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RECREATING *BEOWULF*'S "PREGNANT MOMENT OF POISE":
PAGAN DOOM AND CHRISTIAN EUCATASTROPHE MADE INCARNATE
IN THE DARK AGE SETTING OF *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

By

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B.S., Norwich University, Northfield, Vermont, 2000

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Recreating *Beowulf's* "Pregnant Moment of Poise": Pagan Doom and Christian Eucatastrophe Made Incarnate in the Dark Age Setting of *The Lord of the Rings*

Chairperson: John Hunt

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien recreates the "pregnant moment of poise" that inspired him in his study of *Beowulf*. Tolkien believed that this moment was a brief period of "fusion" which occurred in the Dark Ages as paganism was in decline and Christianity on the rise, when the dueling notions of Doom and salvation briefly coexisted in the hearts and minds of the Anglo-Saxon people. Derived from a careful study of Tolkien's fiction, lectures, letters, and the writings of his contemporaries, instructors, and friends, in combination with many Dark Age texts, the works of various Tolkien critics, historians, and specialists in the fields of Christian and Norse apocalypse, this thesis will consider the ways that Tolkien's study of *Beowulf* inspired him in the creation of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Following the template that he outlined in his lecture, Tolkien integrated history, Christianity, and pagan myth to create a literary epic steeped in Christian and Norse apocalyptic images, in which incarnate religious figures walk abroad in a past that reflects the era in which *Beowulf* was set. The recreation of the "pregnant moment of poise" in this setting allows Tolkien to simultaneously enact the paradoxical outcomes of pagan Doom and Christian salvation at the novel's climatic moments. When Doom and salvation collide, Tolkien's heroes become martyrs without the necessity of death. Because they are mortals faced by powerfully magical enemies and are bereft of hope in victory, they are endowed with all of the rhetorical power that Doom elicits, but their miraculous deliverance enacts divine eucatastrophe, the moment of supreme joy that, to Tolkien, can only be fully appreciated when Doom gives birth to salvation.

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INTRODUCTION

*I fear you may be right that the search for the sources of *The Lord of the Rings* is going to occupy academics for a generation or two. I wish this need not be so. To my mind it is the particular use in a particular situation of any motive, whether invented, deliberately borrowed, or unconsciously remembered that is the most interesting thing to consider.* (Letters 418)

J.R.R. Tolkien reveals in a letter to Milton Waldman (a prospective publisher of the *Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*), that in his early days he developed an insatiable thirst for “heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history” (*Letters* 144). Even from the time of his undergraduate education, he began “seeking material, things of a certain tone and air, and not simple knowledge” to use in his creation of a mythology that he could “dedicate simply to England” (*Letters* 144). He relates that “of course such an overweening purpose did not develop all at once” (*Letters* 145); rather he let it simmer for years in his mind, seeking stories and myths and occasionally finding one “in the legends of other lands” to use “as an ingredient” for his mythology (*Letters* 144).

By the time he began writing *The Lord of the Rings* in 1937 Tolkien had accumulated quite a store of ingredients. A year later he presented an analogy for them in his famous lecture “On Fairy Stories.” For Tolkien, the source of all fiction is the “Cauldron of Story,” an enormous pot of bubbling ideas, blending, splitting and reforming constantly in a jumbled “soup.” The Cauldron contains bits and pieces of legend, religion, history, myth, and fairy-tale. Each author dips in his/her ladle and draws forth a hybrid creation from its depths (*Reader* 46-47).

Apt as this analogy might seem, it is misleading when applied to *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien’s soup is not as entirely chaotic as he would have us believe, though many of its ingredients are still a mystery. He knew what he was cooking, for he was following an ancient recipe that he had discovered in his study of *Beowulf*: the threefold dynamic of Christian salvation, pagan Doom, and Dark Age history.¹ Tolkien used *Beowulf* as a thematic template for *The Lord of the Rings*, blending pagan and Christian

¹ Exactly when Tolkien made this discovery is a mystery, but it was certainly before 1936, the year in which he gave his lecture *Beowulf: the monsters and the critics*, and a year before he began work on *The Lord of the Rings*.

belief to create an epic steeped in Christian and Norse apocalyptic images, where traditional religious figures are incarnate in a recreated European past.

Tolkien engages readers of *The Lord of the Rings* in a reconstruction of the most inspiring implication that he drew from his study of *Beowulf*. Like the poet, Tolkien “glimpses the cosmic” (*Monsters* 33) in his novel. He examines essentially the same conflicts between good and evil, courage and despair, and Doom and salvation that he believed were implicit in *Beowulf*. Unlike the poet, however, who focuses on a single warrior, Tolkien examines the reactions and interactions of many characters of all shapes, sizes, ages, and genders. The young (Merry and Pippin), the old (Treebeard and Théoden), the short and homely (Hobbits and Dwarves), the tall and graceful (Elves), the significant (Aragorn, Boromir, and Faramir) and insignificant (Sam and Frodo), male and female (Éomer and Eowen) all play vital roles in toppling the power of the Enemy. Through this, simply by virtue of their humanity, Tolkien’s readers are made active participants in an apocalyptic battle to save the world from hellish forces of evil, recreating what he believed to be the unique religious conception of the *Beowulf* poet.

Thomas Shippey was the first to discover this reconstructive facet of Tolkien’s fiction. At a 1982 symposium in Odense, Denmark in his presentation titled “Goths and Huns: the Rediscovery of the Northern Cultures in the Nineteenth Century,” Shippey shows that in his fiction, Tolkien is explicitly engaged in the “process of reconstruction,” which consists of working backwards from historical clues found in language and stories, and then attempting to “look outwards to the past, and not merely project the present backwards.” In other words, through fiction “kindled by a rigorous and academic discipline” (Shippey 69), Tolkien creates a world that expands outward far beyond acceptable historical fact and academic theories. Thus, it is possible to see the ancient material (directly from *Beowulf* and many other sources) in *The Lord of the Rings* as a growing entity, leaping beyond the historically prescribed parameters of his source texts, and combining in new and unique ways.²

The following chapters will explore how Tolkien fuses themes and imagery from the pagan Norse apocalyptic myth of Ragnarök with Christian apocalyptic imagery and

² Shippey’s observations are primarily concerned with the historical Goths, Gothic language, and their presence in the characters and construction of Tolkien’s Rohirrim, but they are equally applicable to *The Lord of the Rings* as a whole.

themes in a recreated Dark Age historical setting to create *The Lord of the Rings*. Chapter One focuses explicitly on Tolkien's lecture, *Beowulf: the monsters and the critics*, identifying the Anglo-Saxon recipe that he emulated in the creation of *The Lord of the Rings*. In Chapter Two, the recreated historical setting is outlined and interpreted. In Chapter Three the Norse apocalyptic layer is extracted and the thematic concepts of pagan Doom and courage are investigated. Chapter Four examines the biblical apocalyptic imagery and characters within the text along with the themes of eucatastrophe and hope. Chapter Five looks at specific Dark Age Christian apocalypses, and the inclusion of their characters and themes by Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*. Because each of these chapters is a dissection of a creation that only functions properly when viewed as a whole, Chapter Six demonstrates the four in synchrony, fused together in the climatic battle of the Pelennor Fields.

1.

“A PRODUCT OF THOUGHT AND DEEP EMOTION”:
BEOWULF AS A THEMATIC RECIPE FOR *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

The significance of a myth is not easily to be pinned down on paper by analytical reasoning. It is at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends; who presents it incarnate in the world of history and geography. (Monsters 12-13)

In a surprising number of ways, *The Lord of the Rings* can be read as Tolkien's third published essay on *Beowulf*.³ Instead of laying his theories out in an abstract analytical paper, Tolkien breathes life into them by presenting them to his audience incarnate in a living work of fiction. Using history, Christianity, and pagan myth as tools in the service of literature (maintaining no specific loyalty to presenting them in an academically truthful light) he creates an epic in which he reconstructs and expands upon the ancient fictional setting and themes of *Beowulf*, recreating the poet's unique outlook on the world, which he believed to be composed of pagan Doom and Christian salvation set in a world that echoes European history and political geography. In this way, Tolkien's allows his readers to internalize his academic theories and observations and to become a participant in them through fiction. Thus, by the final page of *The Lord of the Rings*, the reader can implicitly feel and understand the world-view that Tolkien spent so much time trying to make explicit in his *Beowulf* lecture.

Above all, Tolkien was inspired by the “fusion that has occurred *at a given point* of contact between old and new” within *Beowulf*. He believed this fusion was engendered in Anglo-Saxon England when pagan “northern heroic imagination was brought into touch with Christendom, and with the Scriptures” (*Monsters* 18-19). He suggests that at a precise historic moment when Christianity was on the rise and paganism was in decline, “an alchemy of change” began that allowed two belief systems to briefly “touch and ignite” (25) in Anglo-Saxon literature, displaying a unique and seemingly paradoxical world-view. In his lecture, Tolkien defines the two primary

³ The other two are the aforementioned *Beowulf: the monsters and the critics*, published from a lecture given in 1936, and the less well known “On Translating *Beowulf*,” published as a foreword to the 1940 edition of *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment* by C.L. Wrenn (*Essays* 2).

components of this ancient outlook as the pagan belief in Doom and the Christian faith in salvation.

He describes pagan Doom as the belief that life is a “battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark that ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat” (*Monsters* 16). Because there is no continued existence or afterlife beyond the certainty of this defeat, Tolkien argues that belief in Doom produces a “perfect” type of courage that he calls “absolute resistance” (*Monsters* 19). This courage allows pagan warriors to possess a deeper and more profound brand of heroism than their Christian counterparts. Tolkien writes that the “strength of the northern mythological imagination” is that it “found a potent but terrible solution in naked will and courage” in a time when even the gods were mortal and in a society that worshipped “martial heroism as its own end” (*Monsters* 24-25).

Juxtaposed against this pagan belief, Tolkien saw the rising faith in Christian salvation. He explains that as Christianity gained acceptance in pagan England, “the tragedy of the great temporal defeat remained for a while poignant, but ceased to be finally important” (*Monsters* 20-21). In *Beowulf*, he notes that the theme of salvation “is not treated—[because] it does not arise out of the material” (*Monsters* 21). However, he states that it is his belief that salvation was on the mind of the poet and of his audience, and colored their interpretation of the poem (*Monsters* 21). As he would later make explicit in his lecture “On Fairy Stories,” “eucatastrophe,” or the denial of “universal final defeat” (*Reader* 89), is a crucial element of the Christian religion. It is logical to suppose that Tolkien believed eucatastrophe to be the single element of the Christian religion powerful enough to turn his grim and fearless ancestors from their pagan beliefs in Doom and the importance of “unyielding will” (*Monsters* 18) to faith in the “possibility of eternal victory” (*Monsters* 21).

Tolkien notes, however, that this religious “shift is not complete in *Beowulf*” (21). He writes,

We get in fact a poem from a pregnant moment of poise, looking back into the pit, by a man learned in old tales who was struggling, as it were, to get a general view of them all, perceiving their common tragedy of inevitable ruin, and yet feeling this more *poetically* because he was himself removed from the direct pressure of its despair. (*Monsters* 21)

It is likely that Tolkien saw a bit of the *Beowulf* poet in himself, for he too was a Christian man “learned in old tales” who wrote fiction to gain perspective on history. In a letter to his son Christopher, he explains that when writing *The Lord of the Rings*, the emotion that moved him “supremely” was “the heart-racking sense of the vanished past” that his novel evoked (*Letters* 110).

It becomes apparent from a study of his fiction that he, too, was surveying the past, though his goals were slightly different. Rather than existing in a “pregnant moment of poise” and attempting to make sense of it on paper (as he suggests of the *Beowulf* poet), Tolkien recreates that moment of poise in his fiction, allowing readers to understand it and to be similarly inspired by the pinnacles of both apparently paradoxical belief systems simultaneously—to feel the oppressive weight of Doom and to experience both the despair and “perfect” courage that it generates, but also to experience a “catch of the breath and a beat and lifting of the heart” when eucatastrophe denies the seemingly inevitable Doom, “giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy” (*Reader* 86).

The root of this paradoxical union, for Tolkien, is the *Beowulf* poet’s explicit connection of Grendel, a seemingly pagan monster or giant, with scripture through the biblical person of Cain. For Tolkien, this attachment of a pagan giant to a Christian religious figure is the “key to the fusion point of imagination that produced the poem” (*Monsters* 17). While many of Tolkien’s scholarly predecessors and contemporaries suggest that this blending is simply a muddle, Tolkien explains that the simultaneous inclusion of pagan myth and Christianity “is not due to mere confusion—it is rather an indication of the precise point at which an imagination, pondering old and new, was kindled” (*Monsters* 25).⁴

Through the Grendel-Cain connection, the *Beowulf* poet allows Christian demons to become “incarnate” or “embodied in physical bodies capable of pain, and weariness, and of afflicting the spirit with physical fear, and of being ‘killed’” (*Letters* 202). At this

⁴ Many of Tolkien’s contemporaries believed that this was merely a confusion. Tolkien notes that these critics claimed it as “an evident sign of the muddled heads of early Anglo-Saxons. They could not, it was said, keep Scandinavian bogies and the Scriptures separate in their puzzled brains” (*Monsters* 17). Others saw this “seeming contradiction” as the effect of Christian scribes converting a pagan tale to conform to their belief system. J. Duncan Spaeth, for example, who published a translation of *Beowulf* in 1922, suggests that the Cain-Grendel connection is “evidence that original story has been covered with a veneer—a “superficial Christian coloring” (Spaeth 196).

point, the two worlds meet, alchemically fuse, and a new conception is born (*Monsters* 19). Because the demons in this conception are corporeal and can be slain not just by angelic beings, but also by the hand of man, it transforms the classically Christian metaphorical war between heaven and hell—where invisible and invincible angels and demons struggle for control of individual souls—into a visible conflict where the ultimate outcome is life or death in the here and now. Tolkien writes that the *Beowulf* poet is “concerned primarily with *man on earth*” (21). As such, Beowulf’s demonic enemies “inhabit the visible world and eat the flesh and blood of men; [Grendel] enters their houses by the doors. The dragon wields a physical fire, and covets gold not souls; he is slain with iron in his belly” (*Monsters* 21-22).

The singular focus of *Beowulf* on one warrior’s struggles limits the scope of this alchemy, but Tolkien seems to see it as indicative of a larger possibility—that of a vast military confrontation between a horde of mortal demonic monsters and an army of human Christian warriors. He observes that in *Beowulf* “the monsters remained the enemies of mankind, the infantry of the old war, and became inevitably the enemies of the one God *ece Dryhten*, the eternal captain of the New” (*Monsters* 20). In Tolkien’s military vision, the mortality of the demonic host draws Christian warriors actively into the epic pagan conception of a “battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark” (*Monsters* 16), allowing them to be incorporated as “part of a great strategy that includes all good men, as the infantry of battle” (*Monsters* 24).

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien puts this theory into practice. He juxtaposes the same themes of pagan Doom and Christian salvation that he defined in his lecture on *Beowulf*, but does so on a larger scale. He multiples the Grendel-Cain dynamic a thousandfold, setting whole armies of men and demonic/monstrous Orcs in a war of apocalyptic proportions “that has no middle ground, no gray area dividing the sons of darkness from the sons of light” (O’Callaghan 128).

In order to produce the proper effect, Tolkien borrows images, characters, and themes from the two supreme examples of pagan Doom and Christian salvation: the Norse myth of Ragnarök, and Christian apocalypse. The former, a great military clash in which the giants and monsters defeat and slay the heroes and gods, ends with the world burned to a cinder (Sturluson 86-90). The latter, also featuring great battles, such as the

one prophesied to take place at Armageddon, ends not with the void, but with the defeat of Satan and the joyous reunion of the saved with Christ (*Revelation* 20:4).

In fact, the simultaneous combination of the Norse myth of Ragnarök and the Christian myths of apocalypse into one literary moment becomes one of the essences of Tolkien's epic. He takes the pagan apocalyptic matrix, and like his interpretation of *Beowulf*, removes the old gods, substitutes Christian apocalyptic figures, and literally demonizes the monsters. His human characters then must clash bodily with enemies inspired by the biblical tribes of Gog and Magog, Christian demons, and even by Antichrist himself. Thus, a Christian reader, simply by virtue of his or her humanity, is drawn actively into an apocalyptic conflict in a way that modern Christian religion does not allow.

When viewing Tolkien's tale through the lens of his lecture on *Beowulf*, it becomes apparent that what is thematically central to both *The Lord of the Rings* and pagan myths is that the characters must *fully expect* to meet an unavoidable doom. Only when the characters reach the point where they are "on the very brink where hope and despair are akin" (*Return* 162), do they achieve the ideal of "perfect" courage. Yet, they do not go down to death as do the pagan heroes and gods. Rather, they are saved by Christian eucatastrophe. It happens whenever hope is gone and the pagan version of apocalypse seems inevitable. Eucatastrophe is what Tolkien uses to recreate the "pregnant moment of poise" in which the "the value of [the] doomed resistance" of the pagan warrior is deeply felt, but in which the final "despair" of the "great temporal tragedy" is joyously averted (*Monsters* 21).

The blending of pagan myth and Christianity, however, is only part of the equation that Tolkien borrowed from the *Beowulf* poet. Equally important to Tolkien is that the combat in *Beowulf* between a human warrior and an incarnate demon is presented as occurring "in the world of history and geography" (*Monsters* 13). Grendel and Beowulf fight in Heorot, the hall of the historic King Hrothgar, in Denmark, in "about A.D. 500" (*Monsters* 26). Tolkien explains that *Beowulf* was written as "a historical poem about the pagan past" (*Monsters* 25), but the poet "used an instinctive historical sense ... with a poetical and not historical object" to tell a dramatic story rather than to record history (*Monsters* 3-4). In *Beowulf*, history is a tool in the service of literature.

The poet imports a fantastic dragon and a Norse giant into a historical matrix including many battles and kings of the late 5th and early 6th centuries (Hallberg 113).⁵ The inclusion of this historical setting adds a level of what Tolkien calls “primary truth” to the story, allowing the tale to be “presented as ‘true’” (*Reader* 42).

What Tolkien is drawn to in the historical setting of *Beowulf* is not unlike what he describes as the fundamental appeal of the Bible: it is “Primary Art” (*Reader* 89). In *Beowulf*, Grendel, the offspring of Cain, is a Christian demon incarnate in flesh and blood, walking the lands of northern Europe in a specific period of history. He is slain by Beowulf, a human warrior. In the Gospels, Jesus is God incarnate as a human being of flesh and blood. He is walking the named lands of the Middle East in a specific period of history and is also slain at the hands of mortal men. Of the Gospels, Tolkien writes, “it is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were to be found to be ‘primarily’ true, its narrative to be history, without thereby necessarily losing the mythical and allegorical significance that it had possessed” (*Reader* 89). He claims that this is the case of the Bible, and especially the Gospels, in which “Legend and History have met and fused” (*Reader* 89). Legend and History have not quite fused in the fictional *Beowulf*, but Tolkien would likely argue that it is as close to primary truth as a work of fiction can get, and remains the primary example of his passion for “heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history” (*Letters* 144).

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien constructs his narrative in the guise of a historical document. The story is ‘discovered’ in the Red Book of Westmarch, of which he writes “the original Red Book has not been preserved, but many copies were made, especially of the first volume” (*Fellowship* 16). Through this device, he indicates that we are standing today on the same soil upon which Gandalf and Aragorn stood in ages past. In fact, a close look at his fictional history in combination with both the political climate and topography of Middle-earth actually reveals that in large part *The Lord of the Rings*

⁵ It is not the only Anglo-Saxon text to do so. For example, in Cynewulf’s *Elene*, Constantine’s vision and conversion happen on the banks of the Danube prior to a battle against the Huns (20-50). In reality, the battle occurred on the banks of the Tiber against the forces of the emperor Maxentius’ troops in the year 312 (Diana Bowder, *The Age of Constantine and Julian* 22-23). The Huns did not even bear mention in any Roman history until 376, and were not directly involved in conflict with the Roman Empire until 384 (J. Otto Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns* 26,41), almost 50 years after Constantine’s death in 337.

is, like *Beowulf*, occurring in the world of history and geography—in fact, it is set in a fictional history that mirrors that of the Anglo-Saxon poem itself, echoing late 5th and early 6th century Europe.

Essentially, Tolkien recreates in *The Lord of the Rings* the larger world that he felt was implied by the *Beowulf* poet. “A product of thought and deep emotion” (*Monsters* 18), the underlying theme of this world is the seeming paradox of simultaneously invoked Doom and salvation. In this world, he gathers armies of both men and monsters for a great war and inserts characters representative of the iconic figures of Christian apocalypse, which, like Grendel and Christ, are “incarnate in time” (*Monsters* 15). This draws the reader into an implicit understanding of the fictional reality that Tolkien believed was present in *Beowulf*: one in which powerful and magical figures of biblical significance walked abroad in the world, led nations, and fought battles. These figures could be resisted not just on a spiritual level, but in the old pagan way, by a warrior armed with an abundance of courage and a sharp blade, forged by men from the iron of the earth.

2.

“THE BLACK YEARS”:
DARK AGE HISTORY AS THE PRIMARY WORLD SETTING OF
THE *LORD OF THE RINGS*

Beowulf is not an actual picture of historic Denmark or Geatland or Sweden about A.D. 500. But it is (if with certain minor defects) on a general view a self-consistent picture, a construction bearing clearly the marks of design and thought. (Monsters 26)

Tolkien’s lecture, *Beowulf: the monsters and the critics*, is at its core a defense of Grendel and the Dragon. These two fantastic creations (along with the water-dwelling mother of Grendel) were, at the time, considered the unique flaw of the poem. It was believed that by focusing on the monsters the poet put the “irrelevancies at the center” of the plot, while pushing the human drama of history, “the serious things,” to the “outer edges” (*Monsters* 7). Tolkien saw this analysis as fundamentally flawed, and in refuting it, turned the phrase, claiming that in reality the poet put “the particular on the outer edge, [and] the essential at the center” (*Monsters* 16).⁶ Even so, Tolkien notes, the particular, a smattering of historic names, dates, battles, and references to other heroic legends, serves an important function, grounding the story (which otherwise might be placed in front of the “vague” or “debasement” background of “once upon a time” [*Reader* 99]) in “a past that itself had depth and reached back into a dark antiquity.” He adds, “this impression of depth is an effect and a justification of the use of episodes and allusions to old tales” (26-27).

Two years after he lectured on *Beowulf*, in his lecture, “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien lays out a bit of theory that helps to explain the importance of history to fantasy. In his lecture, Tolkien defines literary art (and especially fantasy) as a form of “Sub-creation” that seeks to induce “Secondary Belief” in its readers (*Reader* 68). The success of a literary work, he suggests, is calculated by the amount of secondary belief that the story or poem inspires, which is a function of how well the sub-creation reflects the “inner consistency of reality” (68). According to Tolkien, fantasy is the most difficult form of literature to create successfully because its very nature compromises its credibility. He

⁶ The essential in this case, according to Tolkien is a backward-looking focus on Doom from a removed vantage point of salvation, which is facilitated through the fantastic nature of the enemies and the Grendel-Cain connection (17).

writes, “in practice ‘the inner consistency of reality’ is more difficult to produce, the more unlike are the images and rearrangements of primary material to the actual arrangements of the Primary World” (*Reader* 69). Thus, the inclusion of magic, elves, dragons, giants, or anything fantastic in a work of literature makes the task of the author much more difficult.⁷ To combat this difficulty, an author’s task is to make the remainder of the story as believable or “real” as possible. As Tolkien notes, “Fantasy does not blur the sharp outlines of the real world; for it depends on them” (*Reader* 97). The primary then is used to sharpen the fantastic so that it might sustain the close gaze of the curious and still result in secondary belief. The way that *Beowulf* accomplishes this is to insert his story into the history, and the network of legends already present in the “Primary World.”

In the setting of his Fantasy, Tolkien follows the same model, though not to the same degree. In *The Lord of the Rings*, he achieves the “inner consistency of reality” through a sub-creative reconstruction of Dark Age history. Like the *Beowulf* poet, he makes no attempt at “literal historical fidelity based on modern research” (*Monsters* 25) in his construction, for (like the poet) he feels no obligation to get the details right. Instead, he uses the history as building material to encase his “essential” core of fantasy with primary materials. As Tolkien writes, “Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood” (*Reader* 78).

The Lord of the Rings is set on the cusp of two great ages of the world. The final days of the Third Age are waning, and the Fourth Age looms ahead. Tolkien explains that at the end of the Third Age “the time was come for the dominion of Men and the decline of all other ‘speaking-peoples’” of Middle-earth (*Return* Appendix B 400).⁸ At that point, Tolkien’s fiction ambiguously blends into the history of the real world. Looking to make the time of connection between the fictional history of Middle-earth and European history more explicit, many critics and readers have cited parallels between the

⁷ However, Tolkien is adamant that more difficult does not mean less valuable. He writes that the inclusion of “things not of the primary world is a virtue, not a vice. Fantasy is, I think, not a lesser but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent” (*Reader* 69).

⁸ Most of the characters portrayed as wise in the book recognize this imminent change, including: Saruman (*Fellowship* 291), Elrond (*Fellowship* 301), Galadriel (*Fellowship* 409-410), Denethor (*Return* 65), Gandalf (*Return* 279).

fictional history of Middle-earth and the historical development of Europe in the Middle Ages. Two critics that have taken up this quest, Tom Shippey and Judy Ann Ford, have specifically documented aspects of the history of the Third Age of Middle-earth that align surprisingly well with the history of the 5th and 6th centuries AD.⁹

These centuries roughly constitute the era that in Tolkien's day would have been referred to as the Dark Ages—the blank spot on the literary timeline that transitioned the classical age into the medieval period of Europe's history. Then perceived as an era of mass ignorance and suffering, the Dark Ages included major events such as the collapse of the Roman Empire and the devastating invasion of the Huns from the east. This was the age in which the Anglo-Saxons, whose literature was Tolkien's lifelong delight and study, first occupied England and during which the historic King Arthur supposedly fought them with his knights (Morris 103). The Dark Ages are also the setting of many of Tolkien's favorite literary works, including *Beowulf*, the German *Nibelungenlied* (*Monsters* 9), the Norse *Volsung Saga* (*Letters* 449), and many others.¹⁰ The age captured Tolkien's imagination—it was then that Grendel ravaged Hrothgar's hall, Sigurd slew mighty Fafnir the Dragon, Attila served Gunnar the heart of his brother on a golden plate, and Hervor boldly took Tyrfing, her father's sword, from his grave in defiance of his terrifying ghost.

Combining Shippey's and Ford's observations about the historical connections of *The Lord of the Rings*, a convincing case can be made that the geographic, historic, and political setting of Tolkien's novel at the end of the Third Age of Middle-earth is based largely on imaginatively reconstructed European history of the 5th and 6th centuries. *The Lord of the Rings* contains no names of actual kings and countries, yet if one looks closely enough at the geography, ethnicity, and political environment of Middle-earth in the Third Age, a recognizable historical framework becomes apparent. Shippey begins this process through his suggestion that the Rohirrim are patterned after the ancient Goths. Ford builds on Shippey's analysis by comparing Gondor to Rome of the 5th and

⁹ Their works, which point in the general direction of this statement, do not go so far as to make this connection explicit. Rather, they are each focused on a separate element of Tolkien's novel and are not concerned with making overarching connections.

¹⁰ *The Battle of the Goths and Huns*, *The Lay of Hervor*, works of Finnish legend, many Norse sagas, etc.

6th centuries. Neither author connects the Orcs of Sauron with the Huns of Attila. This final connection provides the critical link that completes the historical framework.

Before he turned twenty, Tolkien had become enthralled with the Gothic people, a nation of Germanic horsemen who disappeared from the annals of Europe during the Dark Ages. He describes his “discovery” of Gothic history and language as one of the “most important” events of his early life (*Letters* 214), noting that in 1908 or 1909, he became “fascinated by Gothic in itself: a beautiful language... [and in the] tragic history of the Goths” (*Letters* 357). It is this interest by Tolkien in the Goths that first caught Shippey’s attention.

From his lengthy studies of the author and his works, Shippey hypothesized that much of Tolkien’s fictional writing is based in part or in whole on his imaginative reconstructions of vanished cultures. Working from this assumption, Shippey focused on Tolkien’s documented interest in the Goths, and discovered that the people of Rohan in Middle-earth did indeed bear an uncanny resemblance to the “horse folk *par excellence*, the *equitatus Gothorum*, ‘the cavalry of the Goths’” (Shippey 53). Shippey notes that in their physical appearance and choice of arms, the riders of the Rohirrim seem to be Germanic. A quick look at their first appearance in *The Two Towers* reveals them in this light. They were “tall and long-limbed. Their hair flaxen-pale, flowed, under their light helmets, and streamed in long braids behind them; their faces were stern and keen. In their hands were tall spears of ash, painted shields were slung at their backs, long swords were at their belts” (*Towers* 25).¹¹ In this scene Tolkien imaginatively recreates in detail a lost moment of history, which had vanished utterly from the world (Shippey 53).

According to historian C.W.C. Oman, a student at Oxford while Tolkien was teaching and writing *The Lord of the Rings*, the Goths were the first Germanic nation to adapt to horsemanship. He explains, “Dwelling in the Ukraine, they had felt the influence of that land, ever the nurse of cavalry... [and] had come to consider it more

¹¹ After noting these physical similarities, Shippey shifts his focus to use language as the primary bridge between the Goths and Rohirrim, noting many similarities between Old English and Gothic, and suggesting that “with their English names and Gothic history” there seems to be a connection for Tolkien between the two nations. This connection is explored in more detail by Michael D.C. Drout who leaps one step farther in his article “A Mythology for Anglo-Saxon England,” suggesting that Tolkien at one time saw the Goths as *Beowulf’s* Geats, and also equivalent to the Jutes who settled England along with the Angles and Saxons. Thus, according to Drout, Tolkien conceivably saw the Goths as part of the English heritage and Anglo-Saxon race (Chance 236).

honorable to fight on horse than on foot” (5-6). Under the attack of the invading Huns, by 376 AD, they had given up their Ukrainian homelands and moved southwest alongside and into the Roman Empire, where they proceeded (like most of the other Germanic tribes within or on the borders of the Empire) to emulate the Roman culture, though continuing to rely upon their cavalry army in battle (Heather 13). The Empire, according to the 6th century history of Jordanes, received the Goths into their land “as a wall of defense ... against other tribes” (Jordanes 88).

Ford notes that in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Rohirrim follow a similar trajectory toward incorporation in an Empire. The Rohirrim, who “loved best the plains, and delighted in horses and all feats of horsemanship,” lived in the plains to the north, but as the “shadow of Dol Goldor [the volcano in Mirkwood where Sauron had reestablished himself] was lengthening,” they migrated south and were ceded lands to dwell in by Gondor (*Return* Appendix A 379). In exchange for the land, the Rohirrim would be a wall of defense, against invasion from the northeast, and their kings swore an oath to come at the call of the Stewards of Gondor if ever there was need (*Return* Appendix A 366). These similarities between appearance, migration, ways of life, fighting styles, and political relationships of the Rohirrim and Goths are complemented by Ford’s observation that the king of the Rohirrim, like the kings of the Goths, lives in a “Germanic-style greathall” (Anderson, Drout and Flieger 61) at Meduseld, as opposed to the stone fortresses of Gondor.

One final similarity between the Goths and the Rohirrim that has escaped Shippey’s and Ford’s notice surrounds the name and fate of their kings. The Dark Age Gothic historian Jordanes includes a myriad of kings’ names and deeds in his *Gothic History*, but perhaps the single most recognizable and dramatic moment in his whole text occurs with the death of the elderly king Theodrid in his final battle at the Catalaunian Plains. In *The Gothic History*, Theodrid leads his cavalry army to war against Attila and his Huns to aid Valentinian, the Emperor of Rome, but as his men fell victoriously upon Attila’s flank, Theodrid “riding by to encourage his army, was thrown from his horse and trampled underfoot...thus ending his days at a ripe old age” (*Jordanes* 109).

It is hard to miss the similarity in names between the Visigoth king Theodrid and the king of the Rohirrim, Théoden (who had a son “Theodred” [*Towers* 124]), but the

commonalities between the two men run much deeper than simply their names. Like Theodrid, Tolkien's elderly Germanic horse-lord engaged in a battle with enemy forces at the request of a neighboring empire. As his mounted wave of Rohirrim fell upon the flank of the forces of Sauron outside the walls of Minas Tirith, he called to his quailing soldiers, "'Up Eorlings! Fear no Darkness!' But Snowmane [his horse] wild with terror stood up on high, fighting with the air, and then with a great scream he crashed upon his side... the king fell beneath him" (*Return* 113). Both kings are old and fall during the greatest battle of their time, toppling from their horses while attempting to rally their men. At this moment in the novel, it almost seems that Tolkien did not just want to recreate the Gothic nation, but wanted to include a dramatic moment of their history as well.

Building on Shippey's Gothic observations, Ford unearths the second level of the structure to Tolkien's Dark Age reconstruction in *The Lord of the Rings*, linking Gondor with Rome. She argues that Gondor can be seen as analogous to the late Roman Empire, citing the fact that nearly all of the stone structures and roads built in Middle Earth were left behind by the Númenoreans (of whose descent the only kingdom left is Gondor), and are irreparable by men who have lost the skill of their ancient masters. She explains that this echoes the state of Europe in the Dark Ages when the "Germanic kingdoms, possessing far fewer of the necessary tools" for empire building, came into power over areas once held by the Roman Empire (Anderson, Drout and Flieger 54). She also notes that geographically, Gondor's position along the sea to the south mirrors that of Rome in Europe, as does the position of Rohan to the north and dangerous invaders to the east (Anderson, Drout and Flieger 54).

Among the many facets of the Kingdom of Gondor that mimic the Roman Empire of the 5th and 6th centuries, Ford specifically notes the decay of the stonework in Minas Tirith, and its ebbing population that is no longer big enough to fill the city; She compares "Westron," spoken as the common language of the land (and also brought to Middle Earth from Númenor), to Latin, which the Romans imposed upon Europe (Anderson, Drout and Flieger 54). She analyzes the citadel Minas Tirith itself, noting its paved streets, fountains, multiple gates and almost exclusively stone construction in comparison to Theodred's wooden hall (Anderson, Drout and Flieger 61). Like the

Empire, which due to the frequent sacking of barbarians moved its western capital from Rome to Ravenna in 402 AD, Gondor had abandoned its greatest city of Osgilliath in favor of the more easily defensible Minas Tirith (Anderson, Drout and Flieger 60). Finally, she compares the powerful and always victorious armies of early Gondor in the appendices to those in the heyday of the Empire, noting Tolkien's description of historic Gondor, in which the words 'the Dúnedain of the South' could be easily be replaced with 'Roman Empire' in a historical text: "though war never ceased on their borders, for more than a thousand years the Dúnedain of the South grew in wealth and power by land and sea" (*Return*, Appendix A 355).

Inexplicably, despite her strong argument in favor of Gondor as Rome and Rohan as the Germanic tribes, Ford does not equate Sauron and his Orcs with Attila and his bloodthirsty Huns. She does mention the Huns, choosing (rather than the Orcs) a reference buried in Tolkien's appendix to the Wainriders as their equivalent in Middle-earth's history (65). The Wainriders, "a confederacy of many people who came from the East" that "journeyed in great wains" (*Return* Appendix A 360), do fit the picture of the Huns recorded by Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, who writes that they "roam from place to place, like fugitives, accompanied by the wagons in which they live" (Marcellinus 385). However, Tolkien's historical placement of the Wainriders, far before the events documented in *The Lord of the Rings*, does not correspond with Ford's well argued thesis that "the kingdom of Gondor in the present of the novel mirror[s] Rome of the fifth and sixth centuries" (62), because, over the better part of the fifth century Rome feared destruction at the hands of Attila and his Huns (Bury 142).

A nomadic people native to the east, the Huns swept down on an unsuspecting continent in the latter years of the 4th century so successfully that they inspired a sense of awe and terror that would last over a millennium. They quickly conquered the Ostrogoths and the Alans, and within fifty years, under their greatest warrior-king, Attila, had managed to turn themselves into the primary threat to the security of the waning Roman Empire (Bury 48-51). In all these facets they mirror the rise to power of Sauron in Mordor at the end of the Third Age, who comes to power in 2951, and by 3017 is waging a war for control of Middle-earth (*Return* Appendix B 409-410). Also, in appearance, language, and choice of weapons, the Orcs who follow the orders of the

brutal Sauron, “a destroyer who would devour all” (*Towers* 314), are almost identical with the Gothic historian Jordanes’ depiction of the Huns that obey their king Attila whose “mind was bent on the destruction of the world” (Jordanes 103).

The primary connection between the Huns and Orcs is in physical appearance. J.B. Bury, author of *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, and a contemporary of Tolkien, notes that Huns are part of the “Ural-Altian race group” along with the Finns, Turks, and Mongols (Bury 48), and were thus physically very dissimilar in aspect from their contemporary Mediterranean or European counterparts. This difference can be seen in Jordanes’ description of the Huns, whom he calls “stunted” and “foul” (85). He says that “they made their foes flee in horror because their swarthy aspect was fearful and they had, if I may call it so, a sort of shapeless lump, not a head, with pin-holes rather than eyes” (86). According to Bury, the descriptions of Huns offered by Jordanes and other contemporary historians exaggerate the swart pallor of the Hun’s faces, their shorter stature, and squint eyes, referencing the Huns’ Asiatic origins in a heightened depiction of racial difference (Bury 48). It is remarkable then that of his Orcs’ appearance Tolkien writes in a letter to Forrest J. Ackerman, “they are (or were) squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types” (*Letters* 274).¹² It is to be expected, then, that Tolkien’s Orcs share almost all of their features with Jordanes’ depiction of the Huns.

Perhaps the best single example of Orcish features in *The Lord of the Rings* is an unnamed Orc that attacks Frodo during the battle of the chamber of Marzabul inside the mines of Moria. He is “a huge Orc-chieftain, almost man-high” that is described as having a “swart” face and “eyes like coals” (*Fellowship* 365). The combination of his swarthy complexion with the fact that the Orc is considered huge, but even so, is not the

¹² An exhaustive study of race (and perhaps racism) in *The Lord of the Rings* would be an interesting project yielding fruitful results, but for the purpose of this argument, it suffices to say that both the Orcs’ seeming Mongolian ancestry and the Rohirrim’s Germanic connection reside in a more extensive medieval European racial framework that includes the Scandinavian “Beornings” in the North (*Fellowship* 450, *Return* Appendix A 379), the seemingly Arabic “Haradrim” and “Southrons” of the southeast (*Return* 113), apparently African “black men like half-trolls with white eyes and red tongues” from the far south (*Return* 121), the very English (in all but size) Hobbits from the isolated Shire in the Northwest, and the Dwarves, of whom Tolkien writes “I do think of the ‘Dwarves’ like Jews” (*Letters* 229) who are in exile from their homeland (Moria) and wander Middle-earth in search of wealth (*Return* Appendix A 396), fulfilling the negative stereotype through an irrationally greedy nature (*Hobbit* 265-267).

full height of a man, neatly matches Jordanes' descriptions. In fact, Orcs in general have many facial similarities to Jordanes' Huns. In *The Lays of Beleriand* they are said to have "faces swart and foul" (*Beleriand* 270), a description that uses two of the same words that Jordanes' uses to describe his Huns. They are also described as "squint-eyed" (*Towers* 187), suggesting Jordanes' pin-holes.

Another similarity between the Huns and Orcs is in their choice of weapons. Jordanes notes that the Huns were always "ready in the use of bow" (87) and exclusively used that weapon to thin out their enemy before engaging in battle. The bow of the Huns, according to historian J. Otto Maenchen-Helfen, "is a reflexed composite bow, 140-160 centimeters in length. Its wooden core is backed by sinews and bellied with horn." (222). While a common reader's image of an Orc may not be generally associated with archery, upon closer inspection, nearly every encounter with Orcs in *The Lord of the Rings* is prefaced by a barrage of arrows.

At Gandalf's first glimpse of the Orcs in Moria, "arrows whined and whistled down the corridor" (*Fellowship* 363), and the Orc army massed to besiege Helm's Deep begins its assault with a "cloud of arrows" (148). Similarly, when the Orcs overcame Boromir it was not in hand-to-hand combat. Instead, "they shot a rain of arrows" (*Towers* 42). His brother, Faramir, is also nearly killed by arrows returning from Osgilliath (*Return* 90). Additionally, when Frodo gets a quick glance at an Orc bow on the plain of Gorgoroth in *The Return of the King*, it is described as "a bow of horn" (214). This is not an isolated image in Middle-earth. In *The Lays of Beleriand*, the Orcs uniformly carry "bows of horn" (271), which suggests that they are the standard missile weapons of Orcs in general.

A final interesting similarity that bears note (given Tolkien's interest in Philology) is between Orc and Hun language. It might be argued that this is a tenuous link because as Maenchen-Helfen notes, the Huns had no interest in writing so "all we know of the language of the Huns are names" (376), which were often drawn from any combination of Hunnish, German, Latin, or Iranian (384).¹³ The implied conclusion here

¹³ While very few of the recorded historical and literary Hun names bear a direct resemblance to the Orc names listed in *The Lord of the Rings*, two notable exceptions are "Bagrat" (Maenchen-Helfen 381) which compares favorably with Tolkien's "Shagrat" (*Return* 183), and Jordanes' "Snagiban," king of subjugated Alani tribe (105), which can be compared with "Snaga," a slang name meaning, "slave" (*Return* 191).

is that as a conglomeration of conquered and conquering people, the Huns spoke or combined many languages in their daily dialect, which Jordanes describes as “scarcely human... one which bore but slight resemblance to human speech” (85). Tolkien describes the language of his Orcs in much the same way. Of the Orcs he says: “It is said that they had no language of their own, but took what they could of other tongues and perverted it to their own liking; yet they made only brutal jargons, scarcely sufficient for their own needs, unless it were for curses and abuse” (*Return* 457).

Through implicit connections between the Rohirrim and the Gothic cavalry, Gondor and the Roman Empire, and the Orcs and the Huns, Tolkien recreates Dark Age history in a fictional mythological setting. Like the *Beowulf* poet, who uses the historical association of greatness of Hrothgar and grandeur of his Danish court to increase the secondary belief in his narrative, Tolkien appropriates the political relationships, and historical resonances of Dark Age civilizations to achieve the “inner consistency of reality” in “the particulars” of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien’s use of historical material goes deeper than merely creating a “self-consistent” backdrop to his story (*Monsters* 26). Tolkien characterizes the history behind *Beowulf* as a “construction bearing clearly the marks of design and thought” (*Monsters* 26). The word construction is essential, because it suggests that the history has been modified to suit the needs of the story. Obviously, this is also the case in *The Lord of the Rings*, where the names, dates, and in some cases outcomes of historical material have been changed to advance the narrative.

In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien generates a history that looks “outwards to the past, and [does] not merely project the present backwards” (Shippey 69). The relationships are familiar, but the outcomes are in doubt. In Middle-earth, as in Dark Age Europe, all the lands of the West are kept safe by the vigilance of the vast and powerful kingdom to the South (*Fellowship* 275), which in turn relies partially on its ally’s powerful cavalry army for defense (*Return* Appendix A 366). Traditionally, the wars to protect the West in Middle-earth have been fought between Gondor and the Haradrim in

Other Orc names include “Gothmog” (*Return* 120), “Gorbag” (183), “Radbug” (191), “Garn” (211), “Azog” (391), “Ugluk” (*Towers* 42), “Grishnakh” (43), and “Bolg” (*Hobbit* 284). Hun names include, among others “Belda” (Maenchen-Helfen 387), “Onegesh” (388), “Ruga” (389), “Massaget” (390), “Uibat” (403), “Ellac” (407), “Mundzuk” (409), “Anagi” (413), and “Ernak” (415), to name a few.

the southeast (*Return* Appendix A 356), but at the time of the novel, a new threat has suddenly arisen in the East. Sauron and his Orcs, so foreign and monstrous in aspect as to be considered an entirely different species, have meteorically arisen to threaten the entire known world (*Fellowship* 275). Like Attila, who was dubbed “the Scourge of God” by early clerics, and who was thought to be “in alliance with the Devil” (Maenchen-Helfen 1-3), Sauron is no mortal and human adversary, and the fear generated by his presence is larger than life, carrying with it connotations of an apocalypse of biblical proportions, which imminently threatens to “cover all the lands in a second darkness” (*Fellowship* 56).

3.

“NAKED WILL AND COURAGE”:
RAGNARÖK AND DOOM IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

It is the strength of the northern mythological imagination ... that it put the monsters in the center, gave them victory but no honor, and found a potent but terrible solution in naked will and courage. ‘As a working theory absolutely impregnable.’ So potent is it, that while the older southern imagination has faded forever into literary ornament, the northern has power, as it were, to revive its spirit even in our own times. (Monsters 24)

There has been a significant body of research done by scholars on the influence of Norse myth upon *The Lord of the Rings*, but no author has yet shown how thematically central the northern Germanic notion of “Doom,” “theory of courage,” and belief in the ultimate futility of life (*Monsters* 18), derived from the Norse apocalyptic myth of Ragnarök, are to Tolkien’s epic. In his lecture on *Beowulf*, Tolkien describes the pagan idea of Doom as the conviction that life is a struggle against a “hostile world” that inevitably ends “for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat” (*Monsters* 16). Predicated upon the participants’ foreknowledge of this defeat and inescapable mortality, Tolkien argues that belief in Doom produces a “perfect” type of courage that he calls “absolute resistance” (*Monsters* 19), which allows pagan warriors, and even pagan gods, to possess a deeper and more profound fatalistic heroism than their later Christian counterparts.

Unfortunately, as John Godfrey notes, “our knowledge of [pre-Christian] Anglo-Saxon religion is disappointingly meager” and there is little left of Anglo-Saxon paganism to study (63).¹⁴ According to Tolkien, however, despite his feelings of “regret that we do not know more about pre-Christian English mythology ... it is legitimate to suppose” that in its focus on Doom, rooted in a final confrontation between the gods, heroes, and monsters, that pagan Anglo-Saxon myth was “fundamentally the same as later Icelandic” (*Monsters* 23). He adds that in the founding principles of the Norse faith, northern courage, mortality, and fatalism, “we may suppose that pagan English and Norse imagination agreed” in their “vision of the final defeat” (*Monsters* 19).

¹⁴ It is widely assumed, though, that a complete Anglo-Saxon pagan mythology at one time existed. In *Beowulf*, for example, the poet remembers a time when “the bravest warriors” sometimes made sacrifices “to the old stone gods, / [and] made heathen vows” (174-76).

As cavalier as substituting one culture's pagan mythology for another's may seem, it is not a practice wholly without precedent. Godfrey explains that scholars "in the past were tempted to repair the deficiency of knowledge about Anglo-Saxon religion by enlarging on certain obvious affinities between Old English heathenism and Scandinavian mythology" (63). For example, many of Tolkien's contemporaries believed that Norse mythology, as recorded in the Eddas, two Icelandic texts of the 11th and 12th centuries, held the key to a general understanding of earlier Germanic and Anglo-Saxon paganism.

Both William Craigie, Tolkien's teacher of Norse language at Exeter (Bramlett 144) and an editor on *The Oxford English Dictionary* for whom Tolkien worked, and W.H. Auden, a poet and close friend of Tolkien, espouse this opinion in their works. In the introduction to Auden's translation of *The Elder Edda* (which was dedicated to Tolkien) it is claimed that Eddic poetry is "derived from the same common Germanic stock as Old High German, Old English, and Old Saxon poetry" and deals with "traditional Germanic gods" (Taylor and Auden 13-14). Craigie observes in his short book, *The Icelandic Saga*, that the Norse tales were "told in exactly the same form throughout the whole of Saxony," and adds, "In all probability it was in Norway that these were learned from North German merchants" (98). Both of them seem to hint that Anglo-Saxon myth might actually be the ancestor of Norse myth, and therefore could be reconstructed based on the Norse equivalent with some degree of accuracy.

The foundational Doom myth from the Norse is, of course, the one that tells the story of the great End—the "final defeat" (*Monsters* 19) of the gods and heroes by the monsters: Ragnarök, "the Doom of this Age" (Taylor and Auden, *The Lay of Vafthrundir* 41). It is this myth that Tolkien so frequently references in his lecture on *Beowulf*, using it to build his case for Doom and courage in contrast to Christian faith in ultimate salvation. Tolkien was inspired by this myth and used it as a source for his fiction (*Letters* 149).¹⁵

¹⁵ Andy Dimond observes that Tolkien specifically imitated Ragnarök in his fiction prior to writing *The Lord of the Rings*, quoting a letter from Tolkien to Milton Waldman in which Tolkien admits that *The Silmarillion's* final battle "owes, I suppose, more to the Norse version of Ragnarök than to anything else" (*Letters* 149).

Contained in the Eddic poem *Voluspa*, the myth of Ragnarök predicts the events of the end of the world. In the poem, Odin receives knowledge of the final battle between gods and monsters from an ancient seer. An age of incest and war will ensue, resulting in three consecutive summerless years. Wolves will swallow the sun and moon, and the treacherous god Loki will board an enormous dread ship and advance upon the gods with his children (most notably Fenrir the wolf and Jormungand the serpent) and “all the family of hell” in tow. Simultaneously, the frost giants of the north under their leader Hrym and the fire demons of the south under their leader Surt will converge on the Gods as well (Taylor and Auden, *Voluspa* 30-52, Sturluson 86-90).

Meanwhile, the god Heimdall blows a great blast on his horn, calling the gods to council. They arm themselves for battle, and along with all the warriors of Valhalla, venture forth to do battle with their enemies.¹⁶ All will meet at the plain of Vigrid to join in combat, whereupon everyone—god, man, demon and giant alike—will kill each other in a war without victory. Finally, Surt’s flames will burn the earth to a cinder, and everything will return to the darkness of the void. All is not lost, however, as two people and some of the gods’ children will miraculously survive the cataclysm and start the cycle anew (Taylor and Auden, *Volsupa* 30-52, Sturluson 86-90).

This final section of Ragnarök with its theme of rebirth seems to contradict Tolkien’s notion of Doom (*Monsters* 18). However, it has been theorized that this section is an addition made to the myth after contact with Christianity, because both Eddas were recorded by practicing Christians. As Nordal Sigurdur explains in his introduction to *The Prose Edda*, the tales recorded in the book do not “give us an idea of Scandinavian heathenism as it really was,” adding that “much of the mythology and many of the stories about the gods... derive from speculation current during the decline of paganism, occasionally mingled with ideas that are Christian and southern in origin” (Sturluson 12-13).

Related to this, Andrew Peter Fors, a contemporary of Craigie, suggests in his short book, *The Ethical World Conception of the Norse People* that “the original myth of Ragnarök perhaps ended” not with a rebirth, but with the void, “drawing a veil over all

¹⁶ Valhalla is a great hall where courageous warriors who died in battle (The Einherjar) go to await the final conflict in which they will participate (Sturluson 63).

things, plunging the earth again into darkness, as out of darkness it had emerged” (24).¹⁷ This is certainly a view that Tolkien shares. In his lecture on *Beowulf*, he refers to the end according to Norse paganism as “the great temporal defeat” (20-21). He also suggests that the struggle of Norse gods and men against evil is “perfect because [it occurs] without hope” (19).

In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien puts forward the idea of Doom early and reinforces it often. Doom is the name of the Volcano to which Frodo must take the Ring to be destroyed (*Fellowship* 67). Boromir has a dream in which “Doom is at hand” (*Fellowship* 276). Gandalf’s death is foreshadowed in Moria as the drums of the Orcs beat “*Doom Doom Doom*” (*Fellowship* 369). Théoden is warned that battle outside Minas Tirith will decide “the Doom of our time” (*Return* 65). As Tolkien shows in his lecture, the notion of Doom itself is predicated upon the mortality of its participants and their foreknowledge of defeat. Only when these two facets combine can the courage of the heroes achieve the level of “absolute resistance” and evoke the “deeply felt” and supremely moving sorrow of “defeated valor” (*Monsters* 21).

For Tolkien, the defining trait of the Norse gods is their mortality. Through their incarnate nature, the Norse gods possess a quality Tolkien calls “humanness,” which draws them physically toward humanity through a mutual existence “within Time,” and predisposes the two groups to be allies in defense of their shared world. Unlike the Christian God and his angels who (with the sole exception of embodied Christ) are “timeless and do not fear death,” and are without physical want or need, the Norse gods must eat and drink and fight and die like the humans that worship them. Tolkien explains that because they experience pain, sorrow, weariness, fear, and death, this makes their voluntary participation in battles more poignant (*Monsters* 22). Of the battles in which they fight, Ragnarök holds a special place, because when the culminating inferno ceases, the scorched bones of every god lie scattered upon the plain of Vigrid, where each met a separate and painful death.¹⁸

¹⁷ This was published in 1904 and, as one of the few works written on the subject at that time, may have been available to Tolkien in his studies of Norse as a special subject under Craigie.

¹⁸ “In terrible duels, each one of the ‘functional gods’ will succumb, sometimes beating his adversary and sometimes being avenged by another god. Odin will be devoured by the wolf Fenrir, which in turn will be torn apart by Vidarr, son of Odin. The dog Garm and Tyr will kill each other. Thor will cleave asunder the World Serpent [Jormungand], but will fall immediately, poisoned by the venom that the beast spews forth.

There are two groups of characters in *The Lord of the Rings* that share this combination of divinity and humanness with the Norse gods: the Elves and the Istari (wizards). Both are immune to death from aging, and have superhuman magical powers, but are also made of mortal flesh and fear injury and death. As Tolkien puts it in a letter to Robert Murray, the Istari are, like the Norse gods, powerful magical beings that are “embodied in physical bodies capable of pain, and weariness, and of afflicting the spirit with physical fear, and of being ‘killed’” (*Letters* 202). Therefore, they must overcome the same instinctive bodily desires as their human counterparts, and their courage must come through a similar act of will (202). If anything, because they are willing to risk their infinite life spans, their courage is in some respect greater than human courage and their sacrifices are more poignant.

Because of their shared mortality, the Norse gods do not disdain human help in their “battle with the outer darkness” (*Monsters* 24). Rather, they share a common dependence on the Earth with humanity, and continuously recruit human heroes to become the Einherjar of Valhalla, to be incorporated in the war as “part of a great strategy that includes all good men, as the infantry of battle” (*Monsters* 24). The level playing field of mortality allows humans to have a measured impact in this war. The Einherjar, wielding man-made blades, spears, and axes, possess the ability to slay monsters and giants, and even engage with the traitor-god Loki. Thus gods and mythic creatures can be slain “with iron in their bellies” by human heroes (*Monsters* 22).

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien too capitalizes on this shared peril and mortality. Both the Elves and Istari are physically threatened by the possibility of Sauron’s dominion over Middle-earth, and while neither group is powerful enough to end the threat themselves, they make it their task to “arouse the hearts and minds of those [humans] threatened by Sauron to a resistance with their own strengths; and not just to do the job for them” (*Letters* 202). Despite the risk of death and defeat, the Elves join with the human Beornings in the north to fight Sauron’s Orcs under the boughs of Mirkwood (*Return* Appendix B 415). Gandalf gives up his life in Moria to save his companions, battling the powerful demonic Balrog (*Fellowship* 371). He also helps to raise the army

The demon Surt will kill Frey. Finally, the primeval god Heimdall and Loki will confront and destroy each other” (Dumezil 61).

of Rohan against Saruman's Uruk-hai (*Towers* 142), and leads the forces of Minas Tirith against their besiegers (*Return* 87).¹⁹

The mortality of the Norse gods is essential to the theme of courage, but it alone does not allow them to achieve the "perfect" level of heroism that Tolkien identifies with their defeat at Ragnarök and Beowulf's combat with the dragon. As Tolkien relates, the Northern gods "are on the right side, though it is not the side that wins. The winning side is Chaos and Unreason—mythologically the monsters—but the gods, who are defeated, think that defeat no refutation" (*Monsters* 19). The gods participate in the great battle knowing that death in defeat is the only possible outcome (Sturluson 88). Their unquestioned acceptance of this fact, backed by an iron-clad resolve to continue the struggle *despite* this, raises the Norse gods' heroic courage to the level of "absolute resistance, perfect because without hope" (*Monsters* 19).²⁰

For Tolkien, the foreknowledge of defeat is thus an essential ingredient of Doom. The heroes must go into an utterly hopeless situation, knowing the outcome beforehand, but possess the "unyielding will" necessary to carry on (*Monsters* 18). This strength is possessed by the gods and heroes at Ragnarök, by Beowulf when he ventures into the lair of the dragon, and by many of Tolkien's characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, who summon the courage and willpower to continue their struggles past the point when "hope is but ignorance" and all resistance is "vanity" (*Return* 130).

Like the Norse skalds, Tolkien uses the utter despair of Doom to rarify the courage of his heroes to the point of absolute resistance. Indeed, the entire book is based on this premise: What hope do Frodo and Sam have of reaching Mount Doom with the ring? What hope does an exhausted and weakened Gandalf have against the primeval might of the Balrog on the bridge of Khazad-Dûm (*Fellowship* 371)? What hope do Théoden and his tiny army have at Helm's Deep surrounded by a "sea" of 10,000 Uruk-hai (*Towers* 148)? What hope is there when Aragorn leads the remaining army of

¹⁹ In fact, the Balrog that Gandalf battles is likely influenced by the image of the Norse god Surt, the destructive fire god of Norse myth who is to burn the world at the end of Ragnarök. Like the Balrog, Surt holds a "blazing sword" (Sturluson 32). Also, in his role as the incinerator of the world, Surt is quite like Tolkien's description of the Balrog as "a primeval spirit of destroying fire" (*Letters* 80).

²⁰ As a survivor of WWI and of the Battle of the Somme, where two of his best friends, R.Q. Gilson and G.B. Smith, were "mowed down" by German machine guns in doomed charges (Jones 47-48), Tolkien was certainly in a unique position to appreciate the value of absolute resistance. He likely felt a kinship with the *Beowulf* poet, whom he believed "deeply felt ... the worth of defeated valor" (*Monsters* 21).

Gondor against the Black Gate, which opens and pours fourth Sauron's gathered horde of "Orcs innumerable" (*Return* 175)?

In each of these scenes Tolkien uses the pagan notion of Doom to heighten the courage of his heroes to the point of perfection. Against all odds Frodo and Sam make it to Mordor, only to find the incalculable might of Sauron arrayed between them and their Doom. His armies, encamped on Gorgoroth, the "plateau of terror," are so vast that "as far as their eyes could reach along the skirts of the Morgai and away southward, there were camps, some of tents, some ordered like small towns... clustered like some huge nest of insects" (*Return* 213). This prompts Sam to exclaim, "I don't like the look of things at all... pretty hopeless, I call it" (*Return* 213). Yet, despite their lack of faith in victory, the two choose to continue on, painfully conscious of their peril.

In Moria, as the drums beat the sound of his Doom, Gandalf stood, "small and altogether alone: grey and bent like a wizened tree before the onset of a storm" against the flame-wreathed might of the Balrog that stretched across the great cavern "from wall to wall" (*Fellowship* 371). Seeing this, Aragorn realized that "he cannot stand alone," but turned to his aid too late, for the old wizard's staff broke and he fell into the chasm, twined in the flaming whip of the Balrog (371). In that moment, Tolkien would later write, Gandalf, for all of his supernatural powers, made the supremely heroic choice to die to save his friends, despite the fact that "for all he could know at that moment he was the *only* person who could direct the resistance to Sauron successfully, and *his* mission was in vain" (*Letters* 202).

At the battle of Helm's deep, gazing out at the dark mass of Uruk-hai as his tower gate crumbled to earth, Théoden (rather than accept the monsters' offer of surrender) decides to ride forth and "make such an end as will be worth a song" (*Towers* 155-57). His fatalistic heroism is truly "potent and terrible" because it dooms his people—old men, women, and children who are fighting in the nearby caverns—to die with him. Leading what he believes to be his final charge, announced by the deafening sound of the "great horn of Helm" (157), King Théoden evokes the heroic image of the Norse god-king Odin charging forth to death upon his steed at Ragnarök beneath the echoing sound of Heimdall's horn blast (*Sturluson* 87).

Arguably Tolkien's culminating moment of "absolute resistance" in the face of pagan Doom occurs outside the Black Gate of Mordor. Even before Aragorn's army marches against the gathered myriads of Sauron, they have foreknowledge that defeat and death are imminent. They know that they are marching "open-eyed into [a] trap, with courage, but small hope" for themselves (*Return* 162). Once Aragorn's army arrives, the black gate opens, disgorging Sauron's hordes, and the small army of Gondor gathers upon two mounds to make a last stand. Tolkien writes that "all about the grey mounds, forces ten times and more than ten times their match would ring them in a sea of enemies. Sauron had taken the proffered bait in jaws of steel" (*Return* 175).

Tolkien places the participants of this battle in exactly the situation of the early Norse and Anglo-Saxon heroes he describes in his lecture on *Beowulf*. He says that the poet, when describing the great warriors of the past,

may have meant in dictionary terms 'heroes under heaven,' or 'mighty men upon earth.' But he and his hearers were thinking of *eormengrund*, the great earth, ringed with *garsecg*, the shoreless sea, beneath the sky's inaccessible roof; whereon, as in a little circle of light about their halls, men with courage as their stay went forward to that battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark which ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat. (*Monsters* 16)

In the pagan conception, each of the circles of light would inevitably be snuffed out by the darkness, which seems to be the case in the final battle of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Aragorn, Gandalf, Éomer, Legolas, Gimli, and all the rest are surrounded by a sea of dark enemies and utterly bereft of hope, believing Frodo to be dead and the ring taken (*Return* 173). Yet, all of them fight on. Even Pippin, smallest and weakest of the whole doomed army, makes a resolution to "do his best" (*Return* 176).

Faced with this bleak landscape, Tolkien gives only the two alternatives of Norse mythic conception: courage and cowardice. In the Norse tradition, we learn from Tolkien to despise those characters that, though essentially good, give up or join the enemy to save themselves, while adoring those that, like Aragorn and his army, look defeat in the eye and go down to death swinging a blade. Denethor, who burns on a pyre rather than face a warrior's death (*Return* 131), and Saruman, who joins Sauron to save himself (*Fellowship* 291), are two examples of the earlier category, while Frodo, Théoden, and Aragorn are prime examples (among many) of the latter.

Because these characters *fully expect* to meet unavoidable death through their actions, yet make those choices regardless of the anticipated outcome, they evoke the “perfect” pagan heroism of “absolute resistance.” Yet, in *The Lord of the Rings* the display of this courage ends not with the expected oblivion, but with a eucatastrophic grace bestowed by a higher power. In fact, all of the acts of “absolute resistance” end in this way. Frodo and Sam fulfill their quest when Gollum and the Ring unexpectedly fall into the volcanic pit of Mt. Doom (*Return* 240). Gandalf is returned from the dead after his defeat of the Balrog atop Zirakzigil (*Towers* 111). At Helm’s Deep, Gandalf appears at dawn with the soldiers of Erkenbrand to save Théoden and his people (*Towers* 157). The heroes at the Black Gate, surrounded by a sea of dark monsters and looking their inevitable Doom in the face, do not perish as do the heroes and Norse gods of legend. Rather, the ring is miraculously destroyed and “the power of Mordor was scattering like dust in the wind” (243).

Tolkien’s inspired recreation of the world he saw in *Beowulf*, with its dueling themes of ultimate defeat and eternal salvation, blends at this point into a new creation—one in which “the worth of defeated valor ... is deeply felt” (*Monsters* 21), but in which the ultimate outcome foreshadows the coming of Christ and the joyous end of “the Great Eucatastrophe, the Christian Gloria” (*Reader* 89). Like Ragnarök, *The Lord of the Rings* rarefies its characters’ heroism through a flirtation with Doom and carries the reader to the edge of destruction. This puts the reader, at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, in a position to understand the world through a unique set of eyes. Through averted Doom, Tolkien recreates what he believed to be the world-view of the *Beowulf* poet who “could view from without, but still feel immediately and from within, the old dogma: despair in the event, combined with faith in the value of doomed resistance” (*Monsters* 21).

4.

“A SUDDEN MIRACULOUS GRACE”:
BIBLICAL APOCALYPSE AND SALVATION IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

[Eucatastrophe] is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (Reader 86)

Set in a time of dread when the “Dark Lord ... has arisen again” (*Fellowship* 55), and under the threats of universal enslavement and world devastation, *The Lord of the Rings* consistently evokes a mood of apocalyptic expectation. The threatening tone of the novel is established with Frodo’s first encounter with the rumor of Sauron, when Gandalf eclipses the cozy serenity of the Hobbit’s home with terrifying imagery of apocalypse.

The wizard warns:

Already, Frodo, our time is beginning to look black. The Enemy is fast becoming very strong. His plans are far from ripe, I think, but they are ripening. We shall be hard put to it. We should be very hard put to it, even if it were not for this dreadful chance. The Enemy still lacks one thing to give him strength and knowledge to beat down all resistance, break the last defenses, and cover all the lands with a second darkness. He lacks the One Ring. (*Fellowship* 56)

At that moment, the apocalyptic tension that is to permeate the rest of the novel comes into razor-sharp focus for the first time. It recedes quickly back to sunshine and the hearthside, but only so that it can slowly emerge in detail and terror throughout the course of the novel. It is this anticipation of inevitable conflict—not just a battle between good and evil, but as Brian Daley puts it, a “vivid expectation of a violent end to human history and the present world” (*Apocalypticism II* 3) that is lurking behind the unexpected reemergence of the “Dark Lord” in both *The Lord of the Rings* and apocalyptic works of the Bible.

Tolkien characterized *The Lord of the Rings* in a letter to his friend Robert Murray as “fundamentally religious and Catholic” in its genesis and revision, claiming that a “Christian religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism” (Letters 172). Working from statements such as these, critics J.R. Wytenbroek and Diane Speed have

examined *The Lord of the Rings* from a Christian perspective and cited some similarities between the novel and Biblical apocalypse. They theorize that Tolkien's epic evokes an apocalyptic resonance through imbedded Christian imagery and themes. However, neither critic recognized how crucial Tolkien's lecture on *Beowulf* with its discussions of pagan and Christian fusion, nor his definition of "eucatastrophe" from his lecture "On Fairy-Stories," are to an understanding of how Christian apocalyptic images and themes function in *The Lord of the Rings*. By combining Wytenbroek and Speed's observations, those of specialists in the field of Christian apocalypticism, and Tolkien's own lectures and letters on the subject, one obtains a new and deeper understanding of one of the motives behind his inclusion of Christian apocalyptic characters and themes in *The Lord of the Rings*: the recreation of the "pregnant moment of poise" when his grim pagan ancestors converted from their fatalistic belief in Doom and "unyielding will" (*Monsters* 18) to faith in the great "eucatastrophe" of the Resurrection and eternal salvation (*Reader* 88-89).

Wytenbroek reveals the first of the manifold unions between *Revelation* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In his article, "Apocalyptic Vision in The Lord of the Rings," he notes many areas of overlap between Aragorn, who both raises the dead and returns as King to bring victory to his overmatched kingdom, and Christ in His biblical second coming. He also unearths parallels between Sauron, "the Enemy", and the Beast of *Revelation* (Wytenbroek 9). Wytenbroek's study, however, is incomplete. Christ is not necessarily embodied in a single figure, and there are many other traditional apocalyptic figures that are used by Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* that Wytenbroek does not consider, including the Son of Man, Antichrist, and the angelic and demonic hosts.

The figure of the risen Christ is central to Christian apocalypse, for its impetus is the authors' belief "that Christ would soon return in power and majesty" (Emmerson 23). In *Revelation*, for example, the world is in a downward spiral: evil is multiplying, the righteous are being oppressed, and just when everything—literally—begins to go to hell (the Beast has gathered "all the kings of the earth, and their armies together to make war" upon the righteous [*Revelation* 19.19]), Christ returns to miraculously defeat Satan and grant the righteous eternal life (*Revelation* 19-21). Studies of Christ figures in the *Lord of the Rings* have focused on Aragorn, Gandalf, and Frodo, but each critic has attempted

his or her comparison in isolation, and has not acknowledged the possibility that there are multiple Christ figures in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Biblically, Christ is often referred to separately as either “the Messiah” or the “Son of Man” (O’Callaghan 83). The Messiah is “the traditional prophetic idea of a Jewish liberator or savior,” often depicted as a warrior-king who will save his people (O’Callaghan 83). The Son of Man, though manifestly human, “belongs completely to the divine sphere” because he is Christ *after* he has ascended to heaven. “His appearance is human but his identity would seem to be that of a supernatural angel enjoying a singular union with God” (O’Callaghan 83-84).

Wytenbroek suggests that Aragorn is the proper Christ figure in Tolkien’s apocalyptic construction, claiming that he is “definitely a symbol, possibly even a representative for Christ, in his role of wandering exile, protector and guardian of the weak, fighter of evil, and of course as king” (Wytenbroek 9). He cites Aragorn’s raising and pardoning of the dead, his healing of Faramir at Minas Tirith, and the fact that “it is Sauron and Aragorn who are in most direct conflict with each other, not Sauron and Gandalf or even Sauron and Frodo” (Wytenbroek 9), as three primary reasons for this judgment.²¹ Additionally, although Aragorn does not have a miraculous birth to equal that of Christ, his ancestry goes back to an extraordinary union between men and Elves, which ties him to Christ in his immortal heritage (*Return* Appendix A 342).²²

At times, such as his raising of the dead in Dunharrow, Aragorn is eminently Christ-like. Wytenbroek observes that in this scene, Aragorn mirrors Christ both in His power of judgment and in his mythic descent into and harrowing of hell (Wytenbroek 9).²³ Aragorn’s interactions with the dead are both a symbolic resurrection and judgment,

²¹ To claim Aragorn as messiah based on his healing of Faramir is problematic because earlier in the novel, through his skill alone, he cannot heal Frodo of the wound inflicted by the Witch King. He says “there is some poison or evil here that is beyond my skill to drive out” (*Fellowship* 230). Based strictly on a study of miraculous healing abilities, Elrond who cures Frodo’s wound (248), or Gandalf who drives the demon from Théoden (*Towers* 128) would be equally good choices.

²² Elves will be compared to the angels of Christian apocalypse (Tolkien makes this comparison explicit in one of his letters [147]). If this is accepted, Aragorn’s birth, though not immaculate, is certainly celestial.

²³ One implicit connection here may be in the very title of the chasm into which Aragorn leads the Grey Company to meet the dead. According to Théoden, the place “is called Dunharrow” (*Return* 41), and in an earlier draft Tolkien named it “Harrowdale” (*Letters* 259), both words that include the religious term harrow. Also of note, according to Emerson, the term ‘harrowing’ comes “from Old English *herian*, ‘to make a war raid’” (108), which is another connection of *The Lord of the Rings* to the tongue and soil of England.

because he calls them forth to battle as if they were living beings and then, acting as the final arbiter, pardons them of their crimes for all eternity, pronouncing upon them the verdict that “ye shall have peace and depart forever” (*Return* 53).

Aragorn is a fair representation of Christ as Messiah, but fails entirely to fit the second, and more prominent, apocalyptic category of Christ as Son of Man. The Son of Man in Biblical *Revelation* is described as one whose “head and hairs were white, as white wool, and as snow, and his eyes were as a flame of fire...and his face was as the sun shineth in his power” (1:14-16). In *Daniel* he is similarly described as an “ancient of days” with a “garment white as snow and the hair of his head like clean wool” (7.9). The obvious physical connection to Christ as the Son of Man in *The Lord of the Rings* is not Aragorn, but Gandalf after his fall in Moria. When the wizard first reappears to Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli his description is as follows: “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” (*Towers* 102). This description is so nearly alike to those of the Bible that it would be difficult to argue that the Son of Man did not influence Gandalf’s physical appearance at that moment.

Like Christ who is believed to have died and descended into hell, Gandalf essentially falls into hell as he battles the Balrog in Moria (*Towers* 110).²⁴ He overcomes his opponent, but at the cost of his own life. Gandalf claims to have passed through “fire and deep water” (*Towers* 103) and “fire and the abyss” (*Towers* 110), but Tolkien clarifies in a letter to Murray that “Gandalf really ‘died,’ and was changed ... [and] probably he should rather have said ... ‘I have passed through death not ‘fire and flood’” (*Letters* 201). Like the Son of Man in apocalypse, Gandalf is “sent back” (*Towers* 111) to assist in the final battle.

In fact, both Ezekiel and John make the Son of Man their war leader in the ensuing apocalyptic battle. In *Ezekiel*, God commands the Son of Man “set thy face against Gog and the land of Magog,” the two demonic tribes of apocalypse (*Ezekiel* 38.2). In *Revelation*, John beholds “a white horse; and he who sat upon him was called

²⁴ Though Jesus’ descent to hell is not found in the gospels, the Apostles Creed, still read as a statement of faith in many churches today (Emmerson 109), requires parishioners to read the lines “I believe in God... in Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord: [who] was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell” (1-8).

faithful and true, and with justice doth he judge and fight ... [and] the Beast, and the king of the earth, and their armies gathered together to make war with him that sat upon the horse, and his army” (*Revelation* 19.11-19). Like the Son of Man, mounted on a white steed, and sent by God to lead His faithful against these gathered forces, Gandalf, the “White Rider” is “sent” to lead the forces of good against the massing armies of Sauron (*Return* 76). Similarly, upon the completion of his task, Gandalf returns with the Elves to Valinor, Tolkien’s equivalent of heaven (*Letters* 147), just as Christ, as the Son of Man, is to return to heaven with the elect upon the culmination of the apocalypse.

In his letter to Murray, Tolkien explains that the key to Gandalf’s glorious and powerful reincarnation is that he

sacrificed himself, was accepted, enhanced, and returned. ‘Yes, that was the name, I was Gandalf.’ Of course, he remains similar in personality and idiosyncrasy, but both his wisdom and power are much greater ... He is still under the obligation of concealing his power and of teaching rather than forcing or dominating wills, but where the physical powers of the Enemy are too great for the good will of the opposers to be effective he can act in emergency as an ‘angel.’²⁵ (*Letters* 202-203)

This statement, while again affirming the Gandalf-Son of Man connection, also highlights the major difference between Tolkien’s theory of salvation and that of biblical apocalypse.

In biblical apocalypse, the righteous are miraculously saved without the necessity of physical participation in their salvation. For example, when Satan and his demonic hordes of Gog and Magog surround the “beloved city” in *Revelation*, those who are besieged do not fight. Instead, “there came down a fire from God out of heaven, and devoured them” (19:8-9). In Tolkien’s apocalyptic vision, however, the righteous are not saved by faith alone, but must physically participate in the war. Tolkien writes that Gandalf is sent to Middle-earth to “kindle and organize” “human resistance” to Sauron (203). His role is to “train, advise, instruct, [and] arouse the hearts and minds of those

²⁵ Diane Speed references both this letter and *Revelation* in her survey, “Christian Perspectives in The Lord of the Rings”, but does not quite make the Son of Man connection explicit. She explains that “as the White Rider leading the company against the forces of evil he [Gandalf] bears some resemblance” to the apocalyptic version of Christ offered in *Revelation* (Speed 2000), but concludes based on Tolkien’s letter, that “although he may function in a Christ-like way, he [Gandalf] is essentially angelic” (Speed 2000).

threatened by Sauron to a resistance with their own strengths; not just do the job for them” (202).

A second major difference between Tolkien’s appropriated apocalyptic versions of Christ and their scriptural source is that they share incarnate “humanness” with the pagan gods. While Christ, himself, was incarnate in the Gospels, in his second coming, he is invulnerable—so powerful that he and those who follow him need have no fear of defeat. In *The Lord of the Rings*, this is not the case. Both Aragorn and Gandalf may be killed, and much of Tolkien’s energy is spent showing the likelihood of their demise and the utter hopelessness of their resistance (*Return* 25, 82-83, etc.). Also, unlike the risen Christ (but like the pagan gods) Aragorn and Gandalf must overcome the physical “fear” of death, and suffer both “pain and weariness,” as must their human allies (*Letters* 202).

The villains who are traditionally opposed to Christ in apocalyptic literature are two different manifestations of Satan: the Beast (or Dragon), and the manifestly human Antichrist (Emmerson 23). As the leader of what Tolkien would later claim as an “absolute Satanic rebellion” (*Letters* 202), Sauron enacts the role of the Beast. The Witch King of Angmar can be read as the traditional Antichrist figure. In *Beowulf: the monsters and the critics* Tolkien claims that Beowulf is “something more significant than a standard hero” because he is “a man faced with a foe more evil than any human enemy of house or realm” (*Monsters* 15). He says that through his combats with the demonic Grendel and the dragon (whom Tolkien believed to have biblical significance to the poet [*Monsters* 17, 25]), Beowulf achieves a legendary and mythical status above that of any historical hero or king (15). Tolkien follows this recipe for heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*, elevating the struggles of his characters to a truly mythic level by making sure they are faced with the most powerful, evil, and merciless enemies available—those of the Christian apocalyptic tradition who can bring about the end of the world.

The principal enemy of *Revelation*, the Beast or Dragon, is often considered to be Satan himself. Described by Cohn as “a gigantic embodiment of anarchic, destructive power” (34), he is unfailingly inhuman. Likewise, Sauron, the principal enemy of Middle-earth, is openly hailed as “a destroyer who would devour all” (*Towers* 314). Unlike most of his bipedal followers, Sauron is inhuman, having lost his humanoid body after a battle with heavenly powers (*Silmarillion* 336). Also, he is essentially a fallen

member of the heavenly court (*Silmarillion* 341), just as the biblical Satan was originally an angel in the heavenly court of God (*Revelation* 12:9). And, just as the Beast of apocalyptic tradition is said to have “had a fatal wound and had been healed” (*Revelation* 13:12), Sauron was thought to have been killed in battle by Isildur, but in reality “was diminished but not destroyed” (*Fellowship* 273) and “at length [took] shape and power again” (281).

The primary weapon of the Beast of Christian apocalypse is fear. No one will stand against him. The multitudes adore him. “Who is like to the Beast?” they ask, “and who shall be able to fight with him?” (*Revelation* 13:4). This is similar to the views of both Saruman and Denethor in *The Lord of the Rings*, when faced with the prospect of war with Sauron. Denethor gives in to despair, lamenting that “against the Power that now arises there is no victory” (*Return* 130). In contrast, Saruman joins with him, saying “a new power is rising” and against it “there is no hope left.” Like those who worship the Beast, he suggests that “it would be wise” to “join with that power” (*Fellowship* 291). Both Sauron and the Beast feed off fear, heightening it to the point of hopelessness and then turning the inaction of the multitudes to their advantage.

Also, Sauron and the Beast seem to share identical motives. In a letter to Anne Barrett, Tolkien explains that Sauron’s ultimate goal is to be worshipped as God. He says that inevitably Sauron “would have demanded divine honor from all rational creatures” (*Letters* 244). This is also true of the Beast whose goal is to “make all, both little and great, rich and poor, freeman and bondmen,” worship his image or “be slain” (*Revelation* 15:16). Tolkien explains that in “*The Lord of the Rings* the conflict is not basically about ‘freedom,’ though that is naturally involved. It is about God and His sole right to divine honor” (*Letters* 243). Tolkien’s summary of his conflict (replacing the word Eldar with “Angels of God,” Númenorians with “Christians,” and Sauron with “the Beast”) could just as easily be a summary of any biblical apocalyptic text: “The Eldar and the Númenorians believe in The One, the true God, and held worship of any other person an abomination. Sauron desired to be a God-King” (243).

After the Beast, the second and most popular manifestation of Satan in Christian apocalypse is Antichrist (Cohn 78). In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Witch King of Angmar, Lord of the Nazgul, enacts this role. Perhaps the most telling sign that Tolkien

modeled the Witch King on Antichrist is that he is constructed as the antithesis of Gandalf, just as Antichrist of apocalypse is primarily the inverse of the Son of Man. The facets of Antichrist that create this opposition to Christ are his human form and his “supernatural power, which enables him to work miracles” (Cohn 78). Like the Son of Man who, though manifestly human, is the embodiment of a “supernatural angel enjoying a singular union with God” (O’Callaghan 83-84), Antichrist is a demon in human form whose “power comes from Satan and is exhibited in the black arts which he exploits for the ruin of the saints” (Cohn 78). Even his very name, “the Witch King,” declares this proficiency in black magic, and like Antichrist’s magic, which comes from Satan, the Witch King’s magic comes to him through the ring he wields, from Sauron himself.²⁶

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Witch King is made into a sort of “Antigandalf” through a series of carefully selected inverted parallels. The first is that the Witch King is leader of “the Nine Riders” (*Fellowship* 288) in contrast to Gandalf, who is the leader of the “Nine Walkers” of the fellowship (309). Secondly, he is cast as The “Black Rider” (*Return* 100) in opposition to Gandalf as “The White Rider” (*Towers* 94). The Witch King is always “turning hope to despair and victory to death” (*Return* 114). Gandalf on the other hand is constantly turning despair into hope (*Return* 94) and snatching victory from the jaws of defeat (*Return* 76). Throughout the novel, the two are locked in an inverse pattern that seems to be spiraling toward an ultimate confrontation, but when this apocalyptic confrontation seems imminent—when Gandalf “alone is left to forbid the entrance of the Lord of the Nazgul to Minas Tirith when the city is overthrown and the gate is destroyed” (*Letters* 203)—no conflict occurs. The fate of the Antichrist figure in Tolkien’s fiction lies in “other mortal hands” (203).²⁷

In addition to these very specific heroes and villains of biblical apocalypse, Tolkien creates forces of good and evil that mimic Christian angels and demons. O’Callaghan explains that in Christian apocalypse an entourage, or heavenly court of angels, surrounds each of the powerful characters (125). As the servants and messengers of God, these angels are usually depicted as pure and beautiful, but as the servants of

²⁶ One possible biblical connection between the Antichrist and the Witch King is through Simon Magus, the magician of Acts, who according to Emerson “prefigures the antichrist” because of his use of black magic (27).

²⁷ There is more that should be written about this crucial non-confrontation, but it must wait for its proper context in Chapter 6.

Satan, they are presented as corrupted and demonic. These “angelic and diabolic forces come to be considered as fully fledged protagonists of an all-out battle between good and evil, [and] between light and darkness” (O’Callaghan 125).

Tolkien goes out of his way to explain some of the intentional similarities between Elves and angels in his letter to Milton Waldman. He refers to the fall of Elves in the *Silmarillion* as “a fall of Angels” (*Letters* 147). He also observes that the Elves, like angels, are “the firstborn” of God, and that “the doom of the Elves is to be immortal” (*Letters* 147). Like angels, the Elves have magical powers (*Fellowship* 406), have special abilities to cure illness (*Fellowship* 246), and are stronger, faster and wiser than men.

Tolkien writes in the *Silmarillion* that the Elves at one time traveled to and lived in Valinor, Middle-earth’s equivalent of heaven and the only place of brilliant light in the world (*Silmarillion* 59-63). As Gandalf explains, those like the mighty and wise Glorfindel “who have dwelt in the Blessed Realm live at once in both worlds, and against the Seen and the Unseen they have great power” (*Fellowship* 249). Glorfindel uses this power, seen by Frodo as a “white light” shining through his “form and raiment, as if through a veil” (*Fellowship* 236) to miraculously save Frodo from the Nazgul (*Fellowship* 240-242). Galadriel, another elf returned from Valinor, is even able to bottle this heavenly light in a vial and gift it to Frodo to help in his dangerous quest (*Fellowship* 423).

Oposing the angelic character of the Elves are their archenemies, the vile Orcs, who parallel Christian demons. Like Satan, who did not create the angels of heaven, but corrupted them into demons through deceit (Job 1.6), Morgoth (Tolkien’s rogue deity of the *Silmarillion*) corrupts the Elves to create Orcs. Tolkien writes “I have represented at least the Orcs as pre-existing real beings on whom the Dark-Lord has exerted the fullness of his power in remodeling and corrupting them, not making them” (*Letters* 195). According to the *Silmarillion*, Elves that were captured by Morgoth “were put in prison, and by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved; and thus did Melkor [Morgoth] breed the hideous race of Orcs in envy and mockery of the Elves, of whom they were afterwards the bitterest of foes (*Silmarillion* 47).

Tolkien makes this connection more explicit in a letter to Naomi Mitchison, when he defines “Orc” as “derived from Old English *orc* ‘demon’” (*Letters* 178). A look at

Tolkien's *Lays of Beleriand* adds to this evidence. Twice in the work "Orc and Demon" are combined as a single unit (269, 341), also twice in the work Orcs are said to come from Hell (55, 270), and finally, their war songs are said to be "blasphemy" (275), which implies an opposition to the Christian religious structure. Additionally, there are no Orc women, no Orc farmers, and no Orc children to be found anywhere in Tolkien's fiction.²⁸ They presumably exist only to maim and butcher, and can apparently live indefinitely in an underground setting without food while maintaining their numbers without a natural birth process.²⁹

In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien moves these symbolically loaded characters and images along a traditionally biblical apocalyptic trajectory that creates the expectation of "an impending, full-blown 'end of time' event that may take place at any moment" (O'Callaghan 72). By raising the Satanic figure of the Dark Lord, showing Frodo a continent-wide military buildup between the opposing forces of two symbolic cities, and casting these forces as the armies of darkness and light, Tolkien creates apocalyptic expectation in *The Lord of the Rings*.

In biblical apocalypse, and especially in *Revelation*, apocalyptic tension increases as Satan and his minions appear, spread evil, and gather their forces. In *Revelation* Satan appears incarnate in the form of "the Beast," subdues nations, gathers worshippers, and then musters "all the kings of the earth and their armies together to make war" upon the righteous (19.19). In *Ezekiel*, these armies gather in hordes of "horses and horsemen all clothed with coats of mail, a great multitude, armed with spears and shields and swords" that are to descend on an unsuspecting and vulnerable Jerusalem (*Ezekiel* 38.2-10).

A moment when the equally apocalyptic scope of Tolkien's impending conflict is revealed occurs when Frodo sits upon the chair of Amon Hen, the "Seat of Seeing":

²⁸ Aside, perhaps, from a single reference in *The Hobbit* to Gollum catching a small "goblin-imp" (81).

²⁹ Despite these similarities to demons, some critics argue that "the role of demon [in *The Lord of the Rings*] properly belongs to the Balrog" (Garth 220). This is an understandable assumption if one looks exclusively at the frightful depiction of the Balrog in Moria: an enormous creature of great darkness with shadowy wings surrounded by billowing flame that holds both a burning sword and whip (*Fellowship* 369-70). Given its combination of darkness, flames, wings, and a whip, the Balrog evokes obviously demonic image, but its singular, smoldering, giant, and awe-inspiring form is not one that equates well the apocalypses' images of the army of Satan's angels being as numerous as "a third part of the stars in heaven" (*Revelation* 12:4), an image that the "orcs innumerable" (*Return* 175) certainly can achieve.

Everywhere [Frodo] looked he saw the signs of war. The Misty Mountains were crawling like anthills: orcs were issuing out of a thousand holes. Under the boughs of Mirkwood there was a deadly strife of Elves and men and fell beasts. The land of the Beornings was aflame; a cloud was over Moria; smoke rose on the borders of Lorien. Horsemen were galloping on the grass of Rohan; wolves poured from Isengard. From the havens of Harad ships of war put out to sea; and out of the East Men were moving endlessly: swordsmen, spearmen, bowmen upon horses, chariots of chieftains and leaden wains. All the power of the Dark Lord was in motion. (*Fellowship* 450)

Here Frodo sees the armies of Sauron gathering from across Middle-earth, preparing for their final conflict for dominion over all life. Against the massed might of Sauron, Frodo's home of the Shire would be equally as vulnerable as Israel before the hordes of Satan in *Ezekiel*, which is described as a land "without walls" and where the people "dwell securely" with no "bars nor gates" (*Ezekiel* 38.11).

Also when seated upon Amon Hen, only moments after he sees the apocalyptic buildup to conflict, Frodo is shown a vision of the epicenters of both good and evil in Middle-earth: Minas Tirith and Barad-dûr.

He beheld Minas Tirith. Far away it seemed, and beautiful: white-walled, many-towered, proud and fair upon its mountain-seat; its battlements glittered with steel, and its turrets were bright with many banners. Hope leaped in his heart. But against Minas Tirith was set another fortress, greater and more strong. Thither, eastward, unwilling his eye was drawn...it looked upon Gorgoroth, the valley of terror in the Land of Mordor. Darkness lay there under the Sun. Fire glowed amid the smoke. Mount Doom was burning and a great reek rising. Then at last his gaze was held: wall upon wall, battlement upon battlement, black, immeasurably strong, mountain of iron, gate of steel, tower of adamant, he saw it: Barad-dûr, Fortress of Sauron. All hope left him. (*Fellowship* 451)

Minas Tirith is white and hopeful, while Barad-dûr is black and a source of despair. The two are struggling with each other for dominance in Frodo's mind, but with the vast military buildup surrounding the two, that symbolic struggle seems destined to become a physical war—one in which the outmatched Minas Tirith seems doomed.

The opposition of two symbolic cities is also a part of the traditional setting of biblical apocalypse. Emerson notes that these cities are usually "Jerusalem and Babylon." Jerusalem is invariably painted as the source of hope and righteousness, as it is in *Daniel* 9.24, where it is referred to as the "holy city" and as the site where "sin may have an end, and inequity may be abolished, and everlasting justice may be brought,"

while the second is the source of the enemy's power and is a breeding ground of decadence, as in *Revelation* 17.5 when Babylon is said to be "the mother of fornications, and the abominations of the earth." In Christian apocalypse, Jerusalem usually seems outmatched by Babylon, as in *Revelation* (20:7-8) and *Ezekiel* (38:10), which is also the case with Minas Tirith, which seems to dim in the shadow of Barad-dûr.

The stark contrast of light and shadow in Frodo's vision also has a part to play in creating the mood of apocalyptic expectation that permeates *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien frequently uses the apocalyptic chromatic symbolic system of darkness and light to visually separate "the foul black host of the enemy which stood opposite the clean white army" of the righteous (Cohn 87). In apocalypse, this separation "invariably culminates in a battle that has no middle ground, no gray area dividing the sons of darkness from the sons of light" (O'Callaghan 128). Tolkien almost exclusively uses apocalyptic imagery when referring to either the forces of Sauron or those allied with Gondor. For example, just as Minas Tirith, the white tower (*Return* 110), is opposed by Barad-dûr, the dark tower (*Return* 242), Gandalf, the white rider (*Return* 77), is juxtaposed against the black rider, the Witch King of Angmar (*Return* 100).

The final effect that this traditional symbolic division creates in both *The Lord of the Rings* and in apocalyptic texts, however, is more complex than simply indicating the moral alignment of its participants. In each, care is taken to show that the whole world is turning black. White becomes the slim hope of survival. Sauron, for example, threatens to "cover all the lands with a second darkness" (*Fellowship* 56), and does so literally with his armies and the great plume of smoke from Mt. Doom (*Fellowship* 451).³⁰

This too is an image that Tolkien saw in the pagan worldview, culminating in the return to the darkness of the void following defeat at Ragnarök. In his lecture on *Beowulf*, he refers to the poet's understanding of pagan belief in the "outer darkness" (*Monsters* 24) and the heroes' battle with the "offspring of the dark" (*Monsters* 16). The difference between the Christian apocalyptic conception of this symbolism and the pagan is that in the Christian, light is more powerful than that darkness and will have the victory in the end, for "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John.1.5). As in the

³⁰ This "second" darkness implicitly recalls the *first* darkness—the formless void of biblical Genesis before God said "let there be light" (1.3). It hints at the end by recalling the beginning.

Bible, in *The Lord of the Rings*, no matter how dark it becomes, the shadow ultimately can never obliterate the light.

An illustration of this takes place during the battle of Helm's Deep when Saruman's dark horde of Uruk-hai is massed beneath the wall of the Hornburg:

For a staring moment the watchers on the wall saw all the space between them and the Dike lit with white light: it was boiling and crawling with black shapes, some squat and broad, some tall and grim, with high helms and sable shields. Hundreds and hundreds more were pouring over the Dike and through the breach. The dark tide flowed up to the walls from cliff to cliff... Then the Orcs screamed, waving spear and sword, and shooting a cloud of arrows at any that stood revealed upon the battlements; and the men of the Mark amazed looked out, as it seemed to them, upon a great field of dark corn, tossed by a tempest of war. (*Towers* 148)

Against this dark field, at the moment when the situation becomes blackest (just before dawn Théoden and Aragorn are making a last valiant sally from the doomed fortress), "there suddenly upon a ridge appeared a rider, clad in white, shining in the rising sun. Over the low hills the horns were sounding. Behind him, hastening down the long slopes were a thousand men on foot" (*Towers* 158). They sweep the Uruks from the field, gaining the victory. Gandalf's appearance is miraculous and his light is glorious. His arrival snatches victory away from defeat, ending the threat of darkness with the arrival of the White Rider and the dawn.³¹

In his lecture "On Fairy Stories" Tolkien defines the "happy ending" of a fairytale as an example of "eucatastrophe," a "sudden and miraculous grace" that "denies final universal defeat" (*Reader* 86). His carefully chosen words "miraculous grace" and "final defeat" hint toward his epilogue, which states that eucatastrophe is ultimately religious and Christian in origin, because it is thematically connected to "the Great Eucatastrophe," of the reincarnation of Christ (*Reader* 89). Tolkien explains that "the *Eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function" (*Reader* 85), noting that the scriptures and gospels of the Bible "tell a fairy-story: the greatest" (*Letters* 100).

In *Revelation*, the fairy-story is enacted through the device of a vivid dramatic narrative divulging God's plan for the redemption of the world. This plan includes

³¹ This itself, as Speed notes, is very nearly an image from *Revelation*, chapter 19, verses 11-14. When opposed by all of the armies of the world led by the Beast, "heaven opened and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called faithful and true...and he was clothed with a garment of white... and the armies that are in heaven followed him on white horses."

terrible hardship, but ends with the rescue of the Christians from subjugation and from the temptations of the Devil. Because the joy brought by this ending is directly proportional with the hardship faced in the story, the apocalypse encapsulates the highest possible form of joy, which, to Tolkien is a “sudden glimpse of [the] Truth” of God’s love fulfilled in future redemption of the human race (*Letters* 100) juxtaposed against the horrible black backdrop of Doom.

In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien attempts to create a similarly joyous “glimpse of Truth.” His primary tactic in achieving this supreme level of joy is through the use of an apocalyptic formula that makes the enemy seem all-powerful, and pagan Doom seem imminent, but then miraculously opens the door to victory. Through the presupposition of Doom he creates an apocalyptic setting of utter hopelessness—troubles are heaped upon troubles until the point where the great Steward of the White City, Denethor, declares that “hope is but ignorance” and resistance is “vanity” (*Return* 130)—then sets the bright light of salvation in front of this dark background. The resultant joy, because it possesses the ability to be as deeply felt as the tragic sorrow of Doom (*Reader* 86), to Tolkien, is the crucially important element of the Christian religion powerful enough to turn his grim and fearless ancestors from their pagan beliefs in the heroic value of “unyielding will” (*Monsters* 18) to faith in final and “eternal victory” (*Monsters* 21).

The outcome of each Doom event in *The Lord of the Rings* is engineered to display and embrace the “pregnant moment” when salvation is born from Doom. This happens whenever hope is gone and the pagan version of apocalypse seems inevitable: At Helm’s Deep Gandalf, the incarnate Son of Man, charges over the hill with the dawn and Fangorn miraculously moves across the landscape (*Towers* 158). At Minas Tirith Aragorn comes on the wind of victory from the sea (*Return* 122). At the Black Gate the eagles swoop down on the enemy and the Ring falls into the lake of fire, bringing a swift end to Sauron’s kingdom (*Return* 240-243). Each of these victories, to Tolkien, echoes the inevitable triumph of Christ (*Reader* 86).

The unique element of Tolkien’s recreation is that, like his interpretation of the pagan conception, humanity must defend itself against the darkness. The Dark Lord has risen, the Riders are abroad in the world, and the fate of Middle-earth lies in human hands. Gandalf and the Elves will help, but cannot grant an unfought victory. In *The*

Lord of the Rings, all ages and types of people are required to participate bodily in apocalypse, wielding a power unlike that attributed to man in any canonized work of the Christian religion. Thus, simply by virtue of their humanity, readers of *The Lord of the Rings* are allowed to become active participants in an apocalyptic battle for the world against the forces of hell in a way that modern Christianity cannot permit.

5.

“BULWARK OF THE WEST”:
DARK AGE CHRISTIAN APOCALYPSE IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

From the land of Gondor I have come. And it would be well for all to know what passes there. For few, I deem, know of our deeds, and therefore guess little of their peril, if we should fail at last... By our valor the wild folk of the East are still restrained, and the terror of Morgul kept at bay; and thus alone are peace and freedom maintained in the lands behind us, bulwark of the West. (Fellowship 275)

We have already seen how the political geography and history of Dark Age Europe are echoed in Middle-earth, and how within that geography the magical and miraculous figures of biblical apocalypse walk aboard and influence events. However, the Christian apocalyptic materials used by Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* are seamlessly interconnected with the Dark Age historical resonances of Middle-earth in a unique way. In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien joins traditional Christian apocalyptic themes, figures, and symbols with those derived from apocalyptic works written during and about the time of the late Roman Empire, to three-dimensionally recreate the historic moment that he derived from his study of *Beowulf*.

The picture that Tolkien paints for his readers, though echoing Dark Age historical and political relationships, is modeled far more on Dark Age apocalypse than history. The reader is led to believe in the black magic of the Enemy and to fear the onslaught of his armies on an emotional level that cannot be achieved by dispassionate historical analysis. Through this apocalyptic focus Tolkien gives his readers an ‘outward looking’ view of history—one in which the modern disinterested and scientific outlook is replaced by a recreated ancient mindset, displayed in an emotionally incarnate fiction.

For Dark Age Christians, the arrival of the Huns was terrifying. A far cry from the church at the time of *Revelation*, which had feared both persecution and annihilation at the hands of the Romans, the church of the 5th and 6th centuries was dependent upon Rome’s survival for its own existence. Once Christianity became the official religion of the Empire under Constantine, Rome ceased to be analogous to the Dragon of *Revelation* and instead became a force for God. The Empire was considered the “restraining force” (McGinn, *Visions* 51), holding back the onslaught of the tribes of Gog and Magog and the onset of apocalypse. When the Empire fell to invaders, early clerics believed, so

would the Church—into Armageddon. So it was that the Christian church, ensconced in the declining Roman Empire, demonized the Huns. Religious literature of the period declared that “the Huns were in alliance with the Devil,” insinuated that Attila was Antichrist and assumed that his hordes were the harbingers of Armageddon and the end of the world (Maenchen-Helfen 2-3).

A similar sense of dependence upon the “restraining force” for protection from apocalypse can be found in *The Lord of the Rings*. When speaking of the role that Gondor plays in defense of the world, Boromir explains to the Council of Elrond that “by our valor the wild folk of the East are still restrained, and the terror of Morgul kept at bay; and thus alone are peace and freedom maintained in the lands behind us, bulwark of the West” (*Fellowship* 275). Here, Gondor can be seen to be fulfilling the same role in Middle-earth as Rome did in early Christian apocalyptic thought, holding the terror of the Dark Lord and his black armies at bay.

From this brief overview, the influence of Dark Age history, especially the Hunnish invasion of Rome, on apocalyptic thought is apparent, and some of its relevance to *The Lord of the Rings* can be seen. By looking more deeply into the apocalyptic texts that this invasion spawned, and which were available to Tolkien in his studies, it is possible to see the ways in which this branch of apocalypticism was an inspiration to *The Lord of the Rings*.

Four Dark Age apocalyptic texts appear to have influenced Tolkien’s fiction: The “Latin Tiburtine Sibyl,” composed in Phoenicia shortly after 500 AD (McGinn, *Visions* 43); the writings of Pseudo-Methodius, thought to have been recorded in the late 600’s AD (McGinn, *Visions* 70); the “Legend of Alexander,” recorded between the late fifth and early sixth centuries by Jacob of Serugh (McGinn, *Visions* 56); and *Elene*, a religious poem by the Anglo-Saxon poet Cynewulf that included an apocalyptically influenced reconstruction of Constantine’s vision of the cross set at the time of the Hunnish invasions. Each of these works has a distinctively earthly focus, being concerned with historical kings and empires in real geographic locations, and the conflicts occur between human (generally Roman) armies aided by God and demonic (but generally Hunnish) forces aided by Satan. In this way, they evoke precisely the same Christian focus on

mortal and earthly salvation through physical resistance to evil that inspired Tolkien in his study of *Beowulf* (*Monsters* 21) and which he reconstructs in *The Lord of the Rings*.

It is likely that Tolkien read all of these texts. The first two were recorded in German (a language in which Tolkien was fluent) by Ernst Sackur in his book, *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen Pseudomethodius, Adso und die tiburtinische Sibylle*, published in 1898. The Oxford Bodleian Library, at the university where Tolkien both studied and taught, purchased this book in 1925, well before *The Lord of the Rings* was written (see the appendix for a copy of email correspondence with the library staff). The *Legend of Alexander* was also available as a separate manuscript, recorded in “some eighty versions composed in twenty-four languages,” one of which was in Middle English, a language that was one of Tolkien’s special interests and to which he devoted a great portion of his attention and study (*Visions* 56). Finally, Tolkien had certainly read and analyzed Cynewulf’s *Elene*, because he references the poem on page 42 of *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*.

The 5th or 6th century apocalypse known as the *Legend of Alexander* begins with a myth involving Alexander the Great, from whom it takes its name. In it, Alexander is contacted by an angel of God and commanded to build a vast gate across a pass in the Caucasus Mountains. The great gate will hold back the wrath of the “unclean races of horrible appearance” (McGinn, *Visions* 73) until the end of the world when it is to open and disgorge the armies of the enemy who “shall go forth on the earth and cover all creation like a locust” (McGinn, *Visions* 57). Following this, the legend blends into the biblical text of *Revelation* by suggesting that the forces that come from the gate will conquer the earth and then besiege Jerusalem (McGinn, *Visions* 58).

Similar in location, function, and ancient origin, Morannon, Tolkien’s Black Gate, was built “in days long past” by the people of Númenor at the pass between the Mountains of Ash and the Mountains of Shadow that formed “one great wall” about the realm of Mordor (*Towers* 271). Like the Gate of Alexander, which is holding back the evil tribes, Morannon was built to keep watch on the Orcs and prevent Sauron from returning and attempting to cover the world with a second darkness (*Towers* 271), and like those tribes, who come forth from Alexander’s gate “like a locust” to march on the

Empire, the Black Gate of Mordor opens and “Orcs innumerable” (*Return* 175) “issue forth like black ants going to war” (*Towers* 272).

The gate itself is important as a symbolic portal between hell and earth. It represents a “fusion point of imagination” (*Monsters* 17) similar to the one which connects Grendel and Cain in *Beowulf*. The gate, made (like the weapons and armor of *Beowulf*) by men out of the wood and stone and iron of the earth, disgorges the barbaric and demonic tribes of Gog and Magog, who in this myth are uniquely analogous to the historical Huns (McGinn, *Visions* 76, 303). These tribes are destined to pour forth against the faithful Christians of the Beloved City, who are no longer simply the persecuted Christians in Jerusalem of *Revelation*, but become simultaneously the citizens of the Roman Empire within the city of Rome itself (McGinn, *Visions* 75). The salvation to be achieved later in the heavenly kingdom of God is prefigured by an earthly victory in which the demonic host will “fall by the sword[s]” of men (McGinn, *Visions* 58) and which will reestablish the might of the Roman Empire (McGinn, *Visions* 75).

A second popular Dark Age apocalyptic theme that expresses a similar Christian and Roman desire for deliverance from the Hunnish invaders, and a return to imperial glory, is that of the Last World Emperor.³² In it, “a mighty Emperor, whom men had long thought to be dead, shakes off his slumber and rises up in his wrath.” He annihilates the enemies of Rome and “lays waste to their lands with fire and sword. There follows a period of peace and joy during which the Empire, united under this great ruler, flourishes as never before” (Cohn 32). In his function as war leader and empire builder, the Last World Emperor is something of a Christian and Roman throwback to the Jewish apocalyptic concept of a Messiah, the great leader who, like King David, would conquer his enemies and lead his people to a restoration of their past glory.

The Last World Emperor figure in *The Lord of the Rings* is Aragorn, King of Gondor. Aragorn reveals himself as the last of a line of kings thought to have perished from the earth (*Fellowship* 277), arises to miraculously defeat the forces of Sauron in battle, and after his victory, as King “*Elessar*, the Elfstone, and *Envinyatar*, the Renewer”

³² The primary apocalyptic story recorded in Sackur’s book is that of the Last World Emperor. It is translated by Sackur from two different sources, *The Latin Tiburtine Sibyl*, believed to be composed about 500 AD, and the text of Pseudo-Methodius, recorded in the late fifth century (*Visions* 49, 70).

(*Return* 141), initiates an age of plenty in Gondor that is more prosperous and splendid “than it had ever been, even in the days of its first glory” (*Return* 266).

The primary apocalyptic function of the Last World Emperor is to deliver the Empire from invaders. He is the embodiment of martial salvation from the enemies marching upon the Empire, and his path to triumph is always soaked in blood. He also is to rejuvenate and expand the Empire and subjugate its ancient enemies. After the Emperor’s victory, it is written that “there will be great peace and tranquility upon the earth such has never been nor ever will be any more” (McGinn, *Visions* 75). His glorious reign will be reflected in the fertility of the earth, for once he ascends to power, “there will be great riches and the earth will give fruit abundantly” (McGinn, *Visions* 49). But while this rebirth occurs, he will also lead his armies in campaigns to “devastate all the islands and cities of the pagans... [and] whoever does not adore the Cross of Christ will be punished by the sword (McGinn, *Visions* 49). He will return “his own land to the inheritance of his fathers—Armenia, Cilicia, Isauria, Africa, Greece, Sicily... [and after that,] Egypt will be desolated, Arabia burned with fire, the land of Ausania burned, and the sea provinces pacified” (McGinn, *Visions* 75).

In *The Lord of the Rings* the renewal of Gondor under the reign of King Elessar echoes the prophesied renewal of Roman Empire in the Last World Emperor myth. In Aragorn’s time “the city was made more fair than it had ever been, even in the days of its first glory... and all was healed and made good, and the houses filled with men and women and the laughter of children” (*Return* 266). Ithilien, a wasteland bordering Mordor, “became once again the fairest country in all the westlands” (*Return* Appendix A 399). Yet all is not peace and plenty. Juxtaposed against the happy peaceful splendor of Minas Tirith is the “thunder of cavalry” on “the far fields of the south” (*Return* Appendix A 387). Like the Last World Emperor, Aragorn quickly renews the old borders of his lands: “In Gondor the King Elessar now ruled, and in Arnor also. In all the lands of those realms of old he was king” but “though Sauron had passed, the hatreds and evils that he bred had not died and the King of the West had many enemies to subdue” (*Return* Appendix A 387). To keep the peace in his land, Aragorn’s reign was destined to be full of “expeditions against enemies in the East” (*Letters* 324).

Finally, Aragorn reigns as king of Gondor for 122 years (*Return* Appendix B419-20). In the Latin Tiburtine Sibyl the Last World Emperor reigns for 112 years (*Visions*, 49). This is particularly interesting because some versions of the Last World Emperor myth give varying lengths for the emperor's reign. McGinn explains that of the options, "122 years; 112, and 120 were well-known variants in Roman speculation on the longest possible life span" and were used because the Emperor would reign for a lifetime of men on earth (McGinn, *Visions* 296). This limit makes sense also for Aragorn's reign, since it is proclaimed to the citizens of Gondor that "the King has come again and will dwell among you all the days of your life" (*Return* 260), which, like the reign of the Last World Emperor, must extend to the utter end of even the children born on the day of his ascension.

What makes the Last World Emperor myth unique is that he is almost completely severed from any tie to the Bible. He is simply the heir to the Roman Empire, a man who brings material salvation to his living subjects, and aside from the demonic nature of his enemies is, as Cohn notes, no different from "the pharaoh and many another 'divine king'" (84). However, Tolkien would likely argue that, even devoid of biblical significance, his eucatastrophic victory against the demonic forces of Gog and Magog "looks forward to the Great Eucatastrophe, the Christian Gloria" of the Resurrection and salvation (*Reader* 89), and as such has a Christian and religious quality as a joyous "sudden glimpse of Truth" (*Letters* 100).³³

The final text to be considered was actually written in Anglo-Saxon times, although it is set in the same Dark Age timeframe as the *Legend of Alexander*, the Last World Emperor myth, and *Beowulf*. Cynewulf's *Elene*, the fictional story of how the Byzantine Emperor Constantine's mother took upon herself a quest to find the True

³³ The Last World Emperor is a more commonly known and even iconic figure in Europe (and especially England) than might at first be imagined. Cohn suggests that the Emperor's apocalyptic figure is at the root of England's King Arthur legend and other myths about once-great kings waiting to return (Cohn 113). He explains that the apocalyptic tradition of the Last World Emperor held "enormous influence" in the Middle Ages because it was "infinitely adaptable," and could be "constantly edited and reinterpreted" to suit current events (33), and therefore Arthur, Frederick the Great, Charlemagne, and various other recurrent local legends of "a sleeping emperor who would one day return as savior" sprang up all across Christian Europe (113).

Cross, begins with a history of the Emperor's vision of the cross prior to a battle with an invincible Hun army.³⁴

Cynewulf's tale of the battle between Emperor Constantine's army and the Huns is set on the banks of the Danube and is embedded in what should by now be a familiar apocalyptic setting: The king of the Huns, having gathered together "an uncounted multitude" of his fierce and warlike people (Cynewulf 61), who "longed to overrun the realm of the Romans, and lay it waste with their hordes" (Cynewulf 40-41), is marching toward the heart of the Empire. Hearing of this imminent invasion, Constantine gathers his small army and swiftly marches to meet them. The action begins with the Hun horde encamped on one side of the Danube, and the small and hopelessly outnumbered contingent of Romans encamped on the other.

On the eve of battle, the pagan Constantine goes to sleep and "there appeared before him in the form of a man a certain warrior, radiant, resplendent, brilliant, more glorious than he ever beheld...a bright herald of glory" (Cynewulf 73-78). This herald reveals to Constantine a vision of the cross. He then announces that God offers Constantine victory if he will convert to Christianity.

It is specifically Cynewulf's description of the cross and its function as a war standard that bears note in relation to *The Lord of the Rings*. Throughout the poem, the Christian cross is almost exclusively described as a "tree" (the "tree of glory" [89], "shining tree" [91], "holy tree" [106-7, 128], the "rood of the King" [217] etc.). In its first appearance, Constantine saw it as "the beauteous tree of glory, gleaming with treasure and decked with gold—the gems shone brightly" (89-92). After seeing it, Constantine is instructed that he and his army are to "lift up the emblem of battle, take the holy tree before them, and bear the sign of God into the press of their foes" (107-09). When he does so, he is granted the victory. "As the king of the Romans, dauntless in battle, bade raise that holy tree, the people of the Huns straight fled away, and their warriors were scattered far and wide" amongst great slaughter (127-30). This stunning victory recalls the promised triumph of the Last World Emperor over the hordes of Gog and Magog (McGinn, *Visions* 50).

³⁴ No exact date for *Elene* has gained widespread acceptance.

The symbol of the holy tree emerges in *The Lord of the Rings* not as a cross, but as a literal tree in Gondor, where the sacred White Tree that originally came from a sapling in Edenic Valinor grows upon the seventh level of the White City (*Return* 270).³⁵ This tree is the source image of the flag of Gondor and also of the battle ensign of its king. Embroidered upon the banner of Aragorn, the Tree of Gondor appears as the holy tree did in the first vision of Constantine, bedecked with treasure and encrusted with gems. When Aragorn arrives at the battle of the Pelennor Fields, he unfurls his banner and upon it

³⁵ Seven is an apocalyptic numerological symbol of perfection (O'Callaghan 67).

there flowered a White Tree, and that was for Gondor; but seven stars were about it, and a high crown above it... and the stars flamed in the sunlight, for they were wrought of gems... and the crown was bright in the morning, for it was wrought of mithril and gold. (*Return* 122)

Just as the tree of glory routs Constantine's foes, the Orcs "flee before" Aragorn and his army, advancing beneath their standard. And like the forces of Constantine, the defenders of Gondor go from being without hope (*Return* 121) to achieving a miraculous victory. From this it is possible to argue that the Anglo-Saxon image of the tree of glory may be the foundational symbol of the nation of Gondor, and therefore the connections between Gondor and Christian Rome can become more explicit.

There is a literary precedent for Tolkien taking an allegorical image like the tree of glory and working it literally into *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien himself admits that he was particularly impressionable when it came to literally interpreting metaphorical images, especially those involving trees, of which he was particularly fond (*Letters* 419). In a letter about the Ents, for example, he admits that "their part in the story is due, I think, to my bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use made in Shakespeare [in *Macbeth*] of the coming of 'Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill'".³⁶ He admits to being filled with excitement and wonder at the thought of a moving wood, but terribly disappointed when it turned out to be only some men camouflaged with branches. He writes, "I longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really go to war" (*Letters* 212n). Similarly, it is conceivable that Tolkien was quite taken with the literal image of a Rood of the King, put forward in *Elene* and also in the Anglo-Saxon *Dream of the Rood*, and planted it in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The only major discrepancy between the description of Aragorn's banner and the vision of the tree of glory recorded by Cynewulf is the crown set above the tree on the flag of Gondor. By combining Cynewulf's image of the holy tree with one of the Last World Emperor recorded by Sackur, however, the appearance of the crown on Aragorn's banner might be explained. In Pseudo-Methodius' text it is recorded that before he dies, the Emperor will ascend Golgotha and "take the crown from his head and place it on the

³⁶ Ents are mobile tree-like beings living in Fangorn Forest that march on and destroy Saruman's fortress at Isengard.

cross” (McGinn, *Visions* 76). The crown set above “the rood of the King” (Cynewulf 217), is the flag of Gondor.

The inclusion of Dark Age Christian apocalyptic material in *The Lord of the Rings* allows Tolkien to perfectly fuse his “particular” primary historical material with his “essential” theme of salvation. Because both are present and already fused in these ancient myths, Tolkien is able to incorporate their symbols and themes seamlessly into his fictionalized history of Middle-earth, which includes all of the factors that originally inspired the apocalypses—from invaders in the east, to collapsing kingdoms, to apocalyptic fears of an emergent Antichrist and an imminent end to civilization. They help to complete the “outward looking” view of history that Shippey began to uncover in *The Lord of the Rings* (69).

From the position of a citizen of Gondor, Tolkien allows his readers to internalize the outlook of an ancient Christian in Dark Age Rome. Within the walls of Minas Tirith, seemingly secure in the great White City under the sign of the White Tree, there is still fear of Sauron and his vast armies of Orcs, Easterlings, and Haradrim. The Black gate to the Northeast may open at any time and bring the final onslaught. All that one can do is pray for the return of the King to save the kingdom from defeat at the hands of the Dark Lord. And when the King does return, he will not single-handedly defeat Sauron through magic, but will raise his people and lead them in a mortal war for earthly salvation. This war is predicated upon the acceptance of the “fusion point of imagination” that originally inspired Tolkien in *Beowulf* (*Monsters* 17): that human beings, with some divine assistance, can mount a successful physical resistance to demonic and even apocalyptic forces of evil.

6.

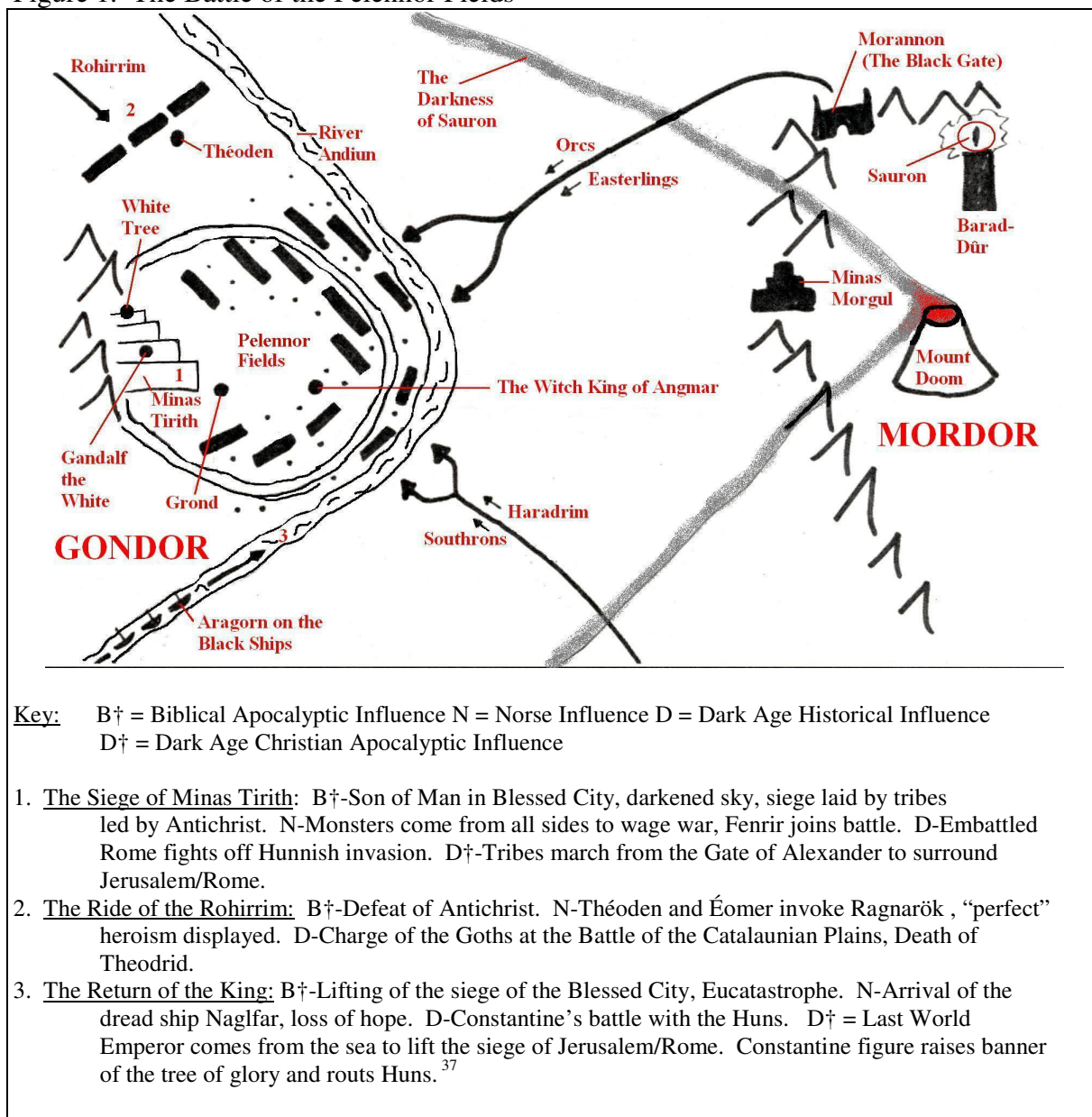
“AN ACCUMULATION OF OLD STONE”:
TOLKIEN’S RECREATED DARK AGE APOCALYPTIC BATTLE
OF THE PELENNOR FIELDS

In both of his famous lectures Tolkien refers to the joining of history, myth, religion, fairytale, and legend (in any combination) in the service of literature as a “fusion” (*Reader* 89, *Monsters* 19). His careful choice of wording implies that the fused elements constitute a new and independent whole. According to Tolkien, the task of literary critics has traditionally been to artificially peel apart and analyze the layers of this fusion, but because a story is “alive at once and in all its parts, and dies before it can be dissected” (*Monsters* 13), he feels that such dissections often do more harm than good. He uses the following analogy in his lecture on *Beowulf* to explain this phenomenon:

A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone, some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, to discover whence the man’s distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: ‘This tower is most interesting.’ But they also said (after pushing it over): ‘What a muddle it is in!’ And even the man’s own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he was about, were heard to murmur: ‘He is such an odd fellow! Imagine using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did he not restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.’ But from the top of that tower he had been able to look out upon the sea. (*Monsters* 4-5)

So far, this study has toppled Tolkien’s allegorical tower and exposed the writings on the “stones” of Biblical apocalypse, pagan Doom, Dark Age history, and Dark Age Christian apocalypse in isolation. While essential to understanding Tolkien’s sources and materials, this approach can do no more than outline his construction. Following is an account of the Siege of Gondor and the Battle of the Pelennor Fields that attempts to show the tower as Tolkien created it—“alive at once and in all its parts” (*Monsters* 13)—and, perhaps, gives a glimpse of the sea.

Figure 1. The Battle of the Pelennor Fields



1. The Siege of Minas Tirith

There was a flash, as if lightning had sprung from the earth beneath the City. For a searing second it stood dazzling far off in black and white, its topmost tower like a glittering needle; and then as the darkness closed again there came rolling over the fields a great boom. (Return 110)

Beneath a darkened sky, choked by the cloud of Mount Doom, stands the embattled citadel of Minas Tirith. White-walled and seven-tiered, it embodies both the

³⁷ See Appendix for expanded map of influences on *The Lord of the Rings*.

apocalyptic chromatic symbolism of purity and the numerological symbolism of perfection (O’Callaghan 67). Capped by the White Tree and the steeple-like Tower of Ecthellion, which stands “high within the topmost wall, shining out against the sky, glimmering like a spike of pearl and silver”(Return 8), the fortress is an imposing incarnation of both the biblical “Beloved City” of *Revelation* (20.8) and of Jerusalem in the *Legend of Alexander* (McGinn, *Visions* 58).³⁸ Inside it, mounted on Shadowfax, waits Gandalf the White, who, like the Son of Man in *Ezekiel* (38.2-5) and in *Revelation* (19.11-19), is appointed to lead the resistance (Return 94).

On the dark and sunless morning of the battle (91), which implicitly recalls the eve of battle in *Revelation* when the “sun became black as a sackcloth of hair” (6:12), Minas Tirith becomes the very image of the city of the saints at the moment of apocalyptic encirclement—the last bastion of hope, “enclosed” by a black “sea” of enemies (*Revelation* 20.7). Tolkien writes, “the last City was besieged, enclosed in a ring of foes... The plain was dark with their marching companies, and as far as the eyes could strain in the mirk there sprouted, like a foul fungus-growth, all about the beleaguered city great camps of tents, black or somber red” (Return 90-91). The surrounding armies of Orcs neatly fit the profile of the nations of Gog and Magog in their apocalyptic colors, demonic origins, and seemingly limitless numbers. In fact, when the outer wall around the Pelennor Fields is penetrated, the Orcs are even personified as the “sea” from *Revelation*. “The dike is down,” men murmured, “here they come pouring through the breaches!” (Return 88). Even the Easterlings and Southrons who come from far and wide to join the Orcs in battle have an antecedent in Christian myth, recalling the armies from Persia, Ethiopia, and Libya that march with the nations of Gog and Magog in *Ezekiel* (38.4) and the *Latin Tiburtine Sibyl* (McGinn, *Visions* 49), as well as the various “kings of the earth” of *Revelation* (19.19).

At the same time, the great stone city of Minas Tirith, full of fountains, paved streets and soaring architecture, is akin to 5th century Rome. At the moment of encirclement it is still a grand and powerful citadel, full of the memory of its glory—but

³⁸ Even the name of the tower has religious significance if the connection between Elves and angels is accepted. Ecthellion was an equal of Glorfindel who perished gloriously in the act of slaying Gothmog, lord of the demonic Balrogs (*Lost Tales II* 185), so its presence atop Minas Tirith (*Fellowship* 274) invokes perhaps the most famous battle between angelic and diabolic forces in the history of Middle-earth.

its crumbling facades, deserted courtyards, and weakened defenses belie a decay that is growing “year by year” (*Return* 9). Like the Roman Empire, decaying Gondor is seen as the “restraining force” (McGinn, *Visions* 51, *Fellowship* 275) holding back the invaders from the east, but as predicted by the *Legend of Alexander* myth, the great gate is opened and invading hordes are on the move. The “stunted,” “swart,” and “foul” (Jordanes 85-86, *Letters* 274) Orcs surrounding the city can also be likened to the Hunnish hordes of Attila. The reinforcing Easterling and Southron armies become the “innumerable people of diverse tribes, which [Attila] had subjugated to his sway” (Jordanes 107, *Return* 120-21), all gathered in an “uncounted multitude” (Cynewulf 61) to “overrun the realm of the Romans and lay it waste with their hordes” (Cynewulf 41-41).

On a third level, the monstrous Orcs and their allies converging on Minas Tirith from the south and east recall the attack on Asgard by the giants, monsters and muspell who came from the same directions in Norse myth (Taylor and Auden 172, *Voluspa* 42-43). The battle that is to ensue on the plain of Vigrid is called in the Norse “Ragnarök,” or “the Doom of this Age” (Taylor and Auden *The Lay of Vafthrundir* 41), a phrase which is echoed in *The Return of the King* when Denethor’s messenger says, “It is before the walls of Minas Tirith that the doom of our time will be decided” (*Return* 65). At the siege, the courage of Tolkien’s heroes is tested in the Norse fashion. All hope is peeled away so that “even the stout-hearted would fling themselves to the ground... letting their weapons fall from nerveless hands while into their minds a blackness came” (*Return* 93). Those who continue to defend the White City are cast as the heroes of Norse myth. They become the mythic warriors who awed Tolkien with their bravery, and of whom he writes, “as in a little circle of light about their halls, men with courage as their stay went forward to that battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark which ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat” (*Monsters* 16).

These three levels coexist simultaneously in the text because they are unified in Tolkien’s recreated “moment of poise,” and the whole created from their integration is greater than the sum of its parts. Minas Tirith is the Beloved City of *Revelation*, Jerusalem of *The Legend of Alexander*, and historic Rome of the 5th century. It takes all the resonances, both apocalyptic and historical, and fuses them together. Similarly, the Orc armies surrounding the city are akin to Christian demons, historic Huns, and Norse

monsters. But, like *Beowulf's* Grendel, they are also made *mortal* by becoming incarnate. They, and all of the heroes and villains present, including Gandalf as the Son of Man, shining with heavenly light, and The Witch King of Angmar as Antichrist, a “huge shadow” (*Return* 100), speaking “words of power and terror” to goad on his warriors (*Return* 99), become “embodied in physical bodies capable of pain, and weariness, and of afflicting the spirit with physical fear, and of being ‘killed’” (*Letters* 202). This allows the iconic Christian characters, such as the Son of Man, to experience human emotions and fear human death (*Return* 25, 82-83). It also allows strictly human characters (at great risk to themselves) to participate bodily in the apocalyptic process, slaying the demons, confronting the monsters, and holding to their ideals in a physical resistance.

During the siege Faramir’s courage is tested in the pagan fashion (*Return* 85); Gandalf’s heavenly radiance is revealed (*Return* 76-77); and the Witch King is shown for the first time in his full power as “a spear of terror” and “a shadow of despair” (*Return* 87). Not long after the battle begins, the enormous battering ram, Grond, forged “in the likeness of a ravening wolf” (*Return* 98), appears in the distance and advances on the heroes, just as Fenrir, the giant wolf of Norse legend, advances on the gods and heroes across the plain of Vigrid (Sturluson 89). The wolf rends the great gate of the city asunder, and as the dust settles from its collapse, the Witch King and White Rider face each other for the first time.

“You cannot enter here,” said Gandalf, and the huge shadow halted. “Go back to the abyss prepared for you! Go back! Fall back into the nothingness that awaits you and your Master! Go!”

The Black Rider flung back his hood, and behold! He had a kingly crown; and yet on no visible head was it set. The red fires shown between it and the mantled shoulders vast and dark. From a mouth unseen came a deadly laughter.

“Old fool!” he said. “Old fool! This is my hour. Do you not know Death when you see it? Die now and curse in vain!” And with that he lifted high his sword and flames ran down the blade. (*Return* 100)

The Wolf batters the gate. A headless Antichrist brandishing a flaming sword attempts to enter the Beloved City. The Son of Man threatens him with the abyss. An apocalyptic conflict between these figures seems imminent, and in any traditional apocalypse (Norse or Christian) it would have commenced.

But, at the moment when Tolkien's battle seems about to turn traditionally apocalyptic, something unexpected happens: "There came from far away another note. Horns, horns, horns. In dark Mindolluin's sides they dimly echoed. Great horns of the north wildly blowing. Rohan had come at last" (*Return* 100).

2. The Ride of the Rohirrim

And so King Théoden departed from his own realm, and mile by mile the long road wound away, and the beacon hills marched past: Calenhad, Min-Rimmon, Erelas, Nardol. But their fires were quenched. All the lands were grey and still; and ever the shadow deepened before them, and hope waned in every heart. (*Return* 71)

Théoden and his Rohirrim have a historical genesis and exclusively human attributes, but the Germanic cavalry of Rohan participates in a great apocalyptic battle of the scope of *Revelation* or Ragnarök, freeing the Beloved City, slaying demons, banishing an Antichrist figure, and achieving the pinnacle of pagan courage in the face of Doom. Their glorious and hopeless charge into battle is the incarnation of the powerful role played by humanity in Tolkien's recreated apocalyptic moment.

It is apparent from a study of Jordanes and Cynewulf that the part played by the Riders of Rohan in the battle outside Minas Tirith comes straight out of Dark Age history. Denethor, steward of Gondor, calls the Rohirrim to battle by sending a rider bearing a red arrow as a "token of war" (*Return* 64), a parallel with Cynewulf's *Elene* in which Constantine summons "his heroes to war against the foes" through "dispatch of the arrow" (43-45). Like the mounted army of Goths charging to Valentinian's aid under the banner of their elderly king (Jordanes 108), the Rohirrim heed Denethor's summons, muster, and ride off with all haste toward Minas Tirith behind elderly Théoden upon his great war steed, Snowmane (*Return* 71).

When the Goths arrive, according to Jordanes' text, the Romans are under fierce attack by Attila. This battle rages on until the mounted army of Visigoths "fell upon the horde of the Huns," at which point Attila's army breaks and is routed (108-109). In *The Lord of the Rings*, the army of Gondor is losing the battle for Minas Tirith against the ferocious onslaught of the armies of Sauron. The gate has been splintered in and "Death" is standing on Gondor's doorstep when the Rohirrim suddenly arrive (100).

As dawn breaks, these warriors crest a hill and are accosted by the scene of apocalypse surrounding Minas Tirith. Seeing the sea of monstrous Orcs ready to pour into the citadel, the Rohirrim are “stricken suddenly by anguish [and] by dread... as if a great weight of horror and doubt had settled on” them (*Return* 110). They are faced simultaneously with the moral imperative to assist the White City and the pagan apocalyptic certainty of death. And, as the ancient heroes of legend that inspired Tolkien by their choice to do battle with “offspring of the dark which ends for all” in defeat (*Monsters* 16), the Rohirrim choose to attack.

Before they join the fray, however, Tolkien’s Germanic cavalry gathers in battle formations on the ridge and listens to their King invoke the Norse myth of Ragnarök. In Sturluson’s Eddic recording, the sibyl sings that Ragnarök will be

*an axe-age, a sword-age,
shields will be cloven
a wind-age, a wolf-age,
before the world’s ruin.* (Sturluson 86)

Théoden, in contrast, stands tall upon his stirrups and cries,

*Arise, arise, Riders of Théoden!
Fell deeds awake: fire and slaughter!
spear shall be shaken, shield splintered,
A sword-day, a red-day, ere the sun rises!
Ride now, ride now! Ride to Gondor!* (*Return* 110)

At the moment when the horns of the Rohirrim blow, Gandalf and the Witch King are facing each other across the threshold of Minas Tirith. Tolkien explains that Gandalf “alone was left to forbid entrance of the Lord of the Nazgul to Minas Tirith, when the City has been overthrown and its gates destroyed—and yet so powerful is the whole train of human resistance... that in fact no battle between the two occurs: it passes to other mortal hands” (*Letters* 203). The culminating link of that chain of “human” and “mortal” resistance is when the Rohirrim, like Jordanes’ Gothic cavalry, charge down into the flank of the enemy, “hewing, slaying, [and] driving their foes” before them (*Return* 112). The Witch King’s plans are interrupted and by the temporal might of “good men” (*Monsters* 24) the city enjoys a temporary reprieve.

It is in the press of battle at the Pelennor Fields that two of the most profound moments in Tolkien's fiction occur. Both of these involve the Rohirrim, and both develop from the elevated importance of men and women in Tolkien's recreated "moment of poise." When Théoden (just like the Gothic King Theodric) tries to rally his troops and falls under his horse (Jordanes 109, *Return* 113), the Witch King swoops in to finish him. There, on the field of battle, a pair of insignificant mortals—a woman and a tiny hobbit—face the incarnate Antichrist. Disguised as Dernhelm, Eowen says,

"Begone, foul dwimmerlaik, lord of carrion! Leave the dead in peace!"

A cold voice answered: "Come not between the Nazgul and his prey! Or he will not slay thee in thy turn. He will bear thee away to the houses of lamentation, beyond all darkness, where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shriveled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye."

A sword rang as it was drawn. "Do what you will but I will hinder it if I may."

"Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!"

Then... It seemed Dernhelm laughed, and the clear voice was like the ringing of steel. "But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Eowen am I, Eomund's daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you are not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you if you touch him."

The winged creature screamed at her, but the Ringwraith made no answer, and was silent, as if in sudden doubt. (*Return* 114)

The antichrist figure threatens Eowen with eternal torment, but because he is incarnate and not as "deathless" as he seems, he feels doubt and even fear as a mortal. And so he should. Merry stabs him in the leg, Eowen finishes him with a thrust to his face, and, like the enemies of *Revelation*, his dying spirit vents through his mouth (16.13-14): "A cry went up into the shuddering air, and faded into a shrill wailing passing with the wind, a voice, bodiless and thin that died, and was swallowed up, and was never heard again in this age of the world" (*Return* 116). Not only are mortal warriors able to combat a foe that holds the whole world in fear and threatens destruction and enslavement upon all nations, but they are even able to slay him. Thus, Eowen and Merry wield an apocalyptic power previously attributed only to The Son of Man, the Archangel Michael, and God Himself—the ability to expel Antichrist.

Coming upon his dead lord and collapsed sister, and seeing what he presumes to be "the last stroke of doom" (*Return* 121), the Black Ships of the Corsairs of Umbar

sailing up the river to battle (like the dread ship Naglfar of Norse myth [Sturluson 87]), Éomer loses his last hope of victory. In the pagan tradition he decides to fight on even to his death. His hopeless but perfect heroism, and that of his men, is apparent in his battle cry and their response as he leads what he presumes is the last doomed charge against the myriad forces of Mordor. His words echo what must have been the sentiments of the Æsir and Einherjar charging the combined force of monsters, giants and muspell on the mythic plain of Vigrid: “Over the field rang his clear voice calling: ‘Death! Ride, ride to ruin and the world’s ending!’ And with that the host began to move.”³⁹ But the Rohirrim sang no more. *Death* they cried with one voice loud and terrible” (*Return* 118). The fact that Éomer, and indeed every other character and soldier on his side in the war, have lost all faith in final victory, but yet have the willpower to seek “a potent but terrible solution in naked will and courage” (*Monsters* 24), and to exert the last of their strength to sustain their ideals, grants them a moral triumph in defeat that is beyond the power of evil to vanquish.

Yet, the “the last stroke of doom” (*Return* 121) never falls on the Rohirrim. Rather, the expected catastrophe miraculously turns to victory. At the sight of the Black Ships closing for battle, Éomer gathers his troops on a hill “to make a great shield-wall at the last, and stand and fight on foot till all fell, and do deeds of song on the fields of Pelennor, though no man should be left in the West to remember the last King of the Mark” (*Return* 122). Standing there, expecting his final defeat, he again invokes Ragnarök :

*Out of doubt, out of dark to the day’s rising
I came singing in the sun, sword unsheathing.
To hope’s end I rode and to heart’s breaking:
Now for wrath, now for ruin and a red nightfall!*

But, “even as he laughed in despair he looked out again on the black ships and he lifted up his sword to defy them, and wonder took him and great joy... [for] behold! Upon the foremost ship a great standard broke” (*Return* 122).

³⁹ The words “ruin and the world’s ending” again hearken back to the sibyl’s invocation of Ragnarök, which ends with a premonition of “the world’s ruin” (Sturluson 86).

3. The Return of the King

Thus came Aragorn, son of Arathorn, Elessar, Isildur's heir, out of the Paths of the Dead, borne upon a wind from the Sea to the kingdom of Gondor; and the mirth of the Rohirrim was a torrent of laughter and a flashing of swords, and the joy and wonder of the city was a ringing of trumpets and a ringing of bells. But the hosts of Mordor were seized with bewilderment... and a black dread fell on them, knowing that the tides of fate had turned against them and their doom was at hand. (Return 122)

In the *Latin Tiburtine Sibyl*, it is written, “the unclean nations that Alexander shut up will arise from the North. These are the twenty-two realms whose number is like the sands of the sea. When the king of the Romans hears of this he will call his army together and vanquish and utterly destroy them” (McGinn, *Visions* 50). In Pseudo-Methodius' version of events, the Emperor will go forth against the tribes from the ocean and engage in a similarly victorious battle (McGinn, *Visions* 75). In *The Legend of Alexander*, this battle occurs outside the walls of Jerusalem, where “shall fall by the sword the hosts of the children of Gog and the house of Magog with great slaughter,” for “the sign of the Lord shall drive them away from it and they shall not enter it” (McGinn, *Visions* 58).

Outside Minas Tirith, all of these events are echoed. The gate opens, the city is besieged, and the King returns. Like the victorious Last World Emperor, Aragorn arrives to the battle from the south on the wind of victory from the sea. His standard, bearing the White Tree, goes before him into battle and fills his enemies with terror, just like the “sign of the Lord” in the *Legend of Alexander* passage. Similarly, though the forces of Mordor and the Witch King himself make it to the doorstep of Minas Tirith, standing “under the archway that no enemy yet had passed”, like the tribes in the *Legend of Alexander*, they never cross the threshold (*Return* 99).

Aragorn's bloody, but unmistakably kingly and imperial arrival heralded by the unfurling of an ancient banner, the blowing of trumpets and the ringing of bells, is a point at which the apocalyptic layers in *The Lord of the Rings* are so interconnected as to be nearly inseparable. On one level, Aragorn's arrival and defeat of the Orcs at Minas Tirith can be almost directly read as an incarnation of the Last World Emperor's defeat of the hell-spawned tribes of Gog and Magog predicted in *The Latin Tiburtine Sibyl*, and by

Pseudo-Methodius. On another it can be read as the battle that occurs outside the walls of Jerusalem predicted in *The Legend of Alexander*. On yet another, it is the defeat of the tribes (with the help of the Son of Man), as numerous as the sands of the sea, besieging the Blessed City in biblical *Revelation*. And, on yet another, it is the Roman hope of a returning Caesar (or in this case also Constantine under the sign of the Tree of Glory), unexpectedly arising to conquer the Huns that threaten the very existence of the Empire. In every case it is an act of salvation, nearly beyond hope, carried out by a great military leader.

If the battle of the Pelennor fields were to be a pagan apocalypse, Éomer and his battered army would go down to death in glory. But Tolkien's hybrid tale of Christian salvation tempered by pagan Doom requires a happy ending (*Reader* 86). Like the pagan conception which grants humanity the ability to be part of the "great strategy that includes all good men as the infantry of battle" (*Monsters* 24), Tolkien's conflict allows humans to clash with demons and even to defeat an antichrist figure. However, both Christianity and pagan myth concede that humans can never succeed totally by themselves: "Man, each man, and all men, and all their works will die" (*Monsters* 21). Ultimately, only by divine intervention, by a "sudden and miraculous grace" (*Reader* 86), can humanity be saved. The Return of the King is the miraculous Christian ending essential to Tolkien's recreated Dark Age apocalyptic tale. It is the eucatastrophe that "denies final universal defeat" (*Reader* 86).

At the exact moment of eucatastrophe, the Christian and pagan meet and the paradoxical outcomes of hope and despair, of defeat and redemption, are simultaneously invoked. Because Éomer believed he would die, his courage grants him the pagan ideal, but because Tolkien's theme is ultimately Christian, he will be saved. Only when all hope of victory is gone, but he continues to resist—when he is "on the very brink where hope and despair are akin" (*Return* 162)—can this paradoxical coexistence occur, and even then it exists only for a split-second as grim determination transitions to joy.

CONCLUSION
 “A PREGNANT MOMENT OF POISE”

We get in fact a poem from a pregnant moment of poise, looking back into the pit, by a man learned in old tales who was struggling, as it were, to get a general view of them all, perceiving their common tragedy of inevitable ruin, and yet feeling this more poetically because he was himself removed from the direct pressure of its despair. He could view from without, but still feel immediately and from within, the old dogma: despair in the event, combined with faith in the value of doomed resistance. (Monsters 21)

It is clear from a close reading of Tolkien’s lecture *Beowulf: the monsters and the critics*, that he had a number of working theories about *Beowulf*, about the poet, and about the people for whom the poem was written. Instead of laying these theories out in an abstract analytical paper, however, Tolkien presented them, like the poem itself, “incarnate in the world of history and geography” in a living work of fiction (*Monsters* 13). Through his unique combination of characters, setting, symbolism, and themes in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien recreates the “pregnant moment of poise” that inspired him in *Beowulf* (*Monsters* 21). Using history, Christianity, and pagan myth as tools in the service of literature he creates an epic steeped in Christian and Norse apocalyptic images, where traditional religious figures are incarnate in a recreated past that reflects the era in which *Beowulf* was set. Within that epic he examines essentially the same conflicts between good and evil, courage and despair, and Doom and salvation that he saw in the poem.

The profound influence of *Beowulf* on his setting and themes can probably best be explained by his desire to generate a mythology that he could “dedicate simply to England” (*Letters* 144). He explains to Milton Waldman that he had been “grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own” (144). He hoped to enrich his English heritage with a mythological tale that, though composed of borrowed “ingredients” from the “legends of other lands,” remained “bound up” in the “tongue and soil” of England (144). The logical point of connection between Tolkien’s fiction and the tongue and soul of England is what he referred to as the “supreme example” of “the ancient English temper,” *Beowulf* (*Monsters* 4).

That said, however, there is little explanation in his letters or essays for why he reads *Beowulf* in the distinct way that he does. Tolkien makes a number of leaps of logic

and presumptions in his assessment of *Beowulf*, the most important of which to this study are his absolute insistence on the Christianity of the original author (*Monsters* 5), and his belief in the influence of the pagan notion of Doom on the poet (12, 21). Of the latter there is some evidence in the poem, and Tolkien discusses it in his lecture. However, the question of the poet's Christianity aside, of the counterpoint to Doom, salvation or eucatastrophe, there is almost nothing in *Beowulf*. Tolkien claims that, as a poem written about the pagan past, salvation (though implicit in the Christian nature of the work) "is not treated" because "it does not arise out of the subject material" (21). Nevertheless, his whole analysis and resultant theories are predicated upon the notion of the poet and audience's knowledge of the Doom/salvation dichotomy.

The contact between Doom and salvation was, for Tolkien, the "fusion point of imagination" that, colliding like matter and antimatter, alchemically produced *Beowulf* (*Monsters* 17). While this could be disputed about the poem itself, it is hard to deny that contact between Doom and salvation became a major fusion point for Tolkien in the creation of *The Lord of the Rings*. As we have seen, many of the themes and characters within the trilogy grew directly from Tolkien's pondering of the same perceived fusion in *Beowulf*. A thorough understanding of his psychology and life history would benefit this study, but from a reading of his letters and biographies, it appears that one of the reasons for which he made these themes predominant in his analysis of *Beowulf*, and implemented them in his fiction, is because of their applicability to his own life.

Tolkien was exposed to death from a very early age. His father died when he was four, his mother when he was twelve (Jones xiii), and his surrogate family, the TCBS (a close-knit group of four friends), was cut in half by machine gun fire at the battle of the Somme (xiv). This battle is the likely root of his appreciation for pagan Doom. On the killing fields of the Somme, Robert Gilson and Geoffrey Smith (and tens of thousands of others) charged hopelessly into a storm of German gunfire, participating in what they must have known were doomed charges (Jones 47-48). Given the fact that Tolkien witnessed many of these charges and their gruesome aftermath, he was in a unique position to appreciate the value of "absolute resistance." He likely felt a kinship with the *Beowulf* poet, whom he believed "deeply felt" the "worth of defeated valor" (*Monsters* 21).

In contrast to what must have been an overwhelming sense of the nearness of death and the frailty of life was Tolkien's Catholic faith. Tolkien's mother, who converted to Catholicism when he was eight and created a rift within her family, was tenacious in her faith, refusing to renounce her Catholicism even when it would have resulted in better care for herself and her sons (Jones 6-11). Tolkien, too, retained his Catholicism, and followed that faith until the end of his life.⁴⁰ He summarizes the implicit connection between his faith and his fantasy in his lecture "On Fairy Stories," in which he defines eucatastrophe, or salvation, as the common thread of both (*Reader* 89). The reasons for his importation of this theory into his understanding of *Beowulf* are unknown, but when he speaks of the poet's belief in "eternal victory" and ability to view the "despair" of Doom from the removed vantage point of salvation (*Monsters* 21), he implies that the poet and audience held a similar Christian faith in the ultimate outcome of death.

To claim, however, that Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* specifically or solely to implement his theories on *Beowulf* would be problematic. They certainly were on his agenda from the outset, but the writing of his epic spanned three decades, and during that time Tolkien's own motives and desires for the text certainly went through a series of metamorphoses. For example, even attempting to settle the question of Tolkien's projected audience is problematic. There are moments in his personal letters when he claims the he is only writing *The Lord of the Rings* to please his son, Christopher (94); when he feels sure that he is writing it solely for his own personal satisfaction (143) and believes that it will end up in "the limbo of the great unpublishables" (114); and when he admits to "greatly desire publication" (122), and expresses everything he has written as if it were planned for an audience, as he does in his first long letter to Waldman (143-161). His thematic and rhetorical goals likely also went through similar mutations. Despite the span of years that passed during the writing of the *Lord of the Rings*, so many lines of thought flow directly from Tolkien's lecture *Beowulf: the monsters and the critics* into

⁴⁰ His wife, Edith, similarly fractured her family when she converted to marry him. His story of Beren and Luthien (about an elf maiden who gave up eternal life for her love of a human) is his self-admitted retelling of his and Edith's love for each other. He even had the names Beren and Luthien inscribed on his and Edith's tombstones (*Letters* 420).

his fiction, that the influence of his *Beowulf* study on his writing cannot be underestimated.

Predictably, this observation and those on the preceding pages elicit more questions than answers. Regardless of authorial intent, Tolkien's use of apocalyptic themes, Dark Age history, and early medieval manuscripts opens up numerous new and intriguing avenues of exploration that should be visited in depth through further research. Some of the naturally occurring questions that have yet to be addressed are: How do Tolkien's appropriation of Dark Age history and historical themes move forward into his present (1938-1955)? Are the fears and desires of Tolkien aligned with those of Dark Age apocalyptic authors because of a correlation between the predicament faced by the collapsing Roman Empire and that of the collapsing British Empire? What does Tolkien's seemingly cyclical understanding of apocalypse suggested in his letters (110) and displayed in the history of Middle-earth mean to the apocalypticism of his fiction? How do the ancient apocalyptic themes in *The Lord of the Rings* join with Tolkien's modern apocalyptic themes involving industrialism and machines? Do the reproduced Dark Age racial dynamics borrowed from Dark Age history and intolerant religious texts translate directly into racism in *The Lord of the Rings*? Do the myriad influences of ancient history and fiction present in *The Lord of the Rings* sap or enhance the power of the story? And, what are the implications of a Dark Age source study on Tolkien's legacy of creative genius?

These questions and many more should be addressed in the future if we ever wish to claim understanding of the author and his work. Setting them aside for the moment, however, it remains apparent that the recreated pregnant moment of simultaneously occurring Doom and salvation fulfills a psychological need for Tolkien. It is also apparent that *The Lord of the Rings* fulfills a similar need for his readers as well, as its millions of copies and sustained popularity can attest. What can be here concluded is that Tolkien's paradoxical thematic union allows both himself and his readers to indulge in the seemingly unattainable cliché of "having their cake and eating it too." His heroes are made martyrs without the necessity of death. In effect, they choose to die for their beliefs and are endowed with all of the rhetorical power that this choice grants them, but are saved. The reader is allowed to grasp "the value of doomed resistance" (*Monsters* 21)

and appreciate Tolkien's heroes as if they had made the ultimate sacrifice, but can also experience a "consolation for the sorrow of this world" that reflects a "far off gleam" of salvation (*Reader* 88) in the joy of their miraculous deliverance.

In practice, it does not seem possible for both to simultaneously function, but that is part of the magic of *The Lord of the Rings*. The degree of joy is directly proportionate to the weight of despair, and the resultant "catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart" (*Reader* 86) is a function of their proximity. The effect Tolkien elicits through this formula is akin to (if one can imagine it) flinging oneself from a cliff in inverse. He lowers us by degrees into the abyssal "pit" of pagan Doom (*Monsters* 21), and then just as the pressure is about to reach the crushing point—in the blink of an eye—he lifts us to the soaring height of salvation. Part of the magic and mystery is that it doesn't matter that we've all enjoyed the flight a hundred times before, nor that we know exactly when it will occur; experiencing that split-second transition is what keeps us coming back, time and time again, to *The Lord of the Rings*.

EPILOGUE
 “ON HOBBITS”

But even as hope died in Sam, or seemed to die, it was turned to a new strength. Sam’s plain hobbit face grew stern, almost grim, and the will hardened in him, and he felt through all his limbs a thrill, as if he were turning into some new creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue. (Return 225)

In all of the discourse on *Beowulf* and on apocalypse—on armies and lords and great heroic figures of myth and legend—the true heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam, are almost forgotten. Yet, these two small hobbits are at the core of Tolkien’s epic. In effect, they are carrying Satan’s soul to the biblical lake of fire, and all the while he is searching for them with the utmost intensity. Frodo and Sam display as much perfect heroism as Éomer and the Rohirrim ever could. Although they embody all of the previously mentioned heroic attributes, they do not fit into traditional apocalyptic or Dark Age heroic tales.

Frodo and Sam lose all hope many times—Frodo’s loss happens early in the work upon the seat of Amon Hen when he looks at Sauron atop Barad-dûr and “all hope left him” (*Fellowship* 451). It never truly returns, even after his homecoming to the Shire (*Return* 332), but Sam’s hope is more fluid, rising and falling with the events of the novel until he finally moves past hope in the passage quoted above. Despite their lack of hope, both hobbits find reserves of courage deep enough to match those of the greatest warrior, and indeed to surpass them, for the courage of the warrior is summoned from a well of reserve to meet the needs of the moment, whereas the hobbits display it hour after hour and day after day.

Through these two hobbits from the Shire, the smallest and most ordinary of beings, Tolkien shows that final victory does not necessarily come through the actions of lords and kings and heroes in battle, but through the continued faith and perseverance of ordinary men. The hobbits represent the ultimate apocalyptic empowerment of the disenfranchised, for it is not Aragorn nor Gandalf, nor even their gathered army, that ultimately destroys Sauron—though they play an essential role. The destruction of the “The Enemy” who was nearly strong enough to “beat down all resistance, break the last

defenses, and cover all the lands with a second darkness” (*Fellowship* 56) is accomplished only because of the impossible journey of insignificant Frodo and Sam⁴¹. Thus, through the actions of hobbits, the everyday lay-Christian is granted the ultimate apocalyptic power.

In this, Frodo and Sam seem to be Tolkien’s major departure from the *Beowulf* recipe. Beowulf is a hero in every sense of the word. He is larger than life, possessing a heroic stature, heroic courage and heroic weapons and armor. He is the son of a lord, and seems to have been born for the task that he is to complete. On the other hand, Frodo and Sam are weak, and insignificant in every possible sense, but their actions result in the greatest victory of all. Events rarify their courage to the point of absolute resistance, and they are granted eucatastrophic redemption. In essence, they become the common man’s Beowulf, a pair of characters to whom everyone can relate.

⁴¹ Though, like the Rohirrim, they cannot save the world through their works alone, so the eucatastrophe of Gollum’s fall into the lake of fire is still necessary.

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APPENDIX

1. Email correspondence with Oxford Bodleian Library:

From: Elizabeth Crowley [mailto:elizabeth.crowley@bodley.ox.ac.uk]
Sent: Thursday, September 06, 2007 7:23 AM
To: Scott Howard
Subject: RE: Begging a favor

Dear Scott Howard,

Thank you for your enquiry regarding Sibylinis che Texte und Forschungen Pseudomethodius, Adso unit die Kiburtinische Sibylle by E. Sakur. It has taken a little while to retrieve from the bookstack, but I now have it. The only way to date the acquisition of books by the Bodleian is to look at the stamp they were given when they arrived. This item has a stamp with the date 27th October 1925.

As the Bodleian is reference only, none of the book were borrowed so no records were kept of who consulted which books and when.

I hope this information will be of some help.

Yours,

Elizabeth Crowley
Senior Library Assistant
Main Enquiry Desk
Bodleian Library
Oxford
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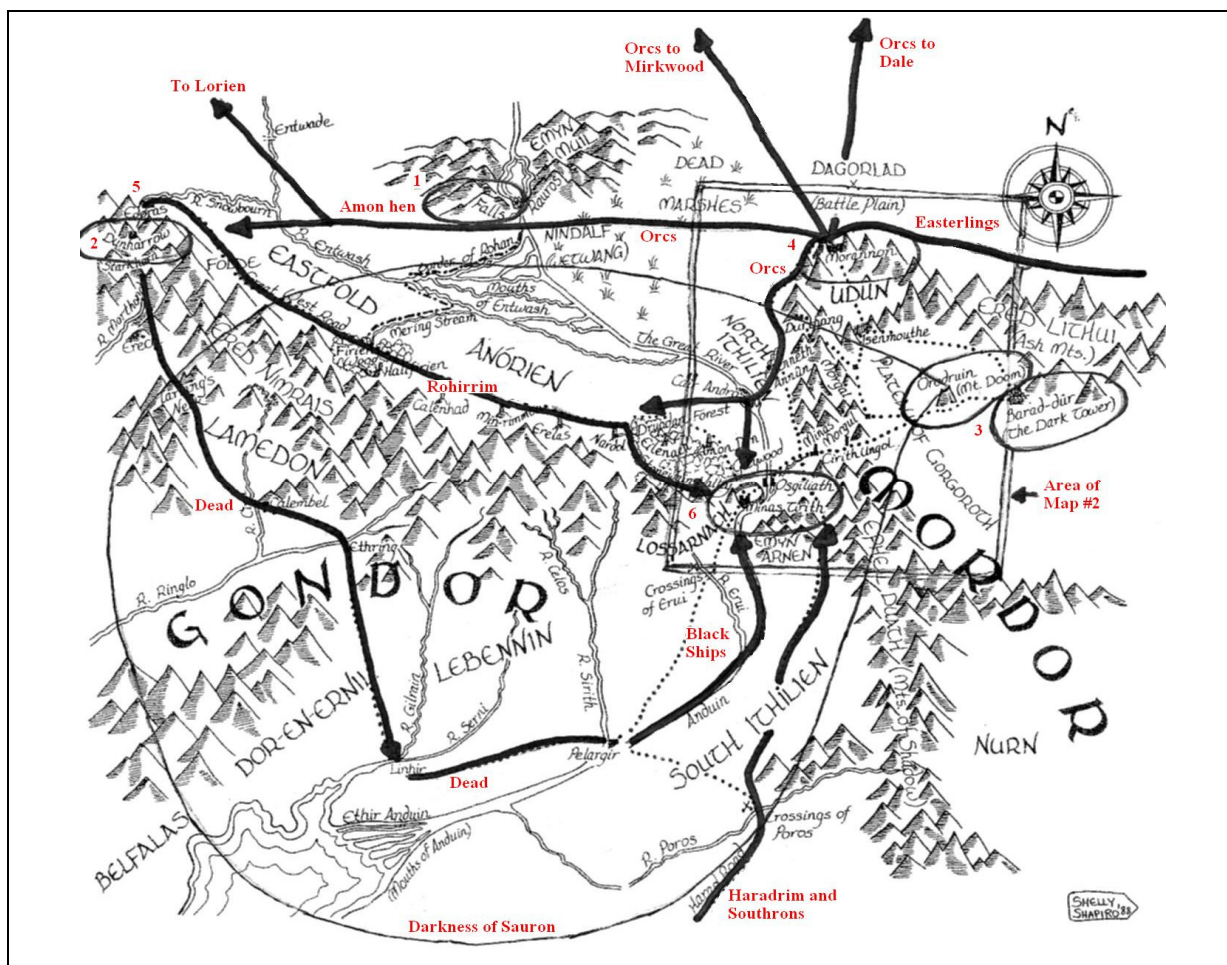
Hello,

My name is Scott Howard and I'm a graduate student at the University of Montana in the United States. I'm currently in the process of writing my masters thesis on the influence of late classical and early medieval apocalypse on JRR Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. I was wondering if someone over there could do me a favor. I note that you have a book in your library: Sibyllinis che Texte und Forschungen Pseudomethodius, Adso unit die Kiburtnische Sibylle by E. Sakur 9391 d.9 (Box B000000497577). Can someone substantiate that the book (published in 1898) was on site before 1937? And if so, and if you keep the old library cards, could someone check to see if Tolkien ever checked that book out and if so (because I believe he did) send me the dates? I know its a long shot, but if so, it is the silver bullet in my research. There are some amazing parallels between the Last World Emperor and Aragorn (up to and including a 122 year reign) and between the Black Gate of Mordor and the Gate of Alexander that seem too much for mere coincidence.

Thank you so much for your help.

Hopefully,

--Scott

Figure 2. Expanded Map of Influence on *The Lord of the Rings*

Important events leading up to the Battle of the Pelennor Fields

(Modified from the map on the page directly prior to page 1 in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.)

Key: B† = Biblical Apocalyptic Influence N = Norse Influence D = Dark Age Historical Influence
D† = Dark Age Christian Apocalyptic Influence

1. Frodo sits in the “Seat of Seeing” on Amon Hen: B†-The “Two Cities” juxtaposed, Sauron seen as Satanic leader of a Hellish land. N-Situation made hopeless, Frodo continues anyway. D-Political geography like Europe made visible. D†-Gondor seen in its role as “restraining force.”
2. Aragorn enters Dunharrow and calls forth the dead: B†-Harrowing of Hell. N- The Einherjar are called forth from Valhalla. D†-Last World Emperor begins his march to save embattled Rome.
3. Sauron releases his darkness and prepares for war: B†-Darkness of Revelation. N-Darkness of Ragnarök. D†-Darkness of Legend of Alexander.
4. Orcs issue out of Morannon: †-Tribes of Gog and Magog of Revelation, Daniel, and Ezekiel are released upon the earth. N-Monsters march to Ragnarök. D-Huns march on empire. D†-Gate of Alexander opens and releases the tribes to march on Jerusalem/Rome.
5. Denethor calls for aid from Rohan: D-Valentinian calls for help from Theodrid against the Huns.
6. The Siege of Minas Tirith and the Battle of the Pelennor Fields:—see Page 87.