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Between *Mythos* and *Logos*: Christian Hope and Restoration in *The Return of the King*

Our world no longer pays heed to the myths of old that once spoke of gods, heroes, and the mysteries of the cosmos. The same has happened with Christianity as it has been rejected among the many other myths. With no more appeal to the sacred, we now live in a secular world that is “progressively disenchanting” (Smith 24) with anything transcendent, favouring a “buffered” (Taylor 37) approach to the questions and meanings of life where the world has become devoid of magic, enchantment, and sacrament. The consequences reveal that humanity now finds herself “haunted” (Smith 4) and lost. But there is hope for the world. Tolkien has written a deep myth and has captivated many (if not most) of his readers, speaking directly to us and having ultimate appeal to reality. More than this, to understand Tolkien’s myth fully is to recognize that it is deeply (if not explicitly) Christian, expressly witnessed through the prominent traces of hope and restoration, where

From the ashes a fire shall be woken,

A light from the shadows shall spring;

Renewed shall be blade that was broken,

The crownless again shall be king. (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* 260-61)

Therefore, the present task is to explore Tolkien’s deep myth, *The Return of the King*, and how it appeals to reality—signifying the true myth of Christianity—seen through the threads of hope and restoration.

We need to recover a proper understanding of myth, which is to recognize that our myths are not simply “untrue.” While myth “stands off from our experience [it still speaks] *about* our experience” (Howard 337), unveiling our longing for “greatness and wholeness [through countless stories of] courage and glory and mystery and romance and heroism” (Howard 342). Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is a myth precisely because it speaks to these same desires: Rivendell and Lothlorien become Eden-like images of sweetness and serenity that speak to our desire for paradise; Mordor, being black and full of Shadow, resonates with our sense that something has gone awry and that there exists the presence of evil in the world; and the fellowship of the ring, among its travails, tragedies, and triumphs resound within us feelings of hope, defeat, friendship, and heroism. The reader has sympathy for Sam, with the ring “gnawing at his will and reason” (Tolkien 1178), because the reader understands temptation. Likewise, the reader celebrates with Sam, who “could sit. . . in endless happiness” (1191), when he triumphs over his temptation and rescues Frodo. This certainly reveals a consequence when reading Tolkien: myths cannot be untrue because they appertain to reality; it becomes far better to ask, “how true [do they] ring?” (Howard 336), in which, for Tolkien, truth not only resounds, but the “eucatastrophe” of Middle-earth has even the power to overturn our own struggles through the consolation of final “joy” (Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories” 68).

Myth speaks truth through how it captivates us and what it summons within us. In *The Return of the King*, the reader is drawn in by the dance between defeat and hope as well as restoration and ruin. But while defeat and ruin bring tension to the reader, there is a prevailing sense of hope, victory, and restoration. In Mordor, Frodo and Sam both experience feelings of doubt and defeat, wondering if their quest can really succeed. But glimpses of hope become a lifeline, such as when “peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the

mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart. . . hope returned to him [and] the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing” (Tolkien 1206). Such visions of beauty, victory, and home give Sam the will to press on, and while Frodo’s burden dims his own desire for home, Sam maintains hope, who says: “after coming all that way I don’t want to give up yet. It’s not like me, somehow, if you understand” (Tolkien 1244). Semblance of hope and restoration is also witnessed as the free people of Middle-earth also wait on Frodo and Sam. Faramir, in the House of Healing, recounts the tension between hope and defeat, who says, “my waking mind tells me that great evil has befallen and we stand at the end of days. But my heart says nay; and all my limbs are light, and a hope and joy are come to me that no reason can deny” (Tolkien 1261). Likewise, during the final battle against the hosts of Mordor, where hope is “foundering in a gathering sea [and where] the shadows of death [fall] dark upon the earth” (Tolkien 1241), Gandalf is given “some sudden vision [and cries] in a loud voice ringing above the din: The Eagles are coming!” (Tolkien 1241), prompting great hope among the free fighters of the West. Such reveals the tension in Middle-earth between hope and hopelessness, but “oft hope is born, when all is forlorn” (Tolkien 1148), and such resounding hope pierces—spear-like—into the side of our flesh.

These traces of hope and restoration make Tolkien’s myth a Christian tale. Pre-Christian myths do not “overcome the powers of Chaos and Unreason” (Wood 137), where malice and evil reside. The prominence of “transcendent hope” (Wood 138) found in Middle-earth must therefore invoke none other than Christianity. This is not to say that Tolkien’s story is one great allegory for Christ or the Church, nor do “Christian” novels need to be about “Christianity, [the] Christian, or a Christian world” (Kreeft 65). Likewise, while pagan myths do not overcome evil and pain, they are not to be discounted as “wholly mistaken [but] as confused precursors” (Kreeft

221) to something *other*; something *Christian*. It is such that this tale is one “pre-Christian,” beseeching the myths of old through common images, symbols, and narratives. But we must also confess that *The Lord of the Rings* is undeniably catholic and religious (see Tolkien, “Letter 142”) at its core, in which the unrelenting threads of hope and restoration reveal inherent Christian meanings that this myth will not deny.

Christian hope and restoration—found within Middle-earth—is aptly seen after the travail of our heroes when Sam is restored to a previous joy and exclaims to Gandalf, “is everything sad going to come untrue?” (Tolkien 1246), to which Gandalf re-joins with laughter that pierces Sam “like music, or like water in a parched land” (Tolkien 1246). Such is akin to the God who says “comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended” (Isaiah 40:1), the very same God who restores his people to great Jubilee. Likewise, at the Fields of Cormallen, where “the host laughed and wept. . . where pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness” (Tolkien 1249), is a moment likened to the God who “will restore health to you, and [will heal] your wounds” (Jeremiah 30:11), who frees all people from trouble, harm, and dismay. This hope is finally inaugurated with restoration from “the hands of the king [that] are the hands of a healer” (Tolkien 1127; 1129; 1252; 1266), through the coming reign of Aragorn. The people of Gondor sing of this hope: “your King shall come again, and he shall dwell among you all the days of your life. And the Tree that was withered shall be renewed, and he shall plant it in the high places, and the City shall be blessed” (Tolkien 1262). It is this song that sounds a “peace [where] there will be no end [and] justice [and] righteousness. . . forevermore” (Isaiah 9:7). At last, Gandalf commissions Aragorn, saying, “this is your realm, and the heart of the greater realm that shall be. The Third Age of the world is ended, and the new age is begun; and it is your task to order its beginning

and to preserve what may be preserved” (Tolkien 1272). The king has come, setting hope in hearts and restoration in the eyes and hands of “men.” All of this goes to say that hope and restoration is plentiful within Middle-earth, which is a myth that looks to none other than the Christian vision of hope, redemption, and restoration.

At last, *The Return of the King*, a “pre-Christian” tale but resounding with Christian meaning, becomes both *mythos* and *logos* to the reader. Tolkien’s epic is *mythos* in that it sensibly invokes the imagination toward images of glory (and defeat), romance (and hate), fate (and responsibility), courage (and fear), as well as the heroic (and unheroic). But Tolkien’s world also gives flesh to the *logos* of Christianity, that is, appealing to the Word and wisdom of the Christian narrative, as seen through the deeply woven threads of hope and restoration. For the people of Middle-earth, consolation is sure because the king “has taken back all his ancient realm [and] will ride soon to his crowning” (Tolkien 1247). But for the reader, “hope’s object is always personal” (Kreeft 202) and it is with this reason that “myth must become fact” (Lewis, *God in the Dock* 67). Tolkien’s world reveals the *mythopoeic* God of Christianity: where the hopes and longings of humanity—glinting and gleaming in fantasy, fairy-land, and myth—is met with Christ, who claims “not only our love and obedience [but also] our wonder and delight” (Lewis, “Myth Became Fact” 67). It is through the hope and restoration of Middle-earth that brings taste of what is *really* real to the reader, who finds that there comes the day at last when each “Shall take the hidden paths that run / West of the Moon, East of the Sun” (Tolkien 1345); that there is a day when we will truly taste of Hope and be forever satisfied.

Tolkien’s tale makes appeal to both the sensible (myth) and the intelligible (fact); and with hobbits, elves, and dwarves alike, the reader catches sight of one final hope at the end of

this story, arresting our imagination and speaking of ultimate restoration. It is here where the greatest of hopes tingles deep within Frodo as he leaves Middle-earth and takes path to the sea:

And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise. (Tolkien 1348)

For Frodo, his dream has become real, and for the reader, it is as if we are peering into a dream. Such a vision is one of paradise—of heaven—where sweet fragrances, singing, and sunrise stirs a joy that invokes the place where “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4-5), and where all shall be made new. But this vision fades for Sam, and with Frodo gone “the evening deepen[s] to darkness as he [stands] at the Haven; and as he looked at the grey sea he saw only a shadow on the waters that was soon lost in the West” (Tolkien 1348). Sam is now without his companion and so there is much to mourn. Yet even while this story draws to an end, something is stirred within Sam: “hearing only the sigh and murmur of the waves. . . [sinking] deep into his heart” (Tolkien 1349); what stirs is ineffable, as if within perceiving a sigh that is “too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). But while language hardly speaks to such a stir, and while sorrow and loss is borne by Sam, there also comes a time when “Out of doubt, out of dark, to the day’s rising / Hope [is] rekindled / over death, over dread, over doom” (Tolkien 1278, cf. 1109). Therefore, this myth ended, we are wedged back into our world, left wanting. Though there also remains some remnant—deep within us—that is recovered: the burden of hope and restoration for *our*

own world. Hope (like light from a shadow) springs forth, and with Sam (in final homecoming) we must now say to our world, "I'm back" (Tolkien 1349).

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