

## WHERE HISTORY AND LEGEND MEET: CHRISTIAN MYTH-MAKING IN TOLKIEN AND LEWIS

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**I**magine if you were to learn that all the old legends you had been told as a child were actually true: that leprechauns haunted the woods of Ireland; that the hidden valley of Shangri-la really existed, tucked away in the icy, inaccessible cliffs of the Himalayas; that there was once a mighty civilization known as Atlantis and that its ruins had been discovered in a silent corner of the sea; that the island of Avalon could be reached by a tall ship and the sleeping body of King Arthur gazed upon in all its splendor. What would it mean to you—and to the nations of the West—to know that Jason had once sailed in search of the Golden Fleece, or that Hercules had once performed his twelve deadly labors, or that Achilles and Hector had once fought to the death beside the wall of Troy? Today we think of ourselves as a progressive, forward-looking people, ever pressing onward to that bright future we can only imagine. But there is still that within us which looks to the past as well, casting behind us a long, slow backward glance at some dim, lost Golden Age.

Of all the subjects they learn in school, modern children are perhaps least trained in the discipline of history. Today, more and more young people, and not-so-young people, walk through their lives with little to no knowledge of what took place in the decades and centuries before they were born. They no longer see themselves

as standing within a historical stream, but are cut off, isolated on a stranded piece of the shoreline. And yet, oddly, even as history slips away, the myths and legends somehow persist. They can't place Henry VIII or Charles I on a timeline, but they know that a young man named Arthur once pulled a sword out of a stone. They don't know who Pericles was and probably could not locate Athens on a map, but they have a dim recollection that a hero named Theseus once fought a Minotaur in a labyrinth and that another hero named Perseus once cut off the head of Medusa. When it comes to history, they may have ceased to think, but they have not ceased to dream.

According to Freud, dreams are the royal road to the subconscious. In parallel fashion, I would suggest that the old legends and our desire for them are the royal road to the past. Both J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis rejected the post-Enlightenment tendency to make a sharp and unbridgeable distinction between history and legend, fact and myth. Indeed, one of the decisive moments in Lewis' pilgrimage toward Christian faith came when Tolkien suggested to him that the reason the story of Christ sounded so similar to the scapegoat myths of the pagan civilizations was because Christ was the myth made fact. The coming of Christ, they both felt, had been foretold not only by the Jewish scriptures but by what Lewis liked to call the good dreams of the pagans. In the pre-Christian tales of Adonis and Osiris, of Mithras and Tammuz and Balder, the cultures of Greece and Egypt, of Persia and Babylon and Scandinavia had been prepared for the coming of the one who would fuse history and legend into a single stream. Just so, the Magi followed the star, and it led them to Bethlehem.

There are many reasons why we who live in the modern world need to read and re-read *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*: to instruct us in the nature of good and evil, to spur us on to virtuous action, to help us reorient our moral compass, to build up in us a desire for the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and to revive in us a sense both of our innate dignity and worth and our status as fallen creatures. And one more reason, one that is too often overlooked, not only by secular readers, but by Christian readers as well: the faerie stories of Tolkien and Lewis have the power to

restore to us that legendary, mythic past that has been denied to us by the forces of progressivism, utilitarianism, and scientism, but which still maintains a hold on our hearts.

Although Tolkien fought fiercely to preserve the integrity and separate existence of *The Lord of the Rings* against those who would allegorize it or link it to historical events (Mordor as post-WWI Europe, the Ring as the atom bomb, and so forth), there are a number of elements in Tolkien's epic that are nevertheless linked to human history. Such is the case with the Riders of Rohan (or Rohirrim), a race of men whom Tolkien clearly patterned after the Anglo-Saxons who wrote *Beowulf* and who ruled England before the Norman Invasion of 1066. In terms of their bloodlines, they are neither so noble as the Men of Gondor nor so base as the Wild Men who haunt the forests and mountains. They are brave warriors who live by a code of honor but who have lost their love for the arts of peace and who have allowed their imaginations to shrivel and grow hard. They still sing songs of the elder days, but they have come to shun the elves and to distrust the enchanted forest of Lórien, where dwells the Lady of the Wood: the beautiful and mysterious elf queen, Galadriel.

Perhaps they are most like us, for we too lie between the Men of Gondor and the Wild Men, neither kingly nor savage: civilized yet lacking a sense of our own proper destiny. Like the Rohirrim, we have heard rumors, whisperings of a greater story unfolding behind and around us, but we have chosen rather to ignore or scoff at them than to embrace and be strengthened by them. We would just as soon allow the old legends, like sleeping dogs, to lie quiet and undisturbed.

Though we are meant to experience *The Lord of the Rings* through the eyes of the hobbits, there is one Rider of Rohan through whose eyes we view, if briefly, Tolkien's grand vision. That character is Éomer, nephew to King Théoden, the Lord of the Mark. While riding on the plains of Rohan with his men, Éomer is met by Aragorn, the true King of Gondor, Legolas, an elf, and Gimli, a dwarf. In the dialog that ensues, Aragorn explains to Éomer that he, Legolas, and Gimli have recently come from Lórien and then reveals himself to

be the true King and wielder of Andúril, “the Sword that was Broken and is forged again.” Éomer is amazed and cries out with wonder, “These are indeed strange days . . . Dreams and legends spring to life out of the grass.” When Aragorn then goes on to tell Éomer that they have come to Rohan in search of two hobbits, a second Rider, expressing Éomer’s further amazement, exclaims: “Halflings! . . . But they are only a little people in old songs and children’s tales out of the North. Do we walk in legends or on the green earth in the daylight?” The shock felt by Éomer and his companion is like the shock we the readers feel as we are drawn deeper and deeper into Tolkien’s epic tale. It is as if a door has been opened on to a world where all the legends walk boldly in the sunlight and that which we hoped, prayed and dreamed was *real* is *real*.

But of course to find ourselves suddenly catapulted into the land of legends is not only to experience wonder and joy; the experience brings with it a heavy dose of cognitive dissonance as well. Consider Éomer’s words after the full weight of what Aragorn has told him has sunk in:

It is hard to be sure of anything among so many marvels. The world is all grown strange. Elf and Dwarf in company walk in our daily fields; and folk speak with the Lady of the Wood and yet live; and the Sword comes back to war that was broken in the long ages ere the fathers of our fathers rode in the Mark! How shall a man judge what to do in such times?

Part of the reason that our age tends to reject both legends and magic is that we have lost the old boundaries within which such marvels used to be understood. We simply do not know how to behave in the presence of magic, just as more and more Americans have lost a clear sense of how they are to behave in the presence of death, either that of others or their own. Like Éomer, our thoughts become muddled and our powers of judgment suspended in the face of things we cannot fully comprehend. When catapulted too suddenly into the unknown or unfamiliar, we react like a man who

is wrenched out of a deep sleep and cast into a brightly lit room before his mind has cleared or his eyes have become accustomed to the light.

*The Lord of the Rings* provides its readers with a wake up call. It shakes us, as Aragorn's words do Éomer, out of our lethargy. This is perhaps the reason why when a number of polls taken in America and England pronounced *The Lord of the Rings* the greatest book of the century, the "people" were overjoyed but the literati were horrified. The same thing happened in ancient Athens when Socrates exploded the pretensions of artists and academics and politicians who thought that they, unlike the rabble, possessed a full knowledge of beauty and wisdom and justice: the common folk cheered; the opinion makers plotted his death. There are those in society who are willing to be pulled out of their moral or ethical or aesthetic slumber (think of the tax collectors and prostitutes who followed Jesus) and others who are not (think of the Pharisees). There are those who will allow Tolkien's sacramental, faerie magic to pierce through the modern self-protective walls of naturalism and realism and nihilism and those who, when faced with what they dismissively call escapism, will merely add more bricks to the wall.

To read *The Lord of the Rings* in an open, non-defensive manner, to give it our sympathetic imagination, our willing suspension of disbelief, is to be overwhelmed by a kind of wonder that our modern world has lost sight of. It is to feel, as Éomer feels, that everything has suddenly become strange and unfamiliar. Perhaps all those legends we learned as children about Atlantis and Avalon really are true; or, to say ultimately the same thing, perhaps we really are creatures endowed with purpose and enmeshed in a drama of good versus evil in which the sacred and the secular are one and in which the myths of the poets often prove truer than the naked "facts" of the historians.

If we can see and feel that truth, even if only for a fleeting moment, then we may be able to gain the higher insight that King Théoden himself gains when he learns from Gandalf all the wonders that have so opened the eyes of his nephew:

I have lived to see strange days. Long we have tended our beasts and our fields, built our houses, wrought our tools, or ridden away to help in the wars of Minas Tirith [the capital of Gondor]. And that we called the life of Men, the way of the world. We cared little for what lay beyond the borders of our land. Songs we have that tell of these things, but we are forgetting them, teaching them only to children, as a careless custom. And now the songs have come down among us out of strange places, and walk visible under the Sun.

The Rohirrim, like Americans, have long lived a practical life, tending to their own affairs and worrying little about what lies beyond their borders. And then the old legends start to stir.

One of the things that Tolkien did not like about *The Chronicles of Narnia* was their tendency to borrow widely from a diverse number of legends and cultures. Figures from the myths of Greece and Rome and the tales of the Arabian Nights, as well as Medieval, Arthurian, and Norse themes and objects, even Father Christmas, all find their way into the magical weave of Narnia. Tolkien considered this amalgamation a violation of that consistency he sought as a sub-creator, but the friends of Narnia have tended to respond to this heady mixture with joy and delight. For in Narnia, all those legends we most love rise up and dance. Only in the enchanted land of Aslan do we find grouped together all the archetypal myths which move us at the deepest level of our being. Here, we feel, is God's plenty.

If the cumulative impact of *The Lord of the Rings* can be summed up in the words of Éomer quoted above, then that of the *Chronicles* can be summed up even more briefly in two sentences of great pathos spoken by the aged Digory near the end of the final *Chronicles*, *The Last Battle*. Formerly, in *The Magician's Nephew*, the young Digory had watched with awe as Aslan had sung Narnia into being. Now, translated once more to Narnia in his old age, he watches that same Aslan order its destruction:

"I saw it begin," said the Lord Digory, "I did not think I would live to see it die."

Because our time and Narnian time work independently of one another, Digory is enabled, during a single life span, to witness the birth and death of Narnia. And we, as readers, witness it with him. Over the course of seven brief novels, we see the full history of an entire world contracted, as it were, into a glass. All the legends, all the magic, all the yearnings: all condensed and concentrated, all drawn together by what is arguably the greatest mythic icon in all literature: Aslan the Lion.

In “Myth Became Fact,” anthologized in *God in the Dock*, Lewis argues that in Christ,

[t]he old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens*—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle. . . . God is more than god, not less: Christ is more than Balder, not less.

In the character of Aslan, an equal and opposite process occurs: a figure of pure mythic force takes on the concreteness, the physicality, the reality that we normally associate only with historical “facts.” Though we do not know Aslan, we immediately recognize him, not only because he is, literally, the Christ of Narnia, but because he is also the summation of all those legendary heroes that have stirred the imagination of the world since the beginning (indeed, since *before* the beginning) of recorded history.

Early on in *The Last Battle*, the overly rash King Tirian is captured by the “bad guys” and tied to a tree to await execution on the following morning. As he shivers, alone, in the darkness, Tirian thinks back on the history of Narnia; and, as he mentally retraces that sacred narrative, a connection forms in his mind. Whenever Narnia was in greatest danger, Aslan would always come from over the sea to give aid—but he never gave that aid alone. In all the old

stories, Aslan was helped by two or more children from another world. Legends, Tirian learns, are never arbitrary; there is always a meaningful pattern.

Just so, if we are to understand fully ourselves, our world, and our destiny, we must learn to identify and appreciate the deeper patterns that are missed (if not dismissed) by the utilitarians who run our schools, our media, our government, and, too often, our churches.

Postmodern theorists have long hailed the death of the meta-narrative, of that great, over-arching story that, if embraced, can provide us with meaning, purpose, and a final goal (or telos). The greatest and most central of these meta-narratives is the biblical story of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. The faerie stories of Tolkien and Lewis help us to see that what makes that narrative so compelling is that it effortlessly fuses the mythic, the legendary, and the historical into a single tale.

Knowing and understanding our past means more than memorizing dates or charting the rise and fall of kingdoms on a world map. It means seeing the telos that runs through those dates and kingdoms and acknowledging the part that we ourselves must play in the meta-narrative. It means opening our minds and hearts to the wonder that lies behind us and around us, discerning the hand of providence in the strange twists and turns of history, and seeing both the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end.

It means, yes, learning from the past, but not in a narrowly pragmatic way. Of course we want to avoid making the same mistakes as our ancestors, but studying the past (history, legend, and myth) has value beyond that practical, if worthy end. We study the past so that we can see ourselves *in* it, so that we can achieve that historical sense which, according to T. S. Eliot, “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.”

We don't need a degree in history to know (as Tolkien's Sam Gamgee knows) which tales really matter. We need only the courage and humility to embrace those tales and make them our own. Meditating on the scapegoat myths of the ancient world led C. S. Lewis to the myth made fact. May we, by meditating on the

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legends we have lost, be guided back to the way of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty.

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