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Jewish Golem, and the Christian Gospel?*

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The Riddle of Gollum: Was Tolkien Inspired by Old Norse Gold, the Jewish Golem, and the Christian Gospel?

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Abstract

Tolkien's sources for Gollum were most likely the same as his sources for ents-- his love of word origins (philology), literature (poetry and prose), and life (personal experience). Gollum's precursor in Tolkien's writings was a creature named Glip, from a poem written around 1928. Gollum got his name from the sound he made when he spoke, "the horrible swallowing sound in his throat." The hypothesis of Douglas Anderson, who annotated *The Annotated Hobbit*, is that Tolkien got the name Gollum from *gull* or *goll*, the Old Norse word for gold. One inflected form would be *gollum* (gold, treasure, something precious). Another hypothesis is that Tolkien got the name Gollum from the Jewish Golem. The word *golem* occurs once in the Bible (Psalm 139:16) and is the origin of the Golem in Jewish folklore. Gustav Meyrink's classic fantastic fiction masterpiece, *The Golem*, had been published in English in 1928. The Gospel entered the story when Tolkien revised *The Hobbit* in 1951; Gollum becomes a fallen hobbit in need of pity and mercy.

Introduction

We each have our favorite characters in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Many identify with Tolkien's heroes, such as Gandalf, Bilbo, Frodo, Sam, Aragorn, or the shield-maiden Eowyn. You might be surprised at my own favorite character, or at least the one I most identify with in my Christian walk. That character is the villain, Gollum. I see Gollum as a fallen hobbit in need of pity and mercy. I see my own need for God's mercy. I see Gollum in myself, as a sinner in need of God's grace.

I would like to speculate on Tolkien's sources for Gollum. As a start, it is likely that Tolkien's conscious sources for Gollum were the same as his sources for ents. Tolkien wrote that "...Ents are composed of philology, literature, and life."¹ Tolkien accordingly cites three sources -- his love of word origins or linguistics (philology), literature (poetry and prose), and life (personal experience).

The Precursor to Gollum: Glip

The precursor to Gollum in Tolkien's writings was a creature named "Glip." *Glip* is one of a series of poems called *Tales and Songs of Bimble Bay*.² The poem is undated, but was probably written around 1928. Keep in mind that Tolkien first wrote the sentence, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit," late in 1929.³ Here is an excerpt from Tolkien's poem:⁴

Under the cliffs of Bimble Bay
Is a little cave of stone
With wet walls of shining grey;
And on the floor a bone,
A white bone that is gnawed quite clean
With sharp white teeth.

But inside nobody can be seen --
 He lives far underneath,
Under the floor, down a long hole
 Where the sea gurgles and sighs.
Glip is his name...

And Glip listens, and quietly slips
 And lies in shadow by.
It is there that Glip steals his bones.
 He is a slimy little thing
Sneaking and crawling under fishy stones,
 And slinking home to sing
A gurgling sound in his damp hole;
 But after the last light
There are darker and wicked things that prowl
 On Bimble rocks at night.

Many aspects of Gollum's persona, as seen in *The Hobbit*, are already established in the character of Glip:

- Where he lives -- in "a little cave of stone," "far underneath, down a long hole where the sea gurgles," "his damp hole"
- His invisibility -- "inside nobody can be seen." He "quietly slips and lies in shadow by."
- What he looks like when seen -- "a slimy little thing sneaking and crawling," "slinking"
- What he sounds like -- singing "a gurgling sound"

In the first edition of *The Hobbit* Tolkien wrote that he got the name "Gollum" (1937) from this "gurgling sound." In Tolkien's words, "Gollum" describes "the horrible swallowing noise in his throat", that Gollum makes when he speaks.⁵ Indeed, "That is how he [Gollum] got his name, though he always called himself 'my precious'."

Old Norse Gold

The hypothesis of Douglas Anderson, who annotated *The Annotated Hobbit*, is that Tolkien got the name "Gollum" from Old Norse "Gold."⁶ The Old Norse word *gull* means "gold." In the oldest manuscripts it is spelled *goll*. One inflected form would be *gollum*, "gold, treasure, something precious." It can also mean "ring," as is found in the compound word *fingr-gull*, "finger-ring." These are points that may have occurred to Tolkien.

Old Norse mythology was certainly one of Tolkien's many sources for the riddle contest between Bilbo and Gollum. Word combats with deadly outcomes are common in Old Norse literature.⁷ A riddle contest with Odin is prominent in *The Saga of King Heidrik the Wise*.⁸ Old English literature is another source for the riddle contest. The largest manuscript of Anglo-Saxon poetry, *The Exeter Book*, contains 95 riddles. Bilbo's second riddle, "sun on the daisies," is a play on the word daisy, which was originally "day's eye" (*dæges éage*) in Old English.⁹

Riddles are common in many literary traditions. Bilbo's third riddle, describing an egg, is a condensation of a verse Tolkien credited to American nursery books.¹⁰ Bilbo's fourth riddle, "no-legs", is a variation on the riddle of the Sphinx in Greek mythology: What animal walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening? The answer, as given by Oedipus, is man.¹¹ Riddles are even found in the Bible, involving Moses (Numbers 12:8), Samson (Judges 14), the psalmist (Psalm 49:1), Solomon (Proverbs 1:6), and the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:1, 2 Chronicles 9:1).

The Jewish Golem

An alternative hypothesis is that Tolkien got the name "Gollum" from the Jewish "Golem." *Golem* comes from a Hebrew word that occurs once in the Old Testament (Psalm 139:16): "Your eyes saw my unformed *substance*," the word root for substance being the consonants GLM in the Hebrew.¹² The Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible translates the Hebrew word as "my imperfect being." Tolkien did have an interest in the Hebrew language. He reported being "immersed in Hebrew," but in 1957, after *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.¹³ Tolkien did translate the book of Jonah in *The Jerusalem Bible* (published in 1966), but "Not from the Hebrew direct!"¹⁴

Was Tolkien aware of the Jewish legend of the Golem? The Golem was a creature of clay constructed to represent a human being and endowed with life, but without a soul. The legendary Golem protected the Jews in the Ghetto.¹⁵

Was Tolkien influenced by Gustav Meyrink's *The Golem*, a famous fictional treatment of the Golem first published in English in 1928?¹⁶ *The Golem*, a masterpiece of fantastic fiction, is a supernatural novel (probably more to Charles Williams' taste!). Tolkien read little contemporary fiction, but he did read fantasy and science fiction.¹⁷ Tolkien did not refer to Gustav Meyrink or the Golem in his writings (to the best of my knowledge); however, the Oxford Christian writers could be secretive about their sources. Michael Ward's *Planet Narnia* is a case in point.¹⁸

Gollum and the Golem have quite a few similarities, besides names that sound the same. They are both creatures of the earth. They are both imperfect beings. They both can become invisible; invisibility was a property of the Golem in some stories. Their magical power can be inactivated. Finally, both are "humanoid but of unknown species."¹⁹

The Christian Gospel

In considering Gollum, Tolkien's Christian faith must also be taken into account. Tolkien was "a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic."²⁰ Tolkien said of *The Lord of the Rings*, that it "is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision."²¹ In the original edition of *The Hobbit* (1937), Gollum is clearly not a hobbit: "I don't know where he came from or what he was."²² Only when Tolkien came to write the sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*, did he have the inspiration to make Gollum a hobbit.²³

Tolkien extensively revised the Gollum narrative in the second (1951) edition of *The Hobbit*, so as to emphasize the wretchedness of Gollum and the pity of Bilbo.²⁴ In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien gave Gollum a back history. Gollum had been a hobbit. He had killed his own brother to get the ring. Gollum was a fallen hobbit (an everyman, or an "everyhobbit") in need of pity and mercy, just as we are all sinners in need of God's pity and mercy (Psalm 51, Luke 18:13,38-39).

Pity and mercy become major themes of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Hobbit* Bilbo has the chance to kill Gollum, but out of pity he is merciful toward Gollum and spares him. "A pity mixed with horror" stays his hand. In *The Lord of the Rings* Frodo follows Gandalf's advice, shows pity and mercy toward Gollum, and again spares him. Frodo is enabled to complete his quest on Mount Doom, but only because he repeatedly spared Gollum beforehand.

Other Sources for Tolkien's Inspiration

Three other possible sources for Tolkien's conception of Gollum are Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*, and the Inklings (in particular C.S. Lewis).

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) is recognized as the first fully achieved science fiction novel.²⁵ Literary scholarship is divided as to whether Mary Shelley was aware of the Golem legend or not.^{26,27} Surprisingly there are many echoes of *Frankenstein* in Tolkien's description of Gollum. Tolkien uses the same words to describe Gollum, "miserable" and "wretched", that Mary Shelley uses again and again to describe both Frankenstein and his monster. The monster begs Frankenstein to have pity. As an aside, Saruman's creation of the Uruk-hai is eerily reminiscent of Frankenstein's creation of his monster.

Richard Wagner's operatic ring cycle, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, could also have inspired Tolkien. Arthur Rackham's illustrated editions, which so influenced C.S. Lewis, were published in 1910 and 1911.^{28,29} Gollum is akin to the dwarf Alberich. They both are aquatic creatures that dwell underground. Both Gollum and Alberich are obsessed with rings or objects of power that confer invisibility.

Other Inklings, in particular C.S. Lewis, certainly must have inspired Tolkien. Tolkien acknowledged his "unpayable debt" to C.S. Lewis: ""The unpayable debt that I owe to him was not 'influence' as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement. He was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my 'stuff' could be more than a private hobby. But for his interest and unceasing eagerness for more I should never have brought *The L. of the R.* to a conclusion..."^{30,31}

Tolkien most certainly inspired C.S. Lewis, too. It is well known that the marsh-wiggle Puddle-glum, a major character in C.S. Lewis' *The Silver Chair*, was modeled on Lewis' gardener at the Kilns, Fred W. Paxford.³² Lewis got the name Puddle-glum from an old translation of Euripides' *Hippolytus*, which included the phrase "Stygian puddle glum"; Lewis reproduced the phrase in his *Oxford History of English Literature* volume.^{33,34} Donald E. Glover has noted that Puddle-glum was also modeled on Gollum.³⁵ The similarity in their names is obvious. Both are aquatic, lean, frog-like, and cold-blooded. Of course, Puddle-glum is the hero of *The Silver Chair*, while Gollum is the villain of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Conclusion

We have speculated on Tolkien's sources for the character Gollum. Tolkien's conscious sources for Gollum were most likely the same as his sources for ents--his love of word origins (philology), literature (poetry and prose), and life (personal experience). Regarding the riddle of Gollum, it can be argued that three of Tolkien's primary sources for Gollum were Old Norse gold, the Jewish Golem, and the Christian Gospel.

Notes

- ¹Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981, p. 212.
- ²J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*. Revised and expanded edition annotated by Douglas A. Anderson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002, p. 119.
- ³Leslie Ellen Jones, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003, p. 83.
- ⁴*The Annotated Hobbit*, p. 119.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 120.
- ⁶*Ibid.*, p. 120.
- ⁷William H. Green, *The Hobbit: A Journey into Maturity*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995, pp. 76-77.
- ⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.
- ¹⁰*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 110.
- ¹¹*The Annotated Hobbit*, p. 126.
- ¹²Joachim Neugroschel, *The Golem: A New Translation of the Classic Play and Selected Short Stories*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. ix.
- ¹³Christina Scull, Wayne G. Hammond, *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Reader's Guide*, Hammersmith, London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006, p. 468.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 468.
- ¹⁵Elie Wiesel, *The Golem: The Story of a Legend*. New York: Summit Books, 1983, pp. 45, 103.
- ¹⁶Gustav Meyrink, *The Golem*. Translation by Madge Pemberton, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1928. Republication by Dover Publications, Inc. (Mineola, NY), 1976.
- ¹⁷Colin Duriez, *Tolkien and C.S. Lewis: The Gift of Friendship*, Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Spring, 2003, p. 213.
- ¹⁸Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia*, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2008.
- ¹⁹*The Hobbit: A Journey into Maturity*, p. 75.
- ²⁰*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 288.
- ²¹*Ibid.*, 172.
- ²²John D. Rateliff, *The History of The Hobbit Part One: Mr. Baggins*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007, p. 166.
- ²³*The History of The Hobbit Part One: Mr. Baggins*, p. 166.
- ²⁴*The Annotated Hobbit*, p. 133.
- ²⁵Eric S. Rabkin, *Masterpieces of the Imaginative Mind: Literature's Most Fantastic Works, Part 2*, Lecture Transcript and Course Guidebook. Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2007, p. 22.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, p.22.
- ²⁷Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler, *The Monsters: Mary Shelley and the Curse of Frankenstein*, New York: Back Bay Books (Little, Brown and Company), 2006, p. 321.
- ²⁸Richard Wagner, *The Ring of the Nibelung: The Rhinegold & The Valkyrie*, with illustrations by Arthur Rackham, London: Heinemann, 1910 (reissued 1976).

²⁹Richard Wagner, *The Ring of the Niblung: Siegfried & The Twilight of the Gods*, with illustrations by Arthur Rackham, London: Heinemann, 1911 (reissued 1976).

³⁰*Tolkien and C.S. Lewis: The Gift of Friendship*, pp. 176-177.

³¹*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 362.

³¹Walter Hooper, ed., *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, Vol. III. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007, p. 824.

³²Douglas Gilbert, Clyde S. Kilby, *C.S. Lewis: Images of His World*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973, p. 67.

³³C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century excluding Drama*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 256.

³⁴Colin Duriez, *A Field Guide to Narnia*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004, p. 203.

³⁵Donald E. Glover, *C.S. Lewis: The Art of Enchantment*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981, p. 167.