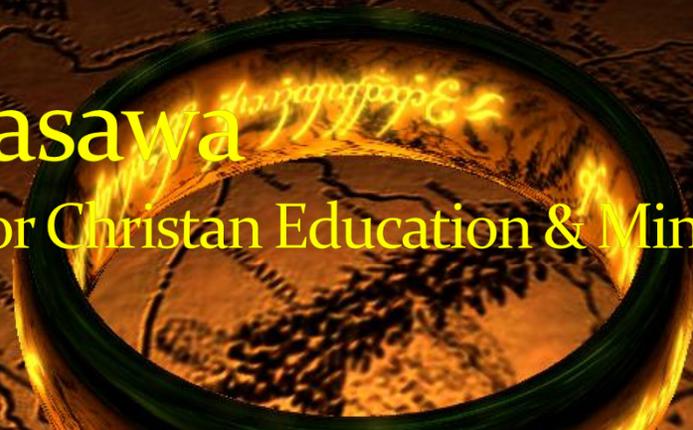


# The Theology of Tolkien's

# LORD OF THE RINGS

Mako A. Nagasawa

The Anástasis Center for Christian Education & Ministry

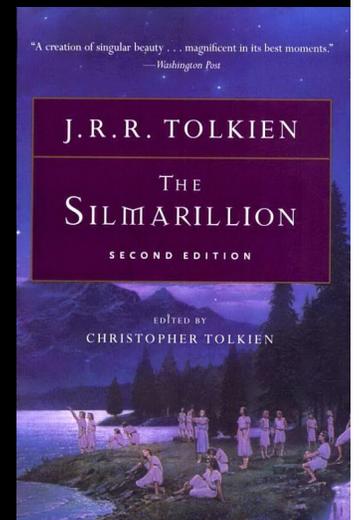


# The Architecture of a Happy Ending Story

- Good triumphs over Evil without becoming Evil: How?
- Evil: Who? What? Why? When?

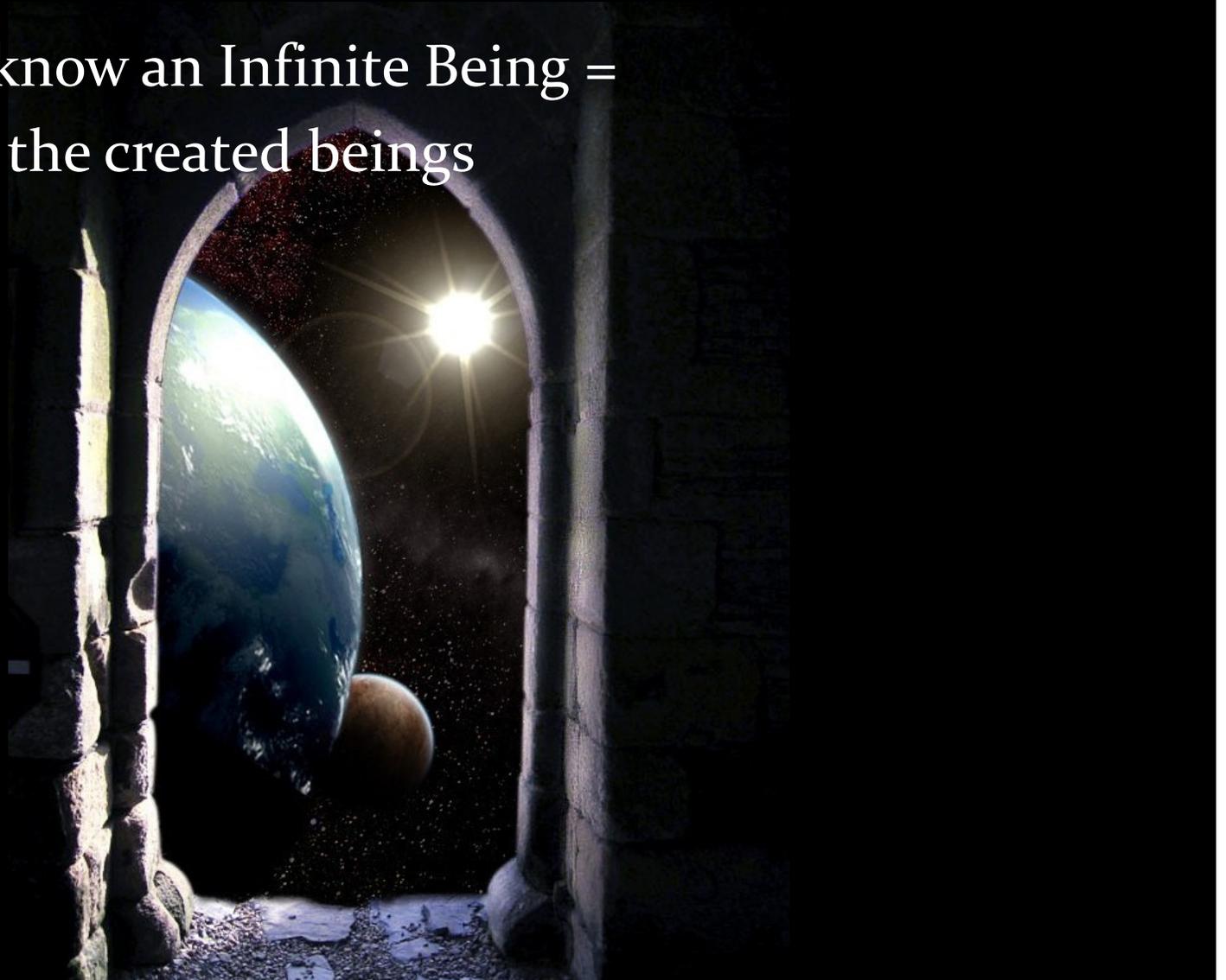
# A Good God and Created Beings

- Iluvatar creates all things by singing. He shares his singing with the Ainur (angels), who become partners with him, *for their own experiential growth.*
- ‘In the understanding of their brethren they grew but slowly. Yet ever as they listened they came to deeper understanding, and increased in unison and harmony. And it came to pass that Ilúvatar called together all the Ainur and declared to them a mighty theme, unfolding to them things greater and more wonderful than he had yet revealed; and the glory of its beginning and the splendour of its end amazed the Ainur, so that they bowed before Ilúvatar and were silent...Never since have the Ainur made any music like to this music, though it has been said that a greater still shall be made... For a great while it seemed good to him, for in the music there were no flaws’ (*The Silmarillion*, “Ainulindale”)



# A Good God and Created Beings

- Getting to know an Infinite Being =  
Growth for the created beings

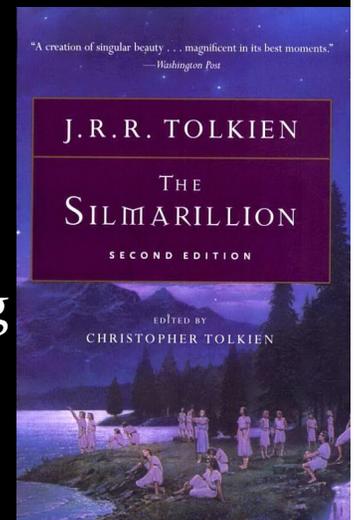


# A Good God and Created Beings

- Logically, a 100% good God must defeat evil
- Belief in a good God requires a happy ending
  - If your theology = high ethical Monotheism
  - Then your hope = Messianic

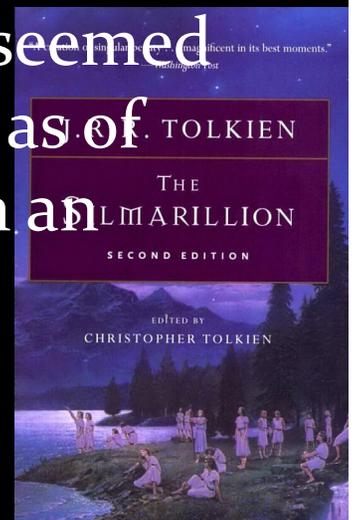
# A Good God and the Problem of Evil

- Eru Iluvatar (God)
- Ainur (angels)
  - Valar
    - Manwe , Varda (Elbereth), Ulmo, Yavanna, Aule, Nienna, Orome, Este, Mandos, Vaire, Lorien, Vana, Tulkas, Nessa
    - Melkor, Ungoliant the Spider
  - Maiar
    - Curunir (Saruman the White), Olorin (Gandalf the Grey), Aiwendil (Radagast the Brown), Alatar and Pallando (the Blue Wizards)
    - Gorthaur the Cruel (Sauron the Sorcerer), Gothmog (Lord of Balrogs)



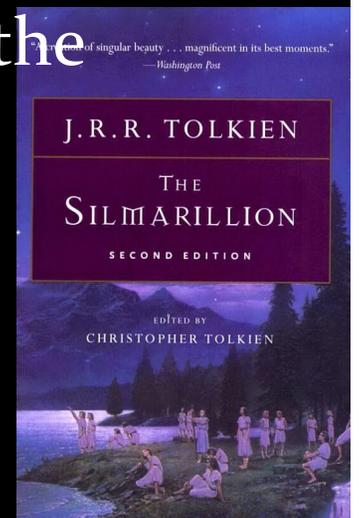
# A Good God and the Problem of Evil

‘Straightway discord arose about him, and many that sang nigh him grew despondent, and their thought was disturbed and their music faltered; but some began to attune their music to his rather than to the thought which they had at first. Then the discord of Melkor spread ever wider, and the melodies which had been heard before foundered in a sea of turbulent sound. But Iluvatar sat and hearkened until it seemed that about his throne there was a raging storm, as of dark waters that made war one upon another in an endless wrath that would not be assuaged.



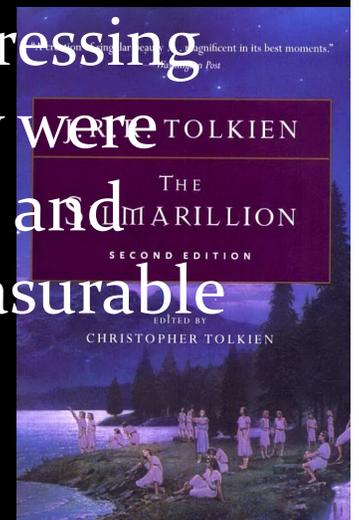
# A Good God and the Problem of Evil

Then Iluvatar arose, and the Ainur perceived that he smiled; and he lifted up his left hand, and a new theme began amid the storm, like and yet unlike to the former theme, and it gathered power and had new beauty. But the discord of Melkor rose in uproar and contended with it, and again there was a war of sound more violent than before, until many of the Ainur were dismayed and sang no longer, and Melkor had the mastery.



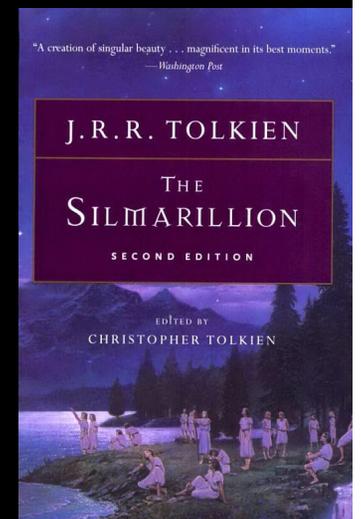
# A Good God and the Problem of Evil

Then again Iluvatar arose, and the Ainur perceived that his countenance was stern; and he lifted up his right hand and behold! A third theme grew amid the confusion, and it was unlike the others. For it seemed at first soft and sweet, a mere rippling of gentle sounds in delicate melodies; but it could not be quenched, and it took to itself power and profundity. And it seemed at last that there were two musics progressing at one time before the seat of Iluvatar, and they were utterly at variance. The one was deep and wide and beautiful, but slow and blended with an immeasurable sorrow, from which its beauty chiefly came.



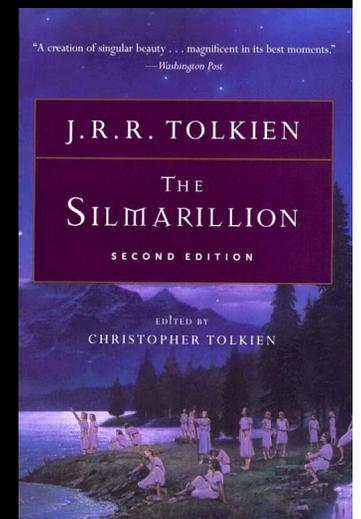
# A Good God and the Problem of Evil

The other had now achieved a unity of its own; but it was loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated; and it had little harmony, but rather a clamorous unison as of many trumpets braying upon a few notes. And it essayed to drown the other music by the violence of its voice, but it seemed that its most triumphant notes were taken by the other and woven into its own solemn pattern.



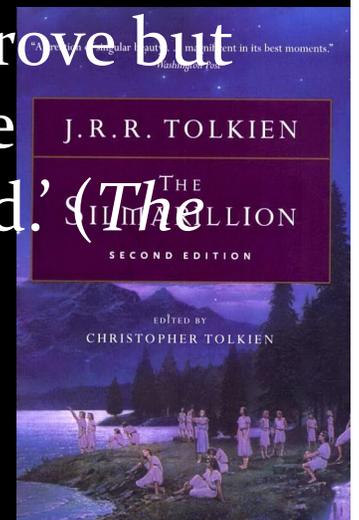
# A Good God and the Problem of Evil

In the midst of this strife, whereat the halls of Iluvatar shook and a tremor ran out into the silences yet unmoved, Iluvatar arose a third time, and his face was terrible to behold. Then he raised up both his hands, and in one chord, deeper than the Abyss, higher than the Firmament, piercing as the light of the eye of Iluvatar, the Music ceased.



# A Good God and the Problem of Evil

Then Iluvatar spoke, and he said: ‘Mighty are the Ainur, and mightiest among them is Melkor; but that he may know, and all the Ainur, that I am Iluvatar, those things that ye have sung, I will show them forth, that ye may see what ye have done. And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.’ (*The Silmarillion*, “Ainulindale”)



# A Good God and the Problem of Evil

- God is original, good is original
- A good God = create creatures with free will = called to grow in goodness and experience
- Goodness experienced in both order and freedom:
  - Creating music
  - Speaking (language, literature)
  - Gardening
  - Relational learning, knowing

# A Good God and the Problem of Evil

- Evil is a corruption of the good, the abuse of free will
- Evil was never necessary
- Evil destroys the balance between order and freedom; chaos and rigidity result, ironically

# A Good God and the Problem of Evil

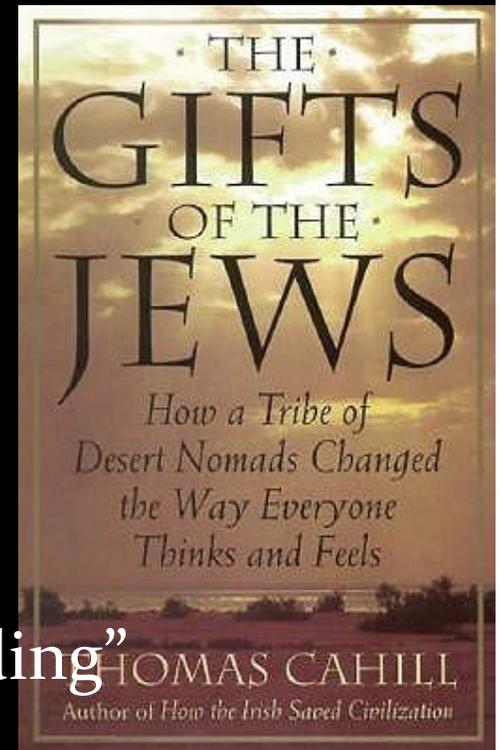
- God Speaking (Genesis) vs. Iluvatar Singing (Tolkien)
  - In Tolkien, the singing creates the world *and history to some degree*
    - Elves, Men, Hobbits, Dwarves were new elements unforeseen by the Valar
  - Ongoing intervention: In the Bible, God continues to intervene by speaking. Does Iluvatar continue to intervene?

# God's Spoken Word

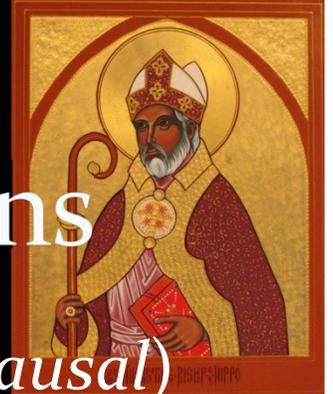
- To Himself: 'Let there be light'; and there was light. (Gen.1:3); ten times in Genesis 1
- To Abram: 'I will redeem your descendants from bondage.' (paraphrase of Gen.15:13 – 15)
- To Abram and Sarai: 'You will have a son' (Gen.17:15 – 19)
- To Samuel: 'David will be king of Israel' (1 Sam.16:1 – 13)
- Etc. etc.

# God's Spoken Word

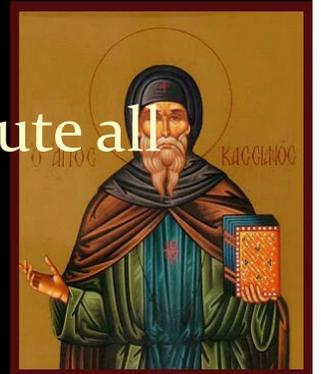
- The pattern: God speaks to act, and acts as He speaks
  - 'Surely the LORD God will do **nothing** except that which He reveals to His servants the prophets.' (Amos 3:7)
  - 'Prophets' are those to whom God speaks first
  - God does not cause everything, only what He has spoken
  - Real historical events
- Human free will is genuine
- The Jews contributed the world's first linear sense of history, and the "happy ending"



# God's Actions and Human Actions



- Augustine's *monergism* ('one will'; God is *omnicausal*) is problematic and incorrect
  - All earlier theologians believed in human free will
  - Augustine himself, in his early years, believed in free will
  - John Cassian, another leading theologian (the 'Eastern Orthodox spokesman'), wrote a sensitive, critical response to Augustine
  - The Second Council of Orange (529 AD) condemned double predestination as a heresy, and denied that Augustine's theology taught it
  - If you believe in *monergism*, then you must attribute all human sinfulness back to God, including the fall, subsequent sins, unbelief, evil, injustice, hell



# Iluvatar's Assistance: Prophecy

- Malbeth the Seer, a wise man of Arthedain (one of the three kingdoms of a divided Arnor), prophecied:

Over the land there lies a long shadow,  
Westward reaching wings of darkness.  
The Tower trembles; to the tombs of kings  
Doom approaches. The Dead awaken;  
For the hour is come for the oathbreakers;  
At the Stone of Erech they shall stand again  
And hear there a horn in the hills ringing.  
Whose shall the horn be? Who shall call them  
From the prey twilight, the forgotten people?  
The heir of him to whom the oath they swore.  
From the North shall he come, need shall drive him:  
He shall pass the Door to the Paths of the Dead. (*RotK*, bk.5, ch.2)



# Iluvatar's Assistance: Prophecy

- Glorfindel, an Elf-lord, says of the Witch-King of Angmar:

‘Do not pursue him! He will not return to this land. Far off yet is his doom, and not by the hand of man will he fall.’ (*LotR Appendix A, I, iv*)



# Iluvatar's Assistance: Prophecy

- 'The hands of the King are the hands of a healer'

Then an old wife, Ioreth, the eldest of the women who served in that house, looking on the fair face of Faramir, wept, for all the people loved him. And she said: 'Alas! If he should die. Would that there were kings in Gondor, as there were once upon a time, they say! **For it is said in old lore: *The hands of the king are the hands of a healer.*** And so the rightful king could ever be known.'

And Gandalf, who stood by, said: 'Men may long remember your words, Ioreth! For there is hope in them. Maybe a king has indeed returned to Gondor; or have you not heard the strange tidings that have come to the City?' (*RotK*, bk.5, ch.8)

# Iluvatar's Assistance: Holy Name

At that moment Frodo threw himself forward on the ground, and *he heard himself crying aloud*: O **Elbereth**! Gilthoniel! At the same time he struck at the feet of his enemy. (*FotR*, bk.1, ch.11)

Then he heard voices far off but clear: the crying of the Elves as they walked under the stars in the beloved shadows of the Shire, and the music of the Elves as it came through his sleep in the Hall of Fire in the house of Elrond. Gilthoniel A **Elbereth**! And with that he staggered to his feet and was Samwise the hobbit, Hamfast's son, again. 'Now come, you filth!' he cried. (*TT*, bk.2.ch.10)

# Iluvatar's Assistance: Free Will

'He heard himself crying out: *Never, never!* Or was it: *Verily I come, I come to you?* He could not tell. Then as a flash from some other point of power there came to his mind another thought: *Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring!*

The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger. He was kneeling in clear sunlight before the high seat. A black shadow seemed to pass like an arm above him; it missed Amon Hen and groped out west, and faded. Then all the sky was clean and blue and birds sang in every tree.' (*FotR*, bk.2, ch.10; compare to Romans 8:5 – 11; Philippians 2:12 – 13; Christian theologian John Cassian, *Conferences* 13)

# Iluvatar's Assistance: Hope

But Éomer said: 'Where is the Lady Éowyn, my sister; for surely she should be lying beside the king, and in no less honour? Where have they bestowed her?'

And Imrahil said: 'But the Lady Éowyn was yet living when they bore her hither. Did you not know?'

Then **hope unlooked-for** came so suddenly to Éomer's heart, and with it the bite of care and fear renewed, that he said no more, but turned and went swiftly from the hall; and the Prince followed him. (*RotK*, bk.5, ch.8)

# Iluvatar's Assistance: Friendship

‘Thus we meet again, though all the hosts of Mordor lay between us,’ said Aragorn. ‘Did I not say so at the Hornburg?’

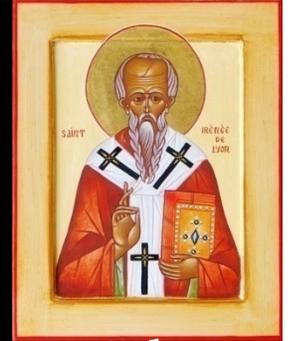
‘So you spoke,’ said Éomer, ‘but hope oft deceives, and I knew not then that you were a man foresighted. Yet twice blessed is **help unlooked for**, and never was a meeting of friends more joyful.’ And they clasped hand in hand. (*RotK*, bk.5, ch.6)

# Iluvatar's Assistance: Humanity

‘And doubtless the good stone-work is the older and was wrought in the first building,’ said Gimli. ‘It is ever so with the things that Men begin: there is a frost in Spring, or a blight in Summer, and they fail of their promise.’

‘Yet seldom do they fail of their seed,’ said Legolas. ‘And that will lie in the dust and rot to spring up again in times and places **unlooked-for**. The deeds of Men will outlast us, Gimli.’  
(*RotK*, bk.5, ch.9)

# Jesus Was “Unlooked-For”



Irenaeus, 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian bishop of Lyons: ‘But what Isaiah said...“The Lord Himself shall give you a sign,” he declared an **unlooked-for** thing with regard to His generation, which could have been accomplished in no other way than by **God the Lord of all**, God Himself giving a sign in the house of David. For what great thing or what sign should have been in this, that a young woman conceiving by a man should bring forth – a thing which happens to all women that produce offspring? But since an **unlooked-for** salvation was to be provided for men through the help of God, so also was the **unlooked-for** birth from a virgin accomplished; God giving this sign, but man not working it out.’ (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk.3, ch.6)

# Ilúvatar's Assistance: Final Healing?

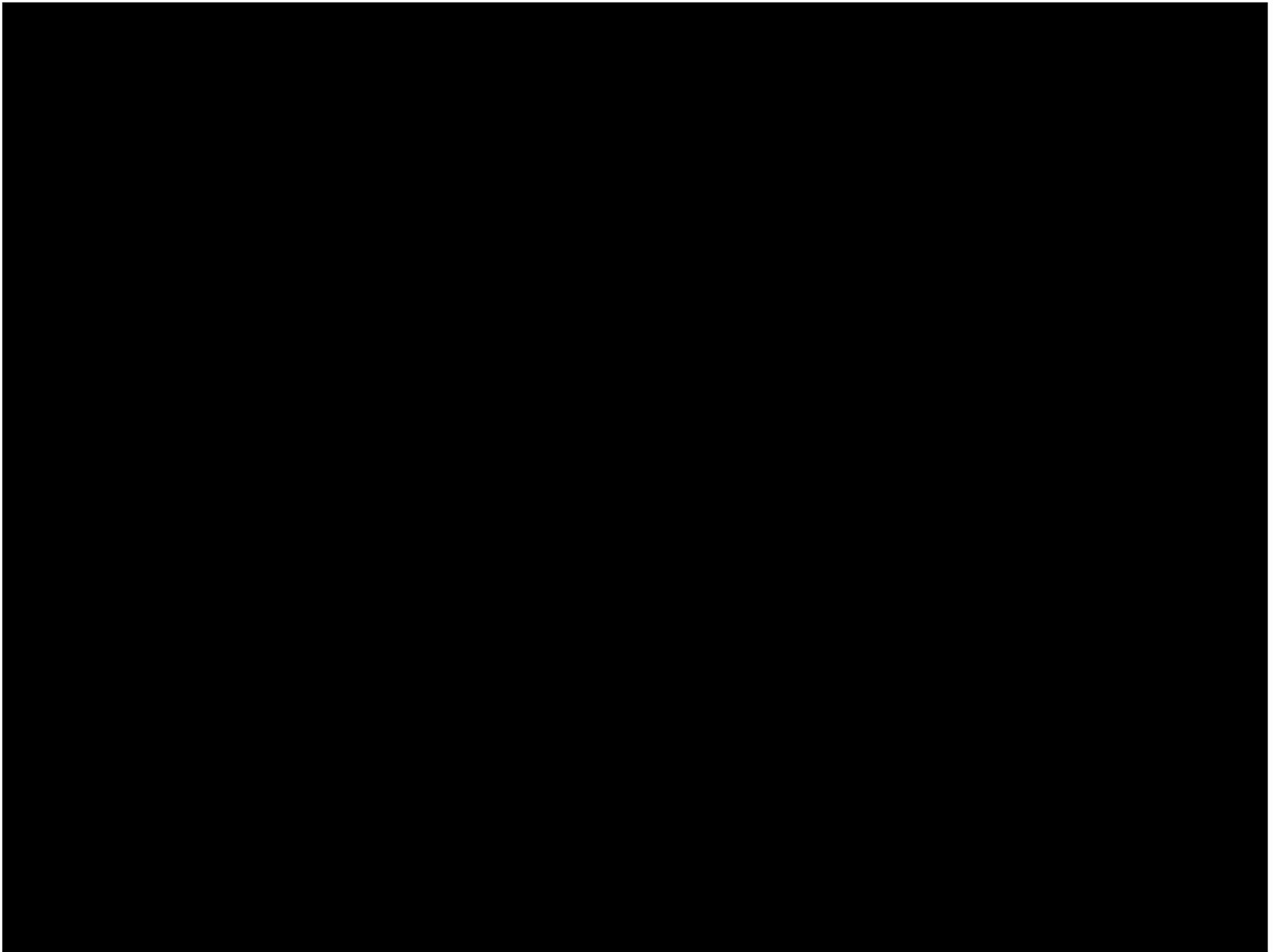
‘It has been said that a greater still shall be made before Ilúvatar by the choirs of the Ainur and the Children of Ilúvatar after the end of days.’ (*The Silmarillion*, “Ainulindale”)

‘If any change shall come and the Marring be amended, Manwë and Varda may know; but they have not revealed it, and it is not declared in the dooms of Mandos.’ (*The Silmarillion*, “On the Voyage of Eärendil and the War of Wrath”)

# Iluvatar's Assistance: Final Healing?

‘Some say that... Eru will find a way of healing that will heal both our fathers and ourselves and those that shall follow us. But how that shall come to pass, or to what manner of being this healing will make us, only those of the Hope (as we say) can guess; none can clearly assert. But there are among us a few (of whom I am one) who have the Great Hope, as we call it, and believe that His secret has been handed down from the days before our wounding. This is the Great Hope: that Eru will himself enter into Arda and heal Men and all the Marring.’  
(*Morgoth's Ring: The Later Silmarillion*, “Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth”)

Note: “Morgoth's Ring” refers to all of Arda. Sauron wanted to damage and control minds. Morgoth damaged *all matter*.



# The Theology of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

1. Introduction: J.R.R. Tolkien
2. Theodicy: A Good God and the Problem of Evil
3. Identity: The Role of Humanity
4. Salvation: The Defeat of Evil
5. Ethics: What is the Right Thing to Do?
6. Epistemology: How Do We Know?

# What are Human Beings?

1. “Children of Iluvatar”
2. “Second Born”, after the elves, the “First Born”
3. The “final melody” of Iluvatar
4. Men possess the “gift of mortality”
  1. Elven souls are bound to Arda (Earth); if slain, their souls depart for Valinor, home of the Valar, to be re-embodied
  2. Human souls leave Arda (Earth) for some other place, which Tolkien leaves open, unanswered
5. Strength is either constant or can increase (e.g. through union with elves)
  1. Strength of Ainur, Elves can be imparted but decreases
6. All named dragons are slain by men

# What are Human Beings?

1. Physically corrupted Vala = Melkor
2. Physically corrupted Maiar = Sauron, Balrogs, Dragons, Spiders
3. Physically corrupted Ents = Trolls
4. Physically corrupted Elves = Orcs
5. Physically corrupted Humans = ??
  1. **Do not become another physical race**
  2. Nazgul cursed by Sauron, Dead Men of Dunharrow cursed by Isildur
  3. Headed towards a ghostly, non-physical existence, 'shadow' (thin, transparent)

# What are Human Beings?



# What are Human Beings?

**First Age**

**Second Age**

**Third Age**

**Fourth Age**

Origin ?

Numenor

United

United

Fall ?

near

Kingdom

Kingdom

Valar &

near the

with Tree,

Elves

Elves

no Elves

Fall

Fall

Fall ?



Leaves room for the biblical account of origins & fall

# What are Human Beings?

1. First Age: The Valar begin a garden, Melkor disrupts
  1. Elves are “discovered” by Valar, rescued from Melkor, are invited to Valinor and behold the Trees
  2. Men are “discovered” by the Elves
    1. Men’s origins are unknown, eastern part of Middle-Earth
    2. *Is a “fall” story already implied?*
    3. Men grouped in three Houses (Beor, Haleth, Marach/Hador) to oppose Morgoth
    4. A “fall” story: Ulfang led some Easterlings to betray the Elves and serve Melkor instead
    5. Men were almost destroyed by Melkor
    6. Melkor defeated by Elves and Men in the War of Wrath

# What are Human Beings?

2. Second Age: The Valar give Numenor to humans
  1. Numenor was an ideal island paradise
  2. Elros Half-Elven (brother of Elrond) became the 1<sup>st</sup> king of Numenor
  3. A “fall” story: Some Men began to desire immortality, caused civil war
  4. A “fall” story: Sauron gave Nine Rings to nine men of Numenor
  5. A “fall” story: Sauron deceived Ar-Pharazon to sail against Valinor; Numenor flooded and sunk
  6. Sauron was defeated by Elves and Men in Middle-Earth
  7. A “fall” story: Isildur failed to destroy the One Ring

# What are Human Beings?

3. Third Age: Numenorian Men resettle Middle Earth
  1. The Dunedain founded Gondor and Arnor
    1. Arnor greater than Gondor, closer to Gil-galad and the Elves of Lindon
    2. Isildur, second king of Arnor, after Elendil, killed by orcs
    3. A “fall” story: Arnor divided between three brothers by civil war
    4. A “fall” story: Arnor fell to the Witch-king of Angmar
    5. Elves started to leave Middle Earth
    6. A “fall” story: Haradrim in the East, Dunlendings through Saruman, allied with Sauron
    7. Sauron defeated by Elves and Men again, the One Ring destroyed, although Frodo failed to do it

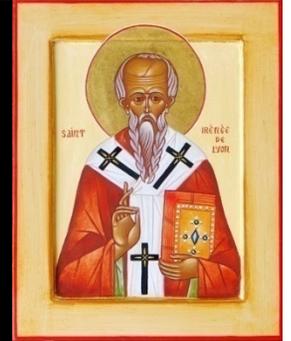
# What are Human Beings?

4. Fourth Age: Aragorn and the United Kingdom
  1. Sapling of the White Tree replanted in Gondor
  2. Last of the Dunedain; Aragorn II Ellesar and Arwen are the last of elvish blood and learning
  3. Men with short life spans
  4. No more contact with elves

# What are Human Beings?

1. Men were meant to be students of the Elves, who were students of the Valar, who were students of Eru Iluvatar; Men were meant to grow
2. Men are meant to live by received wisdom, poems, and physical representations of historical memory (Trees, etc.)
3. We are physically weaker than other beings but beckoned by a destiny beyond Arda alone
4. Men are more vulnerable to temptation and evil than other races, which suggests that Men fell early, but by our own doing, and not into another physical race twisted by Melkor
5. Death was intended to be a gift of some sort

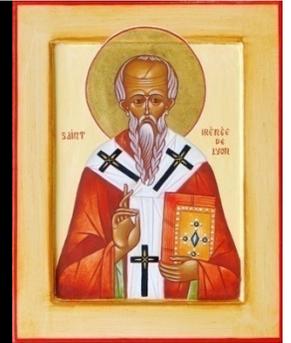
# What are Human Beings?



- **Patterned** after the eternal Son of God, who is dependent on God the Father in the Spirit (God takes a pattern internal to Himself and makes it external to Himself, creating humanity)

‘But who else is superior to, and more eminent than, that man who was formed after the likeness of God, except **the Son of God, after whose image man was created**? And for this reason He did in these last days exhibit the similitude; [for] the Son of God was made man, assuming the ancient production [of His hands] into His own nature.’ (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk.4, ch.33, par.4; cf. Colossians 1:15 – 20; Hebrews 1:1 – 4)

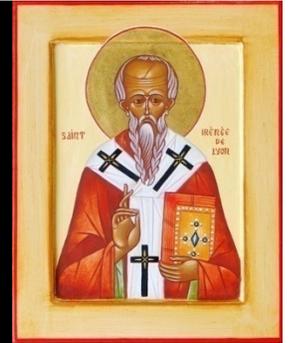
# What are Human Beings?



- Designed to **grow** into maturity and more goodness in relationship with God

‘...man, a created and organized being, is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God, the Father planning everything well and giving His commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit nourishing and increasing [what is made], but **man making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One.** For the Uncreated is perfect, that is, God. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk.4, ch.38, par.3; Genesis 1 – 2)

# What are Human Beings?



- Death is a type of mercy, to prevent permanent corruption

‘Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but **because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable.** But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.’ (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk.3, ch.23, par.6; Genesis 3:21 – 24)