

A Portrait of Holiness:  
The Fictional Angels of Lewis and Tolkien

By Josh Long

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Josh Long", written in a cursive style.

From canonized classics like Dante's *Inferno* to caricatured cartoons like *The Simpsons*, angels have been presented in very contradictory fashions. Some cultures have elevated angels to deities, while others have cast them down into mockeries. Our culture tends to embrace the latter. In film or television, it is not uncommon to find these silly creatures dwelling in the cloudy skies up above or popping up on a shoulder of some individual stuck in the ultimate moral dilemma. Most modern depictions of angels portray them as human-like creatures with wings, a halo, and harp. Angels have fallen from their heavenly homes into a place of "hellarity." To our culture, "angel" is often nothing more than a descriptor for a kind of cake.

But if, in fact, angels are actual supernatural beings, what purpose do they serve in the "True Myth" of Christianity? Very few fiction writers have attempted to present theologically accurate portrayals of angels. However, in their fiction, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien delve full force into the unknowns of angelology. Both writers strive to find a healthy balance between the divine and the asinine, or as Lewis puts it in *The Discarded Image*, Miltonian angels were "too much like the gods of Homer and Virgil," while nineteenth-century art "degraded" into "waterishly feminine" representations (75).

Before I begin my discussion of Lewis and Tolkien's angelology, there are two assumptions that should be avoided when considering their perspectives. The first would be that since Lewis and Tolkien are Christians, their understanding of angels is *strictly* based upon the Bible. Much of the difficulty surrounding angelology arises because the Bible offers little depth into the nature of these beings. After all, even the most learned theologian must rely on speculation.

The second assumption would be that Lewis and Tolkien's angelic characters are based entirely upon *their own* perception of angels. It is very plausible that they infused their beliefs into their fiction; nonetheless, this does not mean that the representations presented in their fiction are what they believed. One can only surmise how much they believed in the angelic concepts they presented in their fiction. In nonfiction, it is much easier to deduce what an author believes about a given topic because plot, characterization, story, etc. have no influence on the text.

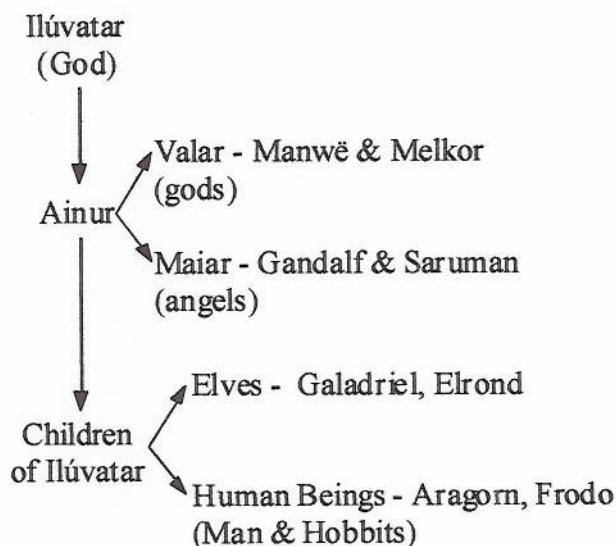
#### Tolkien's understanding of the Istari (wizards)

It is possible to read *The Lord of the Rings* carefully and never see any angels. In fact, Tolkien never even mentions the word "angel" throughout the entire book. At face value, *The Silmarillion* would prove about as useful as *The Lord of the Rings* in a quest for angels. Then how do we know that there are angelic beings in Tolkien's fiction? By turning to Tolkien's letters, the anonymity of Tolkien's "angels" is revealed. In letter 131, Tolkien explains in a

footnote "that they [Istari] were as one might say the equivalent in the mode of these tales of Angels, guardian Angels" (159). In letter 156, he expounds upon his idea of an angelic wizard when he asserts, "But G[andalf]. is not, of course, a human being (Man or Hobbit). There are naturally no precise modern terms to say what he was. I w[oul]d. venture to say that he was an *incarnate* 'angel'- strictly a messenger: that is, with the other *Istari*..." (202). Clearly, Tolkien understands the Istari (wizards) to be a representation of angels.

Interestingly, Tolkien's understanding of angels is very typical of Catholic theology. In recognizing angel incarnation and guardianship, he clearly embraces the beliefs of his Catholic tradition. Although Catholics understand angels to be spiritual beings, they also believe that angels can take on human form. In *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas suggests that "...since the angels are not bodies, nor have they bodies naturally united with them... it follows that they sometimes assume bodies" (265). Tolkien's explanation of the Istari in Appendix B in *The Lord of the Rings* is rather reminiscent of Aquinas' description. "They [Istari] came therefore in the shape of Men..." (1059). It is reasonable to maintain that Gandalf is not only an incarnate angel, but also a guardian angel. In *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, St. Basil describes the guardian angel. He asserts, "From its beginning until death, human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession. 'Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life' " (98).

*Tolkien's Basic Mythology*



For Tolkien, every aspect of his angelology is deeply rooted within Catholicism. That the Istari have free will, contain a higher status than humanity, and were present at the creation of Middle-earth all derive from Catholic angelology. Also, Tolkien illustrates the Catholic dichotomy of

angels and fallen angels through Gandalf as an obedient servant, and Saruman as a self-seeking dissident. The extent to which Catholicism is woven into the fibers of *The Lord of the Rings* is not surprising because Tolkien asserts in letter 142 that *The Lord of the Rings* is a "Catholic work" (172). Joseph Pearce, professional biographer and literary researcher, notes that "for Tolkien... the substantial body of [his] work is 'Catholic' in so far as it represents an orthodox Christian response..." ("Catholic Lit" 106).

#### Tolkien's catholicism vs. Lewis's rationalism

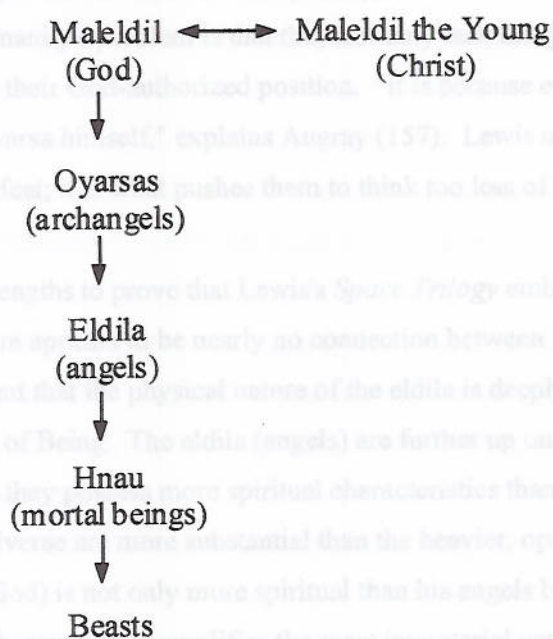
It is clear that Tolkien's Catholicism played a huge role in his life, character, and writing. "For Tolkien, Catholicism was not an opinion to which one subscribed but a reality to which one submitted" (*Man and Myth* 23). Tolkien accepted orthodox angelology for the same reason he refused to write lay theology—his fervent Catholic faith. For Tolkien, the Pope's divine authority taught and directed humanity about matters of theology—*Ubi Petrus, Ibi Ecclesia*. In letter 250, Tolkien writes to his son, Michael, that Catholicism believes "the Pope is the acknowledged head on earth" (339). Agreeing with the Church, Tolkien understood that it was not in the affairs of the laity to meddle in spiritual understandings. Tolkien was frustrated by Lewis's attempts at "mereing" Christianity. By what right did Lewis have to teach theology? Tolkien explains, "It was not for some time that I realized that there was more in the title *Pilgrim's Regress* than I had understood (or the author either, maybe). Lewis would not enter Christianity in a new door, but by the old one... He would become again a Northern Ireland Protestant" (qtd. in Derrick 46). In Tolkien's view, it was the Church's responsibility to act as mediator to God; humanity was to respond by accepting the Church's teachings.

It is apparent that Lewis did not adopt Tolkien's attitudes on religion when he converted to Christianity in 1931. In an article discussing Christian reunion, Lewis describes his main reason for not becoming part of the Catholic Church. I would have "to accept doctrine... [the Catholic] Church hereafter produces. It is like being asked to agree not only to what a man has said but to what he's going to say" (qtd. in Schultz 358). Although Lewis was an active member of the Anglican Church, he "was not afraid to voice disagreements with his church on occasion" (Schultz 80). For Lewis, his theology had to be explained. "He had no concept of a merely religious truth separate from reason and historical fact" (Duriez 199). Tolkien's religious convictions told him what to believe, Lewis's asked why.

### Lewis's understanding of eldila

Just as Tolkien gave us insight into the Istari through his letters, Lewis's letters assist us into the nature of the eldila. Surprisingly, it is not in a profound letter to an acquaintance where one discovers the mystery of the eldila, but in a simple letter to a child. Lewis replies to Martin's inquiry of whether eldila are fairies. Lewis writes, "The *eldila* are meant to be angels, not fairies. Haven't you noticed that they are always about Maleldil's business?" (70). Although one might easily dismiss Martin's questioning of the eldila as juvenile misunderstanding, it is important to point out that most of the reviewers of *Out of the Silent Planet* missed the theological purpose of the book. Lewis writes in a letter to an anonymous lady, "You will be both grieved and amused to hear that out of about 60 reviews only 2 showed any knowledge that my idea of the fall of the Bent One [Satan] was anything but an invention of my own" (167).

#### *Lewis's Basic Mythology*



Although Lewis's hierarchy is quite different than Tolkien's, it is virtually identical to the medieval model of the Great Chain of Being: God → angels → humans → animals → plants → dirt. In *The Discarded Image*, Lewis writes of the Chain of Being, "We see how everything links up with everything else; at one, not in flat equality, but in a hierarchical ladder" (12). He continues by describing the "beauty of the Model" and suggests that it is not simply "a work of art," but "in a sense the central work" (12). Lewis's infusion of medievalism into his *Space*

just as the Oyarsa is the "motive power" by which Ransom journeys to Perelandra (20). In both cases, Frodo and Ransom must begin their journeys blindly—Frodo on an unknown road and Ransom in an unknown coffin. They do not know what awaits them, so they must rely on faith. For both Frodo and Ransom, it is not enough to simply heed what the angels have to tell them; they must respond to their call by taking action.

Angels as emissaries not only present God's message, but also represent God's holiness. It is not enough to simply revere them as holy, but one must wholly fear them. In *Perelandra*, the character of Lewis explains, "And I realised that I was afraid... that sooner or later I myself might meet an edil" (2). In *The Two Towers*, when Gimli, Aragorn, and Legolas first come across Gandalf the White "they stood and found no words to say" out of "fear" (484). This fearful reverence is summed up when Lewis writes to an *American Lady*, "I believe no angel ever appears in scripture without exciting terror: they always have to begin by saying 'Fear not' " (12). He makes a similar statement in the preface to *The Screwtape Letters* when he writes, "In Scripture the visitation of an angel is always alarming; it has to begin by saying 'Fear not.' "

However powerful angels might be, Lewis and Tolkien understand that an angel's authority and splendor is not based upon its own accord, but a reflection of sovereign God. Angels are wholly dependent upon God, and the moment that they advance on their own will or as Lewis puts it "abuse" "their free will," they not only become fallen, but they also sacrifice their power (*Screwtape* preface). In their pursuit after power they become powerless. Tolkien writes in *Unfinished Tales*, "...Saruman the White, fell from his high errand, and becoming proud and impatient and enamoured of power sought to have his own will by force..." (390). In *The Two Towers* when King Thèoden, and Gandalf confront Saruman in Orthanc, Thèoden tells Saruman, "But I fear your voice has lost its charm" (566). In this scene, Saruman's powerlessness is revealed when he is not only belittled by a lower human, but also dominated by his "lower" learner, Gandalf. Tolkien asserts in *Unfinished Tales* that "...Curunír [Saruman] was cast down, and utterly humbled..." (391). The epitome of Saruman's subjection is when he is finally killed<sup>1</sup> "by the hand of an oppressed slave," Wormtongue (391).

Although angels are purposed to carry out God's will, they can only impress themselves upon humanity so far. Angels can only implore humanity to fight against "the opposing forms and forces of chaos," they cannot make them. For Lewis and Tolkien, the absence of free will is a terrible evil because free will allows both angels and humanity to experience true love; in that,

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<sup>1</sup> Although in orthodox Christian theology angels do not die, Saruman's death is not as important as who defeats him. When Wormtongue kills him, it reveals just how weak Saruman has become. Gandalf could not even be conquered by the Balrog, yet Saruman is destroyed by a petty servant.

Lewis equates angles with stars, how are stars similar to Lewis's eldila? The eldila not only dwell in "the sky," (182) but also are "made of light," (145). It is unmistakable that the Narnian singing stars are angels, what Charles A. Huttar, in *The C. S. Lewis Readers' Encyclopedia*, calls "star-angels" (79).

In Narnia, creation begins with the distant voice of Aslan. "In the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing" (116). Lewis captures the brilliance of Ilúvatar and his Ainur when he describes the singing of Aslan, "There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was, beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise... ever heard" (116). Lewis's child-like description is very reminiscent of Tolkien's detailed explanation of the music of the Ainur:

...A sound arose of endless interchanging melodies woven in harmony that passed beyond hearing into the depths and into the heights, and the places of the Ilúvatar were filled to overflowing, and the music and the echo of the music went out into the Void, and it was not void. Never since have the Ainur made any music like to this music. (15)

Both Lewis and Tolkien see creation as a beautifully orchestrated symphony that is only comparable to the perfect song. Not only is the created masterpiece magnificent, but also the act of creating. The angels in all their glory engage with their Creator as apprentice painters, imitating that which their Creator places on paper. "...No theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me," declares the Ilúvatar (17). Although Lewis and Tolkien's angels interact in creation by assisting God in song, their angels are incapable of creating life. It is Ilúvatar's Flame Imperishable, and Aslan's voice that give life to creation. In *Adversus Haereses*, St. Irenaeus of Lyons explains why it would be unreasonable for angels to create, "This would imply that angels were more powerful than God; or if not so, that He was either careless, or inferior, or paid no regard to those things which took place among His own possessions..."

However, some individuals are not satisfied with God's (Aslan, Ilúvatar) creation, specifically Melkor and Jadis (the Witch). Melkor's evil lies in the fact that he desires not only to be above God, but also control the wills of God's creation—humanity. Tolkien stresses in letter 181, "But since in the view of this tale & mythology Power – when it dominates or seeks to dominate other wills and minds – is evil..." (237). Similar to Satan, Melkor is "the greatest of the Ainur [angels]," yet "wished... to be called Lord, and to be master over other wills" (18). Melkor and the other fallen Ainur (specifically Sauron) become "rebels against the One" (*Letters Tolkien* 285) because they fail to heed the words that Ilúvatar spoke, "No theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me" (*Silmarillion* 17). Melkor contests, "This shall be my own

kingdom..." (21). Although not identical, the words of the Witch in the *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* are quite reminiscent of Melkor's, "Understand that you [Aslan] have given me Narnia... (152). It would have been reasonable for her to have added, "This shall be my own kingdom..."

The marvelous music of creation infuriates and frustrates the presence of evil. The Witch's "mouth was shut" and "her lips were pressed together" (118) just as Melkor opened his mouth wider "and straightway discord arose about him" (16). Where goodness resides, evilness remains disturbed. Evilness has two responses to goodness—fall silently still or shout out obnoxious noise.

### Conclusion

As fiction writers, Lewis and Tolkien sincerely sought to present genuine depictions of angels. They understood angels to be messengers, actively fighting against the forces of evil, beckoning humanity into battle against Beelzebub. Angels were not to be worshipped anymore than humans were to be denied the freedom of choice. In their proper place, humans were to revere angels, and angels were to serve humanity. Lewis used angels to direct us towards the unseen spiritual realm, while Tolkien uses angels to direct us towards Catholic orthodoxy.

At the heart of their angelology is the simple truth that angels are a mere glimpse of the undeniable beauty and splendor of God. Any hint of holiness that angels possess is simply a reflection of God the Father. For Lewis and Tolkien, angels are not so much the focus but what the focus of the angels is—God. If the Seraphim (the highest level of angels) in Isaiah had to shield their eyes at the throne of God's glory, how much more should humanity humbly bow their lives before the overwhelming majesty of Holy God?

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