

CHAPTER VII

HISTORY AND CHRISTIANITY

G: Where is God in The Lord of the Rings?

J.R.R.T.: He's mentioned once or twice.

G: Is he the One?

J.R.R.T.: The One, yes.¹

mythology and religion (in the strict sense of that word) are two distinct things that have become inextricably entangled ²

[Gandalf of Frodo] 'to what will he come in the end... Not to evil, I think. He may become like a glass filled with a clear light for eyes to see that can.' (I, 235)

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Throughout Tolkien's works there is an ordered sense of evolving history which gives further meaning to the present. Characters feel themselves as part of a continuum of time and ongoing events. It is manifested in 'old stories', love of genealogy, and wonder at the fulfilment of prophecy. In their travels, the landscape still bears the remains of past inhabitation; a once powerful and dignified civilization of the past is today suggested by no more than an odd arrangement of stones, the origin of which is still not quite forgotten by all. Other characters encountered are strange survivors from a previous age, with

1. D. Gerrold, 'An Interview With J.R.R.T.', Minas Tirith Evening-Star, Vol. 13, No. 1, Jan.-Feb. 1984, pp. 6-7. The interview was originally broadcast by BBC 4 in Jan. 1971.

2. C. Dawson, Progress and Religion: An Historical Enquiry, London, 1931, p.36, quoted by Tolkien in 'On Fairy Stories' (T&L, 31).

their own stories, but seemingly fated to soon dwindle into extinction. The major lesson from this vast history is that all people and the things of Middle-earth are transient. In moral terms the message means either selfishness and despair or stoic endurance and slender hope, for the only act of reverence in the works seems merely a memory of the past, and it has little power to infuse with meaning the choices to be made in the present. That morality endured in some persons, in the face of such potential for despair, is an enormous moral achievement. Such also was the situation for the pre-Christian Germanic peoples, a spirit captured in Beowulf. Yet Tolkien's fictional world moves to some extent beyond this. Several elements in the narrative are analogues for Christian worship, and as Tolkien presents them, they are occasions for renewal and for wonder. The effect of the historical perspective in conjunction with the Christian detail is to suggest a moral transition and, by reflexion, to suggest a mythic past for current Christian worship.

Interpretation of the theme of 'history' in Tolkien's works has concentrated on filling in the adumbrated detail of the greater historical events, drawing (internal) parallels, and in showing how the present has resulted. The approach is akin to Tolkien's own 'sub-creator' role, extending the borders of the created world. While acknowledging the validity of this approach, it has moved away from an emphasis on those things which make the works so powerful, the burden on small people of making great moral choices. More important are the effects of these resonances of metahistory on the inhabitants of the Third Age, which have ultimately a personal impact. In conjunction with the proto-Christian detail of the works, the total impression is of a society moving towards general realisation of the existence of 'the One'³, God. Unlike earlier themes examined in this dissertation, 'history' is not presented through echoic repetition of significant lexis.

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The Hobbit only shows the beginnings of this (historical) theme, but still it is important to the work. As Tolkien actually wrote of The Hobbit:

the presence (even if only on the borders) of the terrible is, I believe what gives this imagined world its versimilitude.⁴

Although The Lord of the Rings will later fill in more of this detail, the terror on its own borders will give the longer work, in addition to its versimilitude, a great moral poignancy. In The Hobbit itself, after the early reference to the Necromancer (H, 30), whose destruction Gandalf dismisses as beyond their capacities, the next suggestion of a greater history is in the landscape. After the Company has moved beyond the lands where 'people spoke strangely' (H, 34) they come into the:

Lone-lands, where there were no people left [and hills with] old castles with an evil look, as if they had been built by wicked people. (H, 34)

The area is not far from Bilbo's home although he has not been there before, and it is disturbing in that it clearly has a past that still appears malevolent. The sense of antiquity continues as they cross 'an ancient stone bridge' (H, 35), and the feeling of threatening evil climaxes in the dangerous encounter with the trolls.

The discovery and use of ancient weapons also puts some attention on the struggles of the past, although in this case the weapons are reminders of stout defence. This motif begins in the examination of the hoard in the trolls' cave:

3. Middle-earth is already, as Tolkien wrote, 'a monotheistic world of 'natural theology'.' Letters, 30 June 1955, p. 220.

4. ibid., p. 24. Tolkien's comment is in response to many requests for more detail on the Necromancer.

[Gandalf] These look like good blades... They were not made by any troll, nor by any smith among men in these parts and days (H, 44).

Here 'good' begins meaning 'serviceable' or 'strong', but is broadened to suggest 'used by powerful beings opposed to evil, in another place and time'. Elrond's reading of the swords' runic inscriptions confirms this antiquity and goodness:

They are old swords, very old swords of the High Elves of the West, my Kin. They were made in Gondolin for the Goblin-wars... Keep them well! (H, 51)

Furthermore, the swords impart a sense of heritage. The good aims of the maker are now entrusted to the Company. That the blades were forged as a continuing force for goodness is seen in their glowing as a warning when goblins are near, and in the impact of the two swords upon the evil Great Goblin. The past is imparting some protection, but also, to some extent, it is a reminder that combatting evil is one's duty. Alone and lost in the tunnels under the mountains, Bilbo realises that his blade is elvish, and

somehow he was comforted. It was rather splendid to be wearing a blade made in Gondolin for the goblin-wars of which so many songs had sung (H, 66).

In this dangerous situation, his self-confidence that comes from possession of the ancient blade is a source of courage (his stout 'heart' is mentioned in the following paragraph). Also notable is the preservation of history in 'songs', and to some extent their ability to rouse one's spirits when under stress.

While still in these caves the narrator adds to our sense of their great age:

Some of these caves, too, go back in their beginnings to ages before the goblins, who only widened them and joined them up with passages, and the original owners are still there in odd corners slinking and nosing about. (H, 67)

For the reader only, the feel of history is here taken beyond the time of the goblins. In addition, the evil creatures from that time are still present, and therefore a threat to the Company, and, as the narrative is now focussed on him,

to Bilbo in particular. The above description is also an introduction for the evil Gollum, although the narrator expresses ignorance about his nature. Further ancient events are suggested at the end of the contest, for Bilbo knows that:

the riddle-game was sacred and of immense antiquity,
and even wicked creatures were afraid to cheat when
they played at it. (H, 74)

The narrator and Bilbo appear to share these ancient thoughts, but something about Gollum causes Bilbo not to trust him. Gollum's character seems capable of profaning the 'sacred'⁵, and has an aura about him of greater age than of any being as yet encountered.

Later historical detail, such as that about the history of Dale, gives us more understanding of comparatively recent events. The history of Dale is useful in pondering the character of Bard, and the renewal that comes from his leadership. Yet the temporal and moral centre of the work is in the encounter with Gollum. Here Bilbo survives largely through his own efforts, and comes out of it with a magic ring which makes later encounters with evil both more complex and also controllable. His achievement in overcoming Gollum is a victory over a very old evil, with some assistance from ancient goodness, and this vast historical perspective in itself makes later moral decisions appear easier.

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The Prologue to The Lord of the Rings is largely concerned with filling in some further detail as to those areas at the 'borders' of The Hobbit; it is much more than the synopsis of the events in the earlier work, which might have been

5. The first edition reads: 'But funnily enough [Bilbo] need not have been alarmed. For one thing Gollum had learned long ago was never, never to cheat at the riddle-game, which is a sacred one and of immense antiquity.' B. Christensen, op. cit., p. 12. In his revision, whether consciously or intuitively, Tolkien has here made the evil older and more intense.

expected in this situation. Its emphasis is upon hobbits and the Shire, and when the history is mentioned, it is on a larger scale. Furthermore it shows fluctuating fortunes, whereby the present period of prosperity is similar to a previous period which lasted for a thousand years, between the 'Dark Plague' (I, 14) and the 'Days of Dearth'. The rise and fall of metahistory⁶ dwarfs any current complacency.

Early in the narrative proper Gandalf states the role of evil in metahistory:

That name [Mordor] even you hobbits have heard of, like a shadow on the borders of old stories. Always after a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again. (I, 60)

As well as repeating the idea of the shadow on the borders of stories, Tolkien shows evil as permanent, for despite one's present efforts it can never be completely eradicated. In telling Frodo this, Gandalf is preparing the hobbit to deal with the vast evil of the now identified Ring.

Old weapons are again used to impart a sense of history to the good protagonists. The knives taken from the barrow are identified by Tom Bombadil as:

forged many long years ago by Men of Westemnesse: they were foes of the Dark Lord, but they were overcome by the evil King of Carn Dum in the Land of Angmar. (I, 157)

So these blades also have antiquity and goodness. Tom follows this up with an enigmatic description of the role of the Rangers, which the hobbits do not understand. However, what is important here is the effect upon the hobbits:

as he spoke they had a vision as it were of a great expanse of years behind them, like a vast shadowy plain over which there strode shapes of Men, tall and

6. Contemporary interest in metahistory was high, stimulated in Britain by the works of Christopher Dawson. His ideas on cycles of civilizations are best seen in his Enquiries into Religion and Culture, London, 1933. Tolkien quotes from him at various points in 'On Fairy Stories'. In Europe, similar ideas to those of Dawson were propounded earlier by O. Spengler.

grim with bright swords, and last came one with a star
on his brow.

The hobbits realise that they are small and even insignificant in comparison with the heroes throughout the vastness of history. Yet still they have an evil to combat in their own time, and as their vision concludes they make ready for their journey with a greater moral awareness. The link between the vision and the preparations is suggested by their both being juxtaposed, and placed just before the mid-chapter break.

According to the Men of Bree, they were the original inhabitants of the region (I, 161), and the narrator takes the opportunity to expand upon their history by telling the reader that these Men were here before the Kings, and are still here 'when the memory of the old Kings [has] faded into the grass.' Again cycles of panoramic history are being used, which show the transience of current effort, but also the necessity of continuous personal action. Interestingly, here as earlier, Tolkien gives a little additional detail on the 'borders' to the reader, a process which adds some tension to the concept.

Part of the depth in Strider's character is revealed to the hobbits by his ability to recount the history of Weathertop, the forts and the 'path' (I, 197). Of the great watch-tower at Weathertop all that remains to be seen is 'a tumbled ring [of stone] like a rough crown on the old hill's head', but Strider's account is sufficient for the hobbits to feel that he was 'learned in old lore'. In conjunction with his closeness to nature, being learned 'in the ways of the wild', he has awareness of and respect for the history of those who have struggled against evil, and his own affinity for the good men who stood firm against the forces of evil is impressed on the hobbits. This is then reinforced indirectly as Sam corroborates Strider's account through a recital of Bilbo's translation of the story of Gil-galad. That he knows the original lay in its 'ancient tongue' (I, 198) which Bilbo translated adds further strength to their appreciation of Strider's

character. In this case the hobbit love of story combines with a sense of long history to suggest respect and even veneration for past sufferings hallowed by the passing of the years. The history of Christian worship might also be pondered upon by a modern reader, as a result of the analogues for Christian worship found in this work.

The Christian sacrament most frequently alluded to by Tolkien is the Eucharist, suggested by the portrayal of lembas. However, all nourishment given by the elves has this hallowing element to it. On the evening before the flight to the ford, Glorfindel offers his companions a sustaining drink which:

was clear as spring water and had no taste, and it did not feel either cool or warm in the mouth; but strength and vigour seemed to flow into all their limbs as they drank it. Eaten after that draught the stale bread and dried fruit (which was now all that they had left) seemed to satisfy their hunger better than many a good breakfast in the Shire had done. (I, 224)

Effort is taken to keep this description clear of all suggestion of pleasure based on nature, the aroma and the taste. Therefore it is a surprise that much 'strength', 'vigour' and satisfaction result from this food. The situation is one of material hardship, stripped of all but the essential, and as such the invigoration appears spiritual. This moral dimension is underlined by the presence of the elements of the Eucharist - 'liquor' and 'bread'. It is not a simple allegory, for the liquor is not wine, and dried fruits are included. Rather, the description is of a proto-Eucharist, and the impression is that these characters and possibly their culture could readily move into an appreciation of a sacramental meal⁷, possibly in the Age of Men to follow. Elrond's miruvor, differing in that it is a pleasurable 'warm and fragrant liquor' (I, 304), has a similar effect:

7. Tolkien saw the Blessed Sacrament as central to his personal faith. See Letters, 1 Nov. 1963, pp. 338-340. In advice to his son therein, he recommends it as a restorative for flagging faith, and as an exercise even suggests '[making one's] communion in circumstances that affront [one's] taste.' (p. 339)

[Frodo] felt a new strength of heart, and the heavy drowsiness left his limbs. The others also revived and found fresh hope and vigour.

This is in the midst of a snow storm produced by a malevolent force, and merely to continue seems to be an act of hope and courage. Nevertheless, the use of the spiritually charged vocabulary, 'heart' and 'hope', shows that the cordial is itself productive of goodness. The long historical view in the works eventually suggests that these sacramental elements are the way of hope for the future.

Several characters refer to the large scale changes that occur over great time, and the effect of this is to infuse the work with the wide historical perspective. With his elven longevity, Elrond has actually seen the Battle of Dagorland at the end of the Second Age, as well as currently taking part in events at the end of the Third Age. And so his influence for good is in part derived from this long experience, for Isildur had rejected his counsel to destroy the Ring on the previous occasion. Therefore now at his Council, when a similar decision has to be made, his is not only the authentication of history but also the sad reflective tone of experience. So he is similarly able to testify to the increasing numbers of fallible Men in the world:

Never again shall there be any such league of Elves
and Men; for Men multiply and the Firstborn decrease,
and the two Kindreds are estranged. (I, 257)

Clearly the emphasis in the future is going to be on Men with their great numbers, shorter life cycles, their general lack of moral consciousness, and their proneness to shallow materialism. Saruman also has a long term view, and his aims of eventual 'Knowledge, Rule, [and] Order' (I, 272) which he sees of such importance that they justify current manipulation. Gandalf's view has more respect for the present, seeing it as part of a continuum, but a present in which the individual is small. He gently rejects Bilbo's offer to destroy the Ring:

If you had really started this affair, you might be
expected to finish it. But you know well enough now

that starting is too great a claim for any, and that only a small part is played in great deeds by any hero. (I, 283)

This view of history humbles individual efforts, while not denying their necessity. It is a corrective to the glorification of the hero, exhibited for this group to some extent by Boromir. In accepting Frodo's offer Elrond refers to large scale history:

This is the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and counsels of the Great. (I, 284)

The hobbits are here enjoined to view themselves as representative of the greater group of all hobbits. Legolas best describes time as viewed by elves:

Swift, because they themselves change little, and all else fleets by: it is a grief to them. Slow, because they do not count the running years, not for themselves. The passing seasons are but ripples ever repeated in the long stream. Yet beneath the Sun all things must wear to an end at last. (I, 405)

This overview of time informs their comments on morality and, in the works currently under study, these are always good.

The occurrence of further elements of Christianity takes precedence over the historical detail in the second volume. It is as though the historical sense is being used to set a vast framework justifying the work's intensification of the moral themes. The familiar religious elements in the first volume were more lightly used, such as a mention of the 'Blessed Realm' (I, 250) and the description of Frodo as 'Bearer' (I, 309). In the second volume the intensity of such uses increases. The Eucharistic lembas, as noted previously, 'does put heart into you! A more wholesome sort of feeling, too, than the heat of... orc-draught' (II, 61), and Merry attributes to the elven food his renewed ability to continue on the journey. Yet not all are able to gain this effect. After Frodo 'broke off a portion of a wafer and handed it to him' (II, 229), Gollum's inability to swallow lembas is suggestive of those in a state of sin being forbidden to partake of the Sacrament.

Subsequently, and despite his disclaimer, Frodo's concern for Gollum has overtones of a confessor or spiritual adviser:

I'm sorry... but I can't help you I'm afraid. I think this food would do you good, if you would try. But perhaps you can't even try, not yet anyway. (II, 229)

This also foreshadows Gollum's later act of contrition in touching the sleeping Frodo's knee, when he does try for communion with the hobbits and there is a momentary release from his fierce burden of guilt. Later, the first consecration, or Last Supper is evoked in the description of Frodo and Sam taking:

what they expected would be their last meal before they went down into the Nameless Land, maybe the last meal they would ever eat together. Some of the food of Gondor they ate, and wafers of the waybread of the Elves, and they drank a little. (II, 320)

Again, this is not a simple allegory, but rather it has some familiar and powerful detail. It is as if Tolkien has dipped into what he elsewhere calls the 'Cauldron of Story'⁸ for an earlier mix of these elements. The effect is to cause one to consider afresh the perfection of these motifs in the 'true myth' of Christianity⁹.

Other suggestions of later religion are in the 'smoke of the burning [of the bodies after battle which] rose high to heaven' (II, 63), and in Treebeard's lighting of the ent-house. The first is an incidental reference, but the latter is another parallel for the Eucharist:

A great stone table stood there, but no chairs... Treebeard lifted two great vessels and stood them on the table. They seemed to be filled with water; but he held his hands over them, and immediately they began to glow, one with a golden and the other with a rich green light; and the blending of the two lights lit the bay, as if the sun of summer was shining (II, 74).

8. J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', (T&L, 34).

9. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson's view, crucial in the conversion of C.S. Lewis, quoted in H. Carpenter, The Inklings, London, 1982 (1st pub. 1978), p, 46.

In conjunction with this description much detail of goodness in nature is noted. Treebeard's entrance or preparation is to stand under 'the rain of the falling spring', to take a deep breath and then to laugh. The product of the consecration above is light, the most frequently used symbol of goodness in Tolkien's works, and the effect of the light here is to show the beauty of the trees surrounding:

every leaf was edged with light: some green, some gold, some red as copper; while the tree-trunks looked like pillars moulded out of luminous stone. (II, 74)

Through this description, light, nature and goodness all seem to be integral to each other, and together with the elements of the Sacrament they adumbrate a background to later revealed religion.

Gandalf's transformation in front of Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli is analogous to the Transfiguration of Christ. With Gandalf:

They all gazed at him. His hair was white as snow in the sunshine; and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun; power was in his hand. Between wonder, joy and fear they stood and found no words to say. (II, 98)

Correspondingly, with his three apostles, Christ:

was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.
Matthew 17 2

Even the same simile is used, and despite its differences Tolkien's description cannot but suggest the Gospel account. Closely following is Gandalf's narration of his experience on the mountain-top and his rescue. It contains an overview of history, as well as a correspondence with the Temptation of Christ, which together in the character of Gandalf at this time implies the movement of history towards Christianity. Lying wounded, for Gandalf:

each day was as long as a life-age of the earth. Faint to [his] ears came the gathered rumour of all lands: the springing and the dying, the song and the weeping, and the slow everlasting groan of overburdened stone. (II, 106)

Even the pain of the bones of the earth is felt in this view of life across cultures and countries. In itself it is a view that offers no hope, for it contains no sense of purpose. Partly this need is met by the description which immediately follows. In Gandalf's rescue by Gwaihir, the eagle recognises the changed nature of the wizard: 'The Sun shines through you' (II, 106), and then teasingly adds 'were I to let you fall, you would float upon the wind', reminiscent of Satan's statement that if Christ falls from the tower, God:

shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Matthew (4: 6)

There is sufficient correspondence to add some hint of hope to the otherwise meaningless ebb and flow of history.

The encounter with Faramir involves a link between history and reverence. Their custom of turning west before eating is an act of traditional obeisance similar to saying Grace:

we look towards Numenor that was, and beyond to Elvenhome that is, and to that which is beyond Elvenhome and will ever be. (II, 285)

The act is performed out of veneration for half forgotten ancient ritual, and for the wider spirit world, although dimly perceived. In addition, the falling cadences of the speech above are reminiscent of the Lord's Prayer. With great respect, Faramir recounts the history of Numenor, and the subsequent decay into stewardship, and it is implied that this is what inspires his own leadership, 'from far away [in time] the air of Numenor' (II, 291) is about him.

Late in this volume, Frodo's use of the Phial of Galadriel is described in a manner that makes it seem like the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, the 'very popular devotion in the Roman Catholic Church'¹⁰:

Slowly his hand went to his bosom, and slowly he held aloft the Phial of Galadriel. For a moment it glimmered, faint as a rising star struggling in heavy earthward mists, and then as its power waxed, and

hope grew in Frodo's mind, it began to burn, and kindled to a silver flame, a minute heart of dazzling light (II, 329)

As well as the element of penance in the hand going to the bosom, the Phial more precisely suggests the Monstrance used in Benediction, the:

Sacred vessel in which the Host is presented for adoration, carried in procession... It consists of a glass or crystal receptacle... mounted in a gilded frame, frequently representing emanating rays¹¹

The Phial has a powerful spiritual effect on Frodo, who:

gazed in wonder at this marvellous gift that he had so long carried, not guessing its full worth and potency. Seldom had he remembered it on the road

In this description, which draws together several moral themes, one can see the devout Catholic Tolkien's joy in his own religion, something that can be given to others, can at times be taken for granted, but can have great power on the journey that is life.

The final volume of the trilogy returns some of the emphasis to the flow of large-scale history. Although the return of the King to Gondor, after a gap of many generations, implies a cycle in history, it is rather a spiritual restoration at the beginning of the new Age of Men. Continuity and development in man's occupation of the land is emerging as the most important historical theme. The Wild Men have been in Middle-earth, as their 'great headman' says, since 'before Stone-houses; before Tall Men come up out of Water' (III, 106). Presumably they will be there well into the new future, with the new King's gift to them of the Forest of Druadan and of his protection (III, 254).

10. J. Hammerton (ed.), The New Universal Encyclopedia, Vol. 2 (10), London, 1951, p. 1084.

11. ibid., Vol. 7, p. 5817.

Later Legolas muses on the history of Men after meeting and being impressed by the Prince Imrahil:

If Gondor has such men still in these days of fading,
great must have been its glory in the days of its
rising. (III, 149)

Gimli agrees with the idea of fading and decay, first from his suitably dwarvish viewing of stone-work, but then from the larger observation of all man's efforts:

doubtless the good stone-work is the older and was
wrought in the first building... It is ever so with the
things that Men begin: there is a frost in Spring, or a
blight in Summer, and they fail of their promise.

Legolas has an even wider view of man's efforts, for he can see renewal and, as a result of its unpredictability, persistence:

Yet seldom do they fail of their seed... that will lie in
the dust and rot to spring up again in times and places
unlooked for. The deeds of Men will outlast us, Gimli.

Gimli's reply clings to the view of Man's decline: 'And yet come to naught in the end but might-have-beens'. But the final word in this section, before a mid-chapter break, belongs to Legolas: 'To that the Elves know not the answer'. Legolas intuits the potential of Man, particularly in the 'unlooked for' aspect of his renewals which suggests that in some way Man is serving a part in a greater plan.

The historical theme of the rise of Men is completed with Gandalf's gentle contradiction of Treebeard's long view of history. The latter has just said that the Kingdoms of Men 'will have to last long indeed to seem long to Ents.' (III, 258)

Gandalf replies:

The New Age begins... and in this age it may well
prove that the Kingdoms of Men shall outlast you,
Fangorn my friend.

It is a sad view, echoing that of Legolas above, for it implies the passing of all the races of creatures, other than Men, in spite of being successful combatants in the great moral struggle which the narrative has recorded. In this way the reader

identification with hobbit heroes gives way to reflection upon the subsequent achievement of one's own race, Men. This sense of decline of an older heroic world immediately before a new age is also present in Beowulf, where the Christian author looks back to the previous pagan story.

Formal parallels with Christianity are relied on less in this final volume. The Eucharistic aspect of lembas is the only Sacramental image, and the detail given is on its therapeutic effect, rather than on the ritual of its administering:

lembas had a virtue without which they would long ago have lain down to die... this waybread of the Elves had a potency that increased as travellers relied on it alone and did not mingle it with other foods. It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind. (III, 213)

Even if this were not supported by the earlier references, the vocabulary used here would imply the Eucharist: 'virtue', 'potency', 'fed the will', and 'beyond... mortal'. Relying on this food alone is at variance with the parallel, although that one does 'not mingle it with other foods' is reminiscent of the rigorous fasting before Holy Communion in Tolkien's day¹².

The spiritual realm is referred to more openly at this time. In the face of the prospect of Denethor's suicide, Gandalf declares: 'Authority is not given to you, Steward of Gondor, to order the hour of your death' (III, 129). As well as hoping to remind Denethor of the moral responsibility of his office, this statement indicates that the ordering of one's own death must come from beyond Middle-earth, presumably in the determining power of the One. Later, Gandalf conveys the seeming Manichaean idea of the spirit world possessing evil much greater than that of Sauron: 'Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is

12. Tolkien acknowledges this point in Letters, 25 Oct. 1958, p. 288, with the additional comment: 'far greater things may colour the mind in dealing with the lesser things of a fairy-story.'

himself but a servant or emissary.' (III, 155) This would appear to contradict his earlier statements to the Council of Elrond that 'nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so.' (I, 281) Only in the Appendices is it revealed that Sauron's master is Morgoth, mentioned in the text proper briefly as the source of the 'Balrog of Morgoth' (I, 371). Therein also is revealed a cosmos with higher levels of rebellion, but above it all, the One. The latter idea is presented, with more artistic success, in the description of the star seen by Sam over Mordor:

like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. (III, 199)

Yet, for the individual, evil is a present reality which must be combatted, with occasional sublunary help from one who will sacrifice himself in order to bear some of the burden for others. As Frodo says to Sam near the work's end:

I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them. (III, 309)

In such a moral work, infused with proto-Christian elements, this comment recalls Christ's Passion. Frodo is not Christ, but the New Testament account is more accessible to one after the sufferings of the hobbit 'Bearer' whose acts terminate one Age and enable the next to begin.

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From among the shorter works, somewhat paradoxically, these themes receive scant treatment in the text which was consciously an allegory. 'Leaf by Niggle' presents time brutally sweeping away memory and all evidence of the past. There is no historical dimension to the events narrated, which might give meaning to current action, and one can only rely on one's immediate perceptions, however limited. Still, there are two links between elements in this story and Christian

belief. The period of suffering for one's minor misdeeds is similar to the Christian concept of Purgatory. One is thereby purified before moving on to Heaven itself. The idea in this story is distinctive in that it is structured on three different stages corresponding to one's level of personal growth: the interrogation/workhouse; the world of 'the Tree'; and the Mountains. The second stage does not involve suffering, but rather the delighted absorption in formerly neglected aspects of life. In addition, no indication is given that the Mountains will be the final stage; it is merely the next stage. Interestingly, unlike the aspects examined in the larger works, the concept of several levels is an elaboration on the Christian Purgatory. Still it is sufficiently different not to be dismissed easily as allegory. Particularly as the Christian idea is itself only briefly outlined, Tolkien's portrayal adds freshness to the tale itself.

A more daring conception is the use of the two Voices, which would seem to be allegorical representations of God the Father and God the Son. First Voice is 'severe' (T&L, 90), while Second Voice was one which:

you might have called gentle, though it was not soft -
it was a voice of authority, and sounded at once
hopeful and sad.

The detail of description given for the Second Voice implies the more knowable Second Person of God. In addition to this, the differences are parts of defined and accepted roles. As First Voice says to Second:

It is your task, of course, to put the best
interpretation on the facts. Sometimes they will bear
it. (T&L, 92)

And of course, it is the Second Person of God who sacrifices Himself for man. On his arrival, Parish thanks Niggle for getting him released earlier, but the latter replies: 'No. You owe it to the Second Voice... We both do.' (T&L, 97) Presumably it is also the Second Person who later arrives, looking 'like a shepherd' and asking:

'Do you want a guide?... Do you want to go on? [to the Mountains]' (T&L, 98). Tolkien's moral message, implicit in the portrayal, is that man should be grateful for the compassion of God, and readily accept His guidance.

* * * *

Farmer Giles of Ham is concerned with history and the value of tradition. Although having churches, saints' feast days, and a parson whose learning is important to the plot, the characters do not derive spiritual strength from this Christian show. Nevertheless, this lack of emphasis on Christianity is not surprising in a work which involves the denial of a (consecrated) King.

The basis of the poor kingship shown in this story is the luxury at court, which is the result of history being forgotten. Memory of the dangers of the past and the methods of keeping them at bay has been degraded to mere formalism, such as the presentation of a confection: Mock Dragon Tail carried in by the 'chosen knight' (T&L, 24) on Christmas Eve. Even the state of knighthood has been degraded to a fashionable and ceremonial role, through lack of testing against evil, lack of an understanding of history, and increasing indolence.

The work's sense of history comes from several devices also found in the longer works. This story is presented as one of the surviving 'fragments' (FG, 9) of history, preserved through chance. Its value is 'in the glimpse that it affords of life in a dark period of the history of Britain'. As such it is a cautionary tale of the dangers of inferior kingship, reminding one that strong and moral leadership cannot be taken for granted. The preference for Latin on formal occasions and for names from the earlier period also adds to a sense of history, as do elvish and the dark tongue of Mordor in The Hobbit and the trilogy. Despite the decay in tradition seen above with the Mock Dragon Tail, the value of tradition is affirmed in the 'popular romances' (FG, 33). By this tradition the

powerful protection offered by the sword 'Tailbiter' is recognised, even if only 'still remembered in the villages.' (FG, 34) Its goodness is clear, for as a result of this tradition, unlike the cowardly knights, the people 'began to take heart again'. Evidence of past ages is also present in the landscape, in the mountains at least. There the dragons live 'when they may, in the tombs and treasuries of mighty men and giants of old.' (FG, 61) Giles is the only man to see these, which he does without comment. In addition the treasure with which Giles deals well is itself evidence of an older civilization. His own rustic goodness seems in keeping with, or at least not discordant with, the best efforts of man in the past.

* * * *

The most recent of the shorter works, Smith of Wootton Major, also has no clear narrative parallels with Christianity. However, some use is made of the historical view. Over a long period there has been a continuity in customs around Wootton Major: the Master Cook; The Feast of Good Children; the Great Cake; and less diligently observed, the painting and gilding of the Great Hall. For the narrow-minded Nokes, this continuity merely serves to inflate his sense of self-worth. Yet as Smith grows to an understanding of the gift bequeathed to him, the knowledge of its venerable antiquity provides a seemingly timeless reference for the moral struggles undertaken.

* * * *

Throughout all the creative work published in Tolkien's lifetime, the historical view leads characters to see themselves as part of a continuum of effort, a major part of which is a spiritual struggle. In the moral battles of Middle-earth (and Tolkien's other settings) there is no hero who approaches the moral stature of Frodo. In contrast with these otherwise good characters he has no desire for

personal glory in either monument or legend, instead merely hoping for healing and wholeness. Yet through his Christlike suffering he has shown the way to all mortal goodness, gloriously fulfilling Gandalf's earlier enigmatic prediction, becoming 'like a glass filled with a clear light for eyes to see that can.' (I, 235) The ubiquitousness of details parallel to Christian worship suggests that this age is on the verge of Christianity. Tolkien wrote that he was drawn back into a fuller practice of his own religion by 'the never-ceasing silent appeal of Tabernacle, and the sense of starving hunger.'¹³ Lacking revelation of divine purpose, Tolkien's fictional worlds all have this spiritual 'sense of starving hunger'. And in the many references to a rudimentary Eucharist a reader versed in Christianity would feel in these works this 'never-ceasing silent appeal of Tabernacle'. Through his own created world Tolkien has shown, not merely that they are 'entangled'¹⁴, but how religion has developed and drawn much of its strength and appeal from ancient mythology.

13. Letters, 1 Nov. 1963, p. 340.

14. C. Dawson, Progress and Religion, p. 86.

CONCLUSION

therin lies the unrecapturable magic of ancient English verse for those who have ears to hear: profound feeling, and poignant vision, filled with the beauty and mortality of the world, are aroused by brief phrases, light touches, short words resounding like harp-strings sharply plucked.¹

* * * *

In this present work, more attention could have been given to the many further analogues from medieval literature. Similarly, the parallels with Christian worship and belief could have been examined in more detail, as also could the many cross-references wholly within the created world of Middle-earth. Still, it has emerged that in Tolkien's creative works the morality and ethical system presented is consistent with a pre-Christian society, awaiting revelation. The vastness of evil is a powerful narrative device, but ultimately it is shown to be merely a denial of an even greater goodness. Yet the small characters on whom the works focus can not come easily to an understanding of this; it is a life's work to do so. In the same way that the full power of evil is never unleashed in the narrative and can only be guessed at, the power of goodness is even one step further from one's knowledge. The benign operation of providence permits only brief glimpses, through nature, light and unexpected grace. Despite the seeming irresistible force of evil, the individual is always vouchsafed a choice, although

1. J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Prefatory Remarks on prose translation of Beowulf', J.R. Clark Hall, op. cit., p. xxvii.

this may not always be perceived at village level. For those who come to realise that they have choice, and through choosing wisely gain a glimpse of the greater goodness, there is a sense of uncomprehending awe at this perceived plan for Middle-earth. The impact of this benign plan is the greater in view of the decay of temporal civilizations, and where all feel unworthy of ultimate hope.

An attempt has been made to show how the detailed patterning of good and evil through repeated words and concepts is crucial to the convincing large scale portrayal. By means of simpler lexis he has both clarified the moods which are the concomitant of religious awe, and enriched the semantic nuances of words which had been worn down through shallow colloquial usage. Through his insights from philology he has been able to highlight for modern readers what has remained as latent power in simple words of Germanic origin. Additionally, in his positioning of significant vocabulary at the ends of sentences, paragraphs, mid-chapter breaks and chapters, Tolkien has created a pattern of emphasis loosely similar to the 'accentual symmetry'² found in Virgil, or to the rhythmic prose of Ælfric³. As used, the pattern signals that one is dealing with profounder concepts than the words might normally indicate, and there is room for more subtle investigations of this aspect of Tolkien's prose style.

Tolkien is teaching by story, the values that are still there for the scholar in the simple vocabulary of ordinary people. Thus, these fictional works become mythic because they have the ring of ancient truth to them. The moral vocabulary reinforces the honesty with which the themes are unfolded. Furthermore the moral and cultural values themselves contain echoes of our own earlier culture, and sometimes these echoes are strong enough to reinvigorate lost senses to

2. W.F. Jackson Knight, Accentual Symmetry in Virgil, Oxford, 1939.

3. G.H. Gerould, 'Abbot Ælfric's Rhythmic Prose', Modern Philology, Vol. 22, 1924-25, pp. 353-366.

current words. It would seem that criticism has not been inclined to examine these issues for two reasons. Those, like Tolkien, with training in philology were generally not interested in modern creative writing, and hence ignored his work⁴. On the other hand his modern audience did not generally have skills in language sufficient for a full analysis of the words, or an adequate awareness of the ancient stories to which his own works were luminous⁵. And to attempt less than this was to risk exposure to Tolkien's widely recognised dislike of criticism⁶. Perhaps in time more of those who appreciate his fiction will be led, from desire for a deeper understanding of it, towards the older texts of our literature, with which his fictional works, like his lecturing, were ever concerned.

Although Tolkien described the Beowulf poet's use of language, 'like harp-strings sharply plucked'⁷, as 'unrecapturable', he has come close to doing this himself. Necessarily lacking some of the poignancy of the earlier pagan view, still it has been the suggestion of this thesis that, similarly, the small words in Tolkien's imaginative writings play upon the heart. As well as intimating the moral base of our culture, he has fictionally explored the private day-to-day morality of small people. In his works, the real centre of good and evil is in the choices made by these lowly and innocent folk, and expressed in their own seemingly commonplace words. It is possible that the secular theology so embodied, forms the basic appeal of this fictional world to often overwhelmed modern man.

4. J.S. Ryan has told me that as a student he was actually warned by Tolkien's peers against reading any of the creative writings.

5. Consider Tolkien's curt dismissal of the comparison with Wagner's Nibelungenlied: 'Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceased.' Biography, p. 206.

6. This is well charted in Shippey, op. cit., passim.

7. 'Prefatory Remarks', op. cit., p. xxvii.

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