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Invasion from Eternity: Time and Myth in Middle-earth

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Invasion from Eternity: Time and Myth in Middle-earth

Abstract
Comparing the creation story and history of Middle-earth and of our world as set forth in the Bible, and shows “how every age of Middle-earth mirrors the Christian tale through [...] creation, degeneration, sacrifice, and renewal” without descending to allegory.

Additional Keywords
Myth, nature of; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Christian symbolism; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Middle-earth—Creation; Sarah Beach
Myths are "lies and therefore worthless even though breathed through silver," C.S. Lewis once said before his conversion to Christianity. It is J.R.R. Tolkien's reply that interests us. "No," said Tolkien, "they are not lies," adding that man is not ultimately a liar. He comes from God, and although he may "pervert his thoughts into lies," his imaginative inventions (i.e., myths) originate in God. Therefore, man is fulfilling God's purpose when he creates these stories. He is reflecting various colors refracted from the white light of truth. The pagan myths are never just lies; Tolkien said, "there is always something of the truth in them." After some discussion, Lewis commented that Christianity is the old myth of the "dying god" all over again, to which Tolkien replied:

Yes, except that there is a real Dying God, with a precise location in history and definite historical consequences. The old myth has become a fact. But it still retains the character of myth.

Tolkien's point can be seen more clearly in this statement: Myth became fact through history in the person of Jesus Christ. We can, therefore, call the Christian story the Mythic Fact (my term), because, for Christians, it is fact with mythic significance.

Tolkien used this principle when he forged Middle-earth. He wanted to create a myth, so he followed the example of the ancient mythic poets. Middle-earth, then is a refraction of truth. It is not just fiction, for it does what all myth does; it reflects the Mythic Fact, and therefore, has fragments of truth in it.

Tolkien looks at himself as a "sub-creator" creating because he was made in the image of a creator. Richard Purtill explains this view in Lord of the Elves and Eldils:

Like all good stories, it [Tolkien's story] echoes of others, including the greatest of all stories—which Tolkien believes is a true story—the life of Christ.

Because the life of Christ is eternity and history combined, any story which mirrors that life must reflect all of history and a bit of eternity as well. G.K. Chesterton supports this statement in saying:

The only right way of telling a story is to begin at the beginning—at the beginning of the world. Therefore, all books have to begin in the wrong place for the sake of brevity.

Tolkien opens his story even before the beginning of the world, and thus reveals the creation of the universe. In The Silmaril-
This is the creation of a new World. There is, within this story, both a vision of eternity and an account of the beginning of history. Both these dimensions are necessary if the nature of myth is to be contained within the nature of Christ. And Tolkien believed that if a story is to have mythic significance, it must echo the true story, the life of Christ; it must deal with eternal things and unveil a history permeated with eternity.

The Genesis account of creation also has elements of history and eternity. The Mythic Fact or what C.S. Lewis calls the Chosen Mythology (i.e., a myth told by God, Himself),5 sets an example of good story telling by using eternity and history as indispensable parts of its narrative. The Biblical statement "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"7 reveals an eternity that exists before creation and a history that begins at creation.

Thus when Christ says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega—the first and the last,"8 Christians can find support for their view that Christ started history as the word of God by speaking creation into existence and that He will be the One Who will end history when time has run its course. In order to fulfill the purpose of myth, both the Bible and Tolkien's tale will not only have to show history's origin; they will have to reveal the end of history's time, as well, and include enough information about the period within history's boundaries to show a purposeful systematic condensation of eternity into history. The events to be included in Tolkien's work are specifically those which mirror the major components of the Christian story. Nature of myth is to contain an echo of the nature of Christ, and Tolkien believed that if a story is to have mythic significance, it must echo the true story, the life of Christ; it must deal with eternal things and unveil a history permeated with eternity.

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Since all these components occur in every age of this pre-Christian history and because Tolkien has placed his world within our own, we can assume that he is unveiling a systematic view of history, in which each mythic tale constitutes an age, and each age is a reflection of the Chosen Mythology, of the boundaries of which are the ends of time. All previous and future myths, then, have a place in history's progression toward eternity. This essay will now examine The Silmarillion, pointing out each of the four major components of the Christian myth as revealed in each of the three ages of Middle-earth.

The creation component is revealed in the first age of Arda when the Valar, Ainur who had sent to Earth to tend and to make war upon the Valar, and mars the symmetry of the lands and waters of Arda. Thus ends the Spring of Arda (p. 37). After the birth of the Elves, Melkor conjures lies and jealousies in the minds of these First Children toward those who come later, a race known as Men. The first folly of listening to lies which cause strife between races continues to work its evil until man fights with man in the Kinslaying at Alqualonde, where the hosts of Peanor kill their own relatives, in their willful rejection of the Valar's command to remain in the Blessed Realm. They steal the white ships of the Teleri for use in crossing over to the lands of Middle-earth. Elves continue to strive against other races and even their own kin throughout the First Age. Their disobedience of the Valar's command results in an exile imposed by the Valar so that they can no longer return. This act resembles Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden.
Many sorrows come upon Middle-earth as a result of this prideful disobedience, including the kinslayings that persist throughout the age. This willful rebellion is the fall, which marks the degeneration component of the First Age. Valinor is excluded from this degeneration and can thus be considered heaven on earth, a reminder of what the world could have been.

Earendil takes it upon himself to make the sacrifice which ultimately results in the renewal of Arda and the crowning of Melkor. He decides it is necessary to disobey the Ban of the Valar by sailing to the Blessed Realm to ask forgiveness and aid for Middle-earth. In sailing west he risks death. This selfless act and plea for pardon parallels Christ's selfless death for the forgiveness of men's sins in the Christian mythology. Like Christ, Earendil does not die; unlike Christ neither does he return from Valinor, heaven on Earth. This shows that Earendil's story is only a hopeful approximation of the sacrificial component of the Christian myth. It does however, contain the most important element of this tale; his prayer is granted. Ulmo (p. 249) emphasizes Earendil's conquest of death in living after reaching the undying lands: "For this he was born into the world," says Ulmo in St. John 18:37. Therefore, Ulmo's statement indicates providential and purposeful control of history.

After the pardon, Valar prepares for battle; the Hosts of Heaven on Earth march against those who want to turn Arda into a living hell. Morgoth is hurled upon his face and bound in Angainor; his crown is turned upside down which marks the degeneration component of the First Age. Valinor is excluded from the First Age. The worship of Iluvatar and the cycle would stop, never reaching the Lord of All, Giver of Freedom, and he shall make you stronger than they (p. 272).

Listening to this advice is the first and greatest sin of the men of Numinor in the Second Age. The worship of Iluvator and the upkeep of his temple is subsequently abandoned. In their pride, the men of Numinor break the Ban of the Valar and sail westward to take from them eternal life within the confines of Arda. In their foolishness, they make war upon even the Valar. Amandil makes the archetypal sacrifice, that of going to the Valar to ask deliverance for Numinor, but Numinor as a whole cannot be saved by his plea. The Valar have done this once with the elves and will not do it again. Still, just as in Noah's time, the Faithful, those who remained friendly with the elves who bring messages and gifts from Valinor, are spared in answer to Amandil's prayer (p. 275). As a result of the salvation of the Faithful,
Gondor is established on the shores of Middle-earth. This constitutes the renewal of the Second Age and the creation story of the Third Age.

Although every age has a renewal, it never quite brings the world back to the standard of goodness that existed at the beginning. Each creation is somewhat less glorious than the one that precedes it. As we shall see, the elves must lose many good things in order to conquer evil in the Third Age because the world is wounding down. Illuvator creates a perfect world which Melkor corrupts. The Valar do the best they can, but cannot bring it to its original grandeur. Numinor is only an island far removed from the wide world. In the Third Age, not even an island, but a city within an imperfect continent, is created. Thus, the renewal archetype degenerates from Perfect World to Symmetrical World restored by the Valar, to an Island within a World, to a City besieged on all sides by evil.

The need for the Great Sacrifice of the Christian story exists because of this delayed but inevitable degeneration, caused by original sin. Gandalf supports this notion of the degeneration of the world with this statement in The Two Towers: "The evil of Sauron cannot be wholly cured nor made as it had not been."

The establishment of Gondor, then, is the creation story in the Third Age. During this time of glory in Gondor, Sauron's spirit returns to Mordor. He rebuilds it upon its old foundations which have never been destroyed, even though Mordor has been leveled by the men of Numinor. Sauron can no longer make himself lovely in the eyes of the different races, so he takes a form of horror and becomes the bearer of the evil wishes of Melkor. Even in this secondary role, he fancies himself his own master and seeks to totally dominate the whole of Arda. He teaches the elves of the Second Age the craft of making magic rings for this purpose. At this time his form is fair and he gains their trust. These magic rings, made by elf-craft, have never been touched by Sauron and therefore, are able to prolong the magical in Middle-earth. The magic of these rings lies in their ability to preserve all that is good and to bring good out of good and evil alike. Sauron, seeing his chance to dominate these rings and thus the elves as well, forges the One Ring, the Ring of Power, which is the cause of the War of the Ring in the Third Age. This Ring contains a great amount of Sauron's own power, power which he allows to pass from him into the ring, so that the Ring can control the elves and their rings and, thus, bring them under his command. With the Ring, Sauron can control the world; without the Ring, Sauron loses control, but retains much of his own power. If the Ring is destroyed, however, Sauron is disarmed. To destroy the Ring, then, is the major objective of the allied races who oppose Sauron in the War of the Ring.

Sauron's Ring should have been destroyed at an earlier time. This failure causes the degeneration of the Third Age. Isildur, prince of Gondor, during the final battle with Sauron, cuts the One Ring from Sauron's finger, but does not throw it into Mount Doom, its place of forging and the only fire hot enough to destroy it. Instead, he keeps the Ring for his own purposes. This is the Ring of Tóru, Ring of Power, Ring of Sin of the Third Age which brings on the degeneration of the world. Consequently, Sauron's power remains and the Ring is drawn back to its maker. While the prince is being pursued by Orcs, Isildur's Bane slips from his finger. Invisible until now, he is revealed and killed. The Ring passes from owner to owner, from Gollum, to Bilbo, to Frodo, and it is Frodo who finally carries it to its destruction at the end of the War of the Ring. This fuzzy-footed, tiny Hobbit performs the sacrifice that is the secular salvation of the Third Age. The Ring's strange power of attraction causes anyone who possesses it to make a final claim of ownership. This desire for the Ring consumes those who carry it. Bilbo is the only being to ever willingly give it away; Frodo is hard pressed to destroy it. But this self-sacrifice brings on the regeneration of the Third Age. The exiled King is restored to power and Sauron is finally destroyed. But we can be assured that Evil will arise again, for as Gandalf says in The Return of the King: "Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary."

Sauron is the unwitting emissary of Morgoth, the Melkor of The Silmarilion. By this time Sauron seeks to dominate completely and forgets that he, himself, is dominated by the will of another. The Persuasive Will that dominates the world of the Christian mythology is Satan. It is he who directs the evil in the world. Tolkien's myth, as well as the Christian story, waits for the coming of a savior who will destroy this source of evil and thus bring the historical cycle to an end. Time will be caught up in eternity. We see, then, that Tolkien's myth reflects the Christian view of history, for Christ is the central figure of both tales, although not clearly foreseen either in Middle-earth or in the Old Testament. The world would disintegrate apart from divine renewal.

Although elfish magic is gone from the world by the end of the Third Age, the Resurrection of Christ brings a new kind of spiritual awareness to rational beings. It is no longer emissaries of Illuvator, the Valar or angels, who dwell among men and direct their paths, but the Spirit of God, Himself, the Holy Spirit of Christianity and the Secret Fire in Tolkien's myth. In The Silmarillion it is called Eä, which means "Be!" (p. 20). This Spiritual Fire causes all to "be" and thus receives its name. Christianity claims that in Christ's resurrection and ascension, humankind has that Spirit working in it. An upward movement in the cycle of history is the result. Although evil continues to thwart good, Good, that is Christ, has already prevailed and the Spirit of God is now directing lives and moving them toward
perfection. When the source of death is destroyed at the end of time, Christ will reign in a perfected world.

Tolkien speaks of Christ's resurrection as the eucatastrophe of the Gospel story. Analogically it could be said that Christ's second coming is the Eucatastrophe of all history. It is the sudden happy turn which surprises everyone. Every myth has it in its retelling of the regeneration story. When right is about to fail, right prevails, and the world is restored. In the Christian myth, which Tolkien says all stories mirror, right is completely victorious, and the universe is eventually returned to the completeness which existed at the dawn of time.

We have seen how every age of Middle-earth mirrors the Christian tale through the four components of creation, degeneration, sacrifice, and renewal which are present in some form in every age. Each age is not presented as Christian allegory, however. This tale is of a pre-Christian world and does not allow for a one-to-one correspondence of its characters and events with those of the Christian myth. But because Tolkien feels that any good myth reflects its Christian counterpart, he has created a world permeated with messages from this deeper reality. The three ages of Middle-earth do not retell the life of Christ, but they parallel the Christian story. Tolkien has remained true to his mission of being a storyteller; he uses it as an example for his own creative efforts because he is, as he says, "made in the image and likeness of a maker".12

NOTES

1Humphrey Carpenter, The Inklings (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), p. 44.
7Genesis 1:1
8Revelation 1:7-17
10The Lord of the Rings, III, p. 190.
12Ibid., p. 55.

Gollum, continued from page 17 effort. And this light is still more powerful than many of the characters expect. Frodo tells Gandalf that he wishes Bilbo had killed Gollum when he had the chance, but when Frodo meets Gollum, he also pities him, and immediately allows himself to become dependent on Gollum as his leader. Gollum then leads Sam and Frodo faithfully through the Dead Marshes, showing not only his goodness, but also his courage. And during this passage through the Dead Marshes, "the hobbits were... wholly in the hands of Gollum." (Vol. II, p. 293) Often Frodo is forced to trust and depend on Gollum, and often Gollum is true.

Gollum is given these chances to help in the destruction of the Ring because of pity, and because there is hope that he may yet recover from the corrupting influence of the Ring. All who are aware of his struggle can pity him, and all are convinced by Gandalf that regardless of his wretchedness there is always hope. Gandalf says that Gollum is "not wholly ruined," (Vol. I, p. 86) and that "I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it." (Vol. I, p. 93) Because of Gandalf's influence, the Elves also "hope still for his cure." (Vol. I, p. 335) So there is awareness that although Gollum is dominated by evil he is "not altogether wicked." (Vol. III, p. 381)

When Sam says to Gollum, "Gollum...would you like to be the hero," (Vol. II, p.490) his words become portentous. Gollum does indeed become a hero. And when Sam says "even Gollum might be good in a tale" (Vol. II, p. 490) he again is correct. Because Gollum is good in the tale of the One Ring. When one looks at what Gollum literally does concerning the Ring, he must be considered heroic. After being under the absolutely evil power of the Ring for 478 years, and then losing the Ring to Bilbo, Gollum returns to lead Frodo through the Dead Marshes, shows the hobbits a secret way into Mordor (and warns them that it may be guarded), and on the way catches Sam rabbits for stew. And then in the ultimate heroic self-sacrifice, Gollum, with the good fraction in his mind finally overpowering the Ring's evil, sees that Frodo cannot destroy the Ring, will use this edition, volumes I, II, and III.

And this ending fits perfectly into the religious schema of The Lord of The Rings. Although the characters are not aware of it, evil can never triumph in Middle-earth. And although it often appears that evil will triumph within Gollum, it never can. Gollum becomes a symbol of the absolute persistence of good in Middle-earth.

Notes

5Genesis 3.