

# UNFORSAKEN: FANTASY, PROVIDENCE, AND THE SILENCE OF GOD

Clayton R. Conder on Finding Clarity  
through the Strange

With the rising popularity of fantasy within Western culture, examples of the genre (both skillful and abysmal) can be seen everywhere. Despite the differences in their unique theological approaches to fantasy, the profoundly influential J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis agreed on the fundamental imaginative force of fantasy as a genre. The way fantasy interacts with our perception of the world is in some ways comparable to myth due to both enabling the audience to see narrative representations of the forces that underlie reality. Old Testament scholar Robert D. Miller uses an adapted definition of “myth” from the works of John Paul II, which is of use here: “Myth . . . expresses in terms of the world what is beyond the world.”<sup>1</sup> Fantasy is similarly capable, though without the necessary ties to cultural development, and can also flip this definition on its head.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Miller, “Myth as Revelation,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 70, no. 3 (October 2014): 540, 556, accessed February 6, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1032791ar>.

Fantasy can express things of the world in terms beyond the world. Peering into the strange may add clarity to our perception of reality, allowing us to further see what is necessarily true not only in this world but in all possible (or imaginative) worlds. In pursuing what Tolkien describes as the “inner consistency of reality,” fantasy literature is capable of displaying the coherence of theological concepts, like divine providence, thus aiding apologists in answering a real-world dilemma such as the silence of God.<sup>2</sup>

### EXPLORING FANTASY

The first task is to define what exactly is meant by “fantasy.” Tolkien defined it as an extension of imagination that “derives notions of ‘unreality’ . . . of freedom from observed fact, in short of the fantastic.”<sup>3</sup> Key to this definition is the liberty that fantasy can take with itself, not relying on empirical reality to set its own stage. Though fantasy must be grounded in a way that makes it familiar to the reader and not totally foreign, the limitations of our observed reality do not prevent the exploration of fantastical ideas. While the fantasy genre itself has certainly developed in the decades since Tolkien, whether in sync with his contributions or not, examples usually fit within his given definition. We may also define it as being, from the perception of the audience, an encounter with the strange or the other (what is foreign to the “observed fact” referenced by

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<sup>2</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories: Expanded edition, with commentary and notes*, eds. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 77.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

Tolkien). However, it need not be strange from the perception of the narrative's characters. This "strangeness" does not mean it cannot be present within reality, merely that it at least falls outside of our everyday perceptions and may be categorized alongside Tolkien's "Other things" (a point which will return soon).<sup>4</sup> When encountering the strange, one must reconcile it with not only what one is observing within the confines of the fantasy but also with what one knows about the actual world they inhabit. Inevitably, human beings draw parallels between what is seen and known as fiction and what is seen and experienced as real. In this way, the "strange" may itself represent something familiar to the audience, though described in terms unfamiliar.

The relationship between the strange and reality, historically, has not been clear cut. While many today dismiss the "otherworlds" of medieval literature (those of the theological and fantastical variety) as "non-existent outside the realm of imagination," they were understood to have been quite real in the minds of medieval and early modern thinkers.<sup>5</sup> It, therefore, becomes inappropriate to discuss such otherworlds by using "modern notions of what might or might not be real to the products of medieval culture."<sup>6</sup> Now, it is not being argued that one must view the fantasy of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings (LOTR)*, or any modern literary equivalent for that matter, as real in the sense that

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<sup>4</sup> Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 81.

<sup>5</sup> Aisling Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy & History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

medieval writers deemed otherworlds. Tolkien himself discusses the importance of maintaining the distinction between the “Real things” and the “Other things,” namely the things that are real independent of the mind or real merely by virtue of the imagination.<sup>7</sup> Rather, by understanding that there is a place in the human imagination to incorporate belief in the fantastic alongside the mundane, fantasy is capable of speaking to the mind by presenting a mirror to the audience, showing where the fantastic reflects the real.<sup>8</sup>

Fantasy is capable of “partaking” in reality, per Tolkien, if the author successfully establishes within the secondary world the inner consistency of this world.<sup>9</sup> This opens apologetic avenues within fantasy unavailable to other types of fiction because it allows one to explore not only the perceptual reality of the audience but also the elements of reality yet unseen or merely felt. Fantasy, inasmuch as it successfully establishes the inner consistency of reality, permits direct exploration of the unseen or unknown (such as God, providence, spiritual evil, and miracles). Fantasy may be used to illuminate these otherwise shadowy concepts, making it possible to display the coherence of such beliefs without violating the audience’s skepticism. This is due to their acquisition of Tolkien’s concept of “secondary belief” within the context of the narrative, “Inside [the story], what [the storyteller] relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are,

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<sup>7</sup> Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 81.

<sup>8</sup> Byrne, *Otherworlds*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 77.

as it were, inside.”<sup>10</sup> This “secondary belief” permits full immersion into the narrative and the theological elements present, thereby displaying rich and insightful portrayals that may connect to the audience’s lived experience. In breaking from Tolkien, fantasy as an extended metaphor (or allegory) may allow deeper ties to be established between fantasy and reality. Holly Ordway describes this connection in her book on imaginative apologetics: “Metaphors are valuable because they build a bridge between the known and the unknown. Or, to put it another way, metaphors serve the same purpose as propositional statements: to orient the reader toward reality.”<sup>11</sup> In this sense, fantasy may serve as a sort of narrative philosophy, displaying the unreal in such a way as to cause reflection on what is real.

## EXPLORING PROVIDENCE

Divine providence is one such aspect of reality that may be reflected within apologetic fantasy. More specifically, the display of providence in fantasy (further references to fantasy will assume it has achieved “inner consistency of reality”) can be used to answer real theological dilemmas such as the silence of God. If God acts in the world for good via providence, directly or indirectly, then we can know that He is not silent and has not forsaken this world no matter the evils around us. Thomas Oden provides a solid, consensual definition of providence within *Classic Christianity*: “Providence is the expression of the divine will, power, and goodness

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<sup>10</sup> Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017), 52.

through which the Creator preserves creatures, cooperates with what is coming to pass through their actions, and guides creatures in their long-range purposes.”<sup>12</sup> It may be easy for many to dismiss the idea of divine cooperation with the free wills of created beings to bring about good, given the ubiquity of suffering in the world. However, if providence can be shown to be coherent within fantasy, then one ought to accept the coherence of the belief in reality.

Scripture provides a foundation for how we can explore the topic of providence, both in our lives and in literature. Jesus tells His followers of the Father’s love for all creation, even providing for the birds of the sky, then rhetorically asking if they are not more precious to God than birds.<sup>13</sup> God is seen to take action Himself to bring about good from evil, as described by Joseph, when he speaks to his brothers after the death of Jacob.<sup>14</sup> He is also shown to work His will through others as seen when he rouses the armies of neighboring nations to punish Israel and Judah for their sins.<sup>15</sup> In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul states that God works within them to bring good into the world.<sup>16</sup> With Biblical examples at hand, providence can more easily be discerned within fantasy,

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 143.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 6:26, ESV.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 50:15-21, ESV.

<sup>15</sup> Within the book of Amos (2:4-5; 2:6-8, 5:25-27, ESV) we see the reasons for God’s coming judgment over Israel and Judah. In this instance, they had forsaken His law by neglecting their obligations to the needy and by turning to idolatry among other sins.

<sup>16</sup> Philippians 2:12-13, ESV.

hopefully shedding light on works of providence in this world.

## PROVIDENCE IN FANTASY

For Tolkien, God's silence in *The Lord of the Rings* is itself a sign of providential care for His creation. In her article on providence found within Tolkien's work, Christin Ivey argues that "[i]t is this implied presence of Providence, and consequentially the lack of an overt allusion to God or religion, that proves essential to the moralistic progression — and universal appeal — of the story and characters in *The Lord of the Rings*."<sup>17</sup> By avoiding direct discussions of God, Tolkien allowed his story to display providence via the actions and choices made by his characters. A similar thought is echoed by Gina Dalfonzo in her article on the way Frodo is depicted as an archetypal Christian hero:

As a Christian, Tolkien would argue that Frodo cannot do any such thing [destroy the One Ring or vanquish evil] — that no mortal can. So even though Christ as God incarnate is not visible in the story, we may say that he is obvious by his absence — or, if we identify him (as Tolkien might have) with the unseen benevolent power at the heart of the story, by what he does without being recognized.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Christin Ivey, "The Presence of Divine Providence in the Absence of 'God': The Role of Providence, Fate, and Free Will in Tolkien Mythology," *The Corinthian* 9 (2008): 189, accessed February 6, 2022, <https://kb.gcsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1061&context=the-corinthian>.

<sup>18</sup> Gina Dalfonzo, "Humble Heroism: Frodo Baggins as Christian Hero in *The Lord of the Rings*," *In Pursuit of Truth: A Journal of*

While the subtle and symbolic approach works beautifully for Tolkien's world, it is not a necessary aspect of fantasy's portrayal of theological realities. In fact, direct discussions of the concept between characters may further help to clarify misconceptions the audience may have regarding belief in God or His providential care for the world (though lecturing the audience through characters is undesirable). Tolkien approaches providence directly from time to time, such as Gandalf telling Frodo that he and Bilbo were meant to have the Ring, "and *not* by its maker."<sup>19</sup> Another example comes from the sword of the Barrow-downs wielded by Merry to wound the Witch-King at the Battle of Pelennor Fields, which would have been an impossible coincidence without divine intervention.<sup>20</sup> Providence is approached both times, but much of it is left to the reader to take in on their own as God is not mentioned, instead His presence is felt in the events and in the words of the characters.

Portrayals of providence within fantasy are, to an extent, subject to interpretation based on the approach of the author. The ambiguity itself may be the author's primary focus, therefore, leaving it intentionally open-ended and questionable. At times, however, the intent of the writer is clear, and providence becomes a necessary element of the interpretation. Regardless, the portrayal

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*Christian Scholarship* (September 28, 2007): 5, accessed February 6, 2022, <https://www.cslewis.org/journal/humble-heroism-frodo-baggins-as-christian-hero-in-the-lord-of-the-rings/5/#>.

<sup>19</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954; reprinted, Boston: Mariner Books, 2021) 54-55.

<sup>20</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (1955; reprinted, Boston: Mariner Books, 2021), 826.

of potential acts of providence within a work of fantasy sheds light on the similar ambiguity of the audience's lived experiences. Virtually everyone has had a moment where they question an apparent coincidence in life and wonder if something more was at work. Occasionally these wonderings may be minute and unimportant, but the retrospection itself is the goal. An example of such wonderings within Tolkien's fantasy can be seen in Ivey's discussion of the Council of Elrond from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, showing how divine will can cooperate with human will to lead people "in their long-range purposes."<sup>21</sup>

In the council of Elrond, Frodo steps forward and accepts the burden of his fate freely, amid the doubts and dangers such a choice assured. With his sacrificial acceptance of his fate, Frodo fulfills his purpose within the providential design . . . This passage suggests not only Frodo's free will acceptance of his fate, which "he had long foreseen" but also alludes to a subconscious intervention of providential guidance.<sup>22</sup>

Here, providence is portrayed as an itch or sense of obligation in the back of Frodo's mind, pushing him to accept a burden he knows no one else can: "A great dream fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken . . . At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some

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<sup>21</sup> Oden, *Classic Christ.*, 143.

<sup>22</sup> Ivey, "Divine Providence," 196.

other will was using his small voice.”<sup>23</sup> Frodo, in a very real sense, responds to the inner workings of God to will for “his [God’s] good pleasure.”<sup>24</sup> This understanding of providence — as the voice of one’s own conscience — is among the best representations in fantasy. It necessarily leads to the retrospection mentioned above as one thinks back to times when they have similarly felt a draw or aversion to something before them. Helping to establish a connection between a literary portrayal of providence and reality via narrative examples makes fantasy of practical use to apologists.

Another episode of providence is seen elsewhere in *The Lord of the Rings* during Samwise’s battle with Shelob at the end of *The Two Towers*: “Even as Sam himself couched, looking at her, seeing his death in her eyes, a thought came to him, as if some remote voice had spoken, and he fumbled in his breast with his left hand, and found what he sought: cold and hard and solid it seemed to his touch in a phantom world of horror, the Phial of Galadriel.”<sup>25</sup> Once again, responding to a voice or a nudge in the back of the character’s mind leads them forward, whether on a quest to rid the world of a great evil or in a battle against a lesser one. Scenes such as these show the divine will working providentially in the minds of creatures, cooperating with their own wills and actions. Frodo and Sam are not being treated as puppets in either scene, their wills are their own, but the providential will calling them to action is what enables

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<sup>23</sup> Tolkien, *The Fellowship*, 263.

<sup>24</sup> Philippians 2:13, ESV.

<sup>25</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (1954; reprint, Boston: Mariner Books, 2021), 712.

their actions to work and to succeed.<sup>26</sup> This divine will and cooperation runs parallel to the role of the Holy Spirit and may be used to display His handiwork in the hearts of believers and through the words of evangelists and apologists.

As the Person of the Trinity most associated with providence, the Holy Spirit finds a direct counterpart in Tolkien's world. Gregory Hartley undertook a study of how Tolkien represented the Spirit in his writings and found three distinct manifestations.<sup>27</sup> The main titles of the Spirit, the "Imperishable Flame" or the "Secret Fire" of Eru Ilúvatar, are referenced at times by characters, most notably by Gandalf in his battle with Durin's Bane.<sup>28</sup> When the Spirit manifests His power in Tolkien's world, it is represented by the wind, which Hartley notes is a "sort of biblical word play" as "both the Hebrew and Greek words for *wind* may be translated *spirit* as well."<sup>29</sup> Finally, the arrival of the Great Eagles at times of great need, such as their rescue of Frodo and Sam from Mordor, represents the Spirit's providential role in creation.<sup>30</sup> Each way the power of the Spirit manifests in Tolkien's world displays an overt intervention while remaining ambiguous as to the source within the immediate text. In

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<sup>26</sup> Oden, *Classic Christ.*, 149.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory Hartley, "A Wind from the West: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Tolkien's Middle-Earth," *Christianity and Literature* 62 (Autumn 2012): 277-78, accessed February 6, 2022,

[https://www.academia.edu/32248806/A\\_Wind\\_from\\_the\\_West\\_The\\_Role\\_of\\_the\\_Holy\\_Spirit\\_in\\_Tolkiens\\_Middle\\_Earth](https://www.academia.edu/32248806/A_Wind_from_the_West_The_Role_of_the_Holy_Spirit_in_Tolkiens_Middle_Earth).

<sup>28</sup> Hartley, "A Wind," 277-78; Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 322.

<sup>29</sup> Hartley, "A Wind," 278.

<sup>30</sup> Hartley, "A Wind," 278; Tolkien, *Return*, 930-32.

the “Secret Fire,” we are merely given the likely identity of the voice in Frodo and Sam’s heads in the above-referenced scenes, which finds similarities in Scripture where the Holy Spirit is described as speaking in the minds and through the mouths of God’s people.<sup>31</sup> The incorporation of Biblical concepts regarding God’s interaction with His creation turns fantasy into an ideal vehicle for imaginative apologetics, though story must not be sacrificed in favor of preaching.

### FANTASTICAL APOLOGETICS

The distinguishing feature of high-quality apologetic (whether direct or indirect) fantasy is the focus and approach taken by the author. “Crude and unsophisticated” approaches, including overtly moralistic stories or ones that emphasize the allegory far more than the quality of the story itself, would prove to be ineffective.<sup>32</sup> Narrative approaches are effective precisely because they are narratives, speaking to the inherent story-telling passion of the human mind. If one dilutes the narrative and uses it merely as a tool to further an agenda, the quality of the narrative itself will suffer, and audiences will know they are being evangelized into the author’s worldview. While it was stated earlier that the subtle, symbolic approach of Tolkien is not a necessity (ex: C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*) in the pursuit of apologetic fantasy or fantasy as narrative philosophy, it is necessary to emphasize the

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<sup>31</sup> John 14:26; Acts 2:1-4; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21, ESV.

<sup>32</sup> Richard L. Sturch, “Fantasy and Apologetics,” *Vox Evangelica* 14 (1984): 65, accessed February 6, 2022, [https://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol14/fantasy\\_sturch.pdf](https://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol14/fantasy_sturch.pdf). 65.

quality of story-telling over intended interpretations. The simultaneous ambiguity and clarity of providence within the aforementioned examples demonstrate a balance that can and should be struck. What such a balance looks like may vary from fantasy to fantasy, but this diversity of portrayal is beneficial in that it allows the many ways God's providential design is felt to be represented.

Richard Sturch argues that part of the appeal of Tolkien's work is the underlying desire people have to "see themselves, as on the side of Good against evil powers and principalities dominating the world."<sup>33</sup> There's a natural inclination in the human mind to be part of the good fight against evil, whether political or existential. This is a language of the mind that is best spoken to via stories, and when effective, it leads to retrospection — which is precisely the goal. The characters present in these narratives also allow for deep explorations of Christian virtue and response to the providential will of God, embodying many of the traits exemplified by hagiographical depictions of saints or by Christ Himself. Frodo clearly embodies a "Christ-like" role in his own journey, freely shouldering a burden he knows will most likely kill him but doing it anyway out of selfless love.<sup>34</sup> Dalfonzo shows that Frodo's humility and mercy displayed throughout the quest further establish his parallel to Christ, except, like us, he is flawed and incapable of succeeding on his own.<sup>35</sup> The best fantasy, or fiction for that matter, speaks to the heart,

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<sup>33</sup> Sturch, "Fantasy," 80.

<sup>34</sup> Dalfonzo, "Humble Heroism," 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

mind, and experience of the audience through characters and struggles with which they can identify. In representing the hand of providence and the humble acceptance of his characters so effectively, Tolkien (along with other fantasy writers who have achieved such “inner consistency of reality”) poses questions to the audience indirectly. One must wonder if such a stirring has occurred in their own mind like that of Frodo’s or Sam’s, or if they have experienced something which jarred their understanding of the order of the world. The coherent display of the theological within fantasy is what enables effective self-reflection. Such questions would not be entertained with any seriousness if the narrative failed to present the subject matter in a believable and internally consistent way.

Beyond all other genres (or supposed non-genre fiction), fantasy is capable of speaking truths about the world or representing reality in such a way that it forces deeper thought and questioning. Tolkien also discussed this point, stating that, “Fantasy (in this sense) is, I think, not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent.”<sup>36</sup> The skeptical mind abandons its skepticism in between the covers of the novel or the credits of a movie and finds itself enamored with the reality of the unseen and the providential. As such, the display of providence within fantasy is capable of speaking to the experience of the audience without preaching, enabling its usefulness in responding to real-world questions and theological dilemmas. If one, after retrospection, determines that

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<sup>36</sup> Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 60.

such a providential stirring has occurred in the back of their mind, how then can it be said that God is silent?

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Unforsaken: Fantasy, Providence, and the Silence of God

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