



Just an Inklings:

How C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien Can Help Us Read Tanakh

Liz Shayne

While I am not going to include them on the source sheet, I recommend having a Tanakh next to you with the following locations marked:

- 1) [Genesis 21:1-34](#) (The Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah)
- 2) [I Samuel 1:1 – 2:10](#) (The Haftarah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah)

Epigraph

The heart of man is not compound of lies,
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,
man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Disgraced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
and keeps the rags of lordship one he owned,
his world-dominion by creative act:
not his to worship the great Artefact,
man, sub-creator, the refracted light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build
gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sow the seed of dragons, 'twas our right
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.
We make still by the law in which we're made.
(Tolkien, "Mythopoeia". *Tree and Leaf*, 87)

Part 1 - C.S. Lewis

A) On stories and morality:

For we have been told on high authority that in the moral sphere [children] are probably at least as wise as we. Anyone who can write a children's story without a moral, had better do so: that is, if he is going to write children's stories at all. The only moral that is of any value is that which arises inevitable from the whole cast of the author's mind. (p. 63)

B) On writing the chronicles of Narnia:

Then of course the Man in me began to have his turn. I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could. (p. 70)

C) On Allegory:

Where [the critic] seems to me most often to go wrong is in the hasty assumption of an allegorical sense; and as reviewers make this mistake about contemporary works, so, in my opinion, scholars now often make it about old ones. I would recommend to both, and I would try to observe in my own critical practise, these principles. First, that no story can be devised by the wit of man which cannot be interpreted allegorically by the wit of some other man. The Stoic interpretations of primitive mythology, the Christian interpretations of the Old Testament, the medieval interpretations of the classics, all prove this. Therefore (2) the mere fact that you can allegorise the work before you is of itself no proof

that it is an allegory. Of course you can allegorise it. You can allegorise anything, whether in art or real life. I think we should here take a hint from the lawyers. A man is not tried at the assizes until there has been shown to be a prima-facie case against him. We ought not to proceed to allegorise any work until we have plainly set out the reasons for regarding it as an allegory at all. (p. 220)

D) On the cyclical nature of reading:

The re reader is looking not for actual surprises (which, can come only once) but for a certain surprisingness, [...] We do not enjoy a story fully at the first reading. Not till the curiosity, the sheer narrative lust, has been given its sop and laid asleep, are we at leisure to savour the real beauties. Till then, it is like wasting great wine on a ravenous natural thirst which merely wants cold wetness. The children understand this well when they ask for the same story over and over again, and in the same words. They want to have again the 'surprise' of discovering that what seemed Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother is really the wolf. It is better when you know it is coming: free from the shock of actual surprise you can attend better to the intrinsic surprisingness of the *peripeteia*. (p. 24)

All C.S. Lewis quotes are from *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*

Part 2 – J.R.R. Tolkien

E) On Enchantment and Fantasy

Art is the human process that produces by the way (it is not its only or ultimate object) Secondary Belief. Art of the same sort, if more skilled and effortless, the elves can also use, or so the reports seem to show; but the more potent and specially elvish craft I will, for lack of a less debatable word, call Enchantment. Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose.

[...]

To the elvish craft, Enchantment, Fantasy aspires, and when it is successful of all forms of human art most nearly approaches. At the heart of many man-made stories of the elves lies, open or concealed, pure or alloyed, the desire for a living, realised sub-creative art. (p. 53-4)

F) On Recovery (the process of finding joy in the world again)

The fantastic' elements in verse and prose of other kinds, even when only decorative or occasional, help in this release. But not so thoroughly as a fairy-story, a thing built on or about Fantasy, of which Fantasy is the core, Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give. By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed; by the making of Pegasus horses were ennobled; in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, Bower and fruit are manifested in glory. (p. 66)

G) On Fantasy as Consolation

But the 'consolation' of fairy-stories has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function, but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite - I will call it *Eucatastrophe*. The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function.

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale):' this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist, nor 'fugitive'. In its fairy-tale - or otherworld - setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as

grief. It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the "turn" comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality. (68-9)

Part 3 – Tanakh?

H) True Fantasy

It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were found to be primarily true, its narrative to be history, without thereby necessarily losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed. It is not difficult, for one is not called upon to try and conceive anything of a quality unknown. The joy would have exactly the same quality, if not the same degree, as the joy which the 'turn' in a fairy-story gives: such joy has the very taste of primary truth. (Otherwise its name would not be joy.) It looks forward (or backward: the direction in this regard is unimportant) to the Great Eucatastrophe. The Christian joy, the Gloria, is of the same kind; but it is pre-eminently (infinitely, if our capacity were not finite) high and joyous. Because this story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men - and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused.

But in God's kingdom the presence of the greatest does not depress the small. Redeemed Man is still man. Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the 'happy ending'. (p. 72-3)

All J.R.R. Tolkien quotes are from *Tree and Leaf*