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Providence at Elrond’s Council

Abstract
Examines the interplay of chance, destiny, and free will during the pivotal Council of Elrond; their coordination in “a continuing series of eucatastrophes” reflects Tolkien’s theology of providence.

Additional Keywords
Lord of the Rings fans have argued for years over the extent to which Tolkien's Christian faith influences Middle Earth and the War of the Ring. Some purists see Gandalf the Gray's resurrection as Gandalf the White to be a specifically Biblical reference, while others adamantly argue that such narrow-minded reading neglects the integrity of the trilogy as a whole and adds little to an appreciation of the work. "Critic Gunnar Urrang enters this fray with his short essay 'Tolkien's Fantasy: The Phenomenology of Hope' when he asserts that Lord of the Rings is "a profoundly Christian work."

However, Urrang does not merely find specifically Christian symbols to trace through the trilogy; he says, "No God is required in this story; it is enough if it suggests the kind of pattern in history which the Christian tradition has inherited to provide the framework of the trilogy's plot."

The chapter on Elrond's Council contains other events which give Urrang a sense of the interconnectedness of all the elements... an ordering of all these elements to one end."

As Gandalf's story emerges at the Council, the members realize that Gandalf's actions influence events touching Frodo and his party. As Strider and the hobbits make their way across the lands, the reader is to be reminded not only of a 'sense of the interconnectedness of all the elements', but also of a ' Duty to perform a large design.'

The reader can detect a pattern of providential design which reveals relationships among isolated bits of information in order to prepare the Council to make needed decisions.

Thus to understand Sauron's aim and power, the Council needs to discern the order and fill in gaps among various bits of information. Gaps in lore-knowledge vanish as Gandalf explains how Isildur initially cut the Ring from Sauron's finger (I, p. 319) - as Urrang describes Gwaihir the eagle to be the lost by Sauron (I, p. 332) - of which Gandalf has heard but rumors (I, p. 336) - and as the wizard reveals Rohan's payment of tribute to Sauron (I, p. 343) and Sauron's treachery (I, p. 338-340). Aragorn explains the role of his Dunedain in preserving peace in the North (I, p. 325-326), and as Gandalf's battle of Dunharrow Legolas' news of Gollum's escape takes on great significance (I, p. 394).

The Council receives a sign of the forthcoming conflict as Aragorn displays the "Sword that was broken" of Boromir's dream and as Frodo completes the closing line of the dream, "And the Halfing forth shall stand" (I, p. 323-324). Throughout the Council meeting, the reader can detect a pattern of providential design which reveals relationships among isolated bits of information in order to prepare the Council to make needed decisions.

In addition to a large, overarching pattern which is often invisible to the very characters affected, Lord of the Rings contains another of the complexities of the Christian faith--that of the balance between predestination and free will. The very existence of prophecy argues for, at least, a fatalistic world view, if not for a providentially preordained one; if prophecy states what is to occur, the foreknowledge of the event indicates the inevitability of its occurrence. Prophecy is rife at the Council meeting. As previously discussed, Aragorn's sword and Frodo's presence fulfill Boromir's vision (I, pp 323-324). Bibo's verse that "the crownless shall be King" (I, p. 325) is later realized at Aragorn's coronation. Gandalf's intention of an important future role for Gollum (I, p. 336) comes to fruition as Gollum leads Frodo into Mordor and ultimately causes the destruction of the Ring. But in Lord of the Rings, awareness of one's future power role is at times limited, so that Eomer does not compel one to act accordingly. Although, in reference to the ring, Aragorn points out to Frodo, "it has been ordained that you should hold it for awhile" (I, p. 324). Frodo is not absolutely compelled to carry it. While Frodo feels "as if some other will was using his small voice" as he accepts the burden of the quest, he none-the-less speaks
Thus during the Third Age of Middle Earth, although actions may be foretold, the mere existence of a prophetic statement does not compel characters into specific action. "R" is never subsumed by predetermination: the two remain an indefinite mixture.

Although a providential design seems to co-ordinate complex affairs while, paradoxically, not forcing actions upon characters, another pattern emerges in Lord of the Rings to encourage Council forces: a pattern of hope. As Urang explains, "even more significant as a basis for hope is the pattern of happenings which we (and to some extent, they (the characters)) see developing, a series of unexpected reactions, of lesser 'happy endings', figuring forth the ultimate triumph." Even within the Council meeting, small ecatastrophes contribute to this developing pattern. Gandalf's dramatic rescue from Orthanc is certainly a close call from which a Council member escapes, while the meeting itself, "in the very nick of time," adds to the growing pattern. Thus, as hope builds upon a continuing series of close escapes, events revealed at the Council meeting play their role in setting a hopeful precedent.

The Council of Elrond at Rivendell provides several indications of providential design at work in the War of the Ring. The co-ordination of complex events, the balance of providential will and individual freedom of choice, and a continuing series of ecatastrophes all parallel the traditional Christian view of God at work through history. As the reader recalls Tolkien's opening "Note on the Shire Records" (I, p. 27-39), he will realize that the "textual problem" Tolkien discusses in regard to the sources for the War identify Lord of the Rings as, history rather than fiction. Thus Urang identifies the providential ordering in the trilogy as Tolkien's own hopeful "theology of history," a theology clearly evinced at Elrond's Council.

Notes

1 The Lord of the Rings is published in three volumes — The Fellowship of the Ring (1965), The Two Towers (1966), and The Return of the King (1967) — in the United States by Ballantine Books in New York. For the sake of convenience, I have designated the three volumes by the numerals I, II, and III.


3 Urang, p. 107. In fairness to the whole of Mr. Urang's argument, I must extend the quote a bit further. After mentioning the "pattern in history," he goes on to say:

Cordai and Aragorn need not turn our thoughts to the Christ of Christian faith; but they persuade us that if we are to have hope in our lives and in our history, it must be for the kind of power and authority revealed in Aragorn the king and on the basis of the kind of power revealed in Gandalf's "miracles" and his rising from the dead. What Frodo does and undergoes speaks to us of what a man's responsibility, according to the Christian faith, must always be: to renounce the kind of power which enslaves others and ourselves and to submit to that power which frees us to be all we are capable of being.

4 Urang, p. 109.

5 Urang, p. 105.