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Loathe to Oath

Voluntary Vows in Tolkien and the Old Testament

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BBST 465: Tolkien and the Old Testament

## Introduction

Matthew's gospel is the only one that includes the Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus appeals to the Jews in the audience who " 'have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn." ... Let what you say be simply "Yes" or "No"; anything more than this comes from evil'" (Matthew 5:33, 37, ESV). Jesus refers to Old Testament texts like Exodus 20:7 and Deuteronomy 23:21-23, familiar to most Jews, that warn against taking the name of YHWH in vain, especially in the form of voluntary vows.

In these Old Testament examples, mankind repeatedly makes promises with the presumptuous attitude that they have the power to control their own circumstances. Such volitional oaths highlight an essential aspect of creation according to Scripture: free will. J.R.R. Tolkien incorporates free will into his own creation narrative, *The Silmarillion*, most notably with Fëanor and his sons' oath to recover the Silmarils to the ends of Middle-earth, which eventually initiates the Noldor's fall from paradise. Tolkien's framework of necessary free will includes the potential for unnecessary oaths, which follow the vower.

### **'A terrible and blasphemous oath'**

Seven chapters into the *Silmarillion* section of Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, Fëanor, high prince of the Noldor, has a "new thought"<sup>1</sup> of his own will to preserve imperishable the glory of Yavanna's Two Trees that supply everlasting light in Valinor. This task he begins and completes in secret and in solitude to produce three jewels: the Silmarils. As the maker of the Silmarils,

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1977), 67.

Fëanor's heart is bound to possess them forever. He is loath to relinquish his ownership of them, even after Ungoliant sucks the life and light of the Two Trees entirely, even after the Vala Yavanna requests the Silmarils to heal the trees and restore Valinor's light, and even after Melkor plunders all the jewels of the Noldor and takes the Silmarils to Middle-earth.

In the first versions of this story, Tolkien writes in the early 1930s version of his *Quenta Noldorinwa* "that Fëanor kept the Silmarils locked away except when he wore them at great feasts, but not yet that he begrudged the sight of them to all save his father and sons."<sup>2</sup> As Tolkien writes and revises, he begins to discover Fëanor's increasingly possessive character. His mid-1930s revisions include "Fëanor beginning to grudge the sight of the Silmarils to all but himself and his sons; [and] Fëanor shutting his doors against Morgoth ..."<sup>3</sup> as the Noldor prince hoards the jewels for himself.

Despite pleas to use the Silmarils for good and plots to use the Silmarils for evil, Fëanor acts in his free will to rile up the Noldor to his plight. He persuades them "with anguish for the rape of the Silmarils"<sup>4</sup> to leave Valinor and follow Melkor, now known as Morgoth, to Middle-earth to retrieve the jewels. At the height of his monologue,

Fëanor swore a terrible oath. His seven sons leapt straightway to his side and took the selfsame vow together, and red as blood shone their drawn swords in the glare of the torches. They swore an oath which none shall break, and none should take, by the name even of Ilúvatar, calling the Everlasting Dark upon them if they kept it not; and Manwë they named in witness, and Varda, ... vowing to pursue with vengeance and hatred to the ends of the World Vala, Demon, Elf or Man as yet unborn, or any creature, great or small, good or evil, that time should bring forth unto the end of days, whoso should hold

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<sup>2</sup> Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 919.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 82.

or take or keep a Silmaril from their possession. ... For so sworn, good or evil, an oath may not be broken, and it shall pursue oathkeeper and oathbreaker to the world's end.<sup>5</sup>

In arrogance, Fëanor and his sons swear on the most powerful gods in existence, willingly bringing judgment from the “Everlasting Dark” upon themselves if they cannot possess the Silmarils. Even the narrator of the *Silmarillion* inserts an editorial voice here, that “none shall break, and none should take” an oath like this. Although taken according to their free will, such an oath detracts from the free will of Fëanor and his sons. Their wills are less free now, that they have sworn this oath—willingly, they have bound their souls to this promise and called the gods themselves as their witnesses. Although Fëanor and his sons have the desire and determination to fulfill it, this is no guarantee that their oath will be fulfilled. Purtill puts it this way:

This and subsequent incidents force us to give up the idea we might get from *The Lord of the Rings* that the Elves are a wholly good race. Under the influence of Melkor they can kill, cover, and steal, but as opposed to human beings, who are a fallen race, it is individual Elves, always under some influence from Melkor, who sin, and their sin does not affect other Elves except as those Elves voluntarily make themselves part of the sin. In Adam all men fell, but by Fëanor only some Elves are led astray.<sup>6</sup>

By the oath of one Elf, Fëanor, his sons are led astray, their destinies and free wills restrained forever to this vow.

As the vow continues unfulfilled and Fëanor and his sons slowly die off in their pursuit to fulfill it, Maedhros and Maglor are the last of his seven sons alive. They remain faithful to the oath until the end, but many failed efforts to possess the Silmarils have accumulated regret and guilt in even these sons of Fëanor. The last chapter of the *Quenta Silmarillion* records they remember the past promise with “weariness and loathing, to attempt in despair the fulfilment of their oath; for they would have given battle for the Silmarils, were they withheld, even against

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>6</sup> Richard L. Purtill, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality, and Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), page 100.

the victorious host of Valinor, even though they stood alone against all the world.”<sup>7</sup> Maglor considers abandoning the oath and submitting to the Valar’s judgment in Valinor, but Maedhros reminds him, “ ‘by Ilúvatar we swore in our madness, and called the Everlasting Darkness upon us, if we kept not our word. Who shall release us?’”<sup>8</sup> Nearing the end of his life, threatened with the Everlasting Darkness, and the judgment of Ilúvatar, Maedhros finally recognizes the madness that overtook him and the other sons of Fëanor, to misuse their free will. Nevertheless, escape from the oath is impossible, and he persuades Maglor to join him in a last effort to possess their father’s jewels.

### **Oaths in the Old Testament**

First Samuel 14:24-46 tells of Saul’s leadership after God saves Israel from the Philistines. The people are tired, yet Saul exercises his free will to swear an oath, cursing anyone who eats food that day. His son Jonathan hasn’t heard the oath, eats honey, and faces death according to his father’s curse. The other Hebrews ransom Jonathan, and he lives. Although Saul’s people and his land have submitted to YHWH, who gave their enemies into their hands, Saul himself submits not his own will and control to YHWH.

You see that in this oath, which is there recorded for us in verse 24, ... there’s a little too much of Saul and not enough of Yahweh in it. Notice his terminology: “Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening and I am avenged on my enemies.” It’s a touch of the “I, me, me, mine” here, as opposed to Jonathan’s approach in the earlier part of the chapter: “It may be that the Lord will work for us.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, page 252.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, page 253.

<sup>9</sup> Alistair Begg, *A Taste of Honey* (sermon, August 27, 2019), accessed November 29, 2024, <https://www.truthforlife.org>.

Saul imposes this oath upon his men in selfish pride and arrogance, like Fëanor, voluntarily making a vow he cannot guarantee. Unlike Fëanor, Saul does not make this oath for the benefit of repossessing something that has been taken from him, but unnecessarily takes his circumstances into his own overconfident hands, attempting to submit YHWH to his own human will under the guise of preparing his soldiers for battle.

Instead, this vow becomes a curse, and stumbles the Hebrews entrusted to Saul's leadership. Robert Jamieson's comments on verses 31 and 32 reveal the curse's end "at evening, when the time fixed by Saul had expired."<sup>10</sup> In their haste to finally eat food, the Hebrews fail to drain it of blood, directly disobeying God's Levitical law to eat no blood. When Saul hears of this, he "reprove[s] them for the sin (v. 33): *You have transgressed*; but [does] not, as he should have done, reflect upon himself as having been accessory to it, and having *made the Lord's people to transgress*."<sup>11</sup> In their efforts to honor Saul's man-made command, they violate the Lord's "divine command."<sup>12</sup> Begg calls this situation "absurd," and highlights Jonathan's sarcasm in confessing " 'Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, I did something *really bad*. ... I had a little bit of honey. Yeah, I deserve to die.' It's absurd. And the absurdity of it is revealed in the fact that ... when the people speak up, they intervene on behalf of Jonathan."<sup>13</sup> Even if the people fail to recognize the madness of obeying one man's will above YHWH's, they see easily the absurdity of holding Jonathan to Saul's unnecessary vow.

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Jamieson, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Old and New Testament*, vol. 2, *1 Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 169.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2, *1 Samuel*, ed. John Brown (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 473-475.

<sup>12</sup> Begg, *A Taste of Honey*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

## Integration

Tolkien creates his fantasy world with the same ingredients of free will and divine will YHWH installs in Genesis. The people of Tolkien’s world are born with necessary free will under powers greater and external—lesser gods, the Valar, and the One God, Ilúvatar. Tolkien uses the word “subcreation” when he describes the intersection between free will and divine will among the Valar. When the Valar participate in creating the world according to their own free wills, and therefore “subcreate,” these powers

guarantee that what they devised and made should be given the reality of Creation. Of course within limits, and of course subject to certain commands or prohibitions. But if they ‘fell’, as the Diabolus Morgoth did, and started making things ‘for himself, to be their Lord,’ these would then ‘be’, even if Morgoth broke the supreme ban against making other ‘rational’ creatures like Elves or Men. They would at least ‘be’ real physical realities the physical world, however evil they might prove, even ‘mocking’ the Children of God. They would be Morgoth's greatest Sins, abuses of his highest privilege, and would be creatures begotten of Sin, and naturally bad.<sup>14</sup>

In explaining to Peter Hastings Free Will as it appears in his stories, Tolkien writes that the Author must necessarily provide Free Will to his subcreation, but this Free Will exists under Sin and may be misused. Morgoth explicitly misuses the free will and the powers of subcreation given to him, which makes his created “ other ‘rational’ creatures like Elves or Men” the highest degree of Sin. In taking what Ilúvatar meant for good and instead controlling it for his own evil, selfish gain, Morgoth deigns that creation would submit to his will instead, much like the Hebrews honored Saul’s oath over YHWH’s. Likewise, Fëanor swearing and making oaths on Ilúvatar misinterprets and perverts Ilúvatar’s first intentions for existence. Ilúvatar does not exist for the Eldar to make binding promises upon him but preexists as the creator of them all.

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<sup>14</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), Letter 153, *To Peter Hastings* (Draft, September 1954), 186–189.

Free will creates the potential for an expulsion from Paradise: a fall. And “There cannot be any ‘story’ without a fall — all stories are ultimately about the fall — at least not for human minds as we know them and have them.”<sup>15</sup> Led by Fëanor, the Elves leave Paradise of their own free will after he and his sons “take a terrible and blasphemous oath of enmity.”<sup>16</sup> By the sin of one Elf, some—not all, like Adam—are led astray.

### Free will and oaths today

Modern thought today would align with Fëanor’s impulse to swear against the gods. In blindly ignoring man’s God-given destinies in favor of exercising free will, it remains

[mankind’s] choice ... to freely accept those destinies and be happy or to reject those destinies and be unhappy. ... The modern who does not believe in God will be consistent in feeling no gratitude or obligation for his or her gifts and talents. But many moderns would want to say that even if God does exist it does not change the situation: we must still be masters of our own destinies.<sup>17</sup>

Fëanor and Saul both ignore the true master of destinies, Ilúvatar and God, respectively, and vow to “be masters of [their] own destinies.” Through Fëanor’s example, “Tolkien plainly means to say that Fëanor made the wrong choice, showing how it led to disaster for himself and for those who follow him.”<sup>18</sup> Although he does not subscribe to this oath-taking himself, Tolkien makes an important distinction between making rash oaths and swearing for emphasis. In a letter to his son, he comments on greasing-banding apple trees, “the damned stuff,”<sup>19</sup> and writes about a Lord Nelson at a production of “Hamlet” who “seized on a quiet moment to yell from the Dress

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<sup>15</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 131, *To Milton Waldman* (October 1951), 147.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>17</sup> Purtill, *Tolkien: Myth, Morality, and Religion*, 122.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>19</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 89, *To Christopher Tolkien* (March 1945), 104-106.



Circle ‘A very fine performance, and I’m enjoying it very much, but cut out the swear-words! ... But he goes on his odd way.’<sup>20</sup> Amused, Tolkien sees Lord Nelson as a loud disturbance but refrains from judging him as evil or righteous. He’s odd, according to Tolkien, who seems less bothered by the swear words in these plays, and more bothered by the vows sworn on God Himself for man’s own purposes.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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