Journal of Tolkien Research

Volume 11 | Issue 1

Article 5

2020

Tolkien's Cosmology: Divine Beings and Middle-earth (2020) by Sam McBride

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Recommended Citation

Tolkien's Cosmology: Divine Beings and Middle-earth by Sam McBride. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2020. xviii, 285 pp. $55.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781606353967. Also available in ebook format.

Sam McBride's book is a thorough, in-depth, and well-researched exploration of the topic suggested by the title. Included under the category of "divine beings" are both what we might consider the polytheistic aspects of the story (the pantheon of the Valar as well as the Maiar and other powerful beings like Tom Bombadil) and also the fundamentally theistic aspect of the mythology (namely, Eru Ilúvatar). In trying to categorize Tolkien's cosmology in some sort of religious or mythical system, McBride argues for a unique category he refers to as *monotheistic polytheism*. This highlights what some previous scholars have also commented on. "Monotheistic polytheism gives Tolkien the mythmaker several narrative advantages. First, the existence of one ultimate divine creator fits comfortably with Tolkien's Catholicism. . . . At the same time, Tolkien's familiarity with diverse mythologies would suggest several benefits from a polytheistic cosmos. Central to storytelling is conflict" (14).

At the core of this work is a look at how Eru's presence and activity can be detected in the histories of Middle-earth, not only through the Valar in the creation of Eä, and in the First and Second Ages, but also in the Third Age where evidence of a divine being or beings seems harder to identify. His treatment also includes explorations of the problem of evil, of death, and of eucatastrophe in the tales. As noted, the treatment is thorough and detailed, and makes reference to an appropriately wide and impressive variety of Tolkien scholarship. The downside to such thoroughness is a lot of summary of that scholarship which is tedious at times, and perhaps more than is necessary.

Early in the book, McBride addresses how Eru works in and through the Valar. "By distancing himself from his creation, Eru forces the Valar to function on their own, learning through trial and error, and introducing the possibility of conflict even among the gods. . . . The Valar also lend divinity a sense of immediacy, at least within *The Silmarillion*" (15). McBride's repeated reference to "trial and error" as the means by which the Valar learn is his attempt to explain how or why the Valar, though in service of Eru, nonetheless are capable of errors of judgement—and possibly even more serious moral failings. According to McBride, Eru largely withholds guidance from the Valar, forcing them to make decisions about the governance of Arda without any previous experience. It is an interesting concept, and he makes some good points in defense of the idea. Interestingly, though, McBride references Manwë communing in spirit with Eru (as he does, for

example, in the story of Aulë and Yavanna.) If Manwë is capable of receiving such council from Eru, then I wonder whether the Valar's decision-making really was reduced to mere trial-and-error or if they simply chose not to avail themselves of such council as often as it might have benefited their governance. The latter seems a likely possibility to me, at least to the extent that they are more humanized in Tolkien's mythology. McBride himself mentions the Valar consulting with Eru prior to attacking Melkor, and then failing to do so before summoning the elves to Valinor. But then he immediately returns to his defense the "trial and error" model (42).

By and large, McBride does a very good job avoiding overly simplistic answers to complex questions. His work shows an appreciation for the subtlety of Tolkien's portrayals as they might impact several aspects of his cosmology, mythology, and theology. He allows ambiguities even when they raise further problems. He notes, for example, that "The Valar . . . cannot be reduced either to spirit-beings or earth-forces; they encompass both simultaneously" (35). And later he points out competing impulses on Tolkien's part, one of which is to give pointers to divine interactions within Arda's history, while at the same time Tolkien also "feels compelled to find causes, internally within his fictional world, for effects that arise externally" (49). The treatment of Tom Bombadil likewise recognizes and respects the ambiguities and unanswerable questions, and the variety of different scholarly opinions. Overall, the third and fourth chapters do an excellent job elucidating the "Interventions" of Eru and the Valar (or Eru through the Valar) in the Third Age, both through visible and invisible powers. I found the treatment of Gandalf and his role—and the significance of his divine ability with fire in opposition to Sauron, both before death and after his death—especially well done and convincing.

The book also does a solid job balancing the author's scholarly opinions with providing a fair treatment of other scholarship. McBride explicitly and honestly acknowledges (on 108-9 in particular) his assumptions and strategy—namely of *looking* for divine influence in various scenes in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*—and the inherent weaknesses as well as the strengths and value of that approach.

I did find some of the claims in the chapter on evil less convincing. It might be one place where McBride worked too hard to find ambiguity. The chapter does begin with a solid basis: "In Tolkien's cosmology determining right from wrong ultimately requires recognizing one's existence as a creature, and thus acknowledging the authority and sovereignty of a creator" (143). The introduction also goes on to point out the "moral space between good and evil in which beings with limited knowledge and experience . . . make mistakes and learn. Those mistakes include the possibility of stepping in the direction of rebellion against Eru" (142-3). I found particularly insightful and well-supported the observation that Eru

asks questions not because he himself lacks the answers, but because the person he is asking needs to examine their own intentions.

The chapter goes on, however, to make a confusing distinction between doing "wrong" and doing "evil"—a distinction I'm not convinced existed in Tolkien's work. Similarly, McBride describes the concept of pursuing "an action he should not pursue" as also somehow distinct from doing evil, and argues for a distinction in Tolkien's writings between falling into folly and committing evil. As one example in the category of something wrong but not evil, McBride lists "Covetousness of Ilúvatar's creation" (151). This is quite close to the last of the Ten Commandments which prohibits coveting anything that belongs to a neighbor. It seems rather odd that McBride would say "These actions are not innately evil" (152). He also suggests what strikes me as an invalid comparison between the fall of an individual and the fall of the world (154) and between disobedience to Eru and disobedience to some worldly authority (156). What seems to be missing in McBride's distinction is the simple concept of sin, that would have been very familiar to any Catholic writer. Sin might be described precisely as doing what one should not do, or not doing what one should do—that is, disobedience to Eru. Some of the differences McBride sees as between "wrong" and "evil' might be better explained as the difference between being repentant and being unrepentant. To his credit, McBride does eventually turn to concept of sin, and the difference between mortal sins and venial sins. His treatment his interesting and worthwhile, and some of his earlier comments, including the distinction between folly and evil, make more sense in the context of this distinction.

I also thought McBride's treatment of orcs in his chapter on evil did a very nice job exploring the ambiguities and unresolved issues that Tolkien himself never seemed to have fully resolved, or made consistent within his works. Though I think McBride's efforts might have been made even better with reference to the etymological roots of the word orc (in the Old English *orcneas*) as "demon spirit", and Tolkien's imagined etymological connection between orcs and balrogs through the back formations to Uruk-Hai and the Valaraukar (the demon-spirits who take the etymological role of *orcneas* within Middle-earth.) Likewise, I appreciated the sections on technology identifying Tolkien's attitude as something like *pessimistic ambivalence* rather than outright hostility toward technology. And though I thought McBride made more of an issue than necessary about a supposed problem with elven reincarnation, the chapter on death and the concluding chapter on eucatastrophe were fitting conclusions to the book.

Overall, the book is a worthwhile read, and a valuable reference. Though I raised (in the spirit of scholarly dialogue) a few places where I found disagreement, or was left unconvinced, that isn't meant to dismiss the valuable insights and scholarly contributions of this careful and thoughtful work. I will be teaching a class this coming semester on Tolkien's writings, and I can definitely see some of my

presentations and discussions being influenced by McBride's thorough, honest, and well-written study.

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