

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript
Episode 351
The Good News of the Return of the King
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Guest: Professor Michael Jahosky (MJ)

Episode Summary

In earlier episodes (322, 334) we chatted with Professor Louis Markos about how the cosmologies of *The Lord of the Rings* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* compare and contrast with the biblical worldview described by Dr. Heiser in *The Unseen Realm*. In this episode we welcome Professor Michael Jahosky to discuss his book *The Good News of the Return of the King: The Gospel in Middle Earth*. Professor Jahosky's thesis is that "The Lord of the Rings is a parable about what Jesus's parables are about, which is the very story of reality itself." Join us as we discuss mythic literature, the New Testament, and insights into how Tolkien's masterpiece reveals his insights into the person and work of Christ.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 351: The Good News of the Return of the King. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! I have a feeling this is going to be one of your favorite episodes.

MH: [laughs] Yeah, it's one of those geek-out episodes. You know? What can I say? Yeah, we're going to have Michael Jahovsky on, who has written a book about Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings*) and the Good News, and just the way the book overlaps with biblical content—the gospel, Jesus. And Michael has read *Unseen Realm* and a few of my other books. And I'm quoted in this book. And he actually does interact with the content a good bit. So Michael was recommended by Louis Markos. And I think this will be fun.

TS: And we have a link on the NakedBiblePodcast.com website. So go there and get the coupon code and get the link so you can go get this book. And with that, Mike, why don't we just get into it?

MH: Right, let's do that.

Well, we're excited to have Michael Jahovsky on with us, here on the Naked Bible Podcast. Now for those of you who... You could probably guess. Michael was recommended (and his book that we're going to talk about and talk through) by Louis Markos. He should need no introduction to the Naked Bible Podcast audience. We spent a previous episode talking about how Louis saw parts of *The Lord of the Rings* worldview and cosmology connecting to my book, *The Unseen Realm*. And then we had a follow-up episode where we talked about Milton. We're going to return to Lord of the Rings today with Michael Jahovsky, again, at Louis' recommendation. And I've read the book. So again, this stuff... Pardon me for geeking out a little bit. [laughter] This stuff fascinates me because I am a Tolkien fan, but I wasn't consulting Tolkien when I was doing my own work in biblical studies. But the cosmological connections are just fascinating to me. So today we're going to talk with Michael about his book, *The Good News of the Return of the King: The Gospel in Middle Earth*. So Michael, I'm going to ask you to introduce yourself a little bit first. Just tell us who you are, and the academic stuff (your degree, where you teach, what you teach, etc.).

MJ: Well, Dr. Heiser, thanks for having me on. I appreciate it. So I'm a Humanities professor currently at St. Pete College in Clearwater now. I've just moved campuses, as a matter of fact. I'd been there for ten years. Previously I was at USF for graduate school. I did a masters in Humanity. So I'm an interdisciplinary guy for what I feel is a very interdisciplinary book. In fact, I was asked in a previous interview about that, and I said, "Yeah, you know, it shows the Humanities training." Prior to that I was at UCF, so I'm a Florida kid. I grew up here. And even though living around the world, I got my degree as an undergrad at UCF. I got a Classical Humanities degree. I focused a lot on Alexander the Great's Hellenistic empire. And then I got a degree in history, where I kind of combined those two. So I've got the three degrees. I've been teaching ten years. I've done two study abroad trips with St. Petersburg College to Israel in 2014 and in 2016. (It's been four years already!) So my background is interdisciplinary. I try to specialize these days in Religion and Philosophy and Mythology. But I've got a background, as well, in History, as I said. And I'm also a big nerd. But I've specialized in Greek and Roman and Jewish civilizations in particular.

MH: Well, it's true. Obviously, our audience has not read the book. They're just getting introduced to it. And it *is* interdisciplinary. I mean, how could it not be, really? [laughs] If you have your head into Tolkien and track on some of the metanarrative themes, I mean, you can't just stay in one place. So that's really understandable. What I want to track on today will become evident to our audience. But we're essentially going to go through the book chapter by chapter. Because I think a chapter/thematic approach will probably make what you're trying to do a little bit clearer.

5:00

MJ: Mm hmm.

MH: But before we jump into the actual content, I'd like you to summarize your journey. This is something... I'd like you to just summarize what you have in the

very beginning of the book, where you start out, “The year 2001 was an important one for me.” And just what your path was and how it wound up here.

MJ: Yeah, speaking of path, I use C.S. Lewis’ essay “I think ‘Christianity and Culture,’” which is in one of those essay compilations) and his phrase “my road into Jerusalem” to describe my journey, which I was just asked to do a few months ago with some students. And it’s been a winding one. I know all Christians have different paths. Mine has been disclosed more clearly to me recently as things have come together in my life. But yeah, 2001 is really where the story starts, although I should just note that I began as a Catholic kid in a Catholic family. I was baptized, received first communion. I didn’t do confirmation, though. That’s because my folks got divorced. I went on a hiatus (not really being a Christian) until about 2001, when we moved into the “milk” Christianity—what we didn’t know at the time was Prosperity Gospel stuff. My mom kind of found Christ again after a car accident, which I didn’t mention in the book. But she kind of brought me to Christ again, but through Protestantism, in 2001. And this was also the year, as you know, that *The Fellowship of the Ring* with Peter Jackson came out in December. And a few months prior to that, starting in the summer I think it was, my brother started reading *The Fellowship* to me. I remember vividly him reading it up to the time of the release. We didn’t finish it, but we finished it after the movie came out. And I did not realize until about ten years after (about 2010/2011) that there was a connection between rediscovering Christianity (although in a different form) and reading *The Lord of the Rings*.

Now the thing that got me was reading N.T. Wright (whom I’m sure needs no introduction to biblical scholars) and his book, *Simply Jesus*, which I think came out that year. And I remember reading it in bed and thinking, “This sounds familiar. Where have I heard this?” [laughter] “This is an exciting way to look at the Bible. I wish somebody had taught me this—God becoming king. What does that remind me of? Oh, yes, that’s *The Lord of the Rings*.” And I made this connection. And from there on out, I started journaling and getting some ideas and gradually to the rest of the preface in the book and some of the intro tells the story. But those were the key points for me.

MH: Yeah, that’s interesting. I didn’t know it either at the time, but my first... Well, not my first. Maybe my second sort of introduction to anything overtly (I can’t even use that word, overtly) Christian was... When I was nine was really my first exposure to anything that we would call serious Christianity. And that was through a neighbor. But then the next year... Actually the same year in school, I had a teacher... It was the only year she ever taught. I was in fourth grade, and she read us *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

MJ: Mmm.

MH: You know? And you don't know it at the time, but then when you're a few years removed and you start getting exposed to biblical stuff, a lot of that stuff starts to sound familiar. [laughs]

MJ: Yeah, it does, doesn't it?

MH: Lewis is more overt in that regard. But yeah, I understand completely. Now as far as your purpose for the book... I'm going to read a little bit of what you have here on the purpose and ask you to comment on it.

MJ: Sure!

MH: You wrote here:

I wrote this book because I wanted to share how The Lord of the Rings, as Christian literature, has helped me understand Christianity better. Let me be clear: this is not because The Lord of the Rings is a carbon copy of the story we can read in the Bible. Instead, it feels like an extension of the biblical story... I realize many books on this subject already exist, but I believe that I have uncovered something very special and worth reading about: The Lord of the Rings is a parable about what Jesus's parables are about, which is the very story of reality itself...

MH: And then you go on to say:

Parables are comparative narratives that bring together the mundane and the transcendent [MH: I actually like the way you put that], the abstract and concrete. They are imaginative stories that re-mythologize and reenchant reality by putting the transcendence back into the world that the modern rational, materialistic worldview has taken out of it... Parables, as a form of mythology, show us that truth is not narrowly defined by what human reason, the senses, and science can prove... My argument in this book is that in The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien has given us a parable of the gospel that not only can restore our understanding and appreciation of Jesus's parables and the Bible, but can also show us how parables can reenchant reality...

10:00

MH: Now I'm going to stop there, because to this audience, you're going to find a friendly audience to the idea of "we need to re-mythologize and reenchant the Church and our approach to the Bible."

MJ: Oh yes.

MH: Because my bread and butter has sort of been that we ought to be reading Scripture through the ancient eyes of the people who wrote it thousands of years

ago. And they were predisposed naturally to a very supernatural worldview. And we are not.

MJ: That's right.

MH: So you're going to find a friendly audience for that. But could you just comment a little bit about what I just read and the purpose behind it?

MJ: Yeah. There's a lot of really great stuff there to comment on, but the first thing I'd like to point out is what I mean by an extension of the biblical story. So I try to make the case in the book that Jesus' parables can open up even a greater understanding of what we might be missing about the Christian worldview, but here *The Lord of the Rings* as Christian literature as a parabolic novel can extend and broaden and show us a more capacious view of the universe through Christian eyes. And in a sense what I'm saying is, as a friend of Tolkien's (Robert Murray, who was a confidant of his) had said, "*The Lord of the Rings* stands as a parable of the kingdom." And I think he's right. And this is somebody who knew Tolkien very well. So that's the first point. So I don't mean that it literally repeats themes, characters, etc., in the Bible, like I said, carbon copy. *The Lord of the Rings* is not about the Bible. It's about what the Bible is about. And about what Jesus' parables are about, which is another way of saying the same thing.

And so that would be the second point, that in both of these stories (in the Bible and in *The Lord of the Rings*) I think we see the same metanarrative, which is, as you know, tied to the term "mythos," at least that's how scholars are connecting it. And so that's what I'm saying there, is that, no, this is not a strict, what Tolkien called in his letters "a conscious and intentional allegory," which was the only kind (we'll talk about this) that he disliked. It is about what the biblical story is about. And I'm saying that that is the story of everything, which is in keeping with what people are saying today. And then the rest of that is really just (and we'll get into this; I know you've asked me to go over this with you, about the book) parables and we'll get into some technical elements there about what they are as a form of literature or as they say a form of mythology. So I'll say more on that later. But it's a special kind of story I think, and particularly like Jesus' way of telling parables, very special, very powerful.

MH: Mm hmm. The mythic terminology I think is important, especially if... We get new listeners all the time, and so we need to unpack that a little bit. Because when some ears hear that, they think, "Oh, if you're using the word 'myth' of something in the Bible, that means you don't think it's true," when actually what we're saying by that term is, "No, it's actually more true than you think." [laughs] And it sounds odd, but for me, I've been working on something (a project here at work) where... Next year I'm going to be doing a class that includes an element of the discussion about the problem of biblical historicity. And so if you think about it this way, if you had two choices to make, and on the left hand side, you have, here's a historical narrative where everything is completely precise,

everything that's mentioned has been fact-checked, everything has multiple source derivation here, everything is just what you'd want it to be. But that historical tale completely excludes and dismisses and, in fact, denies the notion that God or any supernatural reality exists and has any part to play. So that's Door #1.

MJ: Mm hmm.

15:00

MH: Door #2 is you have a historical narrative that isn't precise. That sometimes what it claims really only has one source—that the thing that you're reading that claims it, there's only one source. And so we have gaps in our knowledge and understanding. It's incomplete. But it acknowledges the reality of God and the supernatural having a role to play in what happens. So the question is, "Which one of those doors (Door #1 or Door #2) is more true?"

MJ: Mmm. [MH laughs] Yeah, that's a clever way to put it.

MH: We as moderns and Christians, we're like, "Oh, yeah. That Door #1, that's history." But then when you get to just divorcing all of it from Providence or... It's like, "Oh, wait a minute. That doesn't feel right." But then you go to Door #2 and it's less, it's imperfect of what you'd want it to be, but it's actually more complete.

MJ: Exactly.

MH: You know, it includes *all* of the reality elements that need to be there. And the surprise is that Door #2 is the Bible.

MJ: That's right.

MH: Door #2 is the Bible. It is a selective book. It is not exhaustive and complete in all its detail. Some of the things it says are only said there. But it actually gives you a more real—a more true—representation of the way reality really is. And that's what we're talking about with myth and mythos. So I think people just need to understand what that terminology means, not only in this discussion, but broadly, academics, when they have this discussion, they're going to know this a little bit intuitively.

MJ: Oh yeah. It's a loaded term.

MH: But the public doesn't necessarily know that.

MJ: No, and my experience as an educator (I'm sure you have the same one), is quite the contrary. They're very unfamiliar. And it's the modern definition of "myth" which I can speak to. You've already done it. But it's the Enlightenment story that truth about... And just for our listeners, truth is a statement about fact,

about reality. Reality is that which truth is about. So the modern definition of “myth” is that only historical, rational, empirical, scientific truth about reality...

MH: Material.

MJ: That’s it, yeah. And that’s a very true way of looking at things, but it’s limiting truth to only one kind of truth epistemologically. We can only know how we know what is true through those ways. And as you said, it’s more true to see mythos as part of that. In fact, the word mythology, as you know, combines *mythos* and *logos* together. And a truly mythological worldview would include not only the modern empirical, rational, materialistic ways of knowing truth, but the supernatural, the poetic, the truth-while-nonliteral ways of knowing truth. And that’s what mythos really means. And in fact it does disturb a lot of *my* students. I say, “Well, tell me what myth is.” And they say, “Well, that’s just false, not worth your time.” I said, “Well, what if I told you the opposite was true?” And they just look at me like I’ve...”

MH: [laughs] Like you had two heads.

MJ: Exactly. I’m like, “Well, let me explain.” Sometimes I snag them; sometimes I don’t. But yeah, it’s an imaginative way—an indirect way—of communicating truth. That’s what myth does. It’s a narrative form. In fact, as I hinted at earlier, today “myth” is connected to the concept of worldview. Alister McGrath, who’s a scholar I really respect (who’s reaching out to a lot of postmodern Christians, in fact) says that myth is a narrated worldview. It’s our propositional, philosophical views of various things, but expressed in narrative form. And we all live inside that.

MH: Yeah. And when some of the characters in that narrative form are supernatural beings (like God), that doesn’t invalidate the trueness of the narrative.

MJ: No.

MH: It’s actually more inclusive. It’s more complete.

MJ: Sure.

MH: You have in the book in one place:

The Lord of the Rings is not an intentional allegory of the biblical story. Rather, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Silmarillion* contain the same mythos—the same story of reality—as the Bible, and that is a story for everyone... In saying that Christianity is the myth that came true, Tolkien was saying that Christianity is

a narrated view of reality, but with one crucial difference: the Christian myth really happened; it is the really real.

MH: [laughs] I like the turn of phrase there.

MJ: Oh, thank you.

MH: Yeah. And your last line is:

The Christian myth corresponds accurately with all of reality as humans experience it.

20:00

MH: Which I think is really an important thought. But this sort of bleeds into another thing. This is the last thing I'm going to ask you before we actually get into the book content. And that is... This is an opinion question about the importance of re-enchantment. Now you allude to and use that vocabulary. And this audience is going to appreciate that vocabulary. But why do you think this is crucial for postmodern apologetics, or just to try to articulate what's really real to a postmodern audience?

MJ: Well, I think in particular, we need to remind ourselves that postmodernists think we're all living inside stories that are only true for that community. There is no objective total (or what they might say totalitarian) truth, or a totalizing narrative. That scares them. But what you do when you do that, of course, is you take away the meaning of the word "true." [MH laughs] And so to appeal to a person who is... You know, "Is *that* statement true?" Okay. Whoa. Students are like, "Okay, yeah, that makes sense." Well, I think the fear for postmodernism is a reaction to modernism as we know and the Enlightenment in particular, but also Epicurus back in the day, is that the modern understanding of truth was restricted to the rational, empirical, scientific, and they were reacting to that. But I don't think postmodernists, to their credit, are against narrational truth. And so I think that's how we have to speak to them. I know Dr. Markos, in his *Apologetics for the 21st Century*, has a great book that deals with this. And we have to meet them on their ground and say, "Well, look, we're all living inside this story. So no, nobody can propositionally, rationally prove 100% that this story is true. But we can (and this is me drawing on McGrath, as I've done a lot) tell a better story. A lot of people are saying this today in the scholarly world. And that involves having explanatory scope and power and the ability to... Here's a thing I mention in the book. Your worldview—your myth—has to be able to explain the existence of other worldviews. If it can't do that, it's not a very good worldview. It leaves out a crucial part. How does it... Does it tell a story about the other stories? And I don't think Buddhism does that. Or even Islam. I think Christianity does. And that's a different conversation. But I think we *can* show that Christianity is a better story. And that means to reenchant... Re-enchantment I'm using... A lot of scholars are using the word today. Paul Gould in his *Cultural Apologetics* books defines it as

“putting the transcendence back into the world.” And I think that’s the right meaning.

MH: Yeah, it’s really important.

MJ: It is.

MH: And it just struck me now that... A couple of weeks ago we had an Old Testament scholar friend of mine, John Hilber, on to talk about ancient Near Eastern Old Testament cosmology and the idea of divine accommodation—that God picked people to write the Bible and let them communicate what he wanted communicated through the means by which they were capable. And that creates disconformity with the way we would think about the world, but that really doesn’t matter. But the only way that you can see through that or past that alleged impasse to the Bible being true is to get away from literalism and to start thinking in metaphor. And that is also true right here. Because the only way you’re going to be able to show that the Christian story is the best telling of actual reality—the best telling of that story that we can get—is to be able to escape from a slavish literalism and start thinking in metaphor and archetype. Because that’s how stories are made.

MJ: [inaudible] Yep.

MH: That’s how they’re done. And if you can do that, if you can escape from the reflex literalism and be able to have a conversation about these things, it is much easier to connect to not only postmodern audiences but anyone who’s capable of thinking about theology as story.

MJ: I agree.

MH: So that just hit me here, because we had John on real recently. And it’s just really important.

MJ: It’s so important.

MH: I want to get into specifics here. And I’m going to basically ask you to summarize each chapter. I’m going to start with the title and then I’ll jump into a few questions here. But we’re going to track through the book this way. I think that’s an easy way to get through the material and also in a reasonable amount of time. Because there’s a lot in here.

MJ: Oh, yeah.

MH: Chapter 1 you entitle “The Lord of the Rings as Parable.” And the first section header is Allegory, Parable, and Fairy Stories. So can you briefly define those terms? And how does something like Fairy Story connect to Parable?

25:00

MJ: Yes, I can. We'll start with the definitions. So I did a lot of research on this. And I owe a great debt to a lot of scholars that have book-length treatments on these terms. And I know this will not please everybody. [MH laughs] But I have come to the conclusion...

MH: What? [laughs]

MJ: Yeah, "Huh? That doesn't happen?" Especially Tolkien scholars. With this first term. So allegory, like parables... Two Greek words "to speak of something else, or "to speak of another." And so a story that speaks of one thing in terms of another. I see (and a lot of scholars have said this, so it's not just me) that it's a substitutionary story. This for that. And it's very clear. And so you think of Bunyan with the *Pilgrim's Progress*, I think it was. I'm getting it mixed up with Lewis' *Regress*. Yeah, he has the giant named Despair. Or you think of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. I think, to Lewis' credit, the rest of the six other books are less allegorical. But the children are daughters and sons of Adam and Eve. That's a very clear example of allegory. This for that. It's substitutionary. And yet, parable almost means the same thing. It has literally the word *parabolēn*, which means something a little different, but it has this same connotation of resemblance or speaking of one thing as another, "seeing as," as I know John Crossan has called it back in the day: seeing as. So *parabolēn* means "thrown from the side" or "to cast alongside." I remember one scholar (I can't remember who) put it that way. But I like the definition of the Greek. Both of these are Greek words. "Thrown from the side" implies it's an indirect communication, which is narrative. And that's what allegory is, too. So so far, they're not very different. And I'll get into how they're different when we pile this together. I'll wait to speak on that.

The next one is Fairy Story, and then we'll connect it to Parable and that'll have me talk about all the terms together. Fairy Story I drew, of course heavily on *On Fairy Stories*, which is I think 1939 University of St. Andrews lecture that Tolkien gave that became an essay. And he says, "Fairy contains many things besides elves and fae, besides dwarves, witches, trolls, and also holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky, the earth, and mortal men, when we are enchanted." Well, fairy cannot also be [inaudible] words. "That is one of its qualities," he says, "to be indescribable, though not imperceptible." It's a metaphysical story. It's also a story of seeing as.

But most broadly, I think, fairy story is a story about everything. It is truly a myth. It is a metaphysical story that contains the mundane, the transcendent, the supernatural, the physical. And that's what Tolkien means. It contains things that are real to our imagination, but also to our faculties of reason. It appeals to the romantic in us, but also the rationalist in us, which is what Tolkien had to work on Lewis about, as you probably know. Lewis struggled with that.

So the connection between fairy story and parable I owe a great debt to Father Robert Murray, who is a Jesuit scholar and friend of Tolkien's who wrote an essay in 1992 called "Tolkien and the Art of the Parable." And I started on my research kick when I saw that. I said, "You know, this makes sense to me." I know that Tolkien's way was not to be very heavy-handed and to sermonize. And I think that's why he never mentions parable in connection with fairy stories. But I do a lot of math (in a sense) to show it in the book, through his letters and comments. And this is the best way I can conclude. I argue that Tolkien had a spectrum of allegory—different kinds of allegory. And on the one side, he had what he called (and disliked very much) "the conscious and intentional allegory," which has, as we might say, more allegorical direct language in it and less suggestive language, that would be metaphorical language. And so it's very "in your face." And it's very "this for that." Very substitutionary. On the other end of the spectrum of allegory, I think you can safely say that parable is a type of allegory. Or the other way around. It really ends up being, I think, the same thing. But I submit that parable is another kind of allegory, but it's on the opposite end of the spectrum.

MH: Yeah, [inaudible] over...

MJ: Exactly. And it is, in technical terms (I would say) contrary to the conscious allegory, it is *less* allegorical. Of course it's allegorical. It has to be. But it's more metaphorical. Now the differences there... Scholars have argued that metaphor is speaking of one thing in terms that are suggestive of another. And that's where the strength of the parable/fairy story comes in. Allegory is speaking of one thing clearly and directly in terms of...

MH: Yeah, nobody has to ask what you mean. [laughs]

30:00 **MJ:** Exactly. Like, "Could you explain that?" No. It's very clear.

MH: And your example from Lewis is good: "sons of Adam and daughters of Eve." I mean, nobody's asking what that means.

MJ: No, not at all.

MH: Because it's so overt.

MJ: Yeah, exactly. That's a good word for it.

MH: And you move down the other direction, you get to the less and less and less and less overt, but still similar, still tracking.

MJ: That's right. And so fairy stories and parables... Now to leave kind of the mental model I just gave you, the connection... There's a lot. I would say one of the great points of correlation between parable and fairy story (which again are

on that better end of the spectrum) is the way that the author shifts from the allegorical, familiar mode that is very clear to breaking down the allegorical correspondences. And so for an example, when Aragorn really looks like and resembles Jesus in the book, but not quite. Or [when something] really sounds like a moral argument, but not quite. And you have these moments. And it's when Tolkien as a master storyteller or parable teller shifts from the allegorical to metaphorical mode. And I think that this is how he talked about fairy stories and there's just so many other connections I could talk about. I know you want to move on.

MH: Well, it's interesting. Because it would seem that if you're trying to work the other end of the spectrum (the less overt), you want the reader to think, "Well, that sounds like... But no, wait..." There's, like, this moment of hesitation.

MJ: Yes, exactly.

MH: There's this moment of uncertainty. So if you can get your reader to think that thought, well then mission accomplished. You can go on to the next thing.

MJ: Exactly. That's right.

MH: And so all that you're saying is that this was Tolkien's strategic decision. It was an intentional decision rather than to spend the time on the left end—or the far end of the... one of the spectrum. Now we move to the other end. And we want to put enough in there so that people sense the similarity, but they know that, "Well, that's not quite..." [laughs]

MJ: Exactly. And I think Jesus' parables do the same thing. We know the many echoes. "A man had two sons," and then we think of a *lot* of people in the Hebrew Bible about this. And it reminds us of not just Abraham, but so many others. And so I think there's an echo of familiarity. It's a blur. It brings us to feeling like we've heard this story before. And then it goes and it veers in a different direction. And when we get into the later chapters in the book, I can comment more on that, where that example of the breakdown is really clear. And for the Tolkien scholars out there, what that shows is that, no, this is not a sermon. This is not a "this for that." But the vision is still there. The Christian worldview is very clear. And Tolkien was very explicit in his letters. We're lucky that he was.

MH: Yeah. I mean, you can ask the question, "Well, is this the point of this similarity?" In other words, there could be lots of points of similarity here, and these are here and these aren't. And again, in biblical studies, like "there was a man with two sons." (You just brought that up.) So I actually got a question in a Q&A last night about John 4, the woman at the well with Jesus. Is she... Is this typological of other marriages between sons of God? Like the search for a wife for Isaac (he's the seed of Abraham) and some of these biblical characters,

where they go and they get wives. And the women somehow have a role to play in the messianic story and whatnot. So the question was, “Is John 4 doing this?” And there’s enough there that makes you ask the question. But there’s also enough disconnects there that make you wonder, “Eh, that’s probably not what it’s about.” So there’s this back and forth of what’s going on. It just seems that that’s really what... That sums up what you get with Tolkien. There’s enough there to make you ask the question. And since it *is* there, you can’t wipe the suggestion off the table. You can’t eliminate it, but there are these other dissimilarities as well. And he was content... And that’s probably the wrong word. He probably enjoyed seeing those sorts of discussions come out. And maybe wink at you and say, “Eh, you’re on to something, bud.”

MJ: Yes, exactly. And I’m sure Jesus did, too, which is where I try to envision that. There’s also what I would say, I mean, Tolkien’s comment about fairy being indescribable, but not imperceptible. That’s a great summary of what he’s talking about.

MH: Yeah, that is a good summary.

35:00

MJ: I love that explanation that he gives. And that’s, well, there’s enough on the table, as you said, but then it’s taken away. Brandt Pitre, a Catholic scholar, has worded it that the art of the parable conceals and reveals. I think you’ve mentioned that too, in *The Unseen Realm*. I’m pretty sure you had at least strongly hinted at it. And gets into the messianic plan being concealed, as you said. I think you’re right on the nose there. So I... For listeners who are familiar perhaps with Tolkien’s fairy stories, that the presence of the eucatastrophe, which was a very... I wish I had talked more about it, but I do mention it. The moment of decision is how Murray puts it in his essay about Tolkien’s “Art of the Parable.” But it really means a *dénouement*—an outcome or resolution of the story, a moment of decision where something momentous happens. And we see that in the conception of the fairy story and also in Jesus’ parables.

MH: Yeah, and it could be something disastrous as well. But on the other side, there’s a blessing. There’s a good outcome.

MJ: Exactly.

MH: I mean, for the biblical studies audience, think of the Day of the Lord. There are two sides to that coin. Yes, all that’s wicked will be judged and destroyed and undone, but the flip side of that is that the righteous are vindicated and we get the new heaven and new earth. So it’s this two eucatastrophe... That’s a... I don’t know, did Tolkien coin that term?

MJ: He did. And “dyscatastrophe,” I think he also coined. I just read that the other day. I didn’t focus on that. But yeah, that was one that he coined in the essay on fairy stories. That’s right.

MH: Yeah. It's just an interesting way to put it. So let's drift into chapter 2, because that's also about parables. And the title for chapter 2 is "Parables are Good News Stories." And then the first section header is "Parables as Already and Not Yet Stories." And that's going to be real familiar language to this audience. So how are parables good news stories and "already, but not yet" stories?

MJ: This is one of my favorite chapters. And then we get into the Tolkien stuff more specifically in chapter 3. But the good news, as I'm framing it in the book, is that the king has returned. He's begun to inaugurate—or has inaugurated—the kingdom of heaven—bringing the presence of Eden back to earth, as you put it. And yet the work is not complete yet. We still await the new heavens and the new earth of Revelation 21, and you go back to Isaiah 25 and that kind of looks to, I think, Isaiah 65. So I know you are familiar with this and many of your listeners are. How are parables good news and "already, but not yet" stories? Well, I think we can see this with a few examples. I just picked out a couple that I had mentioned in the book. I mentioned several others where I can think of contours of this. But we see the already and not yet, and I'm just talking of Jesus' parables here, obviously. In Matthew 25, you get the whole chapter there—parables of the ten virgins and the talents are bags of gold. You have the element of something happening (an announcement) but then having to wait a long time before the wedding banquet. Or servants having to give an account (that's a challenging parable) for how they use their time before the return of the king.

MH: Yeah, because look at those elements. It's right there. It just lays it out.

MJ: Yep, very clear, I think. And Mark 1:15, while not a parable there, the opening of Mark (probably our earliest Gospel—probably)... "Repent, change your mind, turn your mind, turn around, believe the good news is at hand," Jesus is saying. I mean, that's a present—an "already"—announcement. But as we know from the rest of Mark and the other Gospels that there's a "not yet" portion of it. Jesus talks about going away. And the Gospel of John. And then coming back and preparing a temporary place, I think, in the famous (is it John 14 or 15?) talk that he gives.

MH: Yeah, "I go to prepare a place for you." Yeah.

MJ: Yeah, it's a temporary place, an interim state, between now and the new heavens and new earth. So I think we could have a lot of fun finding where these elements are present in the parables of Jesus. How do I connect that to "the parabolic novel," as one scholar has called Tolkien's book? And how is *The Lord of the Rings* in particular, but the rest of mythology, an "already, but not yet" story? Well, I think I summarize this later in chapter 3 more clearly, but maybe it is in chapter 2. But page 108-109, we have the announcement that the king has

returned from the eagle at the end of *The Return of the King*. Something has happened. Very clear language. “Your king is returning to you. He will be with you all the days of your life.” And yet we know that’s not true. Aragorn dies, in the appendix. Spoiler alert. [MH laughs] Sorry, guys.

MH: Stuff not to put in the movie. [laughs]

MJ: Yeah, right.

MH: Although, in the last one, it’s alluded to, so not too much of a spoiler.

MJ: I think Arwen has a vision in the movie, the extended edition.

MH: The extended version, yeah.

MJ: Oh, I love those. So the news (and I’m drawing on N.T. Wright here) only makes sense in the longer story, which I’m saying is the story of Arda and the story of the Númenóreans and the dwarves and the elves and the whole story. And that corresponds or resembles the story of Israel. And then that news transforms the present moment and looks to the future. And we see that Aragorn’s coronation, with first the announcement of the eagle... The coronation, then the discovery of the sapling of one of the trees that was originally in Valinor, which is like Eden in Middle Earth. And then...

MH: Isn’t that interesting? There’s a branch. The branch imagery. It’s messianic. There it is again.

MJ: Oh, very much. And the whole imagery from Revelation about the two trees being back and the two trees in Tolkien’s Valinor, in the original conception. So there’s a lot of connections there. And there we have the “already, but not yet.” And there’s a lot more to say. But that’s an answer, I think, to...

MH: For our purposes here, in our audience, here are the takeaways, both on the biblical side and then *The Lord of the Rings* side... I mean, next time you read through the Gospels and you hit parables, ask yourself if you can see “already” and then an interim, and a “not yet” element. I mean, you’re going to see this a lot, this “already, but not yet” theme. So there’s something happening, and then there’s something going on, like boots-on-the-ground, right now, and there’s this accountability factor in a lot of them. And then the “not yet” comes into view. This is frequent. The parables are about the kingdom. Okay? Most of the parables have this as, at the very least, a touchpoint. But a number of them are specifically oriented to this. So try to read them as “already, but not yet” stories. And then when you’re thinking about *The Lord of the Rings*, it mimics it. It mimes that whole approach to telling the story. So again, you went into some examples already. But that idea I think... If this audience can take one thing away from this interview (and hopefully you can take away more), that would be it. Because if

you're approaching both the parables and then when you think about not only *The Lord of the Rings*, but you'll have other literature do this, but specifically *The Lord of the Rings*, this is really the answer to the question of, "How is *The Lord of the Rings* about what Jesus' parables are about?"

MJ: That's right.

MH: That's it. In a nutshell, that's it, what we just talked about.

MJ: Yeah, right, exactly.

MH: Chapter 3 is really when you take a deep dive into the content. The title is "*The Lord of the Rings* is Good News." And again, the first section header is "Your King Shall Come Again." So you devote space in this chapter to perhaps the most obvious connection to the gospel story of Jesus in *The Lord of the Rings* and you've already brought up Aragorn. So there's Aragorn. He's the cryptic, hidden-in-plain-sight king who would return to claim the throne of Gondor, and of course the famous line, "The crownless again shall be king." Can you talk about how the return of the king connects to Jesus in a few other ways?

MJ: Sure. I want to point out, though, too, that there's a lot in the movies and maybe I can integrate some of that into my talk through the next couple of chapters. But the thing I want to say now before I answer that is that we have to kind of assume the Luke 24 perspective. And I talk about this in my book. Hermeneutically, we want to look back from the risen Jesus in the Gospels and search the Scriptures in that sense. But I'm suggesting that Tolkien suggested in his letters and hinted at this, that that is also the proper way to see the whole integrated mythology. And to answer this question greatly is how the return of the king in *The Lord of the Rings* reminds us totally about Jesus. We only notice this if we read *The Lord of the Rings* first, especially from the end, and look back. And in fact, for those of you that don't know, in the *Unfinished Tales*, which is a collection of, well, unfinished tales... [laughter]

MH: That's aptly titled. [laughter]

45:00

MJ: In there is the quest of Aragorn. And there's a tale there that Gimli and Gandalf and the Hobbits are talking after the return of the king. It's not in the main books. And Gimli looks back from the return of the king, after Aragorn has entered and the eagle has said his piece, that all of these events going back to *The Hobbit* and even further back are strangely woven together "very strangely." That's Gimli's words. And I think that gives us that permission that we're only going to understand that *The Return of the King* is the message of the gospel, and we're going to see the connection if we assume that perspective.

But now to your question, I think it's very clear, if you are a Christian... But we can talk later about how it's not clear if you're not a Christian. But you know,

Aragorn and Jesus behaved very similarly in their respective stories. I talk about the Greek word *parousia*, which is a loaded one, having to do with the second coming—erroneously, I think. It’s misunderstood. Obviously, that’s a teaching we believe in, but it’s often misunderstood. *Exousia* is the second one. These Greek words mean “royal presence” or “arrival” and “authority,” respectively. And drawing on N.T. Wright’s great research here... Again, that’s who kind of got me started on this. I looked for examples of authority and they’re everywhere. I counted at least (and I think I just found another one) 19+ moments in *The Lord of the Rings* when Aragorn, like Jesus... when no one dared ask him another question from that day, like in Matthew 22, when they ask him about David and the Lord and Psalm 110, and Jesus just runs circles around them.

MH: Shuts them down.

MJ: Oh yeah. And then exhibits this incredible authority. And we see that in Helms Deep, when Aragorn just gets up on the ramparts... in the books, mind you. It’s not quite the same in the movies. And he just looks down and then dawn breaks and all the orcs are just terrified. And the way Tolkien describes it, you definitely get that *exousia* and the *Parousia*—the royal presence, the royal authority. And everybody is just terrified of them. There are subtler moments throughout the novel. And in *The Fellowship*, when the Hobbits are sitting at Weathertop and Aragorn’s telling them the story of his ancestors, Tolkien even describes the moon rising about the crown. He wore it up the hill behind his head. It’s very suggestive that this is a hill that’s associated with his people. And we get all of these very messianic *Return of the King*-like themes. And it reminds us of Jesus. And Jesus’ parables are filled with these exiled and returning figures, or figures going away and coming back. I mean, there are just so many connections that I explore.

MH: Yeah, it’s really good stuff. I don’t want to... I think to call it “clever” just is a little bit disrespectful. [laughs] It’s more intelligent than just being clever. You could tell that Tolkien knew his Christology really well and really knew how to draw on it for things like this that, granted, the average reader isn’t going to pick up on everything, but he’ll pick up on enough to draw them in, and then they’ll start picking up more and realize, “Oh wow.” It’s hard to go a few pages into anything about Aragorn and not run into something like this.

MJ: That’s right, Dr. Heiser. Even the poem about Strider/Aragorn... That’s his ranger/Dúnadain identity in *The Fellowship*. The whole poem is messianic. It reminds us of so many of the snippets of wisdom literature in the Old Testament, and just really revelant of that theme in *The Return of the King*. And it’s been, I think, N.T. Wright who has pointed out that we read as a main text what the Gospels treat as presupposition. The story isn’t about how Jesus is divine and human. It’s already obviously about that. It’s about what that means is that God has become king. And what *that* means is a lot of other things that it talks about. Of course, it points to what you talk about in your book about Eden returning to

earth. And it's just such a... The way it all comes together, he really was brilliant. As you said, he knew his Christology. He knew his Bible. And he knew his Psalm 82/Deuteronomy 32 worldview. He understood the Divine Council. And we'll get to that, I know.

MH: Yeah, I'm in *The Silmarillion* now, and it's just, like, "Good grief!" [laughs]

MJ: It's everywhere.

MH: Right, it is. Say a little bit about the wedding of Aragorn and Arwen. You say a few things about this in the book in this chapter. How does that connect to the Gospel parables and what we're talking about?

50:00

MJ: Sure. So briefly, it resembles the language found in Scripture of Jesus as the bridegroom and the Church or Israel as the bride. And throughout the Bible, this is language... not just the monarchical language. God is not just king, he's also bridegroom. It's from Sinai to Jesus and everything in between. It's very clear. You also have Jesus' parables that have wedding imagery. And, of course, Jesus' strange comment to those not acquainted with the Jewish worldview about "can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them?" Some people just didn't get it. All of that language, I think, first points to the "already" portion. So in *The Lord of the Rings*, when you have Arwen and Aragorn marry at the end of the "Steward and the King" chapter in *The Return of the King*, it is, I think, first revealant of the first advent of Jesus and the marriage that he made on the cross to his people—the pledge to be with us and to reconcile us and to call back the nations. But also pointing out that he's going away and he's going to come back and he's going to come back for his bride. And so the wedding in the book... And there's a strange line... I may not have interpreted it properly. But I have to go back and look at it. I don't think I included it in the book because I wasn't sure that I had it right. But it's something about... There's a line. I'll have to go find it. But Tolkien says something like, "There's a future element," or "they looked far off," almost like he's suggesting that this is not the end of the story. The wedding is just the beginning. There's more to the wedding in the future.

MH: Does that have anything to do with... This I didn't know, but you mention in the chapter that Tolkien had planned a sequel, *The New Shadow*. So does that... What was that about, and what connections do you see? Does that dovetail into this at all?

MJ: So just looking on my bookshelf here. I think it's Volume 12 of *The History of Middle Earth*. You have *The Peoples of Middle Earth* as the title of the volume there. And in it, Christopher Tolkien (his son) has a summary of his unfinished planned sequel, *The New Shadow*. And I think he probably had a plan to connect this, but that's not what it's about. And so there's no marital elements there. But I'll have to somehow look up the other thing and get back to you on that. But it is

interesting. Anyway, *The New Shadow* is different. It is connecting with different points of, I think, Tolkien's Christian worldview or theology. First of all, it's 13 pages long. It's unfinished. He stayed up one night till 2:00am hitting his head against it and just realizing, "It's not going to work." He's done.

MH: [laughs] It's nice to know that can happen.

MJ: Yeah. We don't know anything about that. [MH laughs] And he knows... We probably are familiar, but some of our listeners may not know that Tolkien credited Lewis with his encouragement to finish *The Lord of the Rings*. But gosh, to finish a sequel to it, I just don't think it was in the cards. So in it, he tells an interesting... My interpretation is that the fourth age of Middle Earth, which is the one after the end of *The Lord of the Rings* and the one that is established with Aragorn's coronation, is what it's about. It's about 100 years after Aragorn's death, where he "lays down"... And Tolkien doesn't even say that he actually dies, but that's beside the point right now. A hundred years after this, kids are playing orc games and people are just kind of getting bored with peace. It's a weird way of putting it, but really cool. And there's some kind of shadowy cult and plot, and then that's it's. It's closed. It's tantalizing, but what I think is that it shows...

MH: Yeah, isn't it?

MJ: Oh, it so is. And it's a very historical dualistic Jewish way of looking at things. It's "we're still living in Arda marred," he says later in another work. "We're looking forward to Arda renewed," which is the "not yet" portion. And I think that a lot of Tolkien scholars have been mistaken to say that the king (and therefore the incarnation) has not arrived yet. "Because well, there it is. Look at the new shadow." Well, hold on a second.

MH: Yeah. They need a good dose of biblical studies for that. [laughs]

MJ: I think so. I mean, especially some of the ones I mention. I'm like, "Well, wait a second. That describes what life is like now." Jesus didn't solve all the world's problems. As you say in your book, if he had done that, he would've had to erase his imagers. So he's not done yet. And anyway, I think it's very clear Tolkien knew about his second coming theology. But he doesn't draw on rapture theology, thank God. Like other educated, very well-spoken theologians (Tolkien obviously was), he knew 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 (which I take a look at) is not about being taken up into the clouds. But it's combining metaphors from the Greco-Roman and Jewish worldviews. And it's all about the king returning. And that is clearly, I think, on display there. And so we look forward to a time when people are not bored with peace, and that the king is going to come back. That's hinted at in Aragorn's so-called death. And so we tie that all together and we have inaugurated eschatology on display here, very clearly.

55:00

MH: In chapter 4 (we'll move on the chapter 4 because we have two to go), I only have one question here. Because this is something that just would never would have occurred to me. [MJ laughs] So the title is "The King Beneath the Mountain: Seeing Thorin and Thinking Aragorn." Now you know I've read *The Hobbit*. I've seen of course the films and whatnot. So the question is, when we see Thorin, how and why should we be thinking of Aragorn? Because this is something that I just didn't... Maybe I'm just not into *The Hobbit* as much, but I just didn't make that mental connection. So when we see Thorin, why should we be thinking of Aragorn? And what's up with the dwarves in all of this? What role do they play?

MJ: This is such a fascinating storyline. And for those of you that haven't explored them in *The Silmarillion*, I talk a lot about this in chapter 5 about the backstory of the dwarves, and it's really underappreciated. A few other reviewers of the book have pointed out that they really liked that I went into this story because we've heard a lot about the elves and the Númanórians. And I do give more focus to the dwarves. And in doing so, I've kind of set myself up for failure to a lot of people allegorically. But of course, that's not what I'm doing. Well, if Aragorn is tied to Thorin, well hold on a second. Aragorn's a Númanórian elf-man. He's not a dwarf. So if Thorin is a type (like David is for Jesus) for Aragorn, which even the movies... Gandalf in the third *Hobbit* movie really makes clear when Thorin—just an awesome scene where he comes out and says "to battle" and they kind of rush the enemy forces and Gandalf says they're rallying to their king... It's very clear in that moment, you can see the glint in his eye, Gandalf is kind of looking to Aragorn. And so there's a good movie example there. So I suggest that we should be kind of looking at Thorin as a type for Aragorn as we do the house of David for Jesus and the kings there. But of course, this wouldn't be a great argument if it wasn't based on something Tolkien had said. Now he was talking more about linguistics and philology here, but he says in a letter (176), "I do think of the dwarves like the Jews." Then he goes on to say, "at once native and alien in their habitation [speaking of exile and yet not fitting in], speaking the languages of the country, but with an accent due to their own private tongue." It's clearly for philology there.

MH: Well, it's the exile theme, which is... I mean, it's... Once you hear it, it's kind of obvious.

MJ: Yeah. You can start making connections. And the two kingdoms of the dwarves: Erebor, the lonely mountain in the North, Khazad-dûm or Moria, the elvish word for it in the South. And you think of Israel and you think of Judah. And you also have this side-by-side with the Númanórian history. So what I think is going on here is, no, there's a breakdown in correspondence typologically between Thorin and Aragorn, because they're different races, but that's because I think Tolkien divided allusions and resemblances to Jesus and the house of David between the story of the dwarves and the Númanórians. Because you see the two-kingdom theme—the exile theme—in both kings' backstories.

MH: Well, he divides Christological elements. They're not all with Aragorn, either.

MJ: Oh, no.

MH: We have some with Gandalf, too. I mean, that's not tactically foreign. He's not sticking everything on one character.

MJ: Right. But I think this is also something that gets overlooked. And it's very important. I think Jesus kind of scattered among those typological allusions themselves. And maybe Tolkien was drawing on the *Beowulf* author here, too. As a professor of Anglo-Saxon literature, this would make sense. But in any event, I think that we look at Thorin and the dwarves as the house of David. And their indispensable role (and here's the great connection) is that in "The Quest of Erebor" (an unfinished tale—that story about Gimli that I mentioned earlier), everything being strangely woven together, Gandalf has a line where he says, "If it wasn't for Thorin and I and the dwarves and Bilbo, then Smaug would've been unleashed on Rivendel. Now for readers, you don't know this if you don't peer really closely, but Aragorn was in Rivendel during the events of *The Hobbit*, and he was only ten years old.

MH: Oh, okay. Yeah, that's right.

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MJ: Now here are two things that are really cool. I think it's Isaiah 42... there's a prophet. The prophet mentions something about hiding. It seems he may be speaking of the messiah "in his quiver." That just reminded me of that—the hidden messiah, the messianic secret. Aragorn was hidden from the enemy. But there's also... But the movie... I think maybe it's the third movie of *The Hobbit*.

MH: It's the extended version. You get Aragorn... He kneels at the statue of his mother. And all that... You get a little bit more of the backstory.

MJ: Yeah, yeah. But in *The Hobbit* film, too, you have Thranduil, Legolas' dad, tell Legolas that there's somebody important in Rivendel you need to go meet. And that's kind of a neat connection as well. So anyway, that's how I see it all together. And so I talk about a lot of interesting things here in this chapter about how the dwarves pave the way, and the way the Jews did, obviously, for Jesus to be descended from the line of David (like Romans 1, Paul says). So that's how I put it together.

MH: Last chapter is just simply named "Estel," which, of course, is the elvish word for "hope." So at one point, prior to this chapter (I can't remember what chapter it was) you wrote that "from two years to 20, Aragorn's identity was kept secret, and he was given the name Estel, which means hope." So just talk a little bit about how, with the fact that this is his given name, how does that play out? How does that statement earlier in your book take shape in this last chapter?

MJ: Well, in chapter 5, what we're seeing is that I've reached back from the return of the coronated king (Aragorn) all the way back into the ancient past of Arda (of Middle Earth), or back in the first and second ages now. And what I try to explore here and what the hope refers to here is in a debate between Finrod, who's an elvish king and the brother of Galadrial, who readers and listeners will know who that is (Cate Blanchett from the movies). And Andreth, who's a woman who was infatuated with Finrod. This debate is very Job-like dialogue, in fact. And in that dialogue, which is a late 1950's work... After *The Lord of the Rings* was finished, Tolkien wrote *The Debate of Finrod and Andreth*. And in it he has Andreth mention that by the first age, which is historically in Middle Earth when this debate takes place, there was already something called the old Estel or hope of Ilúvitar (God) entering into his creation. And then secondly, Finrod at some point in the dialogue (I go over this in chapter 5) says he doesn't think it will be... He doesn't even mention the dwarves. He doesn't think it will be the elves who will be the saviors of all, but a man. And [that was] more true than he realized. Finrod is also connected (this goes real deep) to Beren, who is an ancestor of [Aragorn], and anyway, there's a lot of twists and turns here. But Finrod and Beren (who is a man who is an ancestor of Aragorn)... Finrod I think saved his life in the dungeons of Sauron. So there's a history here. This is a man that I think predicted (or rather typologically when we look backwards it seems he did... pre-figured would be the better word) the messiah coming into Middle Earth understood as the return of the king. And I explore that. And the hope (Estel) refers to not only Aragorn, which that's the name he's given, but that reference should make us go back to this debate and think, "That's what Tolkien was referring to." And so I think it's very significant that this debate takes place in the first age, right on the eve of one of the great six or seven battles that the people were having with the first dark lord, Melkor or Morgoth. And it's already an old hope by this point, which means this is something God had been planning, like we know in the Bible, from the very beginning.

MH: Mm hmm. Yeah, and you devote space in this chapter to discussing a number of points of emphasis that I have in *Unseen Realm*, because it gets into the cosmology, *The Silmarillion*—all that content. So you have elements here of Divine Council, supernatural rebellion, redemption, adoption of humans, children of God, the whole Ilúvitar in Tolkien's terminology. So just generally, how do you see those concepts coming through in Tolkien's cosmology and the figures he has there?

MJ: Let me just give a few examples. So with a great deal of respect for your work that I'm so grateful for... it's changed my understanding of my faith. So thank you. But because of your research in this department, I couldn't help but make these connections and see them on display. And I thought, "Wow. It's clear now that with up-to-date scholarship, we can dismiss the old arguments for the Ainur, the Valar, and the Maiar in *The Silmarillion*, who are these previously thought to be either or a combination of these: the divine aspects of the one true God (his multiple aspects), which you know you dismiss or argue against them in

1:05:00

your *Unseen Realm* book, or that they are references to the Trinity, which I think is just patently false and obviously not in the Bible, either. Or that they're angels or archangels. They're not. They're God's Divine Council. And they're hierarchical. You have the Valar, who are kind of like the senior sons of God (council members) and the Maiar (like Gandalf and the Balrogs), who are the lower Divine Council. And I think now some scholars are waking up to this. I know Dr. Markos has seen it, too. I don't know too many that have pointed this out. In fact, the ones I read, nobody said that it reminded them of Psalm 82. [MH laughs] And that's why I'm like, "It's right there. This is the Divine Council."

MH: You can't see it if, "Oh, 'the gods' here are just men." If you're thinking that, you'll never see it.

MJ: Yeah. Nor the Jewish elders or anything like that. So exactly. So that's one. Obviously, the Divine Council's on full display and the unseen realm is quite obvious. Just in general, Tolkien had a supernatural, fully fleshed-out Christian worldview—the supernatural aspect of the created order, not Platonic, disconnected, disembodied. It's here—the transcendent dimension of the world we live in. And so, obviously, Tolkien includes that assumption in his books. Evil... You've got, I think, the biggest connection that I saw from your *Demons* book had to do with the Melkor rebellion in *The Silmarillion* and its infection of other Divine Council members. Now in Tolkien's universe, you have Melkor (a Valar—the supremely powerful Valar), who starts weaving his own music. The world comes into existence through music. Beautiful. And little do we make this connection, but he, in fact, influences negatively Aulë, who is the creator of the dwarves. And fun fact: the dwarves were created first. But they were put to sleep because it went against God's plan. Well, I made the connection to the Genesis 6 passage here about...

MH: And you also get with Aulë a direct connection to craftsmanship, which you get in the whole sons of God/Watchers thing in Second Temple Judaism. It's just there. It's all there.

MJ: Yes, exactly. It's very clear. Yes. So that's the highlight I wanted to point out. The Pravatō Boni Augustinian doctrine of evil (origin of evil) is very much there. I know Thomism is beyond me, but I know Aquinas is a great influence, as well, on Tolkien's view as a Catholic. There have been better books that explore that. But I think obviously we see that explanation of the origin in nature, metaphysical nature of evil, on display in the Ainulindalë (the creation myth). So that's very clear.

MH: Yeah. I find it interesting. I just... I can't remember who the author is right now because I just bought it. I'm only in the first chapter, but there's a... It's an academic work (Academic Press) on Tolkien's cosmology.

MJ: Mmm!

MH: Yeah, this is something I'll be drilling down into. Because the more I... Through Louis [initially, and now your book, I could camp out here for a while. [laughs]

MJ: It's a lot of fun. You won't regret it.

MH: It is. And I think, for me... I often get asked about tools for doing biblical theology. And we can give you nuts and bolts tools and books and resources. But I honestly think that one of the best things you can have is imagination. And that isn't to fictionalize the data points. But I think an active imagination helps you to sort of connect things in multiple ways. And then you essentially find out what hangs together. [laughs]

MJ: I couldn't agree more.

MH: So it'll be useful for me for that.

MJ: Yeah. Well, have fun. I'm so grateful that you asked me on. And it seems like you enjoyed my book. I know there's a lot in there, but thank you for...

MH: Let me ask you one more question before we wrap up.

MJ: Yeah! Sure.

MH: Can you give us an example of how you would or maybe have used the content of *The Lord of the Rings* to have a discussion with somebody who isn't a Christian? In other words, are there things in here that you've used or would recommend to use as discussion starters?

1:10:00

MJ: Absolutely. Thank you. It's a great question. All of this has been just the best interview. I've really enjoyed it thoroughly, so thank you again. I would leave you with three points, and I think these are my favorite parts of the questions today, if I had to pick. Because they speak to the practical and apologetic usefulness of Tolkien's books.

Now first and foremost, it is a story in its own right. It needs to be considered and treated as an aesthetic object. However, with great caution and respect for the author and his intentions, I would submit these three things to start conversations. And they are conversation starters. The first one I've used was one that was used on me by Peter Kreeft, the great Catholic scholar. And he wrote in his philosophy of Tolkien, "Do you love *The Lord of the Rings*? If the answer is yes," (and I get this from a lot of my secular students), then I kindly and gently point out, "Well, you unconsciously love the Christian story. Here's how." And they go, "What?" And I go, "Let me explain. Did you know Tolkien wrote this? Did you know he wrote that?" And "are you familiar that the same thematic contours, creation, fall, redemption, restoration...?"

And then I give them the second point here. This is related to the first. Here's a talking point. And the nerds that love and know the books (like me and you) [laughs] that the red book of Westmarch in *The Return of the King*... When Frodo is giving a title to he and Bilbo's great journey story, he entitles it "The Downfall of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Return of the King*." And I say, "There I submit to you is a summary of the story the Bible is telling. And the story we find here (creation, fall, redemption, restoration)."

Thirdly and finally, there is a bit more of a philosophical starting point for those of us that like the rational apologetics. In *The Two Towers*, book three, chapter 2, it's entitled The Riders of Rohan. Aragorn has a conversation with Eomer about his metaphysical naïveté concerning the existence of Hobbits. And it's a long thing. I don't want to get too into it. I know we're already running long, but Eomer says, "Do we walk on legends or in the green earth in the daylight?" And Aragorn responds, "A man may do both." And so he says, "The green earth, that is a mighty matter of legend, though you tread it under the light of day." And here I get into a conversation with people about how some of the moral arguments and philosophical arguments of Christianity are present underneath Tolkien's fictional writing. So there's a lot to mine there. So that's a great place to go to have that conversation.

MH: Well, that's good stuff. Yeah. I'm glad we could do this. I'm glad we had you on.

MJ: Thank you.

MH: And certainly thankful for your book. So we will have a link, obviously, to where people can get your book on the episode webpage. And just thanks again for... It's very evident that you not only put a lot of work into this, but it's more than an academic enterprise. It's personal.

MJ: Yep.

MH: And I think that's going to come across in the book. And for those who love *The Lord of the Rings*, it'll be useful fodder to have discussions, but also you're going to learn a lot, and you'll be stimulated to be able to think better even about certain things in Scripture too. It gives you little nudges in certain directions that I think are really an assistance there.

MJ: Thank you. This has been great. Thank you again.

MH: Yep, thank you.

TS: Alright, Mike. It's always fun to watch you, because I know you're geeking out and you love this stuff. But Tolkien, I mean, he really is a master of Christology. I mean, he intimately knew that in order to weave it into his stories. You really have to know something before you can really repurpose it to the level that he did. And so that's what's fascinating, I think—what you find fascinating, of course.

MH: It is. I mean, he's not just writing something and, "Oh, can I drop something in here to make people think about Jesus?" No, I mean, there's so much of it that is... Parts of it are noticeable, but for every noticeable thing you've got three or four things that you'd really have to drill down, and you'd have to know not only *The Lord of the Rings* well, but you'd have to know the New Testament really well. So he knew what he was doing, for sure.

TS: Did you ever watch the 1977 cartoon movie of *The Hobbit*?

MH: I have not seen that. No, I've never watched it.

TS: I saw it as a child, and it terrified me. [MH laughs] I mean, it really did feel biblical in nature. Just the animation style of it and everything, it really had that biblical feel for it. So I think I kind of got that early as a kid by watching that particular movie. It scared the crap out of me.

MH: Wow. I should watch it. With that recommendation. [laughs]

TS: It's good. It really is.

MH: Is that two thumbs up? [laughs]

1:15:00

TS: Yeah. I'd like to go back and watch it, too. And have you watched the movie, *Tolkien*, based on his life?

MH: No, I haven't seen that yet either. Drenna has seen it and really recommended it. I've got to watch it.

TS: Yeah, it's good. So I need to go back and watch *The Lord of the Rings* again, with this mindset. It's kind of like reading the Bible after you've read *The Unseen Realm*. [MH laughs] You go back and you start to understand all these layers, and it makes it more interesting. It really does.

MH: Yeah. Well that's an irresistible recommendation there, so I'll have to do both.

TS: Well, hey, we have Michael's book. We've got a coupon code for his book. So go to NakedBiblePodcast.com and get the link. Well, next week we're going to be getting into Revelation.

MH: Yeah, we'll do an introductory episode, like we do for all of our series. But yep, we're taking the plunge. It begins next week.

TS: Alright. Awesome. It's finally here. Well with that, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.