack (Lewis) felt to be a message from the deity, although his reason told him not to be carried away. Tolkien went on to explain that the Christian story was a myth invented by a God who was real, a God whose dying could transform those who believed him. .. The believer is put at peace and freed from his sin. He receives help overcoming his fault and can become a new person. (Sayer 226)

His conversation with Tolkien and Dyson had an important impact on him. A few weeks later he wrote: "I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ... My long night talk with Dyson and Tolkien had a great deal to do with it." (Sayer 226) This made Tolkien really happy: finally his good friend had joined him in the belief of the doctrine of Christianity (Sayer 131). Tolkien's happiness declined as his friend became a member of the Anglican Church.

Soon, after Lewis converted (too soon in Tolkien's opinion), he was asked by the BBC to give broadcast talks which would render hope to Britain and "explain to his fellow Britons what Christians believe" (*Mere Christianity* XVIII) during the Second World War. The topic Lewis chose was of course the good news which he had found in Christianity. These speeches were later published in a book called *Mere Christianity*. Because of Lewis's conversion from atheism he became known as an apologist for the Christian faith. Most of the issues he covered were questions from the time he was an atheist that he now felt obligated to answer. It can be said that Lewis was an extrovert

Christian while Tolkien rather introvert. This of course is carried out throughout their writings.

2. The purpose of writing

2.1 Tolkien and the gift of creation

Most of Tolkien's writing was written because it interested him. Tolkien's interest in Nordic mythologies encouraged him to make his own 'English' mythology. Early on in his life he started making bits and pieces of this mythical world. These pieces were later made into *The Silmarillion*. One of the most influential piece of Tolkien's writing came into being unexpectedly. It was in his office in Oxford, where Tolkien sat correcting school certificate papers. Tolkien noticed that one of the students left a question blank. Tolkien looked down at his carpet and a sentence invaded his thoughts. "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 215) This line was the start of a creature which became one of Tolkien's best known trademarks, the Hobbit. Hobbits became the central figures in both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* where Tolkien connected them to his mythical world. In the end Tolkien left a legacy which ranged from minor details to vast creation mythology: "hardly a word in its 600.000 or more has been unconsidered." (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien back cover). As the introductory lines of *The Hobbit* show, Tolkien had no plan what to write or why. He simply wrote because the lines that came to his mind interested him. Furthermore, Tolkien expressed his intention with the book in an interview with the BBC. There he said: "It is not 'about' anything but itself. Certainly it has no allegorical intentions, general, particular, or topical, moral, religious, or political" (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 220).

The reason why Tolkien wrote, what he wrote, is maybe best answered by his story called *Leaf by Niggle*. In that story Tolkien writes about a man who is an artist, with an eye for details: "paints leaves better than trees" (Hammond 5). Niggle is obsessed with painting a tree, which is really all he wants to do, but unfortunately Niggle doesn't have time for his art. An essay made on the story reveals an interesting idea about the artistic gift that Niggles possesses. "Niggle's ability to paint is not merely a talent he possesses (for which he can take pride or claim credit) but a true gift from God; so is the completed painting. Niggle is granted a vision of heaven in his lifetime

which he attempts to translate by means of art. Later he is given the fulfillment of that vision” (Hammond 7). Niggle, the main character in the story, is generally thought to be Tolkien. The story is therefore an allegory of Tolkien and his art. It reveals how Tolkien sees himself and his artwork similarly to Niggle. Niggle finds himself obligated to paint, that something inside of him drives him to paint. From the story we find that Tolkien feels that it is his purpose to write. That he is ‘gifted’ to write (from God), as Niggle is to paint. All the time Tolkien spends on his art rather than helping the local parish, like Niggle felt compelled to do, is not at odds with God’s purposes, but rather a calling from God. This view is also expressed in Tolkien’s conversation with Lewis which was quoted earlier in the essay. There Tolkien said: “in presenting a myth, in writing stories full of mythical creatures, one may be doing God’s work.” (Sayer 226) The speech Tolkien gave on that night intemperately influenced his friend Lewis, for it could have been the inspiration for Lewis to write his Narnia books, which Tolkien sarcastically despised. “As Tolkien talked, a mysterious rush of wind came through the trees that Lewis felt to be a message from the deity” (Sayer 226).

2.2 Lewis’ search for truth

C.S. Lewis motivation for writing *The Chronicles of Narnia* has been heavily criticized. Some say that Lewis wrote the novel as a missionary tool, to lure children to Christianity. Lewis, however, denied this in his essay, *Sometimes a fairy story may say best what’s to be said*:

Some people seem to think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument; then collected information about child psychology and decided what age-group I’d write for; then drew up a list of basic Christian truths and hammered out 'allegories' to embody them. This is all pure moonshine.

(On Stories and Other Essays on Literature 46)

Lewis continues by saying that he first saw pictures in his mind, and when combined they formed a story, which he started to love. “Everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn't anything Christian about them” (On Stories and Other Essays on Literature 46). We find that the pictures are taken from different mythologies: some are from Greek or Roman

mythology and even figures like Father Christmas. The merging of different mythologies troubled men of meticulous precision like his friend J.R.R Tolkien who hated the idea.

Although the pictures were not all simply Christian, and the story itself was not at first 'Christian', as the story progressed Lewis purposely started to write a Christian children novel. He wanted the novel to awaken feelings in the reader which he as a young boy had a hard time to awake in himself: "Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? Although the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings." (On Stories and Other Essays on Literature 47) To Lewis this was the chief reason for writing *The Chronicles of Narnia*: To awaken feelings in the reader which he could connect to the suffering of Jesus Christ. "But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency?" (On Stories and Other Essays on Literature 47)

In a way the critics were correct: although Lewis didn't start writing an allegorical story, the story ended up that way. Even though Lewis has been criticized for writing this way, he does it very well and was very successful. If Lewis's purpose with *Narnia* was to introduce children to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, he did really well, as children love his story. Furthermore Lewis emotionally connects children to characters like Jesus in Aslan. Both Lewis and Tolkien based their fictional characters from characters found in *The Bible*, both evil and good. Satan is the prime antagonist in *The Bible* and both authors base their prime antagonists on him.

3. Evil and the Representation of Satan

It is interesting to see how the authors handle the topic of evil. Both Lewis and Tolkien experienced fighting in the First World War. In both the stories the world is on a brink of apocalypse. Both their artworks are in essence a conflict of good versus evil, with their fictional worlds fighting for their survival. Although the authors handle evil in a different way, they also share some similarity in how they represent evil, especially in how Lucifer influences in both the artworks the protagonist.

3.1 Tolkien, Melkor and the Ring

Evil in Tolkien's fictional world is always a perversion of something which is good. It is first made known in the creation of the world when Melkor the greatest of Ainur, wanted to bring things into being according to his will (Silmarillion 6). He starts to sing different music than all the other Ainur, which does not harmonise with the others. He perverts the creation and is punished: "and thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me" (Silmarillion 6). The description of Melkor is somewhat similar to Lucifer's, as Lucifer was also the chief of music in Heaven. "You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you." (Ezekiel 28:14) A cherub is a high angel who is believed to have greater wisdom than other angels, and is thought to be in charge of the worship in heaven (Silmarillion 4). Their sins are the same: Melkor and Lucifer are both arrogant, thinking that their ways are higher than God's. Melkor wants to make his own music and similarly Lucifer wants to be equal to God and in control of himself. "In the pride of your heart you say, "I am a god;" (Ezekiel 28:1). Even though Melkor shares some qualities with Lucifer, he can also be connected to Loki, the 'antagonist' god in the Nordic Mythology. (Tolkien was also very interested in Nordic mythology and read, for example, *Snorra Edda* when he was in the Coalbiters literary group).

Traces of biblical influence on evil are also found in *The Lord of the Rings*. The main manifestation of evil in the trilogy is the evil ring which is carried by Frodo. The Ring shares many similarities to 'sin' as the ring was created to gain control over the free people of the Middle Earth. Elrond says: "[The Ring] is altogether evil" (Fellowship 350). The ring also tempts all the main characters, even Gandalf and Galadriel. It is sly, enslaving the bearer and perverting him. The power of the ring is maybe best demonstrated through Gollum, who had the ring in his possession for years. The ring is an amplifier of the wickedness that is within the person (Shippey 161). "The domination of the Ring was much too strong for the mean soul of Sméagol. But he would have never had to endure it if he had not become a mean son of thief before it crossed his path (The Hobbit 67)." Edwin Muir criticized Tolkien for making his evil characters immutably evil and his good characters constantly good. This might seem

true on the surface, but the idea Tolkien is expressing is quite interesting. As Tolkien says himself: “...*this frightful evil can and does arise from an apparently good root, the desire to benefit the world and others*” (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 146). Tolkien shows that all his ‘good’ characters can, with their ‘good’ ambitions, do terrible things, like trying to steal the ring from Frodo as we see in the case of Boromir. Boromir wants the ring to fight evil, but does not realize the ring would do more bad than good. Tolkien’s characters are thus always moving away from or towards evil by each choice they make. (Lewis held a similar idea about evil, and this will be discussed later in the essay).

Another idea Tolkien expressed in *The Lord of the Rings* is connected to Tolkien’s idea of sub-creation. Evil cannot create, although it can sub-create. When evil sub-creates it is only to mock creation: perverting something good into bad. An example of this perversion is the industrialization of the evil army as they burn trees (creation) to make war machines (sub-creation). In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien connected unclean industrialization to the evil side and clean nature to the good side. Similarly, the two factions in *Narnia* have contradicting factors: Good is connected to heat and summer; evil to winter and frost.

3.2 Lewis and the Witch

C.S. Lewis wrote much about evil. This is seen in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which are in essence the conflict between good and evil. Lewis’s question about the presence of evil in a world created by an all-good God turned him into an atheist, but later turned him into a Christian.

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?” (Mere Christianity 38)

Lewis firmly believed that evil was the absence of God, that in itself it did not exist, similar to the shadow: although we can see shadows and are even affected by them, a shadow exists only because of the existence of light. Furthermore, evil in a way helps us to see that there is something good (a correct line). This idea is somewhat expressed in the beginning of the *Narnia* world. While Aslan is still creating the world, walking

around singing things into being, the white witch Jadis tries to kill him with an iron bar. She throws it towards Aslan and it lands on his forehead, right between the eyes. The iron bounces off, like nothing has happened (*The Magician's Nephew* 122). A few moments later the bar has become a small lamp post (*The Magician's Nephew* 126). The lamp post is the same lamp post that Lucy sees when she first arrives in Narnia and meets Mr. Tumnus. The odd thing about the post is it runs without fuel: it is organic. Furthermore, the scene is the opposite of the evil sub-creational example in Tolkien's world, as something industrialized becomes organic.

In *Narnia* there is also a prime antagonist character, as in *The Lord of the Rings*, who has a clear connection to Lucifer in *The Bible*. The white witch Jadis shares similar characteristics to Lucifer, and by some she is even viewed as 'Lucifer', just in a different world, in a similar way that Aslan is Jesus in the world Narnia. This will be discussed later in the essay. Although Jadis was never an angel who fell from heaven, she did start a war in the world she came from in order to become a queen. Her world is destroyed in the progress. She arrived in Narnia when there was nothing there, only darkness. Then a light appeared along with Aslan, the great lion (*The Magician's Nephew* 199). She heard Aslan begin to sing all things into being: trees, mammals etc. This is the creation of Narnia (*The Magician's Nephew* 119). The setting of the creation story is similar to the one in *The Bible*: there is a large garden with two trees and a gate. Although the setting is similar, the story that happens in the Narnia garden has been altered from the story in Genesis. Jadis eats a silver apple of the Tree of Youth, thus becoming immortal (*The Magician's Nephew* 197), as she becomes immortal her skin colour changes, becoming white. Jadis realizes that she is the only evil in the new world and she is described as cruel and arrogant. Later in the story she gains followers, who are also wicked. Lewis shared an interesting thought on how a person becomes evil with his friend Tolkien:

I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature. (Mere Christianity 86)

Even though we are not told how Jadis becomes evil, she is crucial to understand the development in other characters. Jadis's role in the Narnia world is the same as Lucifer's in *The Bible*. On one occasion the witch tells that she can take the form of a serpent, which is the form of Lucifer in *Genesis 3*. "If I am released from this chair I shall kill you and become a serpent." (*The Silver Chair* 183) Here we can see that Lewis's Jadis is much more clearly connected to Lucifer than Melkor is. It can be argued that Melkor is influenced by both Lucifer and Loki, while Jadis is rather purposely made to represent Lucifer in Narnia. Furthermore, Jadis's connection to Lucifer is made more explicit as she takes the role of the tempter in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (this role is carried out by the Ring in *the Lord of the Rings*). When Edmund first arrives in the world of Narnia, Jadis tempts him successfully. Later Edmund's transgression is paid with the life of Aslan. At the time of the arrival of Edmund and his siblings, Jadis reigns over Narnia, and during her reign Narnia is constantly in winter. With her wand she turns all her enemies into stone statues. The stone statues and the cold winter represent death, which is somewhat similar to what Paul says in a letter to the church in Rome: "the wages of sin is death" in *Romans 6:23*. Aslan's warmth, on the other hand, represents life (*The Magician's Nephew* 119). A quote by Lewis in *Mere Christianity* sums up the part evil plays in Narnia, which has to do with free will. Lewis explains to the reader one of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity: it is the free will of Edmund that allows him to choose to follow the white witch in the first place. It's also this free will that makes all of them participate in the battle with good against bad in Narnia:

God created things which had free will. That means creature which can go either wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong; I cannot. If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. (*Mere Christianity* 48)

4. Representing Jesus

As we have seen, both Lewis and Tolkien were influenced by Christianity, although they were influenced quite differently. As we know, Lewis became a famous apologist of the Christian faith, well known for his religious views. *The Chronicles of Narnia* are a reflection of Lewis's experience of the Christian faith. It does not surprise us that the *Narnia* novels are intertwined with the Christian faith. Furthermore, Lewis makes no attempt to hide the connection between *Narnia* and his faith. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is also intertwined with the Christian faith, just differently. Christianity in *The Lord of the Rings* is more hidden. The best way to see how the authors handle Christianity in their artwork is to look at the centre of Christianity. The centre of Christianity is Jesus' death and resurrection: in both *Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings* there are characters who demonstrate this theme. Lewis's Aslan is not meant to be an allegory of Jesus, but rather *is* Jesus in the world of *Narnia*. Lewis makes Aslan fit the character of Jesus, while Tolkien's characters are more influenced by Jesus than purposely created to fit his role.

4.1 Lewis and Aslan

In *Narnia*, Aslan can quite easily be seen as a representative of Jesus. He shares some striking similarities to Jesus. Everything about Aslan is closely thought to represent Jesus, even his appearance. When Lewis was asked why he made Aslan into a lion he replied:

Since Narnia is a world of Talking Beasts, I thought He would become a Talking Beast there, as He became a man here. I pictured Him becoming a lion there because (a) the lion is supposed to be the king of beasts; (b) Christ is called "The Lion of Judah" in the Bible; (c) I'd been having strange dreams about lions when I began writing the work. (Collected Letters 1244-1245)

At one time Aslan is also shown to be a lamb, which is another metaphor for Jesus taken from *the Bible* (Revelation 5:5-6). The appearance of Aslan is purposely created by Lewis to make children see Jesus as both good and terrible, that the children might get to love him, and fear and honour him. This is shown very clearly when Lucy, Peter and Susan hear Aslan's name for the first time.

“Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous... Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her... And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize it is the beginning of the holidays... But when Edmund hears the name he is only filled with “a sensation of mysterious horror.” (The Lion 70)

More importantly Aslan’s actions mirror those of Jesus. The most obvious and important act is Aslan’s self- sacrifice on the stone table for Edmund, who had ‘sinned’. By law his life is the property of Jadis the witch. “You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to kill.” (The Lion 139) Through the death of Aslan, Edmund’s debt is paid in full. This of course is a reference to the crucifixion of Christ as he redeems all mankind. There are even similarities during the sacrifices, as both of them are mocked and tortured. Both Jesus and Aslan are then resurrected and because they are without blemish or sin, the power of death cannot hold them. This is a theological idea taken from *Genesis*: “But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” (Genesis 2:17) Their resurrections are both discovered by female characters. There are also smaller similarities between Aslan and Jesus. They are both sons of great and powerful beings, Jesus son of God and Aslan the Son of the Emperor Over the Seas. Aslan and Jesus are both present during the creation of the world (John 1:1). They both do only the will of his father (The Lion 139). After Aslan’s resurrection he goes to the fortress of the enemy and sets the captives free, similarly Jesus goes to hell and preached to the imprisoned spirits (1. Pet 3:19-20). There is power in Aslan’s blood to raise up the dead (The Silver Chair 261) and power in his name to drive out evil (The Last Battle 165). Although Aslan and Jesus share all these similarities, Lewis argues in one of his letters to Mrs. Hook that Aslan is not an allegory for Christ, but rather Aslan *is* Christ in the world of Narnia. He answers Mrs. Hook’s question with another question:

“What might Christ become like if there really were a world like Narnia and He chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as He actually has done in ours?” This is not an allegory at all... this works out a supposition.”
(C.S. Lewis letters 475)

This idea is further shown in the end of the third *Narnia* book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, as the children are leaving the world of Narnia.

'You are too old, children,' said Aslan, 'and you must begin to come close to your own world now.'

'It isn't Narnia, you know,' sobbed Lucy. 'It's you. We shan't meet you there. And how can we leave, never meeting you?'

'But you shall meet me, dear one,' said Aslan.

'Are – are you there too, Sir?' said Edmund.

'I am,' said Aslan. 'But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.'

(The Voyage 271)

This quotation also reveals Lewis's primary motivation for writing the *Narnia* books, as the reader leaves the world of Narnia that he might get to know Aslan in the 'real' world under a new name. Therefore, when the children have finished reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* they have been introduced to the basis of the doctrine of Christianity and various elements of theology and furthermore, are emotionally connected to the story. (Stories and Other Essays on Literature 47)

4.2 Tolkien

4.2.1 Gandalf

When searching for the Jesus figure in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf's death comes first to mind, but there are actually three persons who could all in a way represent Jesus. Since Gandalf is the most obvious we will start with him.

Gandalf, like Aslan and Jesus, dies and is then resurrected. This selfless act of Gandalf is the most straight forward manifestation of Jesus in *The Lord of the Rings* as he sacrifices himself for the fellowship and the whole Middle earth, fighting the horrible Balrog alone (Fellowship 434) on the bridge of Khazad-dúm. Both Gandalf and Jesus are leaders and both leave their followers, the fellowship and the disciples, in utter

despair after their deaths. There have been debates over Gandalf's death. Some argue that he didn't actually die, but in a letter to Robert Murray, Tolkien states: "Gandalf really 'died', and was changed... 'I am G. the white, who has returned from death'. Probably he should rather have said to Wormtongue: 'I have not passed through death (not 'fire and water') to brandy crooked words with a serving-man'" (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 201). The death of Gandalf is very crucial to the connection with Jesus, and so is his resurrection. Gandalf is resurrected to finish the task appointed to him. Gandalf's appearance is transformed after his resurrection as he goes from being gray to white, he is also wiser and more powerful than before. The disciples did not recognize Jesus after his resurrection for Jesus' appearance had also changed after the resurrection (Luke 24: 37-39). When Gimli, Aragon and Legolas see Gandalf the White for the first time, they too don't recognize their leader. They even try to shoot Gandalf, but fortunately he is too quick for them. Here are two descriptions which describe the resurrected leaders. The first describes Gandalf: "His hair was white as snow in the sunshine; and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun; power was in his hand" (Two Towers 113). The latter is taken from *The Book of Revelations* and describes Jesus. "The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire... I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!" (Revelations 1:14-18). Gandalf shares more similarities with Jesus that are not as obvious. Although Gandalf is connected to fire he can also command water, an example of this is when he makes horse heads appear on the waves of the river which Frodo has to cross escaping the black riders. Jesus of course commanded the water to be still (Mark 4:36-39). Gandalf is also tempted by Saruman in a similar way that Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Saruman offers Gandalf to be part of his alliance to rule the world (Fellowship 340). Similarly, Satan offers Jesus the world: "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." (Matthew 4:8-9). Gandalf is also tempted to take the ring but refuses it.

Even though Gandalf and Jesus have many common features, they also share contradicting features. For example, Gandalf smokes a pipe and as an absolute last choice he kills (merciful to Gollum and Saruman but kills Orcs), but Jesus was a pacifist

whom showed even mercy to demons (Matthew 8:31).

4.2.2 Aragon

Aragon also shares some features which could be representative of Jesus, although the features are not as clear as in the case of Gandalf. Aragon is of mixed blood, between mortal man and immortal elf. Jesus was the incarnation of God in man: both an immortal God and a mortal man. Jesus is also thought to be the messiah, the anointed one (a king) and a descendent of King David. Jesus identity is like Aragon's: mysterious and hidden. Aragon is also a king and similarly to Jesus he has healing power which reveals his identity (*The Return of the King* 120). These features all connect Aragon to Jesus. They are both obvious and clearly similar to the connection which we find in Lewis's Aslan and Jesus. In Aragon we also find Tolkien making a deeper connection to Jesus. One of these connections is when Aragon takes the 'Paths of the Dead' and sets the army of dead free. Aragon as Ishildur's heir is able to free the captive spirits from the curse of Ishildur. This is similar to what Jesus did after he died on the cross. He ascended to hell to preach to the spirits: "By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah" (1. Pet 3:19-20). Aragon and Jesus' paths also cross in *The Return of the King*. A poem appears called the Eagle Song, written in the style of the *Psalms*. Tolkien writes about the victorious king Aragon. The end of the third verse in the poem is especially interesting in relation to Aragon and Jesus, as it says: "And he shall dwell among you all the days of your life" (Shippey 226). We know that Aragon does not dwell with his people eternally, as he dies, making the end of the third verse fit more to Jesus than Aragon. Furthermore, the poem as a whole can easily be read with Jesus in mind:

Sing now, ye people of the Tower of Anor,
for the realm of Sauron is ended for ever,
and the Dark Tower is thrown down.

Sing and rejoice, ye people of the Tower of Guar,
for your watch hath not been in vain,

and the Black gate is broken,
 and your King hath passed through,
 and he is victorious.

Sing and be glad, all ye children of the west,
 for your king shall come again,
 and he shall dwell among you
 all the days of your life (Shippey 226).

The character of Aragon is not an allegory for Jesus in the story. Certainly he shares some features with Jesus, which can certainly be viewed as an influence from Tolkien's Lord on the lost king of the Númenor. Furthermore Aragon gets married and is by no means a pacifist like Jesus was. The contradicting features only show that Aragon is rather influenced by Jesus than created to fit his role.

4.2.3 Frodo

By many Frodo is viewed as the main character of the story as he carries the ring to Mount Doom. He has many characteristics that are similar to Jesus. Frodo is a meek and gentle character, the only pacifist in the fellowship: he becomes a pacifist after he escapes out of the Mines of Moria. His real battlefield is the mind, as he is tempted to give in to the power of the ring throughout the story. His story shares a few similarities with Jesus' story, especially the passion narrative. In a way Frodo dies and is later resurrected. Frodo is poisoned by Shelob, the giant spider and becomes paralyzed. The spider wraps him in spider web similarly Jesus was wrapped in linen. Then Sam fights the giant spider and becomes victorious, he takes the ring from Frodo because he think Frodo is dead, trying to finish the task by himself. Frodo's body is then taken by Orcs who fight over his garments, which reminds us of the soldiers who gambled for Jesus' garments (John 19:23-24). Frodo is then found by Sam, surprisingly alive.

When Frodo has entered into Mount doom, he gives in to the power of the ring, which some say does not harmonise with our theory of Frodo as a representative of Jesus. When Tolkien was asked if Frodo had failed, he was a bit surprised and replied that through Frodo's forgiveness and compassion towards Gollum earlier on, he was

delivered from evil later on: “The story the ‘catastrophe’ exemplifies (an aspect of) the familiar words: ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.’” (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 233) In a way it is Frodo’s forgiveness which defeats the power of the ring and which harmonises very well to our comparison of the two characters, Jesus and Frodo, as forgiveness is a key concept in the gospel.

Another interesting idea is also found in the *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* which has to do with Frodo’s role which is similar to Prospero in *The Tempest* (The letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 77). Prospero has two servants like Frodo, who are complete opposites. Tolkien describes Sam’s relationship to Gollum as being similar to Ariel and Caliban’s relationship (Prospero’s servants). Many argue that Caliban represents the flesh and Ariel represents his opposite the spirit, making Prospero the soul which has to choose which one to follow. This fits well to Frodo’s role in the story, which in the end causes his flesh side (Gollum) to die. This concept of the flesh fighting the spirit is taken from the Bible. Paul states in the letter to Galatians that they should crucify their flesh with all its desires (Galatians 5:24).

4.2.4 Tolkien and Jesus

Although some of Tolkien’s characters share similarities with his Lord in one of his letters he plainly states: “There is no ‘Embodiment’ of the Creator anywhere in the story... The incarnation of God is an infinitely greater thing than anything I would dare to write.” (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 237) The Characters and the mythology that Tolkien created may share some similarities to that of the Christian faith, although that is more likely because Christianity was a large influence on his life. It coloured his life and creation. In the same letter he says: “Enjoyed is the key-word. For it was written to amuse.” (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 232) He admits that although the story is written to amuse, he is under Christian influence when he writes and the whole story is coloured by Christian religion: “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion’... For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.” (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 172) This might explain how different elements of Jesus

are exchanged between characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. Characters are not altered to fit the role of Jesus, but are rather influenced by the author's religion. The fact that there are multiple characters which fit the role of Jesus, rather than one, is by itself a proof of influence.

Conclusion

Lewis and Tolkien are both magnificent authors, although they have a very different approach to how they write. Tolkien was a very detailed writer, and for example it irritated him that Lewis used a mixture of different mythologies in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He spent much more time on *The Lord of the Rings* than Lewis did on his work, which resulted in fewer books when released. Lewis wrote many books, mostly about Christian apologetics. Narnia thus becomes a world where children learn Christian doctrine without knowing it. The world of Tolkien is not as openly Christian. Although Christian doctrine and influence can be found, it is more hidden than in Lewis's work. This is most obviously seen in how the two authors represent well known biblical figures like Jesus and Lucifer. Lewis purposely involves Christian doctrine into his Mythology by having a figure that does not just reflect Jesus but rather *is* Jesus in the world of Narnia. Lewis uses the same approach on the prime antagonist Jadis, in regard to Lucifer. Tolkien's Jesus is both hidden in multiple characters and created because of influence, rather than on purpose. That is true as well in the case of Lucifer, the ring and Melkor. The different approaches in how the two authors use their religion in their works is maybe best understood in how their life and especially their personal faith was motivated. While Tolkien's religion is mostly kept to himself and close friends, largely due to the experience of his mother's 'martyrdom', Lewis wants everyone to have the answers to the questions that deeply troubled him, and made him an atheist. Lewis also wanted the children to experience and feel the doctrine of the Christian religion, rather than the dead experience he felt at a young age, "An obligation to feel can freeze feelings." (On Stories and Other Essays on Literature 47) Although the writers differ in how they present their faith, they have many things in common, not least that their works are extremely successful.

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