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The Shire Post

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



The Shire Post

"Ad Valar Defendendi"

-- David Ring

This letter is in reference to Burt Randolph's article in the Wedmath issue of 1968. I was quite disappointed by this article and find myself unable to remain silent about it. I have criticisms in four categories.

First of all, some one has mixed up the page references quite thoroughly. As an example I quote, "Morgoth assails (!) Valinor (I,317; I,328; I,347), poisons the two Trees, steals the silmarilli and flees (?) back across the Sea to Thangorodrim where he mounts the jewels in his iron crown." (Page 12, column 2 of TJ). I looked up these pages in the Ballantine paperback edition (tenth printing, March, 1967), and found nothing at all about Morgoth, Valinor, the two Trees, the silmarilli, Thangorodrim, or the iron crown on these pages.

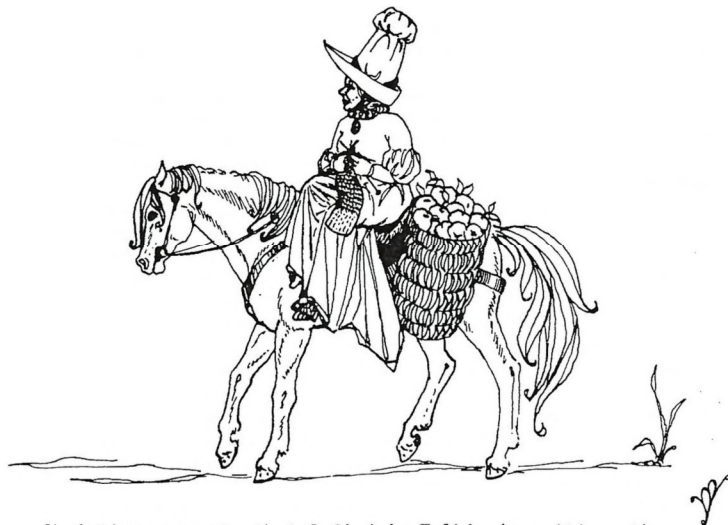
My second complaint regards certain statements and conclusions made by Randolph which do not seem to have adequate basis in what is available to me of Tolkien's works (everything except for the scholarly papers). For instance, he assumes that the Valar tore Elenna and sunk the Great Armament, whereas Tolkien states only that the Valar called upon the One (laying down their guardianship) and these things were accomplished (III, 392; Ballantine paperback edition). Again, I can find no evidence that Morgoth created Ungoliant and the dragons or sank Beleriand.

The third difficulty I find is the paragraph on the four speaking peoples of Middle-earth. (It would be better to call them the four free peoples, since there are obviously more than four speaking peoples--orcs and trolls would have to be included.) I do not see how Randolph can exclude the Ents, unless he is indeed attempting to pass them off as part of the vegetation of Middle-earth. From the conversation of Fangorn with Merry and Pippin (II, 84-85) it is obvious that there are five free speaking peoples. In the Elder Days, the Hobbits, being inconspicuous, were neglected and in later ages, the Ents suffered the same fate, giving rise to a common notion of only four free races.

My final objection is that while Randolph's paper admirably supports his conclusion, that the Valar failed in their guardianship, I feel that the evidence he presents is based on a serious misinterpretation of the purpose and nature of that guardianship. It is my opinion, at least, that he has failed to grasp the spirit of Tolkien's writing concerning the Valar. I wish to emphasize that the view I will present, as a single counter-example to Randolph's, is based largely on my own feelings and my own interpretations of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. To understand the actions of the Valar I have had to make as best I could some assumptions about Professor Tolkien's thinking. If these are offensive to him or to any of his other readers, they have my sincere apologies.

That with which I basically disagree in Randolph's view is the idea that the duty of the Valar was at all times to preserve the peoples of Middle-earth from any sort of evil. I agree that this is commonly the task of a guardian, but it is the task of a guardian of property or cattle, not of children, and the peoples of Middle-earth are the children of Eru, siblings of the Valar.¹ I now wish to continue my argument on the basis of a triple correspondence between the terms of Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Christianity. Thus I say that the One (Eru), Maleldil, and God are the same Person; the Valar, the Oyeresu (and/or the Eldila, who may by the way give a clue to the nature of the "people of the Valar"), and probably the Christian angels are beings of the same or very similar sort; and the children of God (Erusen) are like to the Hnau and the race of Adam.

Having drawn these connections of character, I will go so far as to suppose certain similarities of role and especially, I will assume that the problem of free will, granted to the children of God and the Valar, plays as great a role in Middle-earth as the same gift plays in our world and the Field of Arbol. In other words, I believe that the actions of the peoples and Valar of Middle-earth can best be interpreted on the basis of an underlying layer of



Christian concepts that I find in Tolkien's writing, the supposition of which is supported by his friendships and non-fiction works.

What do we see when we view the history of Middle-earth along Christian lines? The Valar, servants of Eru, build Middle-earth. The free peoples, yet unfallen, awake in its dawn of time and one of them, the elves, come to Valinor where they freely live with the Valar. In Middle-earth, great kingdoms of elf and dwarf arise, and the first houses of men are founded. Then evil comes to Middle-earth through an evil Vala (or Bent Oyarsa or fallen angel) Morgoth. He builds a power of evil in Angband, steals the silmarilli and poisons the Two Trees.

Have the Valar failed as guardians? No! As in Earth, as in Thulcandra, Perelandra, and Malacandra, the first actions of evil must be allowed, for they are the temptations of the children of God, the necessary test of the exercise of their free will. And the Valar, like the Eldila, may not interfere, for that would be to take from the children the gift of free will that their Creator had given them.

The story of Morgoth is the story of the Fall--of the elves. By rebelling against the Valar and assailing Morgoth in vengeance, they succumbed to the sin of pride. All the later evil that came from Sauron and Morgoth was a result of their rebellion. And if they had not rebelled? Who can say what the One in his wisdom might have decreed?

Of the fall of man and the other non-Elvish races Tolkien does not speak so directly (unless the Fall of man takes place in Numenor). However, the story of Earendil tells us that at that time men were not fallen in Middle-earth, or at least they had not deserved to bear the evil of Morgoth. Thus, the Valar were able to give aid when requested by a mortal, though they could not or would not help the elves. Sauron they did not destroy, because (again this is only my own opinion) he was an evil within the ability of men and elves to subdue (at least if they had not wasted strength against Morgoth). Finally, the Fall of Numenor may have marked the Fall of man and certainly must have followed it. Man, also, rejected the Valar, and since it was no longer safe to leave immortality within his reach, and since he would no longer endure his guardians, the Valar removed themselves and Valinor from the circles of man's world.

In summary, the Valar never failed in their charge. They had to allow evil into Middle-earth. It was their own charges, the Free Peoples, that were responsible for the evil taking root. The Valar, then, could only preserve as much as possible from evil the races which had not yet fallen from grace, and when all of the races had at last refused their protection, their function was ended and they withdrew.

Randolph's final question--why Tolkien chose this kind of performance for his Guardians of the World--is easily answered. Tolkien's choice is made on the basis of realism. Whether there are guardians of our world or whether the One Himself watches over us, we have ever been an abundant source of similar "failures" to them or Him. A world without evil or one in which the workings of evil were effectually restrained might be a laudable and desirable

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LEVELS OF INTERPRETATION

by Bob Foster

Source-hunting in *Lord of the Rings* is an interesting and rewarding pastime. On any page one can discover new correspondences--between the Eldarin and Sanskrit seasons, the months of the King's Reckoning and the French Revolutionary Calendar, the rings of Sauron and the Nibelungs--and all of these contribute to an appreciation of the demi-urgic labors of Professor Tolkien's scholarship. Yet to pursue this too far is to lose sight of the work as a whole. The mood of Professor Tolkien's Middle-earth writings, and the ethos which underlies it, is not merely a product of these specific borrowings, yet does in its own way relate to the primary world.

To digress for a moment, the four senses of interpretation of medieval criticism (a system which states that literature, especially the Bible, can be explained on four levels--the literal, the secularly allegorical, the moral or personal and the anagogical or spiritually allegorical) is an overly mechanical system, but it is motivated by a sensitive and vital conception of the nature of literature and the world. To the medieval mind, no event or phenomenon was isolated or meaningless, since the universe was created and controlled by an Absolute moral force. The measure of the accuracy of man's perception was the degree to which he saw that the perceived phenomenon or concept followed the laws of the cosmos, and it follows from this that one mark of excellence in literature was the conformity of literature to these laws. This attitude should not be confused with "realism", since the laws of the medieval mind were more than the "laws of nature", nor should it be assumed that medieval men implicitly believed everything they said; their orientation involved an appreciation of the significance of correspondences more than a concern with the correspondences themselves. Medieval etymologies are so absurd because their inventors could not imagine an important place or person whose name did not reflect, even foreshadow, that importance; however, what is absurd linguistically can be seen more sympathetically, and more profitably, as a serious religious or historical statement. To take a more literary example, the confusion between the love lyric and the religious lyric which produced the bulk of the literature of Mariolatry was not merely a conflation or confusion of forms and images, but rather grew out of a realization that the yearning towards God can be effectively described in sexual terms, and conversely that sexual passion and love are similar to religious desire--on a lower level, but the same process nonetheless. That this equation is still artistically effective may be seen from George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord."

This typically medieval orientation reveals itself in a number of ways in Professor Tolkien's work. Events in Middle-earth are often cyclical, and always significant. To an extent, they are allegorical in the medieval sense; the Fellowship represents (both literally and symbolically) the Free Peoples, just as in medieval writing Jerusalem is both a city and the Church. Even Sam realizes that his use of the Phial of Galadriel places him in a position with respect to Elbereth and the fate of Middle-earth similar to (although lesser than) that of Earendil. The three ages of Middle-earth end with the same wars (between Feanor and Morgoth, Gil-galad and Sauron with the Ring and Elrond, Aragorn and Denethor and Sauron without the Ring), except that each time the Elves become less noble and evil less powerful. Against this reiteration of the moral order, we see the rise of the Edain, a history which is mirrored in Elda-Adan marriages. The inherent goodness of Hador, Barahir and Beren are refined into nobility by the births of Dior, Earendil and Elwing. The Elvish and Mannish traits are sundered to an extent by the decisions of the Peredhil, but the marriage of Aragorn and Arwen reunites them and preserves Eldarin moral and esthetic virtues into the Dominion of Men. It is useful to note that for Tolkien blood is an important and real factor for the individual; Legolas perceives of Imrahil "that here indeed was one who had elven-blood in his veins."

Certain features such as this, as well as many turns of plot in *Lord of the Rings*, are often called "unrealistic" or

"implausible", but to react to them in this way is to deny the existence of a higher Order which arranges coincidences (and meaningfully employs the laws of causality and nature) so as to provide significant alternatives. In a morally ordered cosmos, a highly motivated and morally worthy hero cannot at the time of the ultimate confrontation between good and evil be denied a part in the battle (although he may have to struggle to obtain it), and he should not be denied a fighting chance of winning. Leaving aside the Istar, whose entire function is to further these principles, it is obvious that Seventh Cavalry rescues such as the arrival of the Rohirrim, and later of Aragorn's fleet, at the Pelennor Fields happen all too seldom in the "real" world. But they cannot be scoffed at in Middle-earth, for the recovery of Theoden Ednew, the tardy oath-filling of the Dead and the fortitude of the defenders of Minas Tirith indicate the superiority of the Free Peoples, a moral advantage which is significant in a moral universe. The implication for our world seems to combine the themes of Boethius and such works as the alliterative *Morte Arthur*: hope (which in these contexts means trust in God or Eru to reward virtue) strengthening fortitude--if necessary, fortitude even without hope--is the best stance for the individual confronted by death or evil.

If we can grant that a literary work does not have to realistically resemble the world it describes in order to make a point about it, it becomes easier to discover the relevance of Professor Tolkien's creation to the primary world. As a Christian, he no doubt intends the moral determinism of Middle-earth to apply to the general human condition, but his linking of the moral and heroic codes, as well as the superficial cultural borrowings, suggest to me that *Lord of the Rings* is also an exposition of the world-view of that most Christian of periods, the Middle Ages. In Middle-earth the links between men and God are tangible (the Istar and Valar) rather than purely spiritual, but we find the same moral ordering, including the danger of a powerful, ever-threatening but inferior and vanquishable Devil. Perhaps the most important correspondence is that, despite the mechanical differences, the position and ideal behavior of Man is the same in both worlds; seen in this way, as a statement of the medieval ideal, *Lord of the Rings* is more realistic than a history book, and almost as beautiful as the stars. I would like to thank Professor Tolkien on his eightieth birthday for this contribution to the literature of hope and for communicating so well and so beautifully his conception of the medieval world; I think I am not alone in being better able to understand medieval and the modern world for having journeyed into Middle-earth:

Ripple in still water

When there is no pebble tossed nor wind to blow

Reach out your hand if your cup be empty

If your cup is full may it be again

Let it be known there is a fountain

That was not made by the hands of men.

-- The Grateful Dead



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thing, but to a man of Earth it would make very boring reading. As Tolkien himself has said:

Now it is a strange thing, but things that are good to have and days that are good to spend are soon told about, and not much to listen to; while things that are uncomfortable, palpitating, and even gruesome, may make a good tale, and take a deal of telling anyway.²

¹The Road Goes Ever On. 1967 Houghton Mifflin hardback edition, p. 66.

²The Hobbit. Houghton Mifflin nineteenth printing, pp. 61-62.