

STORY CREATURE

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God created Adam and Eve in God's image and every human being who has ever lived reflects this – the *imago dei*. This means we create because our God is creative; we tell stories because God is a storyteller.

Stories are a fitting medium for a God who is called the Word. Whether it's written down in Scripture, incarnate in Jesus Christ, or eternally upholding the universe, God is telling a story. And God's creatures, likewise, can't seem to help themselves. Despite the distortion of the Fall, humanity continues to create stories within God's grand narrative, yearning for resolution and restoration. People have been playing variations on the same themes for millennia: creation, fall, and redemption have been stamped all over our stories.

Our first stories were spoken aloud. The ancient Greeks, for example, told the story of Odysseus and his long road home from Troy over and over again until Homer wrote it down in the late 17th or early 18th century BC. In this epic poem, Odysseus eventually reunites with his family and defeats those who threaten to take everything from him. This isn't what generations of hearers and readers remember, though. Odysseus lives on because of his longing. Today, an "odyssey" doesn't refer to a triumphant return; it means "a long wandering or voyage usually marked by many changes of fortune." Even if the ancient Greek experience is foreign, there is a deposit of truth: humanity longs for home.

Eighteen hundred years later, a poet with one foot

in paganism and one in Christianity told a story of strength and heroism – the epic *Beowulf*. Yet, for all its grandeur and glory, *Beowulf* is a sad story. The hero triumphs over monsters, wins the love of his people, and even reaches a ripe old age, but something is wrong.

For all his great deeds, Beowulf still succumbs to the final enemy: death. Human glory is extinguished and the reader is left wondering *does it have to be this way, must death be the end?* Some of the greatest moments in literature turn on the reversal of this curse, this darkness that has hung over us since the first sin. Our heroes rail against death because it ought not to be the rule of the world, not forever.

There's great continuity in storytelling. Just as we have been exploring the same themes, so too do we look for stories that echo – and anticipate – the biblical narrative. When J. R. R. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, he did so to reflect the creative nature of God. He created Middle-earth to reflect our Earth. Like ours, Middle-earth is a good world marred by evil – it is full of blessings and curses. It reminds us that the world is a dark place, "but still there is



△ *Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship to keep from steering towards the sirens.*

much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.”

When a crown-less king says “deeds will not be less valiant because they are unpraised” or an immortal elf lord declares that small hands move the wheels of the world, I believe it because I need to. And I can believe it because there is a power above the oppressive powers of the world. The story makes its case for this truth by elevating the good, the simple, and the small in ways reminiscent of Christ’s upside down kingdom. Jesus illustrates the nature of his kingdom in the parables of the prodigal son and the lost coin. God pursues those

who are considered least worthy, like the single coin and the ungrateful runaway; God rejoices over them – not the righteous.

God’s story climaxes in redemption and ends in restoration, the fruit of *eucatastrophe*, Tolkien’s word for the sudden and unexpected good turn in a story. The rule of the world is not death and death becomes an aberration. The gospel is a call to tell better stories that echo the greatest story. In the past we told these stories in part, and we continue to do so by weaving the threads of creation, fall, and redemption into stories for our time. Films like *Mad Max: Fury Road* trace an arc of redemption across a fallen world, while

others like *Ex Machina* examine the costs of human creativity, and like all good stories they refuse to ignore the consequences of sin. For his part, Tolkien believed we will continue telling stories even after hearing God’s own: “Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has



△ *The first meeting of Aragorn and Arwen, characters from The Lord of the Rings, by Anke Eissmann.*

the page or frame and offers hope. Our imaginary worlds are acquainted with the darkness of fear, loss, and death, just as we are, and this reality sets the stage for the great reversal of eucatastrophe. Life overcomes death; love overwhelms hate; light dispels darkness just in time. Good stories are true because they remind us there is light beyond the darkness; the best story reminds us that the light shines *in* the darkness. rlh

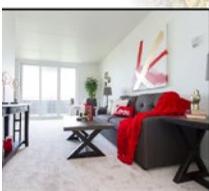


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