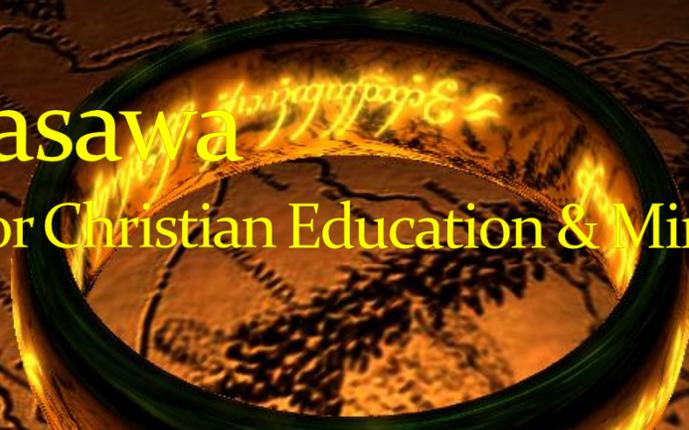


The Theology of Tolkien's

LORD OF THE RINGS

Mako A. Nagasawa

The Anástasis Center for Christian Education & Ministry



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 Does Evil Do to Us?

Our Choices Shape Our Nature



‘I would ask one thing before we go,’ said Frodo, ‘a thing which I often meant to ask Gandalf in Rivendell. I am permitted to wear the One Ring: why cannot I see all the others and know the thoughts of those that wear them?’

‘You have not tried,’ she said. ‘Only thrice have you set the Ring upon your finger since you knew what you possessed. Do not try! It would destroy you. Did not Gandalf tell you that the rings give power according to the measure of each possessor? **Before you could use that power you would need to become far stronger, and to train your will to the domination of others. Yet even so, as Ring-bearer and as one that has borne it on finger and seen that which is hidden, your sight is grown keener.** You have perceived my thought more clearly than many that are accounted wise. You saw the Eye of him that holds the Seven and the Nine. And did you not see and recognize the ring upon my finger? Did you see my ring?’ she asked turning again to Sam. ‘No, lady..’ (*FotR*, bk.2, ch.7)

What Does Evil Do to Us?

Two Philosophical Ideas about Evil



1. Opponent of the good

‘A Ring of Power looks after itself, Frodo. It may slip off treacherously, but its keeper never abandons it. At most he plays with the idea of handing it on to someone else’s care – and that only at an early stage, when it first begins to grip. But as far as I know Bilbo alone in history has ever gone beyond playing, and really done it. He needed all my help, too. And even so he would never have just forsaken it, or cast it aside. It was not Gollum, Frodo, but the Ring itself that decided things. The Ring left him.’ (Gandalf, *FotR*, bk.1, ch.2)

2. Deprivation of the good

‘For nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so.’
(Elrond, *FotR*, bk.2, ch.2)

What Does Evil Do to Us?



Tolkien's synthesis:

1. Evil as Self-Deception: 'Out of a desire to do good'
2. Evil as Addiction
3. Evil as Corruption: Towards 'nothingness'
4. Evil as Self-Defeating

What Does Evil Do to Us?



1. Evil as Self-Deception: 'Out of a desire to do good'
 1. Boromir wants to defend Minas Tirith
 2. Saruman wants to order Middle Earth
 3. No one is purely evil, or becomes a villain to be evil
 4. Good becomes a means to some other end (possession of power), not an end in itself
 5. But Good eventually becomes an obstacle to that end, and is dispensed with

What Does Evil Do to Us?



1. Evil as Self-Deception: ‘Out of a desire to do good’
 1. The Ring of Gyges, Plato’s *Republic* (2.359 a–2.360 d)

‘Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust; they would both come at last to the same point. And this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust. For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice, and he who argues as I have been supposing, will say that they are right. If you could imagine any one obtaining this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong or touching what was another's, he would be thought by the lookers-on to be a most wretched idiot, although they would praise him to one another's faces, and keep up appearances with one another from a fear that they too might suffer injustice.’ (*Republic*, 360 c – d)

What Does Evil Do to Us?



2. Evil as Addiction:

1. The Ring of Gyges: The man who abuses the power of the Ring of Gyges **enslaves himself to his own appetites**, while the man who chooses not to use it remains rationally in control of himself and is therefore happy. (*Republic* 10:612b)
2. The One Ring: 'It felt suddenly very heavy, as if either it or *Frodo himself* was in some way reluctant for Gandalf to touch it.' (*FotR*, bk.1, ch.2, italics mine)

'To his distress and amazement he found that he was no longer looking at Bilbo; a shadow seemed to have fallen between them, and through it he found himself eyeing a little wrinkled creature with a hungry face and bony groping hands. He felt a desire to strike him.' (*FotR*, bk.2, ch.1)

What Does Evil Do to Us?

2. Evil as Addiction:



“But that, of course, would only make the evil part of him angrier in the end – unless it could be conquered. Unless it could be **cured**.’ Gandalf sighed.’ (*FotR*, bk.2, ch.2)



What Does Evil Do to Us?



3. Evil as Corruption: From physical to non-physical
 1. Sauron loses physical form, becomes 'Shadow' and regains less physicality
 2. Nazgul are wraiths, partly physical, mostly shadow
 3. Bilbo feels 'stretched thin, like butter over too much bread'
 4. Frodo, stabbed, begins to 'fade'
 1. 'But to the wizard's eye there was a faint change just a hint as it were of **transparency**, about him, and especially about the left hand that lay outside upon the coverlet.' *FotR*, bk.2, ch.1)

What Does Evil Do to Us?



3. Evil as Corruption: Experiencing good as torment

1. Melkor

1. 'Lusted for the Silmarils, and the very memory of their radiance was a gnawing fire in his heart' (*Silm*, ch.7)
2. Burned himself touching the Silmarils (ch.9)
3. His crown's 'weight became a deadly weariness' (ch.9)

2. Saruman

1. 'I am giving you a last chance. You can leave Orthanc, free – if you choose'... 'That sounds well,' sneered Saruman. 'Very much in the manner of Gandalf the Grey: so condescending, and so very kind' (*TT*, bk.1, ch.10)

3. Trolls and Orcs cannot bear sunlight

What Does Evil Do to Us?



3. Evil as Corruption: Experiencing good as torment
 1. Nazgul fear running water and fire
 2. Gollum cannot stand sunlight, moonlight, starlight, lembas bread, the touch of elven rope
 3. The 'black Numenorians' see death as 'the doom of men' rather than 'the gift of men'
 4. Self-deceived people experience truth and restraint as torment
 1. Boromir
 2. Denethor
 3. Wormtongue
 4. Gollum



What Does Evil Do to Us?

4. Evil as Self-Defeating



Morgoth used Ungoliant, but she turned on him after he refused to let her consume the Silmarils (*The Silmarillion*, “Of the Flight of the Noldor”)



What Does Evil Do to Us?

4. Evil as Self-Defeating



‘The Dark Lord was suddenly aware of him, and his Eye piercing all shadows looked across the plain to the door that he had made; and the magnitude of his own folly was revealed to him in a blinding flash, and all the devices of his enemies were at last laid bare. **Then his wrath blazed in consuming flame, but his fear rose like a vast black smoke to choke him.** For he knew his deadly peril and the thread upon which his doom now hung.’ (*RotK*, bk.6, ch.3)



What Does Evil Do to Us?

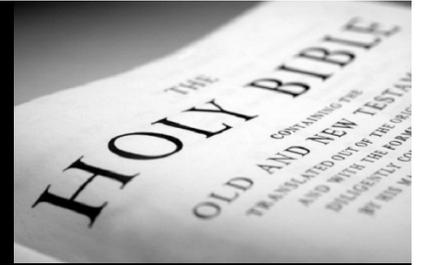
4. Evil as Self-Defeating



‘Precious, precious, precious!’ Gollum cried. ‘My Precious! O my Precious!’ And with that, even as his eyes were lifted up to gloat on his prize, he stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell. Out of the depths came his last wail *Precious*, and he was gone. (*RotK*, bk.6, ch.3)



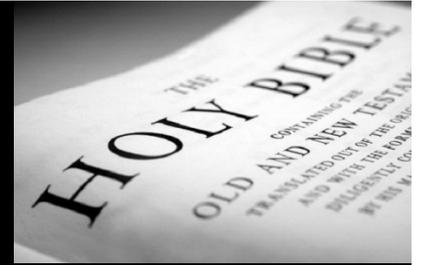
What Does Evil Do to Us?



The biblical diagnosis

1. Evil as Self-Deception
2. Evil as Internal Corruption
3. Evil as Addiction
4. Evil as Relational
5. Evil as Self-Defeating

1. Evil as Self-Deception

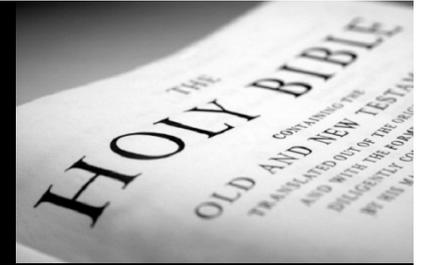


- God made us in His image (Gen.1:27 – 28)
 - They were already with God, already like God, and empowered to be more and more like God by partnership with Him:
 - God loves gardening
 - God loves making each new human being
 - God speaks life into creation
 - God respects boundaries
 - God is ever deepening relationship



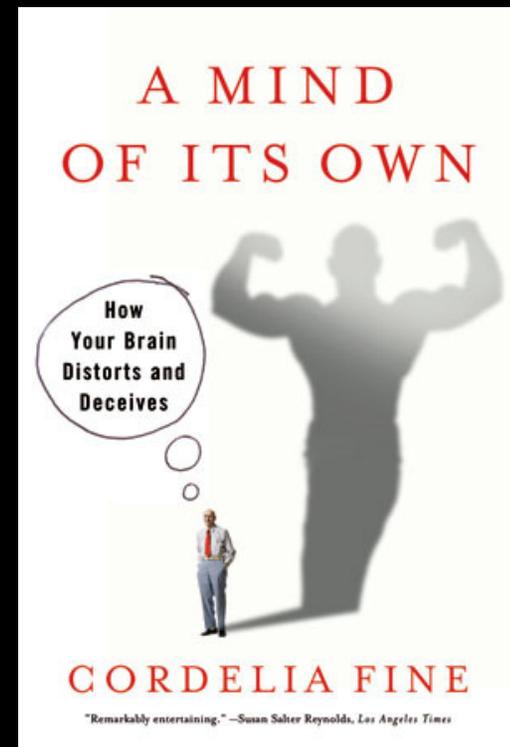
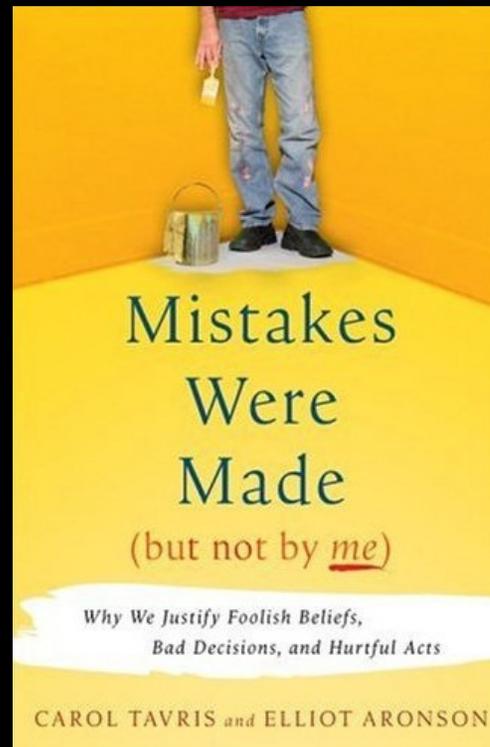
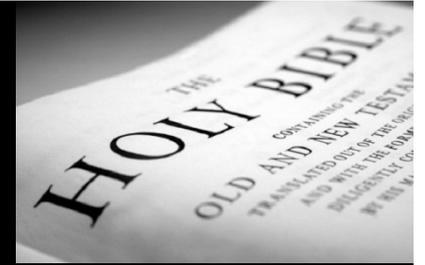
1. Evil as Self-Deception

- God forbade us from eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen.2:8 – 17)
 - Two Trees represent God: life-giver, law-giver
 - We grow in the knowledge of goodness by growth, personal participation in goodness, like God; goodness is not static
 - We grow in the knowledge of evil by growing in goodness and looking backward, not by participating in it



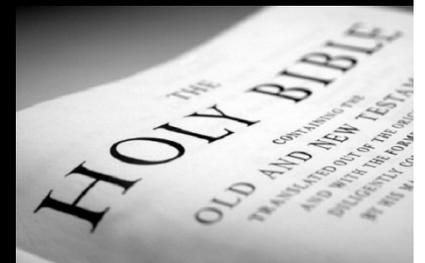
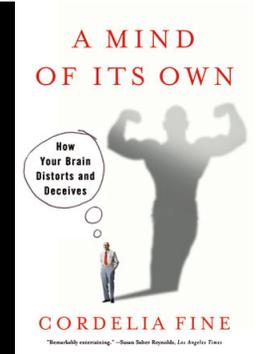
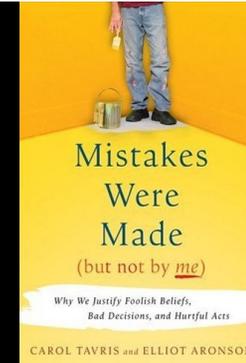
1. Evil as Self-Deception

- Doing evil dulls your sense of evil
 - Neuroscience, the brain, and our choices
 - E.g. Blameshifting: The man said, ‘The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.’ (Gen.3:12)

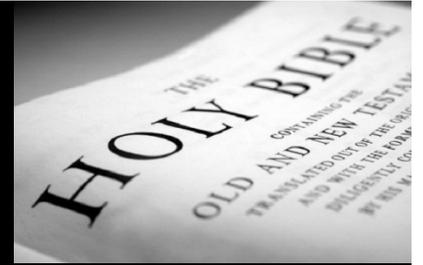


1. Evil as Self-Deception

- Doing evil dulls your sense of evil
 - ‘Vain, immoral, bigoted: this is your brain in action,’ Cordelia Fine, Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at Australian National University (*A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives*, Publishers Weekly) ‘The brain, she shows, distorts reality in order to save us from the ego-destroying effects of failure and pessimism. For example, an optimist who fails at something edits the truth by blaming others for the failure and then takes complete credit for any successes. The brain also routinely disapproves of other people’s behavior (how could he do that?), while at the same time interpreting one’s own actions in the best possible light (I would never do that!)’

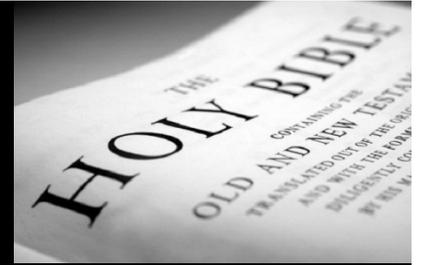


2. Evil as Internal Corruption



- Cain did not need an external voice of temptation (Gen.4)
- Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his **heart** was only evil continually. (Gen.6:5; 8:21)
- Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your **heart** and the **heart** of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your **heart** (Dt.30:6)
- Create in me a clean **heart**, O God, and renew a steadfast **spirit** within me. (Ps.51:10)
- I will put My law within them and on their **heart** I will write it... (Jer.31:33; cf.17:1 – 10)
- I will give you a new **heart** and put a new **spirit** within you... (Ezk.36:26)

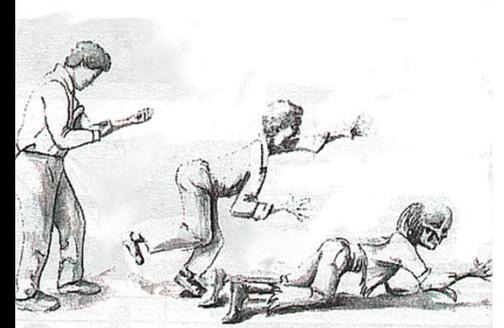
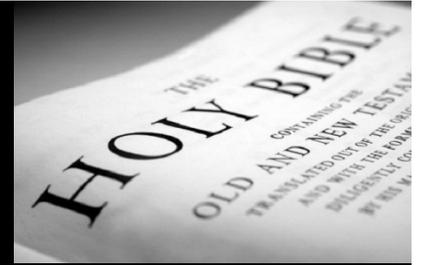
2. Evil as Internal Corruption



- But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the **heart**, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. (Mt.15:18 – 19)
- But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the **heart**, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. (Rom.2:29)

3. Evil as Addiction

- Sin becomes more and more enticing, or necessary to achieve the same sensations, like a drug
 - ‘Excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.’ (Ephesians 4:17 – 20)

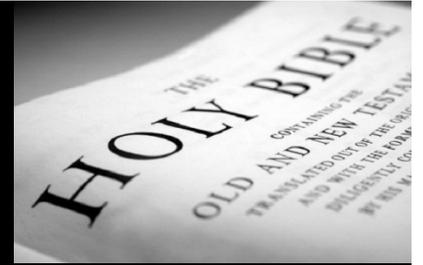


Heroin

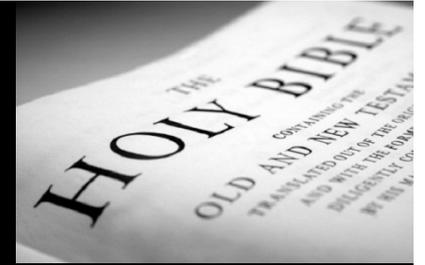


4. Evil as Relational

- People were meant to be living beings, and life-bearers, representing the God of life
- We became dying beings, and death-dealing
 - Cain killed Abel
 - Human violence before the flood
 - Dominance of Nimrod at Babel



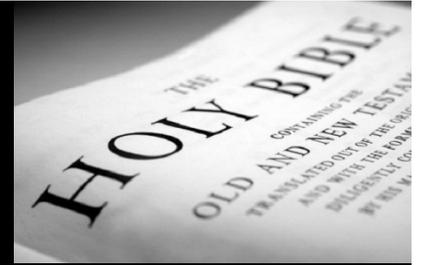
5. Evil as Self-Defeating



- Jesus is God's new humanity
 - Jesus: 'I am' (Jn.18:4 – 8; all of John's Gospel)
- Examples of human beings denying Jesus
 - Simon Peter: 'I am not' (Jn.18:15 – 27)
 - Pontius Pilate: 'What is truth?' (Jn.18:38)
 - Jewish leaders: 'We have no king but Caesar' (Jn.19:15)



Is There a Cure?



The Christian Story

1. God Prepared a Documented Self-Diagnosis
2. Jesus Took to Himself a Corrupted Human Nature
3. Jesus Resisted Addiction
4. Jesus Realigned Human Nature with God
5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity
6. Evil Will Defeat Itself

1. God Prepared a Documented Self-Diagnosis of Human Nature



- God's purpose for Israel : to diagnose and document the internal problem
 - 'For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin... For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.' (Paul, in *Romans* 7:14 – 20)

2. Jesus Took to Himself a Corrupted Human Nature

- ‘The Word became **flesh** and dwelled among us.’ (Jn.1:14)
- **Flesh** (Greek *sarx*): a very negative term
 - Paul, to the Romans: ‘For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my **flesh**; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.’ (Romans 7:18)
 - Philo of Alexandria, ‘The Lord said, ‘My Spirit shall not remain among men forever, because they are **flesh**.’” (‘On the Giants’, *Commentary on Genesis*, 5.19)



2. Jesus Took to Himself a Corrupted Human Nature



- Jesus' incarnation is like Frodo's decision: 'I will take the Ring.' (*FotR*, bk.2, ch.2)

3. Jesus Resisted Addiction

- Wilderness (Mt.4:1 – 11; Lk.4:1 – 13)
- Gethsemane (Mt.26:36 – 46; Mk.14:32 – 42; Lk.22:39 – 46)
- ‘In the days of his flesh, he offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his piety.’ (Hebrews 5:7)



3. Jesus Resisted Addiction



- ‘No!’ cried Gandalf, springing to his feet. ‘With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly.’ His eyes flashed and his face was lit as by a fire within. ‘Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great, for my strength. I shall have such need of it. Great perils lie before me.’ (*FotR*, bk.2, ch.2)

3. Jesus Resisted Addiction



- ‘Well, Frodo,’ said Aragorn at last. ‘I fear that the burden is laid upon you. You are the Bearer appointed by the Council. Your own way you alone can choose.’
(*FotR*, bk.2, ch.10)

3. Jesus Resisted Addiction



- “I pass the test,’ she said. ‘I will diminish, and go into the West and remain Galadriel.’ (*FotR*, bk.2, ch.7)

3. Jesus Resisted Addiction



- The analogy breaks down: Frodo resisted for a time, but ultimately failed in his task to destroy the Ring

4. Jesus Realigned Human Nature with God



- ‘For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh [of Israel], God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh [of Jesus]’ (Romans 8:3 – 4)

5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity



- Gandalf retells and redeems Saruman's story:

‘Indeed I am Saruman, one might almost say, Saruman as he should have been.’ (*TT*, bk.4, ch.5)

5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity



- Aragorn retells and redeems Isildur's story:

'Aragorn threw back his cloak. The elven-sheath glittered as he grasped it, and the bright blade of Andúril shone like a sudden flame as he swept it out. 'Elendil!' he cried. 'I am Aragorn son of Arathorn and am called Elessar, the Elfstone, Dúnadan, the heir of Isildur Elendil's son of Gondor. Here is the Sword that was Broken and is forged again! Will you aid me or thwart me? Choose swiftly!' (*TT*, bk.3, ch.2)

5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity



- Frodo partially retells and redeems Smeagol's story:
 - Both are Hobbit folk
 - Both find the Ring on their respective birthdays
 - Both acquire it from a relative
 - Both carry and wear the Ring
 - But Frodo, too, is unable to willingly destroy the Ring

5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity



- Jesus retells and redeems Israel's story (and Adam's behind that):
'Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he then became hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God...' (Mt.4:1 – 3)

5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity

- Adam and Eve: God's original humanity
 - God parted the waters (Gen.1:6)
 - God placed Adam and Eve in a "garden land" (Gen.2)
 - Fell into sin and exile



5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity

- Israel: God's intermediate step to His new humanity
 - God parted the waters (Ex.1 – 14)
 - God led Israel back to a “garden land” (Num.13)
 - Fell into sin and exile



5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity

- Jesus: God's truly new humanity
 - God parted the waters in Jesus' baptism (Mt.3:13 – 17)
 - God led Jesus through a desolate wilderness (Mt.4:1 – 11)
 - Jesus resisted sin, and healed human nature



5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity



Irenaeus, 2nd century, said: '*Man had sin in himself*, showing he was liable to death... [Thus,] it behooved Him who was to destroy sin, and redeem man under the power of death, that He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, *man*; who had been drawn by sin into bondage, but was held by death, so *that sin should be destroyed by man*, and man should go forth from death...'

5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity



Irenaeus, cont.: ‘Thus, then, was the Word of God made man, as also Moses says: ‘God, true are His works.’ But if, not having been made flesh, He did appear as if flesh, His work was not a true one. But what He did appear, that He also was: God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, *that He might kill sin*, deprive death of its power, and vivify man; and therefore His works are true.’ (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk.3, ch.18, par.7)

5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity



Athanasius, 4th century, said: 'Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required?'

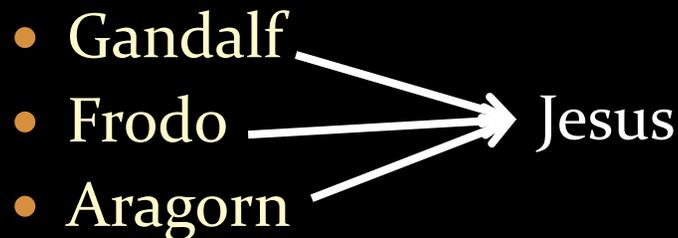
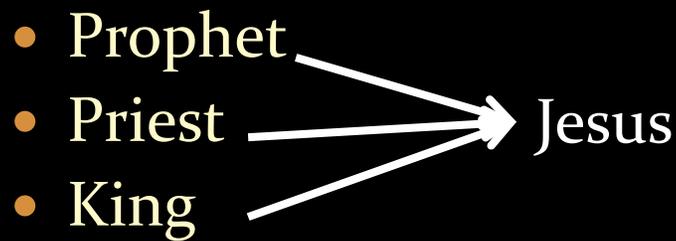
5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity



Athanasius, cont.: ‘Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing?... Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father... **This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.**’ (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 2:8 – 9)

5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity

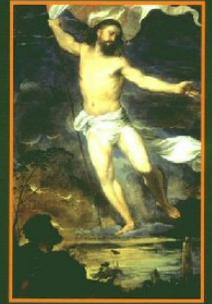
- The 'offices' of Jesus relate to the 'offices' of Israel, and behind them, Adam and Eve: to speak God's word (prophet), to teach and care for life (priest), and reign over creation in love (king)



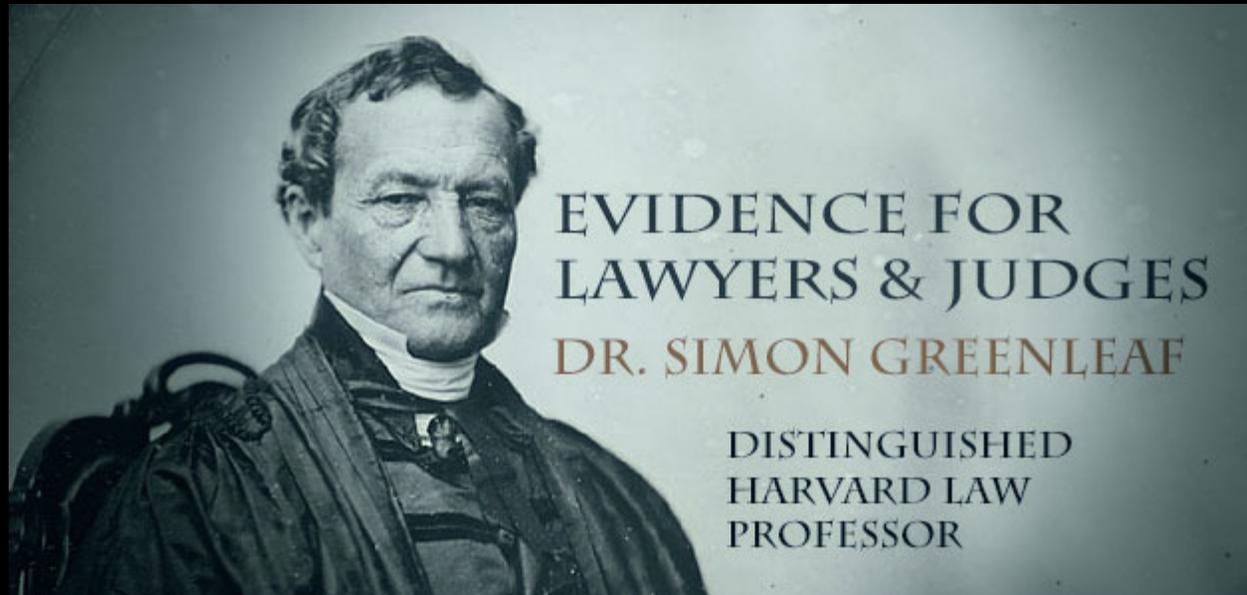
5. Jesus Is God's Restoration of True Humanity

- Jesus' resurrection was a historical event
 - Not mental speculation
 - A physical antidote for a physical corruption

THE RESURRECTION
OF THE SON OF GOD



N. T. WRIGHT



6. Evil Will Defeat Itself



- ‘For one and the same God [that blesses others] inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set Him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of His, [acts with regard] to those who, by reason of any weakness of the eyes cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in Him and follow Him, He grants a fuller and greater illumination of mind.’ (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.29.1; cf. 4.39.1 – 4)

6. Evil Will Defeat Itself



- ‘Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine; I will repay,’ says the Lord. ‘But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’ (Paul, Romans 12:19 – 21)