

The Wisdom of Weeping Gods in Middle Earth and Moses 7

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Several authors have dealt with the theology of Enoch’s weeping God in the Book of Moses, most notably Eugene England¹ and Terry and Fiona Givens.² However, in my own experience, the idea of God’s weeping is still a principle that has not yet been fully recognized and internalized by most church members. As a case in point, a current exhibit at BYU entitled “Jesus Wept: Emotions in the Scriptures”³ aims to highlight “the wide range of emotions found in the scriptures,” as they relate to both human and divine figures. However, in their comprehensive list of emotion-related words in the standard works, they do *not* include the verbs “cry” or “weep,” resulting in the ironic exclusion of the very scripture used to name the exhibit itself (namely, “Jesus wept” in John 11:35), as well as the several passages in the Book of Moses that use this language to convey divine emotion. Clearly, in this particular area, many Mormon religious imaginations have not quite stretched to encompass the richness of their scriptures.

This paper hopes to contribute to the excellent work that has already been done on Mormonism’s weeping God in Moses 7 by putting it into conversation with J.R.R. Tolkien’s weeping goddess in *The Silmarillion* and her influence on the events of *The Lord of the Rings*—works which Tolkien described as being “fundamentally religious” in nature.⁴ Today I will explore the effects that these two weeping gods have on the cosmos in general, as well as their effects on humanity in particular. (As a side note, around same time I was working on this paper,

¹ Eugene England, “The Weeping God of Mormonism,” *35:2 Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, pp. 63-80 (2002).

² Terry and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012).

³ <http://educationinzion.byu.edu/exhibition/jesus-wept/>

⁴ Letter 142

by a happy accident, an author at By Common Consent began work on a similar project, which I wholeheartedly recommend. Perhaps the greatest takeaway from such an odd coincidence is this: in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall Tolkien's word be established (and canonized?).

The Silmarillion chronicles the very beginnings of Tolkien's literary cosmos. Here, a self-existent and omnipotent deity (Ilúvatar) brings forth several lesser divine beings who, according to Tolkien, humans call "gods."⁵ These "lesser gods" then participate in the creation of the cosmos—seven male and seven female, most of whom function together as spouses.⁶ Tolkien describes this process of creation in terms of music—the supreme God declares a "theme" and invites the lesser gods to realize this theme through song, "adorning this theme...with [their] own thoughts and devices."⁷ The result was "[a sound] of endless interchanging melodies woven in harmony"⁸ that goes out into "the Void" and fills it with this flawless music.

But then the most powerful of these lesser gods decides to "interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of [the supreme god], for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself."⁹ This world's Adversary figure, thus introduces discord into the music, disturbs the others musicians, and causes them to falter in their own music-making. At this point, the supreme God introduces a new theme among the chaos, which "gathered power and had new beauty,"¹⁰ but the Adversary's discord only grows in response, causing many of the other lesser gods to stop singing altogether.

In response, the supreme God arises and:

⁵ *The Silmarillion*, p. 15.

⁶ *The Silmarillion*, pp. 16-21. Tolkien's description of this world's pantheon in many ways echoes the pantheon of Greco-Roman and Norse deities. However, there is one being who stands out, not having a clear parallel elsewhere: Nienna.

⁷ *The Silmarillion*, p. 3.

⁸ *The Silmarillion*, p. 4.

⁹ *The Silmarillion*, p. 4.

¹⁰ *The Silmarillion*, p. 5.

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 [God], 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. 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.¹¹

Elsewhere, Tolkien explains that one of these lesser gods was primarily responsible for giving voice to the music's "immeasurable sorrow."¹² Her name is Nienna, and it is said that "so great was her sorrow, as the Music unfolded, that her song turned to lamentation long before its end, and the sound of mourning was woven into the themes of the World before it began."¹³ Within this third theme of sorrow and solemnity, the lesser gods see the coming of "the Children of [God]," which include moral elves, dwarves, and humans, all moral agents. When this final theme plays out, the supreme God brings the music to a close before speaking this song into existence.¹⁴

Already we see points of intersection between the *Silmarillion* and Moses 7. In Enoch's vision, he sees "the power of Satan... upon all the face of the earth... and he had a great chain in his hand, and it veiled the whole face of the earth with darkness; and he looked up and laughed, and his angels rejoiced" (vv. 24, 26). Enoch then sees that "the God of heaven looked upon the

¹¹ *The Silmarillion*, p. 5.

¹² An earlier draft used the phrase "unquenchable sorrow," instead (*Lost Road*, p. 158).

¹³ *The Silmarillion*, p. 19.

¹⁴ In the *Silmarillion*, after the supreme God speaks the song into being, he invites the lesser deities to bind themselves to this physical creation "to be within it for ever, until it is complete, so that they are its life and it is theirs." These beings (including the aforementioned Adversary figure) become the "Valar" or "the Powers of the World." Together, these quasi-incarnate lesser deities help to realize the previous song in heaven, which serves as a sort of blueprint for the creation and continued existence of the cosmos.

There are, of course, the similarities between the two-fold creation account (a conceptual creation followed by a material creation) in Tolkien and the book of Moses' own allusion to a two-fold creation (Moses 3:5), to say nothing of the collaborative creative processes of deities in Tolkien and the book of Abraham, but in this paper I would like to focus solely on the book of Moses (and chapter 7 in particular).

residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?” (v. 28). Though the timeframe of Enoch’s vision here (which spans from the Great Flood to the redemption of the world) is slightly more narrow in scope than Tolkien’s text (which encompasses the very creation of the cosmos to its end), central to both texts is a mingling of sorrow and satanic noise, and each explores how this informs the nature of what it means to be a deity.

We must make an important distinction, however, between the divine beings who are the focus of the *Silmarillion* and in Enoch’s vision in Moses 7. For Tolkien, it is a lesser god who he describes as the agent or embodiment of sorrow, *not* the supreme God himself. Enoch, on the other hand, sees both God *and* the lesser heavenly beings weeping. Nevertheless, the expressly anthropomorphic nature of Nienna—Tolkien’s singular, sorrowful divine figure—provides a convenient area of overlap with the sort of God Enoch sees in vision.

In his first full description of the goddess Nienna, Tolkien writes that she is, “acquainted with grief, and mourns for every wound that [the world and everything in it] has suffered in the marring of [the Adversary].” “But,” Tolkien adds, “she does not weep for herself.”¹⁵ Rather, her weeping is entirely sympathetic. Enoch’s vision similarly depicts a deity who sorrows over the suffering of others: “among all the workmanship of mine hands there has not been so great wickedness as among thy brethren...their sins shall be upon the heads of their fathers...and misery shall be their doom; and the whole heavens shall weep over them, even all the workmanship of mine hands; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?” (vv. 36-37).

¹⁵ *The Silmarillion*, p. 19.

However, Enoch's dialogue with God provides additional details as to *why* God weeps at this suffering: God created humanity with agency and commanded them that "they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood" (v. 33). So, in Enoch's vision, God appears to be weeping over not only the fact of suffering in a cosmos where Satan actively harms others (as is the case with Tolkien's weeping goddess), but Enoch's God also weeps for the tragic nature of needless suffering that could be avoided if God's creatures loved each other and related to God as a parent.¹⁶

This familial or relational aspect is important for understanding the nature of these deities in yet another way. It is clearly in the nature of both Tolkien and Enoch's gods to weep, but only one of these two gods weep in the company of other beings. Tolkien writes that his weeping goddess "dwells alone...her halls are west of West, upon the borders of the world; and she comes seldom to the city of [the gods] where all is glad. She goes rather to the halls [where the spirits of the dead dwell], which are near to her own."¹⁷ When Nienna *does* appear outside her own halls among the other gods, it is also in the role of mourner. In these few public appearances, her weeping is not passive, but active, and has generative or restorative effects—in particular, her physical tears are credited with the flourishing of the two sacred trees which provide the world with light.¹⁸ Similarly, the physical tears she weeps following the malicious destruction of these same two trees allow for the preservation of a remnant of this divine light. In this later episode, Tolkien provides us with a particularly striking image: Nienna "cast back her

¹⁶ Incidentally, an earlier version of *Silmarillion* mentions that Nienna "had little mirth, and all her love was mixed with pity, grieving for the harms of the world and for the things that failed of fulfillment" (*Morgoth's Ring*, 293), but this sentiment was later edited out.

¹⁷ *The Silmarillion*, p. 19.

¹⁸ *The Silmarillion*, p. 31.

gray hood, and her eyes shone like stars in the rain, for her tears were poured out, and she washed away the defilements of [evil]. And when she had wept she sang slowly, mourning for the bitterness of the world and all the hurts of [the world].”¹⁹ But while she sometimes mourns in the sight of the other lesser gods, she weeps alone, at a distance from them.

By way of contrast, in Enoch’s vision, God appears to be in the company of angels (v. 27) and perhaps others, who the diety collectively refers to as “the whole heavens,” who weep *together* over humanity’s suffering (v. 37).²⁰ And beyond the heavens, God suggests that the entirety of creation will ultimately share in this weeping (v. 40). Thus, in Enoch’s heaven, divine weeping takes place within a sympathetic community. That is not to say that the rest of Tolkien’s lesser gods and divine beings are incapable of weeping together; on the contrary—at one point, when this world’s Adversary figure escapes captivity, a community of gathered lesser gods and other divine beings weep together over the conflict and pains that are surely to come,²¹ though Tolkien does not describe these figures as being specifically concerned with the suffering of humanity and other moral agents. Rather, their weeping seems to be more abstract and concerned with suffering in general.

On the other hand, the goddess Nienna’s single-minded attention to the suffering dead allows her the ability to commune with them and to treat their individual sorrows: “all those who wait in [the halls of the dead] cry to [Nienna]...for she brings strength to the spirit and turns sorrow to wisdom”²² (an earlier draft of this story states that she is a “healer of hurts, and turns

¹⁹ *Morgoth’s Ring*, p. 293. The final edited version reads, “[Nienna] cast back her grey hood, and with her tears washed away the defilements of Ungoliant; and she sang in mourning for the bitterness of the world and the Marring of Arda” (*The Silmarillion*, p. 84).

²⁰ Cf. D&C 76:26-27 – “And was called Perdition, for the heavens wept over him—he was Lucifer, a son of the morning. And we beheld, and lo, he is fallen! is fallen, even a son of the morning!”

²¹ *The Silmarillion*, p. 88.

²² *The Silmarillion*, p. 19.

pains to medicine and sorrow to wisdom”²³). Through her solitary ministrations, this weeping goddess helps the spirits of the dead to alchemize their sorrow and sufferings not into cheap consolation, but into wisdom. And among the living, Tolkien writes that “those who hearken to [Nienna] learn pity, and endurance in hope.”²⁴ In this area of divine tutoring, *The Silmarillion* provides us with another significant point of comparison with Moses 7 by describing an extraordinary individual who is deeply affected by his relationship to a weeping deity.

In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien describes yet another order of divine beings called Maiar (roughly equivalent to “angels”), who interact with Nienna and the other lesser gods. The wisest of these angels²⁵ later goes by the name of Gandalf.²⁶ In the days when the world was young, “his ways took him often to the house of Nienna.”²⁷ Gandalf is the only being said to spend any significant time with this solitary goddess, and during his frequent visits, “of her he learned pity and patience.”²⁸ Thus, the particular wisdom which Nienna imparts to Gandalf (namely, pity and patience in hope) springs from the goddess’ sorrow. It is this intensive experience—and perhaps apprenticeship—with the goddess of mourning and pity that presumably leads to Gandalf being considered the “wisest” of these lesser divine beings. However, it is important to note that, in spite of his special apprenticeship to the weeping goddess and the wisdom he received from her, Gandalf never transcends the divine rank wherein he was created.

Returning now to Moses 7, Enoch is similarly transformed by his interaction with a weeping God. After spending time with God and coming to an understanding of why God weeps over humanity, God then “spake unto Enoch, and told Enoch all the doings of the children of

²³ *Lost Road*, p. 206.

²⁴ *The Silmarillion*, p. 19.

²⁵ *The Silmarillion*, p. 22.

²⁶ *The Two Towers*, Book IV, Chapter 5, “The Window on the West.”

²⁷ *The Silmarillion*, p. 22.

²⁸ *The Silmarillion*, p. 22.

men; wherefore Enoch knew, and looked upon their wickedness, and their misery.” Taking this all in, Enoch himself “wept and stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned; and all eternity shook” (v. 41). This passage suggests that Enoch has gone through a significant change. Earlier in the narrative, Enoch was focused entirely on the cosmic struggle between the divine and the diabolic (vv. 24-27). In witnessing God weeping over the human casualties of this battle and in hearing God put words to this sorrow, Enoch receives a sort of emotional intelligence or wisdom that fundamentally changes him. His heart can now “swell wide as eternity,” evoking Enoch’s own description of God as being “from all eternity to all eternity” (v. 29). And the fact that “eternity shook” as a result of Enoch’s weeping provides further evidence of a change greater than a mere shift in perspective—something closer to an emotional apotheosis. This sort of categorical transformation of (at least one part of) Enoch’s being into something divine sets his experience with a weeping deity apart from that of Gandalf’s.

It is worth noting that, though Enoch’s capacity for mourning has been divinized, he has not fully matured into this capacity. In looking upon the same suffering souls which God saw—those who would die in the Great Flood—Enoch “had bitterness of soul, and wept over his brethren, and said unto the heavens: I will refuse to be comforted.” God quickly steps in to temper Enoch’s zeal, telling him to “lift up your heart, and be glad” (v.44), suggesting that there is more to having a divine heart than just mourning.²⁹ This “glad[ness]” which God presents to Enoch is directly tied to relationships—the relationships between God and humanity which

²⁹ Gandalf recognizes the hazards of exercising too much pity / mourning when he rejects Frodo’s offer for him to bear the ring himself: “the way of the Ring [of Power] to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good” (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book I, Chapter 2, “The Shadow of the Past”).

Christ makes possible through his grace in general, and Enoch’s relationship with his own community in particular (v. 47).³⁰

Here is another significant point of comparison between Tolkien’s literary creation and Moses 7—namely, the role which apprentices to weeping gods play among creation after having received their specialized wisdom. In what follows, I will look at the impact Gandalf’s mentoring under the weeping goddess Nienna has on others, comparing his ministry and its effect with that of Enoch, the devotee of another weeping God.

In tracing the effect of the weeping goddess’ wisdom on the world, we see that Gandalf was initially partial to the Elves, taking upon himself their form and placing what Tolkien describes as “the promptings of wisdom” into their hearts,³¹ presumably the same sorrowful wisdom he learned from Nienna. Later, Gandalf “was the friend of all the Children of [God], and took pity on their sorrows; and those who listened to him awoke from despair and put away the imaginations of darkness.”³² Having been sensitized to the sorrow and suffering of living creatures, Gandalf ministers particularly to those who despair and whose imaginations are filled with darkness. In this, Gandalf’s pity is not limited to those who support his own cause—rather, we see him exercising his pity toward the apostate wizard Saruman³³ and all those who have become entangled in various ways by the fallen “angel” Sauron, the primary antagonist in *The Lord of the Rings*.³⁴

But we also see a much more subtle effect which Gandalf’s weeping-related wisdom had upon those closest to him: namely, the development of pity in themselves for others. Gandalf’s

³⁰ However, this does not stop Enoch from weeping altogether—Enoch later repeats his act of weeping, this time over the suffering of the earth itself (v. 49).

³¹ *The Silmarillion*, p. 22.

³² *The Silmarillion*, p. 22.

³³ *The Two Towers*, Book III, Chapter 10, “The Voice of Saruman.”

³⁴ *The Return of the King*, Book V, Chapter 4, “The Siege of Gondor.”

power of pity and its accompanying wisdom was so potent that others could feel it radiating from him, as is hinted at in the following passage: “by a sense other than sight [the hobbit] Pippin perceived that Gandalf had the greater power and the deeper wisdom, and a majesty that was [thinly] veiled.”³⁵ Some of those who recognized the power of pity in Gandalf showed forth this same power in their own circumstances. An excellent, small-scale example of Gandalf’s power of pity bringing forth pity in others is King Theoden—this poisoned man’s first act after having been healed by Gandalf is to offer the poisoner his “pity.”³⁶ Another, larger-scale example of this is Gandalf’s early travel companion, the hobbit Bilbo Baggins, who famously demonstrates pity in sparing the life of the obsessive Gollum, an act so powerful that Gandalf declares that “the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many.”³⁷ Gandalf later mentors Bilbo’s nephew Frodo, who, according to several of Tolkien’s personal letters, was only able to destroy the evil Ring of Power and was saved from its evil through “pity” and its attendant mercy.³⁸ Thus, the power of pity which Gandalf received through his own apprenticeship to the weeping goddess had serious ramifications on the world, its inhabitants, and the course of its history.

The effects of Enoch’s apprenticeship to a weeping God is perhaps best seen *not* in his ministering to individuals like Gandalf, but in his cultivation of an entire community: Zion. In looking specifically at the effect Enoch’s interaction with a weeping God had on the prophet himself, one aspect of this Zion community stands out—the condition of their hearts. Just as Enoch’s heart was changed so that it could “swell wide as eternity” (v. 41), so, too the hearts of those in Zion “swelled wide as the community,” or, in the language of Moses 7, they were “of

³⁵ *The Return of the King*, Book V, Chapter 1, “Minas Tirith.”

³⁶ *The Two Towers*, Book III, Chapter 6, “The King of the Golden Hall.”

³⁷ *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book I, Chapter 2, “The Shadow of the Past.” This entire conversation is so important to the story that it appears as a flashback in *The Two Towers*, Book IV, Chapter 1, “The Taming of Sméagol.”

³⁸ Letters 191; 234; 251-52; 253

one heart” (v. 18).³⁹ As Enoch joined his divinely transformed heart to the hearts of all those in Zion, we can perhaps see the community’s capacity for divine sorrow increased in their ability to exercise pity toward those who were suffering in their midst, leading to there being “no poor among them” (v. 18). And toward the end of his vision, Enoch sees the culmination of this community tutored in the ways of a weeping God: “And [Enoch’s] soul rejoiced, saying: . . . I am in the bosom of the Father, and behold, *Zion is with me*” (v. 47).

To conclude, I believe this exercise of bringing Tolkien’s weeping goddess into conversation with the weeping God in Moses 7 can help to stretch the religious imagination of Mormonism in meaningful ways. For instance, such a conversation helps us to better appreciate that in Moses 7, God’s suffering appears to have less to do with the fundamentally painful nature of the cosmos, than with individual suffering and the unfulfilled potential of humanity. And, in light of the beauty we see in Tolkien’s solitary goddess who weeps even from before the foundation of the world, perhaps we can imagine a more melancholy God in Mormon thought, or perhaps a particular member of the Heavenly Family who is more sensitive than others to brokenness and suffering (after all, Tolkien provides Mormons with a compelling image of a weeping *female* deity). We can also more easily imagine a God whose unique apprenticeships with individuals allows them to gain insights into *particular* aspects of God’s nature—if prophets and disciples may be mentored in very specific areas of God’s life and nature, then perhaps these individuals can only ever truly understand a narrow area of God’s personality (thought that knowledge may run deep). At the very least, this conversation between the weeping gods of Middle Earth and Moses 7 can help Mormons to better appreciate the role that divine weeping plays in the forging of a heavenly community and in the development of wisdom.

³⁹ While this description of those in Zion as being “of one heart” comes before Enoch’s vision of God’s weeping, it can also be seen as an introduction to, a foreshadowing, or a framing of the vision which immediately follows.