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Book review of: *Tolkien Dogmatics: Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-earth* by Austin M. Freeman

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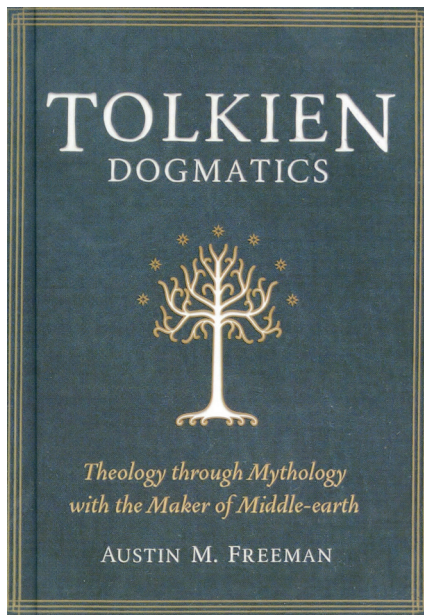


Austin M. Freeman, *Tolkien Dogmatics: Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-earth* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022).

This work by Austin Freeman is a welcome addition to Tolkien studies from the vantage point of Christian theology. It offers the interested reader a comprehensive survey of the theology explicit in Tolkien's nonfiction and implicit in his fiction. Employing the traditional loci of systematic theology, Freeman identifies the key features of Tolkien's Roman Catholic faith and the manner in which they inform the deep structures of Tolkien's mythopoeic work. Exhaustively annotated, with recommended reading at the end of each chapter and a helpful bibliography of theologically oriented Tolkien scholarship, this volume is an excellent resource for scholars and students who seek to understand Tolkien as a Christian thinker.

Freeman holds a PhD (2018) in systematic theology and has done research in patristic theology (especially Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius), angelology/demonology, and the nature of sin and evil. He has an abiding interest in the intersection of Christian theology with both fantasy literature and the modern superhero. This interest is evident in a variety of peer-reviewed articles as well as his edited *Theology and H.P. Lovecraft* (Lexington/Fortress, 2022). However, from the depth and care devoted to this work it appears that Tolkien dominates—or at least has dominated to date—this intersection of his work.

Following the standard order of systematic theology, Freeman begins with a chapter appropriately entitled "Prolegomena" (1-18), in which he defends the legitimacy of the project ("Can we have a Christian Tolkien?"), defines the scope and use of the book, and outlines its methodology. He takes as his point of departure Tolkien's well-known declaration, "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (Letter to Robert Murray, S.J., 2 December 1953, Carpenter 142). However, he rightly rejects as "oversimplification" views that would reduce Tolkien's fiction to either "a thin apology for Catholicism" or a modern attempt to revitalize "pagan myths" (Freeman 4). Instead, he concurs with Claudio Testi's assessment that Tolkien



is “a Christian author sub-creating a non-Christian world that is in harmony with the Revelation” (Testi 10).

From the outset, Freeman acknowledges the limitations of his project: Tolkien was not a professional theologian and as such did not explicitly state his views in every instance. Consequently, this book is “only what it can be: an orderly presentation of Tolkien’s published thoughts on various theological subjects” (13). Freeman’s goal is “to be descriptive” and “to set out as accurately as possible *what Tolkien thought*, without letting my or other people’s views intrude upon the matter” (17, italics original). The notable exception to this rule, as we will see, is his concern to address points at which Tolkien’s thought “departs from orthodox versions” of Christian theological claims (14).

Freeman largely succeeds at his task. Following the “Prolegomena,” he leads the reader through a comprehensive survey of Tolkien’s theology in succeeding chapters on God, revelation, creation, humanity, angels, the Fall, evil and sin, Satan and demons, Christ and salvation, the church, the Christian life, and the Last Things. In each chapter, he identifies Tolkien’s stated theological views in his nonfiction (most frequently his letters), while highlighting their presence and function in Tolkien’s fiction—principally in the mythos of Middle-earth. Throughout the book, he demonstrates both mastery of the multifarious iterations of Tolkien’s stories and lesser known works, and sound discernment as to which points of Tolkien’s theology call for straightforward description and which bear closer examination. This grants the work an equipoise of scholarly comprehension and theological focus that renders it both highly informative and readable, as well as an invaluable resource for further study.

However, at points Freeman moves beyond description to question the “orthodoxy” of a particular view held—or possibly held—by Tolkien. When considering Tolkien’s view of the Trinity, for example, he raises concerns about the conversation in Tolkien’s “Leaf by Niggle” between the two Voices of God the Father and God the Son in Niggle’s purgatorial workhouse. Freeman is concerned that the story’s characterization of “the Son as gentle but authoritative and the Father as stern and condemning” (29) does not accord with sound Trinitarian theology. While he acknowledges that “Niggle” is fiction, he also notes that it is generally recognized to be autobiographical. Consequently, it is unclear to what extent Tolkien might actually believe his characterization of the Trinity to be true. Insofar as he does, Tolkien either “departs from traditional orthodoxy” or “displays mistaken understanding of the basics of Trinitarian doctrine” (29). Yet, having raised this rather trenchant concern, Freeman goes on to acknowledge that Tolkien demonstrates a more nuanced Trinitarian theology in his letters that stands in “marked conflict with the apparent ignorance of the ‘Niggle’ passage” (31). He therefore concludes that we do not have enough information to make an informed judgment as to Tolkien’s theology of the Trinity.

While Freeman is right, theologically speaking, to raise an eyebrow at Tolkien's characterization of the Father and Son in "Niggle," the apparent acuteness of his concern regarding Tolkien's "orthodoxy" raises questions of its own. Why does Freeman not follow his stated method and begin first with Tolkien's non-fictitious and more felicitous statements about the Trinity, *then* turn to consider "Niggle," thereby allowing the clear to interpret the unclear? And why is there no real consideration of *genre*—in this case an allegory told from the viewpoint of an obtuse and self-deprecating caricature of Tolkien—that would grant the real Tolkien the benefit of the theological doubt? If Tolkien is a caricature of himself in "Niggle," it stands to reason that his depiction of the Trinity therein should not be taken too literally, yet Freeman seems intent on doing so.

Freeman interrogates Tolkien in a similar fashion on various points throughout the book. I suspect there may be several reasons he follows this course of action. First, as a junior scholar and professional theologian, Freeman is applying a scholastic scrutiny to his subject that reflects his training. Like any good theologian, he seeks to anticipate and do justice to questions arising. Whether this is the best approach to exploring Tolkien's theology, the reader must decide. However, second, it is clear that this book is a true labor of love. As a theologian who shares that love, I suspect Freeman's deeper motive may be to demonstrate that Tolkien *is*, in fact, orthodox in his theology. By raising, then answering, such questions, Freeman puts Tolkien's theology to the test and does not find it wanting (mostly). In doing so, he demonstrates to the reader that Tolkien can be trusted, theologically speaking.

But trusted by whom? This raises the question of audience and what precisely Freeman might mean by "orthodoxy." Freeman is "a Protestant" (17), and at times it appears that his notion of orthodoxy is more narrowly Protestant than it needs to be. This is evident, for example, in his evaluation of Tolkien's view of divine foreknowledge and human freedom (71-75) in the chapter on Creation. Here Freeman wrestles with what he considers the "highly unorthodox" (72) implications of Tolkien's account of the Music of Creation in *The Silmarillion*. Asks Freeman:

What then are we to make of this? On the one side, the will of Eru cannot be contradicted. On the other side, Tolkien writes that he believes each individual and even the entire human race's destiny is always subject to the mystery of free will (even to the extent of losing salvation), in response to which the choices of God would arrange things differently! (73)

Here we see Tolkien articulating a broadly patristic, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic view of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom (cf. Oden, 49-51), yet one that Freeman appears to have

difficulty recognizing as “orthodox.” Yet Freeman goes on to affirm that Tolkien’s view of God’s non-determinative foreknowledge is essentially the Molinist “middle knowledge” position (74), a position generally accepted as an orthodox option among Protestants. What are we to make of this? Does Freeman’s apparent difficulty reflect his own theological perspective, or could he be employing the dialectics of question and answer as an apologist for Tolkien, with one eye toward Protestant readers like himself?

Whatever the answer, if these are faults they are happy ones, for the result of Freeman’s interrogation is generally to the benefit of the reader. By penetrating more deeply into areas of theological ambiguity in Tolkien, Freeman offers a deeper and clearer understanding of Tolkien’s own theology, and for that we can be grateful.

More positively speaking, Freeman provides generally excellent close treatments of all of Tolkien’s views, but several stand out: His treatment of nature, sub-creation, and art (84-95) is profound and moving. His discussion of the Fall, evil, and sin (156-212) is an excellent introduction to a classical understanding of good and evil, virtue and vice, through a Tolkienian lens. And his chapter on the Christian life (286-308) offers a multifaceted consideration of Christian spiritual formation and ethics. In and through the entire work, Freeman’s presentation of Tolkien’s views demonstrates that the Professor can indeed be considered a theologian in his own right.

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Oden, Thomas C. *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology*. San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1992.
Testi, Claudio. *Pagan Saints in Middle-earth*. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2018.

***J.R.R. Tolkien and the Arts*, edited by Melody Green and Ned Bustard. Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2021.**

Upon reading the title and the brief foreword by Devin Brown, I made two assumptions about *J.R.R. Tolkien and the Arts*. The first was that I was about to read a book that was narrow in scope—that the topics would be limited to those related to artistic creation *within* Tolkien’s created worlds (e.g., the meaning of