



Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled - Part 1 - The Lord of the Rings

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Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled is a lightly edited version of Pete Lowman's doctoral thesis. Links to each part will be enabled as they are published.

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Part 1 - TOLKIEN'S THE LORD OF THE RINGS

Introduction

The Lord of the Rings is a lengthy volume! So it may be wise to begin by summarising its plot. The fantasy world Tolkien creates is one that includes many species of beings beside Men: including Elves (but these are no gossamer fairies, rather an immortal race of considerable valour and wisdom); Dwarves; Orcs (a race committed to the forces of evil); and Hobbits. *The Lord of the Rings* is centred upon the last of these. Hobbits, we read:

are an unobtrusive but very ancient people, more numerous formerly than they are today; for they

love peace and quiet and good tilled earth... They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom... For they are a little people, smaller than Dwarves: less stout and stocky, that is, even when they are not actually much shorter.[1]

Four of the book's heroes, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin, are hobbits from the 'Shire': and the book begins when Frodo's quiet life is interrupted by the realisation that he possesses a magic Ring of immense power, coveted by Sauron, a force of supernatural evil. Gandalf, a member of the 'Istari', an order of wizards opposed to Sauron, informs him that the recovery of the ring by Sauron would lead to the enslaving of the world. As a result, Frodo sets out eastwards for the Elvish stronghold of Rivendell, pursued by Sauron's servants, the Black Riders. At Rivendell a council takes place of all the races not already subjugated by Sauron: and there it is decided that the only way of removing the peril is to destroy the Ring, in the event of which Sauron's power would vanish. The Ring can only be destroyed by casting it into Mount Doom in Sauron's own kingdom, Mordor. Frodo offers to take the Ring to Mordor: and a group of nine representatives of all the Free Peoples, the Fellowship of the Ring, is chosen to accompany him.

The Fellowship pass through great perils as they travel south and east towards Mordor: and at Parth Galen they are ambushed by orcs and separated. Meanwhile, war breaks out. Mordor launches an assault on Gondor, one of the two major kingdoms of Men opposed to it: while the other kingdom, Rohan, is treacherously assaulted by the armies of Saruman, one of the Istari who has become corrupt and is now building his own empire. Among the Fellowship is Aragorn, the lost heir of Gondor, and under his leadership the assault on Rohan is defeated and that on Gondor countered. Frodo and Sam make their way into Mordor, accompanied by Gollum, a creature similar to the hobbits, once possessor of the Ring, now enslaved by desire for it. The leaders of Gondor decide that the only way to reduce Sauron's vigilance is by drawing his attention elsewhere, and so they begin a suicidal invasion of Mordor. Frodo reaches Mount Doom, but decides not to destroy the Ring: at which point Gollum seizes it and falls with it into the flames.

Sauron's power collapses and a new age begins – though not until the hobbits have returned to the Shire, found it under Saruman's control, and organised a rebellion.

A plot summary of a fantasy of 1000 pages is inevitably bald, and this is no exception. There is a great deal more: Tolkien has created his own myth, a whole new world of Middle-earth with its own geography and with a history of three Ages, each containing thousands of years. The book's narrative is followed by over a hundred pages of appendices that describe Middle-earth in even greater detail: another of Tolkien's books, *The Silmarillion*, narrates the story of its first few millennia, beginning before its creation. There can be little doubt that the cosmic scope and overwhelming detail with which Tolkien has worked out his imaginary world are two factors that attract many of the readers who enjoy his books: Middle-earth is a world that it is possible to know a great deal about, and many Tolkien aficionados certainly do.

The concern of this study is not with the book as a whole, but simply with its use of supernatural causality. Part of the 'fantastic' nature of Tolkien's world lies in the fact that it is an overtly supernatural universe: Sauron, for example, is a power of absolute evil that can be seen (if one is unfortunate enough), and that is located, at the time of the story, in the tower of Barad-dur in Mordor. Magic (whatever may be meant by the word) is a reality, and magical powers are possessed both by the wizards and the Elves. But it is not a world where 'religion' plays a major role. There are no temples, there is no organised worship: there is no direct mention of God until the appendices, where there is a veiled reference to 'the One'. One might therefore assume that this is not a book where a pattern of *Christian* supernaturalism would be apparent. But in fact such a pattern exists, and is indeed the foundation of the narrative, as we shall see.

(i) The Sensible Shire

It is important to notice how the book commences. Apart from the Foreword and the Contents page, its first paragraphs belong to a section of the Prologue entitled 'Concerning Hobbits': and these emphasise the hobbits' earthiness and unadventurousness. The third

paragraph describes them as loving 'peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favourite haunt.' The following page fills out the picture:

Their faces were as a rule good-natured rather than beautiful, broad, bright-eyed, red-cheeked, with mouths apt to laughter, and to eating and drinking. And laugh they did, and eat, and drink, often and heartily... The beginning of Hobbits lies far back in the Elder Days that are now lost and forgotten. Only the Elves still preserve any records of that vanished time, and their traditions are concerned almost entirely with their own history, in which Men appear seldom and Hobbits are not mentioned at all. Yet it is clear that Hobbits had, in fact, lived quietly in Middle-earth for many long years before other folk became even aware of them. And the world being after all full of strange creatures beyond count, these little people seemed of very little importance.[2]

The impression the reader receives is clear: these are a very *normal* people, if one discounts their size (and even that, given that they have no magical powers, serves merely to underline their unremarkable nature). The next paragraphs supply a little more of their history, but we read that on entering the Shire they passed 'out of the history of Men and of Elves':

While there was still a king they were in name his subjects, but they were, in fact, ruled by their own chieftains and meddled not at all with events in the world outside... There in that pleasant corner of the world they plied their well-ordered business of living, and they heeded less and less the world outside where dark things moved, until they came to think that peace and plenty were the rule in Middle-earth and the right of all sensible folk. They forgot or ignored what little they had ever known of the Guardians, and of the labours of those that made possible the long peace of the Shire. They were, in fact, sheltered, but they had ceased to remember it.[3]

And with that Tolkien strikes a different note – the keynote of the early chapters of the narrative: outside the 'sensible' Shire there is a world where 'dark things moved', powers that may be forgotten in the 'well-ordered business of living', yet powers that would be capable of destructive activity were it not for other, benign, forces that are equally

mysterious. Tolkien proceeds to describe the hobbits' buildings, their habit of smoking, and their system of government and policing, and then retells the story of Frodo's uncle Bilbo.[4] Bilbo travelled far outside the Shire and acquired considerable treasure, but 'the matter would scarcely have concerned later history ... but for an "accident" by the way.' While lost in the mountains Bilbo found a ring which could make its wearer invisible. 'It seemed then like mere luck.' He next encountered the villainous Gollum in the darkness, whom he outwitted 'more by luck (as it seemed) than by wits'.[5] Why the repeated ambiguity? Tolkien does not explain, and the whole incident is played down by being narrated in the 'quaint' style of *The Hobbit*. But a hint has been given of some force orchestrating events beyond the framework revealed thus far.

A quaint, almost twee tone also marks the opening chapter of the story proper. The first paragraphs tell how 'When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton'; much talk, in part because at 110 Bilbo is showing no signs of ageing, and this brings some disapproval: "'It will have to be paid for," they said. "It isn't natural, and trouble will come of it!"'[6] We are in a world of small, and sometimes small-minded hobbits, happy within their 'normal' world, and distrusting anything abnormal. The next couple of pages portrays Bilbo being discussed in the local hostelry by the village rustics, who have their own share of prejudices: 'They fool about with boats on that big river – and that isn't natural... Mr. Bilbo has learned him his letters – meaning no harm, mark you, and I hope no harm will come of it.'[7] The strategy of these opening pages is clear: Tolkien is presenting a group of characters earthy and admirable enough in their own small way – but the smallness of it comes across clearly. The reader grows tired of their distrust of all things from boats to letters, and so develops an interest in just what is outside their comfortable Shire and what it was that Bilbo saw and (apparently) acquired eternal youth from seeing. The hobbits themselves are interesting, so the reader's desire to move further afield is nurtured only slowly. But of course these same conservative hobbits are not human: the reader is already in a world of fantastic creatures, and being prepared for more.

At the height of his party, Bilbo uses the ring to make himself invisible, and leaves the Shire forever. Frodo inherits his house and the Ring. Seventeen years pass by (Tolkien's casual treatment of the passage of time is one thing that gives his fiction the sense of spaciousness); and Frodo grows restless too. At this stage the wizard Gandalf comes to the Shire and tells Frodo that his ring is the all-powerful master-ring of the 'dark lord' and would eventually 'utterly overcome anyone of mortal race who possessed it, it would possess him'.[8] Worse than that, the 'dark lord' now knows – for the first time for millennia – the whereabouts of the ring, and will attempt to recover it: with the certainty of utter catastrophe for all the lands of 'Middle-earth' if he succeeds. The Shire can only be saved if Frodo takes himself and the ring out of it, fleeing 'from danger into danger, drawing it after me'.[9] It is a passage of revelation, showing Frodo that the world contains far more that is terrible and powerful than he had realised, and forcing him into action. Powers normally forgotten must be taken into account. 'I wish it need not have happened in my time', says Frodo. 'So do I', replies Gandalf, 'and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us'.[10] That context, of what we are 'given', is the arena for mortal free will.

The section also repeats the ambiguous reference to 'accident' of the Prologue. Gandalf tells Frodo that the Ring left its previous owner because it 'was trying to get back to its master'. But its new owner, Bilbo, was 'the most unlikely person imaginable... There was more than one power at work... I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought.' 'It is not', says Frodo.[11] The section is unclear, and *The Lord of the Rings* never puts matters much clearer; but the point is plain: there seems to be some power in the world opposed to the 'dark lord', and capable of orchestrating events in a manner he cannot. Further, that power is in some sense bound up with right and wrong action. Frodo regrets that Bilbo did not kill Gollum, the ring's previous owner, before he could alert the 'dark lord': Gandalf tells him that pity stopped him, and 'My heart tells me that he has some part

to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many.[12] No 'God' has been mentioned, but there is some pattern, some organizing principle in events; and that principle is in some sense 'moral'. Part of the 'widening of the world' that Gandalf produces – and in which Frodo is more or less the reader's surrogate – has to do with something resembling providence.

(ii) A First Step Outwards

Frodo takes Gandalf's advice seriously, and leaves his home in Hobbiton. He does so just in time, for he finds mysterious horsemen or 'Black Riders' are searching for him; and their presence is accompanied by an overpowering urge to put on the Ring – the action Gandalf had warned him against. On the second occasion he comes close to capture. 'But at that moment there came a sound like mingled song and laughter.... The black shadow straightened up and retreated.' It is a wandering company of the Eldar, the Elves. Frodo is amazed. 'Few of that fairest folk are ever seen in the Shire.... This is indeed a strange chance!'[13]

Tolkien has carefully reemphasised the 'earthiness' of the hobbits in the flight of Frodo and his friends across the Shire, through repeated conversational references to food, losing weight, feather beds, and bathwater. The Eldar are a world away from that: 'They passed slowly, and the hobbits could see the starlight glimmering on their hair and in their eyes.' Tolkien's skill lies in the way he brings his earthy Hobbits into the numinous world of the Eldar. The two groups are separate, the hobbits by the side of the path and the Elvish company marching by. But as the last Elf passes he calls out, 'Hail, Frodo! ... You are abroad late. Or are you perhaps lost?' The jovial tone breaks the mystique, and yet the phrasing (particularly the word order of 'perhaps lost') is not entirely out of keeping with the Elves' highly poetic song a few lines earlier; and it establishes a sense of community – Frodo, as Bilbo's nephew, is already known to the Eldar. The next remark from the Elves – 'This is indeed wonderful! ... Three hobbits in a wood at night! ... What is the meaning of it?' is acceptably 'Elvish' (the emphasis on 'meaningfulness' matches with Tolkien's presentation of the Elves as possessors of various forms of awareness unavailable to other races), and yet has a sense of jest not alien

to the hobbits. With Frodo's reply the reverse occurs: 'The meaning of it, fair people ... is simply that we seem to be going the same way as you are. I like walking under the stars. But I would welcome your company.' This has both a tongue-in-cheek note that comes appropriately from a hobbit, and a touch of courtesy that belongs with the Elves' use of language. In short, having presented the hobbits' world of feather beds and the Elves' world of starlight and night-marches as sharply distinct, Tolkien brings them together in a few lines of dialogue. For Frodo's three friends, who have never seen Elves before, this is a further 'widening of the world'. The thematic movement is completed by a physical movement: the Elves are troubled by the hobbits' mention of the Black Riders, and say that 'It is not our custom, but for this time we will take you on our road.' The resumed march is Elf-style, not hobbit-style: 'They now marched on again in silence, and passed likeshadows and faint lights.' As Frodo and his friends are taken into the middle of the marching column, it is also as if they have been absorbed into the world of the hidden forces outside the Shire.

Before the chapter – and the night – ends, Frodo talks with the Elvish leader Gildor, and learns – as does the reader – a little more about the nature of the world into which the hobbits have moved. The Black Riders, it emerges, are evil forces of great power. 'Flee them!', says Gildor: 'Speak no words to them! They are deadly... May Elbereth protect you!'[14] The reference to 'Elbereth' – the power to whom the Elves were singing when they met the hobbits – is not without significance; in this world of evil powers beyond Frodo's previous imaginations, there may be forces for good as well. And, once again, a possible patterning in events is hinted at. Gildor comments that Elves are usually little concerned with other races: 'Our paths cross theirs seldom, by chance or purpose. In this meeting there may be more than chance; but the purpose is not clear to me, and I fear to say too much.' Gildor's uncertainty is a shrewd touch, as he has already been shown to know far more than Frodo does about the forces Frodo must contend with; and if he seemed easily familiar with what was going to happen, then the plot would begin to seem mechanical. Instead, there remains a sense of foreboding. There is some shape in what is taking place, but its end is not clear. Still, this section does an important

thing: it shows that even inside the Shire (which, says Frodo, 'always seemed so safe and familiar') there may be powers with their own reasons for not making their presence overt. Gildor reminds Frodo, 'It is not your own Shire... The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot for ever fence it out.'^[15]

Before moving on, it is worth pointing out how Tolkien uses the Elves in *The Lord of The Rings*. They are a race that are not entirely 'of this world'. They once lived in 'Elvenhome', a place now (it would seem) outside this world, and as Gandalf tells Frodo, 'Those who have dwelt in the Blessed Realm live at once in both worlds, and against both the Seen and the Unseen they have great power.'^[16] The Elvish lands are places where time seems to function in different ways to the rest of the world.^[17] Yet paradoxically, Tolkien succeeds in giving this numinous race concreteness by making them the keepers of Middle-earth's history. 'Only the Elves still preserve any records of that vanished time', he says of the *primaeva* Elder Days^[18]: but those records prove to be of crucial importance for understanding the apocalyptic events in which the hobbits are caught up. And, it should be added, it is in good measure through the vast depth of history with which Tolkien invests the characters, peoples and places of Middle-earth that he gives solidity to his imagined world. Hence, where history is of crucial importance, and is a source of verisimilitude, the Elves as the guardians of history are linked firmly to what seems most real. And thereby the 'wider world' of the supernatural, to which equally they belong, acquires reality.

The Elvish otherworld also has a moral dimension: Aragorn says of their stronghold of Lorien that 'There is ... in this land no evil, unless a man bring it hither himself.'^[19] And the question whether one is for or against the Elves can almost be a test of moral good and evil. For example, the sceptical Ted Sandyman, who expresses his disbelief in the

Eldar in the second chapter, turns evil at the book's close; this is not attributed to his scepticism, and yet a lack of openness to the powers for good in the 'wide world' seems to be part of a complex of characteristics that can be corrupted.^[20] For Frodo's servant Sam, in contrast, the main attraction about accompanying

Frodo out of Hobbiton was the possibility of meeting the Elves; and that proves to be a maturing experience as a result of which he concludes that he must continue to accompany Frodo: 'It isn't to see Elves now, nor dragons, nor mountains, that I want – I don't rightly know what I want: but I have something to do before the end, and it lies ahead.'^[21] In the presence of the numinous people of the otherworld he has found some sort of 'calling'.

For Frodo, Gildor's advice is the decisive factor in making him set out for the Elvish stronghold of Rivendell. And the journey there serves to 'widen the world' still further. For our purposes, the most significant instance is the time the hobbits spend with Tom Bombadil, a remarkably well-imagined figure with a strong folktale flavour that is a curious mixture of the rustic and the numinous. He has lived in Middle-earth even longer than the Elves: 'When the Elves passed westward, Tom was here already, before the seas were bent. He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless – before the Dark Lord came from Outside.'^[22] There is a sense here of some huge upheaval that has 'bent' the seas; and it has to do with the 'Dark Lord from Outside'. Middle-earth itself is proving supernatural enough, but the Dark Lord comes from further beyond, presumably from beyond this world. Tolkien has not created any expectations of his story including beings from other planets; hence most readers are likely to understand the Dark Lord as a force of *spiritual* evil. This is underlined by the sense of something that will outlive the physical universe in the song of the grave-spirit or 'barrow-wight' in the following chapter:

...never more to wake on stony bed, never, till the Sun fails and the Moon is dead. In the black wind the stars shall die, and still on gold here let them lie. till the dark lord lifts his hand over dead sea and withered land.^[23]

Tolkien has introduced a concept very similar to the Christian framework without using Christian terms.

(iii) Rivendell: The Revelation of the 'Pattern'

After various perils the hobbits reach Rivendell. *The Lord of the Rings* is a book with a structure in which an experience of revelation (verbal

knowledge rather than mystical experience) leads to a process of action: Frodo's discussion with Gandalf teaches him about the Ring and causes him to leave Hobbiton; his encounter with Gildor teaches him about the Black Riders and hastens him out of the Shire; and at Rivendell, a far lengthier revelation of things past and present sends him to Mordor. It is his increasing awareness of what happens in the 'wide world' that motivates his travels.

At Rivendell there takes place a Council of leaders of all the 'Free Peoples' of Middle-earth, to discuss what should be done with the Ring. Various possibilities are considered: it could be sent to Bombadil, but neither he nor the leading Elves have the power to withstand the dark lord 'at the last, when all else is overthrown'; it could be thrown into the Sea, but it might be recovered thence and in the meantime the dark lord's power would remain; so the only option remaining is to take it back to the one place where it can be destroyed, the Cracks of Doom in Mordor. Frodo reluctantly volunteers. There are various plot weaknesses here. The case against throwing it into the Sea, in particular, is weak: it is argued that the road to the Sea is watched, and 'fraught with gravest peril'[24], but it soon transpires that the Black Riders have been temporarily destroyed, and that Gandalf has the fastest horse in Middle-earth.

The Elf-lord Elrond fears 'to take the Ring to hide it', because he knows it could corrupt him, but does not seem to consider whether this might be his duty.[25] When Frodo finally volunteers, Elrond remarks that often great deeds must be done by 'small hands ... while the eyes of the great are elsewhere'[26]; but at this point the 'eyes of the great' are most assuredly on the destiny of the Ring. Certainly there are times later in the quest when it seems that a little more strength or wisdom in the Ring-bearer might not have come amiss. But it appears that the various figures of supernatural power – Bombadil, Elrond, Gandalf – are being ruled out so that the task has to be performed by a mortal; Tolkien is writing a book about hobbits going to Mordor, and to Mordor they must go.

Having said that, it is an enjoyable chapter: Tolkien's ability as writer of chronicle is well to the fore, and the dialogue is generally apt, courtly and

dignified. The Council meet in full knowledge that 'doom', the apocalyptic moment, 'is near at hand'; forces such as Aragorn's Rangers who have remained secret, even as the subjects of scorn, to ensure by their ceaseless labours that 'simple folk are free from care and fear', must be openly revealed.[27] The participants at the Council are also aware of some sort of pattern in the events that are taking place. They have not met at Rivendell by their own design; Boromir of Gondor has come because of a dream, Legolas the Elf from the East has come to report the loss of an important prisoner, Gloin the Dwarf because of disturbances from the dark lord's subjects on which his people seek advice. But they have come simultaneously to Rivendell when the Ring's fate must be decided. Elrond tells them,

That is the purpose for which you are called hither. Called, I say, though I have not called you to me... You have come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet is not so. Believe rather that it is so ordered that we, who sit here, and none others, must now find counsel for the peril of the world.[28]

'Providence' does not seem an inappropriate label for this kind of beneficent overruling. It is not an overwhelming, mechanical force. Elrond's hearers are invited to apprehend and perceive the pattern: 'Believe rather...' The theme recurs. To Aragorn, Frodo's possession of the Ring is something 'ordained ... for a while'.[29] The notion of 'ordaining' is an intrinsic part of the pattern that is being revealed.

Four important aspects of this 'ordaining' need to be drawn out to make clear the nature of the providential vision that Tolkien is embodying in his narrative. First of all, there is the paradox that is familiar to Christians: the existence of a providential pattern does not remove the need for difficult decision-making. In the passage quoted above, Elrond makes it clear that those present are 'called' in order to 'find counsel', to find the next stage of the pattern, which will itself require action: 'The road must be trod, but it will be very hard.'[30] The passage in which Frodo volunteers strikes a fine balance:

Still no one spoke. Frodo glanced at all the faces, but they were not turned to him... A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement

of some doom that he had long foreseen but vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo's side in Rivendell filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice. 'I will take the Ring,' he said, 'though I do not know the way.' [31]

It is a free decision, and a reluctant one, the result neither of revelation nor of advice (in fact everyone but Gandalf is surprised[32]). Yet the 'as if some other will' hints that there might be another dimension to this besides an existential choice in a providential vacuum. On the other hand, Frodo's 'overwhelming longing' and the 'effort' involved prevent him seeming a mere pawn on a chessboard whose own will has been temporarily silenced; the deliberate choice and the expression of the pattern go together. Elrond immediately expresses his own judgement that Frodo's choice is indeed what is ordained:

If I understand aright all that I have heard... I think that this task is appointed for you... Who of all the Wise could have foreseen it? Or, if they are wise, why should they expect to know it, until the hour has struck? [33]

This dovetailing of human choice with the unfolding of an ordained pattern is very similar to the biblical vision. And the need for the characters of the story to affirm by their own free choice the providential pattern recurs throughout the book: for example in Galadriel, the ruler of the Elvish land of Lorien, helping Frodo in the full knowledge that the destruction of the dark lord's Ring will mean the dwindling of her land, but desiring only that 'what should be shall be', even renouncing the offer of the Ring which would give her the power to become Queen of Middle-earth.[34]

(It is worth noting here how this note of free choice of renunciation reappears in numerous other contexts: Aragorn leaves the woman he loves to go with the Ring, and Gimli the Dwarf likewise renounces the vision of Galadriel[35]; while for Frodo and for Legolas the Elf, the price of the quest is that they will never be at ease in their own lands again.[36] Indeed, choice of renunciation characterises the Elves' whole approach to history: the Age is changing, their heyday is past, but instead of struggling they are

leaving Middle-earth and sailing away west. Just so, Aragorn will finally lay down his power and his life at the end of his reign, urging his wife to make this choice with willingness rather than despair:

Let us not be overthrown at the final test, who of old renounced the Shadow and the Ring. In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory, Farewell! [37]

Here the concept of an otherworld introduces hope that justifies the choice of renunciation; and for the Elves and Frodo too, consolation in renunciation is likewise to be found in the otherworld of the West. The pattern is not unlike John 12:24: 'Unless an ear of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.' Here again, Tolkien's Christianized imagination embodies a Christian shape in the events of his fiction.)

Arising out of this is a further point: the operations of destiny in Tolkien's Middle-earth not only do not rule out freewill, they actually create room for it by bringing characters to the point where a choice or affirmation has to be made. The apocalyptic era is one in which choice and action are crucial. 'Here is the Sword that was Broken and is forged again!', cries Aragorn to Eomer, the prince of Rohan. 'Will you aid me or thwart me? Choose swiftly!' Eomer is impressed: 'These are indeed strange days... Dreams and legends spring to life out of the grass... What doom do you bring out of the North?' Aragorn replies, 'The doom of choice... None may now live as they have lived, and few shall keep what they call their own.' [38] The crucial moment at Parth Galen, when Frodo has actually put on the Ring, is comparable. He is aware of the will of the dark lord searching for him, and another will (presumably Gandalf) urging him to take off the Ring:

The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly, he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so. He took the ring off his finger. He was kneeling in clear sunlight before the high seat. [39]

'Kneeling' is an interesting addition: there is no reference here to prayer, yet in this conflict of superhuman powers it is hard to believe that such connotations are entirely absent. At any rate it is clear that, even with the Ring on his finger, Frodo remains a free agent: and he uses his freedom to affirm the pattern, deciding to go to Mordor, and (for their sake) to leave his companions behind: 'I will do now what I must.' (In contrast, the effect of evil is to destroy freewill. Gollum could not lay aside the Ring, says Gandalf; having possessed it so long, 'He had no will left in the matter.[40] And yet he is not merely the victim of an overwhelming evil force; he is in this situation because he committed murder to obtain the Ring.) Elrond's Council likewise were 'called' together, yet each of them had come to Rivendell because they had already chosen to make a long journey in order to take right action against the dark lord. The providential pattern both makes room for and works through freely willed choices.

It is important that it should be so; in theological terms, because if destiny removes freewill altogether, then human beings made in the image of the Creator turn into marionettes, and an extreme fatalism results; and in fictional terms, because if the purposes of destiny cannot be hindered by any other will, then the story loses all suspense. Or, at best, its interest resides only in the distant clash of good and evil; the human characters become powerless spectators, and their actions – and hence they themselves – lose significance. (It can be argued that something dangerously close to this occurs in C.S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength*, which we shall examine later.)

A further point emerges from this, however: Tolkien's treatment of 'providence' is such that not only does it operate only through free choice, but also, it seems, only through *unaided* choice. Here the relationship to the biblical framework is less close: there seems no 'vertical dimension' to the process of decision-making, no parallel to 'seeking God's will'. This element is missing from the deliberations of the Council at Rivendell, despite the sense of a 'pattern'. And it is an absence characteristic of the book as a whole. References to 'the One', the God of Middle-earth, do not appear until the Appendices, and the 'Elbereth' to whom the Elves of Rivendell sing[41] is not invoked for guidance. The same restraint is

evident when Elrond bids farewell to Frodo and his companions: 'May the blessing of Elves and Men and all Free Folk go with you. May the stars shine upon your faces![42] – a choice of phrasing noteworthy because it is a point at which a reference to providential care would have come very naturally. Tolkien is keeping the powers behind the 'pattern' very much in the background: possibly to avoid the need for explicit terminology, possibly to avoid damaging the suspense. But the absence of any real relationship with such powers has important consequences, as we shall observe below.

Finally, the providential basis of *The Lord of the Rings* involves an emphasis on the preordained roles of the smaller and weaker characters. When Elrond tells Frodo 'I think this task is appointed for you', he adds, 'This is the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and counsels of the Great.[43] Later in the book Gandalf extends this concept of an 'appointed ... hour' to a general statement:

Other evils there are that may come.... Yet it is not our part to muster all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule.[44]

Nor is it merely the good characters who have a 'part' or a 'task' where they are 'set'. At the very beginning of the book Gandalf reflects that even Gollum (the former possessor of the Ring) has 'some part to play yet'[45], and so it turns out: it is Gollum who guides Frodo and Sam into Mordor, and it is only because of a final desperate attempt on Gollum's part to recover the Ring that it is destroyed at all. There is, then, some sort of providential strategy operating in history, for a small part of which individuals are responsible; the good characters seek out, affirm and collaborate with what is 'ordained'; the others may resist it, but they too may be caught up in it and become a part of it, even against their will. This too is part of the biblical concept of providence, expressed most clearly in the epistle to the Romans.[46]

The significance that this gives to the actions of the small and unimportant is perhaps one of the

things that the book is most centrally 'about'. C.S. Lewis describes it in these terms:

On the one hand, the whole world is going to the war; the story rings with galloping hoofs, trumpets, steel on steel. On the other, very far away, two tiny, miserable figures creep (like mice on a slag heap) through the twilight of Mordor. And all the time we know that the fate of the world depends far more on the small movement than on the great.[47]

As Roger Sale points out, one of the functions of the Ring in the narrative is to ensure the kind of characters who will be its bearers: precisely because of its power over the great, it has to be carried by hobbits, not mighty wizards or warriors.[48] Tolkien has chosen a group of heroes several of whom appear small or weak: Pippin feels like 'a pawn... on the wrong chessboard'[49]; Merry feels 'small, unwanted, and lonely'.[50] And yet in the battle outside Minas Tirith, Merry helps kill the chief of the Black Riders – because the latter 'heeded him no more than a worm in the mud'.[51] Even Gandalf appears generally as an old man, and receives such epithets as 'beggar-like'.[52] It is an absurdly small army that finally assaults Mordor.[53] Again, this complex of themes is analogous to aspects of the New Testament; particularly to Paul's 'God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong'.[54] The small individual is crucially important, because he is selected by elective grace for a specific task. It is an idea that makes a great deal more sense if there is a concept of an overall providential design.

(iv) The Open Country

The motif of a journey is ever-present in *The Lord of the Rings*: Frodo and his friends journeying to Rivendell, the Fellowship of the Ring or Nine Walkers setting off from Rivendell through Moria and Lothlorien and down the Anduin, Pippin and Merry dragged across Rohan by orcs with their friends in pursuit, the Rohirrim racing to Gondor, the Grey Company riding through the Paths of the Dead, Frodo and Sam struggling across Mordor. Many of the characters most aware of the true nature of the world are travellers; the Elves or 'Wandering Companies'[55], Aragorn and the Rangers who turn out to be the unknown but indispensable guardians of many lands, and

Gandalf whose Elvish name is Mithrandir, 'Grey Pilgrim'. The most noble representative of Gondor in the book is perhaps Faramir, captain of the Rangers of Ithilien. The hero, in *The Lord of the Rings*, is a wanderer; the powers for good are powers of the road, powers of the open country.

It is fitting, then, that as Frodo and his companions travel south from Rivendell, the narrative contains numerous references to the openness of the country. This matches a major theme of the section: for an important aspect of the journey is that in symbolic terms too it is an ominously 'open road', with its ultimate end very far from a foregone conclusion. Various places they must travel through – Moria and Fangorn especially – have an evil reputation; when Aragorn ventures into the subterranean Paths of the Dead, his friend Eomer gives up hope of seeing him again. In a time when 'all foretelling is now vain: on the one hand lies darkness, and on the other only hope'[56], the deliberate journeying into danger is an apt symbol of the will to go on with no assurance of success in an unpromising struggle against colossal evil. In such a quest, the traveller – particularly a traveller as small and ordinary as a hobbit – needs the support of others. The first of the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* is entitled 'The Fellowship of the Ring', and 'fellowship' is an essential support when the road is ominously open. When Elrond asks Frodo if he holds to his decision to take on the quest, Frodo replies, 'I do... I will go with Sam'[57]; and it is Sam's support alone that sees him across Mordor. In the choice of Frodo's companions, Gandalf believes that 'it would be well to trust rather to their friendship than to great wisdom'[58]; Gildor's attitude is similar.[59] One of the book's most moving passages is that in which Merry becomes the squire of Theoden, the king of Rohan, on the eve of Theoden's last venture, riding to the rescue of Gondor's besieged capital:

'As a father you shall be to me,' said Merry. 'For a little while,' said Theoden.[60]

But the places of fellowship that exist in the open country are primarily places of refreshment, of encouragement to go on with the journey, rather than strongholds in their own right, alternatives to the open country. This is true of the inn at Bree, of Rivendell, Lorien and Ithilien. Charles Moorman catches the prevailing tone very well:

As in the pagan heroic literature of the West, civilization is seen in terms of outposts, little circles of light and fellowship dotting the forests of the night... Finally the little circles of light die out altogether, and there are no more havens, only the wastes and mountains of Mordor.[61]

But this is not merely a Nordic vision, as Moorman suggests. There is a parallel with the biblical concept of the church: 'Here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come', says Hebrews 13:14. The New Testament church is not an entrenched fortress into which the elect can escape from attack and spiritual conflict, but rather a place of refreshment for the ongoing travel; a community of 'strangers and pilgrims' (1 Peter 2:11) who are all on a perilous journey through the wilderness, like the Israelites of the Exodus to whom Peter is here comparing the church. That, it would seem, is the kind of picture of people engaged in conflict with supernatural evil that informs Tolkien's imagination.

And in opposition to it he sets two very different approaches, those of the towers of Orthanc and Minas Tirith. The second volume of *The Lord of the Rings* is entitled 'The Two Towers', and these would seem to embody defective attitudes to the conflict against the dark lord. Obviously, the book is not an allegory: but at the same time thematic complexes of attitudes become associated with Tolkien's imaginative conceptions. Orthanc is the stronghold of Saruman, greatest of the wizards; Saruman has settled in this stronghold rather than being, like Gandalf, a 'Grey Pilgrim' travelling the open country. By the time of the story, he has become corrupt, concluding that the ends justify the means, that the dark lord's victory is inevitable and that therefore it is best to ally with him: as he urges Gandalf:

We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order....There need not be, there would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means.[62]

This is, of course, the direct opposite of the approach of the Fellowship of the Ring, which is to affirm and act upon the 'pattern' of what must

be done, even if it is leading to an unpromising end. And with the change in means, the ends have changed too: 'Knowledge, Rule, Order' are hardly Gandalf's goals, and Saruman's kind of 'order' and the Fellowship's acceptance of 'openness' seem virtually opposites. Saruman's desire for order means personal control, personal rule ('We must have power, power to order all things as we will'[63]). His response to Gandalf's refusal to collaborate is (appropriately, given his opposition to openness) to confine him in a small space at the top of Orthanc. When Saruman himself is defeated, and has refused Gandalf's offer of freedom – 'free ... to go where you will'[64] – the consequence is his own confinement in Orthanc; and when he finally escapes, he goes to the Shire, with the result that the hobbits on their return find 'a lot of rules and orc-talk', including the fact that 'The Chief ... doesn't hold with folk moving about.'[65] The sickness of Orthanc, in contrast to the Fellowship of the Ring following the 'pattern' wherever it leads them, is its distrust of openness. Minas Tirith, the citadel of the military power of Gondor, represents much that is good. But to the Fellowship, its stronghold is an alternative to their preordained quest, and hence a temptation. Its representative in the Fellowship is its ruler's son, Boromir, who is willing to accept the leadership of Gandalf and Aragorn; but in the conflict against supernatural evil he has a marked confidence in human strength over against the hidden, non-human powers in whom trust must be placed in the 'open country'. Boromir is proud, proud of Gondor: 'Believe not that in the land of Gondor the blood of Numenor is spent, nor all its pride and dignity forgotten. By our valour ... are peace and freedom maintained in the lands behind us, bulwark of the West.'[66] He alone of all the Council urges that the Ring be used by the 'Free Lords of the Free' against the dark lord, something neither Elrond nor Gandalf would trust themselves to attempt.[67] But he does not know the 'wide world' as well as the Rangers of the open country, who are much more oriented to the numinous: Aragorn tells him, 'Many evil things there are that your strong walls and bright swords do not stay. You know little of the lands beyond your bounds.'[68] There is an implicit debate here, and Tolkien has, of course, loaded the scales (as any author will when choosing the tale he will tell): the manifestation of a new, supernatural evil has proved Gondor's valour insufficient, and Boromir has left his stronghold and come to Rivendell in

response to a dream[69]; and in Rivendell it transpires that he does not even know Gondor's own records as well as Gandalf does. *The Lord of the Rings* is not intended as an allegory, but it is not entirely absurd to suggest that Boromir's attitude corresponds to a humanistic approach to warfare against evil, as against dependence on the non-human. The issue surfaces again when they reach the Elvish land of Lorien: Boromir distrusts such a numinous place, preferring 'a plain road, though it led through a hedge of swords'[70] – preferring, in fact, dependence on his own valour.

At the end of the first volume, the matter comes to a crisis. The Company have to decide whether to go on to Mordor (which even to Aragorn appears to be 'to walk blindly ... into darkness'[71]), or whether – since Gandalf is apparently dead – to go to Minas Tirith. To Boromir, it is 'a choice between defending a strong place and walking openly into the arms of death'. Frodo, however, has less faith in human strength, and senses a warning against departing from what had seemed 'ordained' - 'against refusal of the burden that is laid on me. Against – well, if it must be said, against trust in the strength and truth of Men.'[72] Boromir argues again for the use of the dark lord's Ring: 'These elves and half-elves and wizards, they would come to grief perhaps... But each to his own kind. True-hearted Men, they will not be corrupted.' And with that he attempts to seize the Ring from Frodo by force – denying any concept of 'ordaining' as he does so: 'It is not yours save by unhappy chance... It should be mine. Give it to me!'[73] As a direct result of his attempt, the Fellowship become divided.

It is an important moment, for several reasons. For one thing, it demonstrates how Boromir's character functions to prevent 'destiny' swamping the book's causality, in that he can carry out actions that are in opposition to the 'pattern'. Edmund Wilson complains of the absence of 'serious temptations' in *The Lord of the Rings*[74], but Boromir tempts, is tempted, and falls. At the same time, his choice itself becomes woven into the pattern: as Urang points out, it is because of the apparent catastrophe of the Fellowship's breakup that the dark lord's attention is concentrated on its other members and Frodo and Sam are able to enter Mordor.[75] And again, this 'pattern' is concerned with the fate of

individuals and not merely the broad sweep of the conflict. Almost immediately there comes an attack of orcs, and Boromir dies trying to save the hobbits; this is narrated as the death of a hero, and the funeral song that Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli sing (itself a fine elegiac lament) emphasises the point. Further, although Boromir's last words are 'I have failed', this amounts to a negation of his earlier, obsessive self-confidence, and he dies in peace rather than despair. As we noted above, the patterning in *The Lord of the Rings* appears to be a moral providence, and it seems that Boromir is finding some sort of 'salvation' within the terms of the book.

Boromir's death is not the end of this debate, however. His father, Denethor, is ruler of Gondor, and to him 'there is no purpose higher in the world as it now stands than the good of Gondor.'[76] His advice to the horsemen of Rohan – who, as their king says, 'fight rather... in the open', and who ride to Gondor's rescue despite the cost to themselves – is that 'the strong arms of the Rohirrim would be better within his walls than without.'[77] Here again confidence in Gondor's 'strong walls', and a belief in its ultimate importance, are set against the self-sacrifice of the people of the open country. When, finally, the armies of the dark lord appear triumphant, and Minas Tirith seems to have fallen, Denethor has no higher loyalty to fall back on and turns to total nihilism, denying the values of the Western kings that Minas Tirith supposedly represented: 'We will burn like heathen kings before ever a ship sailed hither from the West... It shall all go up in a great fire, and all shall be ended. Ash! Ash and smoke blown away on the wind!'[78] Gandalf attempts (unsuccessfully) to prevent his suicide: 'Authority is not given to you ... to order the hour of your death... And only the heathen kings, under the domination of the Dark Power, did thus.'[79] Practical action, Tolkien implies, is rooted in attitudes to supernatural power: the heathen kings committed their acts of despair 'under the domination of the Dark Power', and Denethor should be bearing in mind the nature of the 'authority' he has been 'given'. Gondor is not ultimate, rather there is a higher power to which he is in some way responsible. Denethor has forgotten this: with disastrous results. In his suicide is embodied Tolkien's conclusion of this particular theme. The war against cosmic evil fails when conducted on the basis of faith in human

strength; indeed, that faith is a type of egoism, and when finally defeated can turn into nihilism. It is the direct opposite of Frodo's willingness to venture out from the safety of the Shire (or Rivendell or Lorien) into the unguaranteed openness of the wild, facing danger but enacting a faith in what is 'ordained'.

Once again it is worth pointing out how all this parallels a biblical theme. The book of Genesis contains the story of how the human race were instructed to spread and 'fill the earth', but instead, in defiance of God, build the tower of Babel, 'so that we may ... not be scattered over the face of the whole earth'; the results are disastrous.[80] In the following chapter, precisely the reverse occurs: Abraham leaves his security in the city of his people to go to a land he does not know.[81] The New Testament chooses this incident as a paradigm of faith: 'By faith Abraham ... obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.'[82] This pattern of the obedient journey out of the security of the city and into the unknown would seem to be the shape of Tolkien's narrative too.

(v) The Vision of Hopelessness

Yet it is at this point that Tolkien gives to his narrative a tonality different from that of a biblical providentialism. As *The Lord of the Rings* progresses, its tone grows darker and darker, from Rivendell onwards. After Gandalf's disappearance, Aragorn asks, 'What hope have we?', and a little later describes the quest as 'more hopeless than ever'.[83] Frodo tells Faramir that he does not think he will ever reach his goal[84], and Faramir too feels that it is 'a hard doom and a hopeless errand... I do not hope to see you again on any other day under this Sun.'[85] To Pippin's query, 'Is there any hope?', Gandalf replies, 'There never was much hope... Just a fool's hope, as I have been told.'[86] When the army of the West makes its final suicidal assault on Mordor, the narrative describes it as a 'hopeless journey' and 'the last end of their folly'.[87] There are numerous similar passages; this is a world away from the ebullient note of, say, Paul's 'Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph'[88], or of 'If God be for us, who can be against us?'[89], which seems to be his response of faith to any situation. Rather, the approach to Mordor is a growing revelation of apocalyptic evil,

with no sense that the pattern that had pointed in that direction could in any respect promise victory. The end point is the passage describing the beginning of the final battle:

The Sun now climbing towards the South was veiled in the reeks of Mordor, and through a threatening haze it gleamed, remote, a sullen red, as if it were the ending of the day, or the end maybe of all the world of light. And out of the gathering mirk the Nazgul came with their cold voices crying words of death; and then all hope was quenched.[90]

Such is Middle-earth when all the forces have been gathered, and the picture is finally clear; cosmic evil is manifest, but no powers of cosmic good seem to be revealed to match them. (There is no suggestion that Gandalf's powers can handle so unequal a conflict: 'Black is mightier still', he says on an earlier occasion.[91]) Here and elsewhere in the book, the absence of powers of cosmic good is such that no matter how desperate the situation the characters do not pray.[92] There is a sense of a path laid before them, but no one has a relationship with God like that which Christians build their lives upon. At the time of need there is no deity who can be called upon or depended upon. It is not the same world as the hopeless universe of, say, Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*, because there is a providential plan of some kind and (as we shall see) that providence seems to have intervened for good on a number of occasions; but it has not been revealed in any detail – Middle-earth has no Bible – and no one can assume it will step in again.

In the absence of powers of cosmic good, the dark lord dwarfs all other characters. The very title of the book, *The Lord of the Rings*, is his title.[93] What binds together the 'Free Peoples' is that they are 'all enemies of the One Enemy'.[94] Galadriel summarises millennia of Middle-earth's history by saying 'Together through ages of the world we have fought the long defeat.'[95] The only hope in such a world is that evil will defeat itself: that the dark lord will be destroyed by his own weapon, or, more precisely, through his own strategy in creating it. And Tolkien gives several instances of such a pattern. 'Often does hatred hurt itself', says Gandalf, after Saruman's henchman, having (presumably) cast around for

something to hurl at Gandalf, finally (and a trifle implausibly) selects a vital magic stone.[96] Elrond hopes – correctly – that the dark lord will not consider the possibility of his enemies seeking to destroy the Ring rather than using it against him, because 'the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power, and so he judges all hearts.'[97] The inability of the orcs to get along with each other gives a narrow escape to Frodo and Sam on at least three occasions, including one where two groups of orcs fallout and slaughter each other almost to the last soldier.[98] Destiny, then, achieves its purpose partly by standing back and leaving evil to work out its own destruction. To what extent this is a biblical concept is questionable; it is not clear that self-destructiveness must necessarily be inherent in the very concept of evil, and certainly the final destruction of the antichrist in the book of Revelation is the result, not of the fruition of 'internal contradictions', but of the return of Christ in power.

At the same time, the artistic advantages of such an approach are obvious. The more colossal the power of evil, the more ominous seems the outcome of the quest, and the more strikingly small do its main protagonists appear. It also helps to preserve suspense. New Testament supernaturalism gave the early church a total conviction that the outcome of their conflicts was guaranteed by God; and if a church is to stake its all on the promises of God, even to the point of martyrdom, it needs certainty, not suspense. In a novel, in contrast, a guaranteed outcome is not what is required; and it is not surprising, therefore, that evil in *The Lord of the Rings* appears monstrous and unchallengeable in a manner somewhat different from the biblical picture. This also serves to enhance the nobility of the struggle. In his essay on *Beowulf*, Tolkien cites a description of the warfare of the gods of Norse mythology against monstrous evil, a war in which they will finally be defeated, as 'absolute resistance, perfect because without hope.'[99] He adds that this vision is changed in literature affected by Christianity: 'The tragedy of the great temporal defeat remains for a while poignant, but ceases to be finally important... There appears a possibility of eternal victory... But that shift is not complete in *Beowulf*.'[100] Nor, indeed, in *The Lord of the Rings*.

It may be that at this point there is a conflict between the Christian aspects of Tolkien's imagination and the Nordic ethos that he also found so attractive. In one sense Tolkien's description of *Beowulf* as a poem by a Christian poet about 'characters conceived dramatically as living in a noble but heathen past'[101] is directly applicable to *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, Tolkien's use of religious references follows the approach he believes the *Beowulf* poet to have adopted: a deliberate suppression both of 'specifically Christian' content and of the 'old gods' too[102], combined with occasional instances that are 'partly "re-paganized" ... with a special purpose.'[103] That is to say, neither the Christian God nor any Middle-earth deity (not even 'the One' mentioned in the appendices) is worshipped in *The Lord of the Rings*[104], but 're-paganized' references - for example the magical invocation of Elbereth – may be utilised outside a context of worship. Such a deliberate depiction of a 'pre-Christian' era (and this is still more true of the sad world of *The Silmarillion*) would explain the sense of abandonment, the absence of anything resembling Christ's 'Surely I will be with you always'.

Some readers have gone further and seen *The Lord of the Rings* as 'basically pessimistic' and 'essentially pagan in conception'.[105] However, this is not really necessary. Certainly Tolkien presents an ambiguous picture where hope and despair seem evenly matched.[106] But the final outcome is not exactly 'a temporary victory gained at enormous cost'[107]; there is a cost, and other evils will come, but the eventual defeat of the dark lord himself is complete. Perhaps the two incidents in the book that come closest to an embodiment of the Nordic spirit are Eomer's defiance and song of despair on the field of Pelennor[108], and Aragorn at the Black Gate ('The Captains of the West were foundering in a gathering sea... His eyes gleamed like stars that shine the brighter as the night deepens'[109]); but both of these are followed, not by a brave resistance to death, but by an un hoped-for deliverance. Here the Christian pattern reappears. Thus the vision of *The Lord of the Rings* as a whole is not dualistic or Manichaeic. But it must be said that the characters' experience along the way is not unlike it; the endeavour seems to them one in which the forces of evil really are going to win in the end. But this too can be a sense

Christians may well experience in the real world.

(vi) Despair, Hope, 'Eucatastrophe'

There are two possible responses to a situation of apparent hopelessness. One is that of despair; in *The Lord of the Rings* this finds its embodiment in Denethor's suicide, one of the book's most powerful scenes.[110] Denethor is portrayed with a real nobility, despite his relapse into a self-destructive paganism, and Tolkien puts real emotional force into his farewell to Pippin and his feelings towards Faramir, his son whose unconscious body he wishes to burn with him. Pippin's response to Denethor's farewell contains the alternative attitude, however:

Gandalf... is no fool, and I will not think of dying until he despairs of life... And if they come at last to the Citadel, I hope to be here and stand beside you and earn perhaps the arms that you have given me.

This alternative has another, subtler expression. Denethor arranges for his son's body to be carried to the House of the Dead, where he intends them both to die; while Aragorn was last depicted setting off with his Rangers through some subterranean tunnels known as the Paths of the Dead, which are the shortest route to Minas Tirith. The reputation of these Paths is such that Aragorn's friend Eomer gives him up for lost; but unlike Denethor's journey, Aragorn's passage through death is one expecting resurrection. Indeed, Tolkien makes Aragorn overcome death in an unusual sense: during this journey he summons the 'living dead', unquiet spirits who had betrayed his ancestors, and uses them for the defeat of the forces of the dark lord. By this counterpoint Tolkien supplies a striking context for Denethor's reaction to apparent calamity. The alternative to Denethor is, in fact, that of the Norse warrior ethic: to go on fighting against evil right to the end. 'Your part is to go out to the battle of your City, where maybe death awaits you', Gandalf challenges Denethor. He cannot offer a promise either of victory or of his son's healing; but the choice is between playing one's part, and abandoning all action. ('Go then and labour in healing! Go forth and fight! Vanity', cries Denethor.)

Despair is a weapon of the dark lord[111]; and

therefore, even in situations of total hopelessness, the forces of good are continually called to hope. 'Do not give up hope!', Aragorn urges Sam after Frodo is critically wounded at Weathertop.[112] Aragorn himself has gone for many years under the name 'Estel', 'Hope'. [113] 'Do you ask for help?', Gandalf demands of the king of Rohan; '... No counsel have I to give to those who despair.' [114] 'Up with your beard, Durin's son!', Legolas tells Gimli the Dwarf when it seems the relieving army cannot reach Minas Tirith in time; '...Oft hope is born, when all is forlorn.' [115] But it is important to notice what such a 'hope' is. 'Don't trust your head, Samwise, it is not the best part of you', Sam reflects after mistakenly assuming Frodo to be dead at Cirith Ungol. 'The trouble with you is that you never really had any hope. Now what is to be done?' [116] Sam's problem here is not that his evaluation of the external probabilities was inaccurate; it is that he has failed to base his actions on 'hope' as an *internal* quality. Tolkien sums up the action of the book as a whole in the words 'hope beyond hope'. [117]

The question then arises, what does *The Lord of the Rings* present as the source of hope? What is it that enables someone to follow the 'open road' – into the open country, into places of notorious danger, into unequal battle – in defiance of the likelihood of defeat and destruction? The book offers several answers. One is the sense of the pattern that is 'ordained' or 'appointed', that motivates Frodo's acceptance of the Ring at Rivendell [118]; Galadriel's encouragement to the Company as they depart from Lorien ('Maybe the paths that you each shall tread are already laid before your feet. though you do not see them' [119]); Frodo's decision to carry on into Mordor, alone if necessary ('I know what I should do' [120]); or Aragorn's decision to challenge the dark lord in the Stone of Seeing ('I deemed that the time was ripe, and that the Stone had come to me for just such a purpose' [121]). Another answer, expressing this pattern, is prophecy, the verbal revelation from a bygone era, such as the verses that lead Aragorn to attempt the Paths of the Dead or Boromir to seek out Rivendell. [122] A third, as we noted above, is the fellowship of like-minded travellers; and, linked with this, devotion to or trust in the wisdom of a guide or leader. Trust in Gandalf is what motivates Frodo's departure from Hobbiton; love for Aragorn leads

the Rangers to venture into the Paths of the Dead[123] and Eomer to join the apparently doomed assault on Mordor[124]. Again these are a combination comparable to the Christian framework. (My personal feeling, by the way, was that they were significantly weakened in the film version; which gave much more force to Boromir's questions as to whether sending the ring to Mordor just with two small hobbits – and thus the plot in general – wasn't simply a bit stupid.)

And we must add a further factor: the embodiment of the pattern in actual events. Gunnar Urang suggests that in *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien is creating 'an imaginative framework ... for the Christian experience of hope', in which hope is nurtured both by the 'ordering of the historical process to some end' (that is, the sense of a providential pattern) and also by the experience of specific "signs" and paradigm-events within history'. There is in the narrative, he says, a series of unexpected rescues, of lesser "happy endings" figuring forth the ultimate triumph. The list is a long one: Old Forest, the River Bruinen, Mount Caradhras, Fangorn, Helm's Deep, the gates of Minas Tirith, the Pelennor Fields, Cirith Ungol, the Black Gate of Mordor, Mount Doom. In everyone of these, despair is abruptly transformed to joy by a sudden and unexpected display of (often magical) power.[125]

This is, of course, the pattern of *euclastrophe* which Tolkien describes in *On Fairy-Stories* as the 'highest function' of fantasy: the 'sudden joyous "turn"' coming out of despair and darkness.[126] Urang is right to observe the repeated way in which this pattern of deliverance appears in the book; and yet more instances could be quoted. There is the close escape from the Black Riders in the Shire after the appearance of the Elves; there is Merry and Pippin's escape from the orc that is taking them to Mordor after the latter is hit by an arrow 'aimed with skill, or guided by fate'.[127] One other example of particular interest, because it shows Tolkien's ability to present this pattern in many different guises, is when Aragorn looks ahead to the future of Gondor. He is filled with foreboding: Gandalf is going, Aragorn himself is mortal; and the legendary and symbolically important White Tree of Gondor, the only tree of its kind, has been dead for many years. Gandalf turns his attention to

'where all seems barren and cold', and on the edge of the snow he sees a sapling of the Tree. To Aragorn, it is a 'sign'. 'Who shall say how it comes here in the appointed hour?' says Gandalf.[128] Here, outside the context of combat, are the ingredients of the same pattern: gloom turned to joy by a quasi-miracle.

(vii) Mordor: The Place of Apocalypse

The most extended instance of *euclastrophe* is the last long journey of Frodo and Sam across Mordor. For here the book's themes come together: the apparently impossible journey of the small across a totally Manichaean landscape, devoid of water, devoid of life (except occasional thornbushes) and devoid of hope; and the deliverance when disaster seems to have fallen at the very end of the quest. Tolkien is very good at conveying the tremendous exertion involved in this final stage; he emphasises repeatedly how hopeless it appears, and how, despite this, the hobbits refuse to give up. 'The whole thing is quite hopeless, so it's no good worrying about tomorrow'[129]; 'I am tired, weary, I haven't a hope left. But I have to go on trying to get to the Mountain, as long as I can move'[130]; 'I never hoped to get across. I can't see any hope of it now. But I've still got to do the best I can.'[131]

It is in such black situations that *euclastrophe*, and the possibility of supernatural intervention, appears. It is when Frodo has been captured and Sam, having failed to find him, sits down 'weary and feeling finally defeated', that, 'moved by what thought in his heart he could not tell' (*sic*), Sam begins to sing; and Frodo hears the song and replies, revealing his whereabouts.[132] This vague hint is repeated. Frodo and Sam are trapped by a monstrous insect; the creature is repelled by a light emerging from a phial given to Frodo by the elf-lady Galadriel, but Sam only remembers it at all because of a 'light' that comes 'in his mind', followed by a vision of Galadriel.[133] A little later Sam again finds deliverance as a result of remembering the phial because 'a thought came to him, as if some remote voice had spoken'; after which 'his tongue was loosed and his voice cried in a language which he did not know', which leads to victory.[134] (To the Christian there is a paradoxical realism about the former at least; for if divine guidance has any meaning, it must in part

at least have to do with thoughts being given or stimulated that were not present before.) As the hobbits press on into Mordor, something resembling answered prayer is slipped into the narrative: Sam remarks. 'If only the Lady could see us or hear us. I'd say to her: "Your Ladyship, all we want is light and water."' [135] Two pages later the clouds clear and the hobbits find an unexpected stream; Sam bursts out. 'If ever I see the Lady again, I will tell her!... Light and now water!' Frodo describes it as 'our luck... or our blessing' [136]; Tolkien is keeping the slight ambivalence with which he has phrased such things throughout the book. However, the most important reason for the credibility of such incidents as these is the fact that the overall picture still seems (convincingly) hopeless.

An interesting aspect of the Mordor sections is that, with the recurring presence of *eucatastrophe*, it becomes plain that the hobbits must live by that and that alone. Tolkien introduces an element one can only refer to as asceticism; the everyday becomes stripped away, leaving Frodo and Sam with the powers of the otherworld – the Ring, the sense of the dark lord's nearness, and Galadriel's phial – in naked confrontation. Tolkien draws this out in a remark about food. In Ithilien, on the marches of Mordor, there had been a moment of relaxation when Sam had cooked a true hobbit meal 'Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit' (the chapter's title); but in Mordor itself they live entirely on food given them earlier by the Elves for 'when all else fails' [137]: It did not satisfy desire, and at times Sam's mind was filled with the memories of food, and the longing for simple bread and meats. And yet this waybread of the Elves had a potency that increased as travellers relied on it alone and did not mingle it with other foods. It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind. [138] The same note appears when Frodo realises he can no longer carry anything but the Ring. First he has to abandon his mail-shirt, at the risk of being stabbed in the dark [139], and eventually his orc-cloak, shield, helmet and sword have to follow ('I'll bear no weapon, fair or foul. Let them take me, if they will!' [140]) At the same time, his consciousness is becoming monopolised by the Ring, and as a result he can recall 'no taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind'. [141] Sam, too, has to leave all that he has carried so

far, even his cooking-gear (his 'chief treasure' [142]). Ancient archetypes of poverty and detachment appear here: all disguises and weapons, indeed everything ordinary, has been left behind, and only the apocalypse and the possibility of *eucatastrophe* remains.

It is immediately after this that Sam feels Frodo has 'found new strength, more than could be explained by the small lightening of the load that he had to carry. [143] Tolkien's touch is again light: no naturalistic explanation is offered, but providence and miracle are not mentioned either. Still, in the context of the 'answered prayer' for light and water earlier, there is an inevitable impression of strength coming to Sam and Frodo from some unspecified source as they labour on at the very limit of their endurance. Thus three pages later – after a final attack of despair brought on by the realisation that they don't know the route for the final stage [144] – Sam finds he has to carry Frodo, and 'whether because Frodo was so worn ... or because some gift of final strength was given to him', he does not find the difficulty he expected. [145]

Soon afterwards comes 'a sense of urgency which he did not understand ... almost as if he had been called'. [146] Frodo has sensed it too: the reason is that many miles away the army of the West is facing annihilation and can only be saved by the immediate destruction of the Ring. That, however, is only achieved by the reappearance of Gollum. It is a last attack by Gollum that 'roused the dying embers of Frodo's heart and will' [147]; and when, at his very destination, Frodo proves to be so much under the power of the Ring that he cannot destroy it, it is Gollum who seizes it, falls with it into the flames and so brings about its destruction – and the downfall of the dark lord. This last *eucatastrophe* is a final instance of evil's self-defeating nature: the dark lord is destroyed by his own Ring, the Ring is destroyed by Gollum's 'devouring desire'. [148]

But it is also the climax of the outworking of an essentially morally-oriented providence. At the start of the book, when Frodo had regretted that Gollum had not been killed, Gandalf had commented, 'My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the

fate of many.[149] The fulfilment is complex: Gandalf's hopes of Gollum's 'healing' are not fulfilled, nor is Tolkien's pattern a purely mechanical providence where Gollum helps Frodo because Bilbo pitied Gollum. Rather, Gollum only *exists* to play his part because other people had spared him – and spared him despite the unpleasant consequences that would probably follow. (In their doing so we see perhaps a further instance of the pattern of the 'open road'; pursuing the right action although the outcome is ominously uncertain.) So, at length, the providential pattern is completed, through the long, freely-willed exertions of Sam and Frodo and through the long-term results of a free choice of *evil* by Gollum. At this point providence and freewill are inextricably interwoven. Patricia Meyer Spacks observes that while this 'final twist' with Gollum is dramatically unnecessary, prolonging the suspense by barely a page, thematically 'it is essential. In the presentation of this event, the idea of free will intimately involved with fate receives its most forceful statement.' Gollum is now will-less through his long servitude to evil, and 'it is appropriate that at the last he should be merely an instrument of ... essentially benevolent fate.[150] Gunnar Urang would seem to be mistaken when he complains that, because Frodo's decision not to destroy the Ring and Gollum's craving for it are both overruled, 'the individual's freedom and power ... are affirmed only in the abstract, whereas the divine absoluteness of power ... is affirmed in the concrete.[151] For there is an important issue at stake here. The biblical confession is that God's sovereignty alone is final: He is Lord. A mortal may have the power to damn himself (Gollum does), but God has not abandoned the cosmos entirely to human frailty. Hence, the Ring-bearer Frodo can still possess the ordinary hobbit's follies – and yet the quest will not fail. In the final event, hope is based not on Frodo's strength but on the final *eucaastrophe*. And yet even that last intervention operates through the long term consequences of freely-willed acts by Gollum and Bilbo many years previously. This is not a humanistic celebration of the hero triumphing over all odds, nor an anthropocentric tragedy of the gulf that finally opens between the ideal and the reality. Rather, even in the Manichaeic landscape of Mordor, the pattern is the biblical one of providence co-working with its willing agents.

(viii) 'Eucaastrophe' and the Products of a Christian Imagination

It is plain that this pattern of the *eucaastrophe*, the providential deliverance, meant a great deal in Tolkien's imagination. Indeed, it is the pattern of the book as a whole: the overthrow of overwhelming evil by the derisory strength of the small, as they attempt to do what is 'ordained'. The specific, paradigmatic deliverances that come, through 'fortune' or 'fate' or the supernatural power of Gandalf, to those who are 'going on' in the midst of despair and ruin, are what distinguish the 'hope' of *The Lord of the Rings* from a more existentialist 'hope' based solely on the fact that the future is 'open'. They are the embodiment of something within history 'working together for good' (reverting again to Paul's terms in Romans) with those who are seeking to follow through what they have seen of the providential pattern. Tolkien makes it quite clear in *On Fairy-Stories* that these *eucaastrophes*, these instances of 'a sudden miraculous grace', are analogous to 'evangelium', the pattern of the Gospel in the real world[152]; the pattern of *eucaastrophe* is the pattern of Tolkien's Christian supernaturalism.

Since we have Tolkien's own authority for emphasising this parallelism, it is worth taking a closer look at the figure of Gandalf. For Gandalf is the agent of deliverance, often by supernatural power, in a number of the *eucaastrophes*. It is he who defeats the wolves on Caradhras, makes possible the escape from Moria, heals Theoden of Rohan and sets him free to play his part in history, turns defeat into victory at Helm's Deep, stands in the breach when the gate of Gondor falls, saves Faramir from his father and Frodo and Sam from the lava, and finds the sapling of the White Tree. 'Gandalf!', cries Pippin when Faramir is rescued from the Nazgul on the field of Pelennor, 'He always turns up when things are darkest'[153] – an explicit comment that Tolkien gets away with only because it occurs in the midst of an effective narrative of action. Throughout the book Gandalf is the guide and director, sensing the turn of events, the movement of the shape of history[154], and indeed moulding it as a kind of surrogate providence: 'a great mover of the deeds that are done in our time', Faramir calls him.[155]

It is significant, then, that he is presented as a power of the otherworld. His appearance does not suggest any great significance: in Fangorn, where he first reappears after his fall in Moria, he is described as 'a bent figure moving slowly ... like an old beggarman'.^[156] But that can be dispelled in a sudden epiphany, when the presence of the otherworld is revealed in him:

The old man ... sprang to his feet and leaped to the top of a large rock. There he stood, grown suddenly tall, towering above them. His hood and his grey rags were flung away ... He lifted up his staff, and Gimli's axe leaped from his grasp and fell ringing on the ground... His hair was white as snow in the sunshine; and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun; power was in his hand. Between wonder, joy and fear they stood and found no words to say.^[157]

The infelicities of this passage are clear – the unhelpful inversion of word order, the virtual meaninglessness of 'power was in his hand'. In context, though, it seems to succeed; in part because Tolkien shrewdly ensures that the transition from weakness to power is incomplete – Gandalf's memory is shown within the next few lines to have considerable gaps. Still, when his true nature is revealed, even Aragorn, heir of Gondor, pledges his allegiance: 'He has passed through the fire and the abyss, and they shall fear him. We will go where he leads.'^[158] As a power of the otherworld, Gandalf is a sign that in the midst of darkness there can be hope for a pattern of deliverance.

The reason for this hope is important. The reference to 'the fire and the abyss' – reminiscent perhaps of the Harrowing of Hell – refers to Gandalf's struggle in Moria with a monstrous, demonic force called a Balrog, recounted by Tolkien in a fine piece of mythic narrative. Gandalf recalls the aftermath of the struggle:

Then darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and Time.... Naked I was sent back – for a brief time, until my task is done. And naked I lay upon the mountain-top... There I lay staring upward, while the stars wheeled over, and each day was as long as a life-age of the earth. Faint to my ears came the gathered rumour of all lands: the springing and the dying, the song and the

weeping, and the slow everlasting groan of overburdened stone.^[159]

So far so numinous. The dominant note here is perhaps more animistic than Christian; that, no doubt, is a deliberate move on Tolkien's part, because later in the book the references to Gandalf take on an explicit death-and-resurrection pattern. 'I am Gandalf the White, who has returned from death ... and I cast you from the order and from the Council', says Gandalf when he is revealed in power to the treacherous Saruman.^[160] 'My heart will not yet despair', says Pippin later. 'Gandalf fell and has returned and is with us.'^[161] For Sam, Gandalf's resurrection becomes a token of a still more far-reaching cosmic restoration: 'Gandalf! I thought you were dead! ... Is everything sad going to come untrue?'^[162]

It is, then, as the 'resurrected one' that Gandalf embodies *eucatastrophe*. It is still important to remember that *The Lord of the Rings* is not allegorical: Gandalf is only 'a steward'^[163], neither omniscient^[164] nor omnipotent.^[165] Unlike with Aslan in C.S. Lewis' Narnia stories, there is no question of the reader being invited to supply an interpretation of deity.^[166] Still, it is not without significance for an understanding of the nature of Tolkien's vision that *eucatastrophe* should be embodied in a deliverer who has died and risen again.

Gunnar Urang goes a little further:

No "God" is required in this story; it is enough if it suggests the kind of pattern in history which the Christian tradition has ascribed to the providence of God. Gandalf and Aragorn need not turn our thoughts to the Christ of Christian faith; but they persuade us that if we are to have hope in our lives and in our history it must be hope for the kind of power and authority revealed in Aragorn the king and on the basis of the kind of power revealed in Gandalf's "miracles" and in his rising from the dead. What Frodo does and undergoes speaks to us of what a man's responsibility, according to the Christian faith, must always be, to renounce the kind of power which would enslave others and ourselves and to submit to that power which frees us to be all we are capable of being.^[167]

Apart from the last phrase, which seems to lack connection with Tolkien's text, this seems a fair summary. Frodo could alternatively be described as the suffering victim bringing deliverance not by his strength but by 'bearing' the Ring and enduring its attendant evil; again, not as an allegorical figure, but as something analogous to the Christian pattern, a figure with some of the characteristics which the Christian believes must be present in the pattern of hope and liberation from evil. Aragorn is the alternative figure, the warrior-messiah who brings in the new age[168]; the King who spent years wandering the wild until his 'looks are against' him[169], who does not assert his kingship forcibly, and who also is a healer, '*Envinyatar*, the Renewer'.[170] Gandalf announces of him, 'There is a king again... Indeed the waste in time will be waste no longer, and there will be people and fields where once there was wilderness' – language reminiscent of Old Testament messianic passages.[171] The news of the fall of the Dark Tower is brought in terms that appear to be straight out of the Psalms:

Your King hath passed through, and he is victorious. Sing and be glad, all ye children of the West, for your King shall come again, and he shall dwell among you all the days of your life.[172]

In all these cases, then, the characters who bring about deliverance embody some part of the Christian pattern; the elements of the Christian story have been separated and recombined, but they are still present. Another instance is the light-giving phial of Galadriel, her gift to Frodo. This is as much the presence of *eucatastrophe* in Mordor as is Gandalf outside it; it repeatedly banishes temptation[173] and fear[174], it breaks the black magic of the Watchers.[175] It contains light from 'Earendil's star'; and Clyde Kilby tells how one Christmas Tolkien sent him a note containing a line of Anglo-Saxon poetry which he later translated as 'Here Earendel, brightest of angels, sent from God to men.' The line was from Cynewulf's *Christ*, a poem concerned with Christ's advent, the ascension and the judgement; and Tolkien described it as 'Cynewulf's words from which ultimately sprang the whole of my mythology'.[176] Earendil himself is a major figure in *The Silmarillion*; and it is significant that Galadriel's phial, the bringer of *eucatastrophe* in *The Lord of the Rings*, should have this direct

connection in Tolkien's mind with advent and the coming of deliverance in the Incarnation – which to Tolkien was 'the eucatastrophe of Man's history'.[177] Again, this is not to see the phial as having deliberate allegorical connotations; the link is not one Tolkien makes *within the text*. Rather, it is another sign of the analogous relationship existing between Tolkien's beliefs about the real world and the shape he moulded into the events taking place in his sub-created world; deliverance in the latter parallels the motions of grace in the former.

For the purposes of this study, then, Tolkien may be considered as having found at least a partial solution to the problems of the fictional depiction of providence, by inventing his own historical process (buttressed by a vast amount of ancillary information, for example in his appendices), and then excluding explicitly Christian terminology while embedding in his history a sense of a purposive design. This design is in some sense opposed to the power of the 'dark lord', and it is a moral providence, working through individuals and their free moral choices. Within the overall design, this 'providence' seems to have a concern for the 'salvation' of virtually all the individual characters: Gollum and Saruman have the opportunity to repent, Boromir's death has importance for the same reason, and at Lorien each of the Fellowship are tested, even those who will not be accompanying the Ring much longer.[178] In the accomplishment of the design, mortal characters may have a role that is 'ordained'; but following the 'paths that are laid'[179] involves a long obedience, venturing into the open in the face of monstrous evil, motivated by a sense of the overall pattern and an awareness of duty, and supported by mutual fellowship. That is a journey that leads (for Frodo, at any rate) right out of this world into the otherworld; and it is carried through not merely by human hardihood but by something resembling grace, manifesting itself in specific paradigmatic events in the darkest moments of all.

What is striking is the wide variety of episodes in which Tolkien expresses these patterns. This is a credit to his imagination; and yet it is surprising that the deliverances do not become repetitious. There are perhaps four main reasons why they do not.

Firstly, the events in question are scattered through a narrative of over a thousand pages; and secondly, those pages are very far from being an account of the elect waiting complacently and inactively for the next deliverance. On the contrary, the imaginative weight of the book falls very heavily on the smallness and weakness of the good characters, and the overpowering nature of the evil that confronts them. In such a situation miraculous deliverances usually serve to balance the forces, making room for the mortal protagonists to continue to exercise their wills in action. That this balance is generally achieved is itself a noteworthy achievement, although the price Tolkien has to pay is removing any element of real relationship with God to the point where his world sometimes seems more Manichaean than Christian. But it does at least ensure that his preliminary *euclastrophes* do not wreck the book; deliverance of the characters is only the prelude to a still greater sense of foreboding. The hobbits escape the Old Forest, but there are still Black Riders ahead; they escape into Rivendell, but a still worse journey is to follow; unexpected deliverance in the battle of Pelennor brings with it as a reward participation in the impossible assault on Mordor.[180]

Besides that, there is the ambivalent nature of the book's references to 'chance' and 'fortune'. 'Just chance brought me then, if chance you call it', says Hombadil after rescuing the hobbits in the Old Forest.[181] 'You have been saved, and all your friends too, mainly by good fortune, as it is called. You cannot count on it a second time', Gandalf warns Pippin at Isengard – repeating later, 'We have been strangely fortunate.'[182] Such references hint at something more than chance that is operating, but they keep it from becoming too imaginatively prominent. It is in the Appendices that Tolkien varies this phrasing in a slightly more explicit manner, when Gandalf recalls that Rivendell escaped destruction in the War of the Ring only because some years earlier a Dwarf-kingdom had been established further east, and that in turn had been the result of 'a chance-meeting, as we say in Middle-earth', albeit one preceded on both sides by quasi-premonitions.[183] Here the implication is that the term 'chance' only makes sense if one's perspectives are limited to the purely terrestrial, to 'Middle-earth' in its ancient sense. (It is not surprising that we should find this in the

Appendices, which are still 'widening the world'; it is in the Appendices that we first find direct mention of 'the One', the God of Middle-earth, and His sole overt intervention in history, in the downfall of Middle-earth's equivalent of Atlantis.[184]) Still, such a providence can scarcely be described as obtrusive.

Finally there is the elegiac note that dominates *The Lord of the Rings*, playing against the sense of victory in a kind of counterpoint. Although the 'dark lord' is finally defeated, much is lost. The Elves lose their power when the Ring is destroyed (despite Elrond's hopes to the contrary[185]), and must leave Middle-earth; they are losing Middle-earth and Middle-earth is losing them. Frodo, too, returns to 'little honour ... in his own country'[186], and will never be at ease in the Shire again: 'It has been saved, but not for me.'[187] All this militates against any sense of a wooden march from facile triumph to facile triumph, thereby preserving the effectiveness of Tolkien's pattern of *euclastrophe*.

Here, then, is one way of presenting providence in contemporary fiction. That is not the *purpose* of Tolkien's book; although he has referred to it as 'fundamentally religious'[188], yet the 'prime motive' was, as he says in the Foreword, 'the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story'[189]; not to express providentialism! There are numerous other thematic complexes that could be drawn out from the story. Still, there can be no doubt that the pattern of hope fulfilled in *euclastrophe*, the repeated revelation of the 'sudden joyous "turn"', is one of the most powerful aspects of the tale for many readers. W.H. Auden wrote that 'No fiction I have read in the last five years has given me more joy'.[190] Bernard Levin, himself not a Christian, launched into rather extravagant praise of the book, calling it 'one of the most remarkable works of literature in our, or any, time. It is comforting, in this troubled day, to be once more assured that the meek shall inherit the earth.'[191] Whatever we may think of Levin's views on the literary canon, it is at least plain that for him, as no doubt for many readers too, Tolkien has found a model of providence that is imaginatively effective. Here, at least, the fantasy option seems justified.

References:

- [1] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-

55), p.1. Unless otherwise indicated all references are to the one-volume Harper Collins paperback edition of 1995, henceforth referred to as *TLOTR*.

[2] *TLOTR*, p.2.

[3] *Ibid*, pp.4-5.

[4] This is the story Tolkien tells in his children's book *The Hobbit*.

[5] *TLOTR*, p.11.

[6] *Ibid*, p.21.

[7] *Ibid*, pp.22, 24.

[8] *Ibid*, p.45.

[9] *Ibid*, p.61.

[10] *Ibid*, p.50.

[11] *Ibid*, pp.54-55.

[12] *Ibid*, p.58.

[13] *Ibid*, pp.77-78.

[14] *Ibid*, p.83.

[15] *Ibid*, p.82.

[16] *Ibid*, p.215.

[17] Cf. *ibid*, pp.225, 379.

[18] *Ibid*, p.2.

[19] *Ibid*, p.349. In Tolkien's other long fantasy, *The Silmarillion*, it turns out that the Eldar are not unfallen, and indeed Galadriel, the ruler of Lorien, participated in the Fall. But that is a complexity beyond *The Lord of the Rings*.

[20] Faramir, likewise, seems marked out as a good character in part by his attitude to the Elves (*ibid*, p.664).

[21] It bears consideration whether Tolkien was influenced at this point by his friend C.S. Lewis' concept of Desire, of a basic human longing which, whatever it appeared to be directed towards, would in time prove to be unsatisfied with all fruitions (like Sam after seeing the Elves?), and pointing beyond, towards heaven. At any rate, Sam's discontent with the narrow bounds of the Shire and his openness to the 'wider world' undoubtedly had positive connotations for Tolkien.

[22] *Ibid*, p.129.

[23] *Ibid*, p.138.

[24] *Ibid*, p.260. It is an effective touch that the generally saintly and altruistic Elves should be quite capable of selfishness in this case: if the dark lord's army pursue the Ring to the Sea, they argue, 'hereafter the Elves may have no escape from the lengthening shadows of Middle-earth.'

[25] *Ibid*, p.261.

[26] *Ibid*, p.262.

[27] *Ibid*, pp.242.

[28] *Ibid*, p.236.

[29] *Ibid*, p.240.

[30] *Ibid*, p.262.

[31] *Ibid*, pp.263-64.

[32] *Ibid*, p.265.

[33] *Ibid*, p.264.

[34] *Ibid*, p.356.

[35] *Ibid*, pp.766, 369. Daniel Hughes notes the unusual importance of renunciation in the book's central action, in that Frodo goes forth not to find a treasure but to lose one ('Pieties and Giant Forms in The Lord of the Rings', in Hillegas, *op.cit.*, p.85).

[36] *TLOTR*, pp.1006, 855.

[37] *Ibid*, p.1038.

[38] *Ibid*, p.423.

[39] *Ibid*, p.392.

[40] *Ibid*, p.54. Patricia Meyer Spacks points out that Saruman, after his defeat, 'too corrupted to choose, is forced by the decay of his own will to remain in a slavery resulting from free choice made long before.' ('Power and Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*', in *Tolkien and the Critics*, ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (Notre Dame, Indiana. 1968), p.93.) At the same time, Saruman is offered a kind of 'salvation', and it comes to 'the balance of a hair' (*TLOTR*, pp.568-70); the same is true of Gollum (*ibid*, p.699; cf. Gandalf's 'There is little hope... for him. Yet not no hope' (p.54). The outworkings of destiny bring a moment of free choice to everyone, although their past actions have left both Saruman and Gollum hardened; and this, too, is enacting something very much in keeping with the biblical pattern.

[41] Tolkien himself saw the references to Elbereth as 'references to religion' (cf. Clyde Kilby, *Tolkien and the Silmarillion* (1977), p.55.)

[42] *TLOTR*, p.274.

[43] *Ibid*, p.264.

[44] *Ibid*, p.861.

[45] *Ibid*, p.58.

[46] Cf. Romans 8:28, 9:17.

[47] C.S. Lewis, 'The Dethronement of Power', in Isaacs and Zimbardo, *op.cit.*, p.13.

[48] Roger Sale, 'Tolkien and Frodo Baggins', in *ibid*, p.253.

[49] *TLOTR*, p.750.

[50] *Ibid*, p.812.

[51] *Ibid*, p.823.

[52] *Ibid*, p.502.

[53] *Ibid*, p.864.

[54] 1 Corinthians 1:27.

[55] *TLOTR*, p.83.

[56] *Ibid*, p.367.

[57] *Ibid*, p.268.

- [58] *Ibid*, p.269.
[59] *Ibid*, p.83.
[60] *Ibid*, p.760.
[61] Charles Moorman, "'Now Entertain Conjecture of a Time" – The Fictive Worlds of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien', in Hillegas, *op.cit.*, p.66. Incidentally, there is a very similar passage in Lewis' *That Hideous Strength*, p.139.
[62] *TLOTR*, p.253.
[63] *Ibid*, p.252.
[64] *Ibid*, pp.568-69.
[65] *Ibid*, p.979.
[66] *Ibid*, p.239.
[67] *Ibid*, p.260.
[68] *Ibid*, p.242.
[69] *Ibid*, pp.239-40.
[70] *Ibid*, p.329.
[71] *Ibid*, p.359.
[72] *Ibid*, p.388.
[73] *Ibid*, pp.389-90.
[74] Edmund Wilson, *The Bit Between My Teeth* (1965), p.329.
[75] Urang, *Shadows of Heaven*, p.114.
[76] *TLOTR*, p.741.
[77] *Ibid*, p.781.
[78] *Ibid*, pp.807, 834.
[79] *Ibid*, p.835.
[80] Genesis 9:1, 11:4.
[81] Genesis 12:1.
[82] Hebrews 11:8.
[83] *TLOTR*, pp.324, 393.
[84] *Ibid*, p.666.
[85] *Ibid*, p.678.
[86] *Ibid*, p.797.
[87] *Ibid*, pp.868, 869.
[88] 2 Corinthians 2:14.
[89] Romans 8:31.
[90] *TLOTR*, p.873.
[91] *Ibid*, p.489.
[92] For example, in Gandalf's imprisonment at Orthanc, Frodo's vital decision at Parth Galen, or the total disaster that seems to have befallen the quest after Frodo is apparently killed at Cirith Ungol, when Sam is 'utterly alone' (*ibid*, p.877). The invocations of Elbereth (eg. p.894) are more a magical weapon than a prayer.
[93] *Ibid*, pp.220, 259. The point is Manlove's, *op.cit.*, p.193. It could be argued, of course, that Gandalf, Aragorn, Sam or (most of the time) Frodo are 'lords of the Ring' in that they master its power in renouncing it.
[94] *TLOTR*, p.644.
[95] *Ibid*, p.348.

- [96] *Ibid*, p.569-70.
[97] *Ibid*, p.262.
[98] *Ibid*, p.884. Other instances of the same pattern are found on pp.797, 816, 858.
[99] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics* (1983). p.21. Cf. C.S. Lewis: 'Dualism can be a manly creed. In the Norse form ("The giants will beat the gods in the end, but I am on the side of the gods") it is nobler by many degrees than most philosophies of the moment.' (*God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids. 1970), p.24.)
[100] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, pp.22-23.
[101] *Ibid*, p.39.
[102] *Ibid*, p.22. Kilby quotes a letter to Father Robert Murray in which Tolkien describes *The Lord of the Rings* as 'fundamentally religious', but adds that he had 'cut out practically all references to anything like "religion", to cults and practices in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.' (Kilby, *op.cit.*, p.56.)
[103] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, p.41.
[104] In *The Silmarillion*, in contrast, there are many religious references, because the book sets out the entire cosmology of Middle-earth. The issue of worship is crucial in the section titled 'Akallabeth'.
[105] As does Charles Moorman, in Hillegas, *op.cit.*, pp.62ff. But the 'never-ceasing wars against evil' that Moorman stresses are part of the Christian vision of this world too; he cites Elrond's description of the previous victory over Sauron as 'fruitless', but Elrond himself modifies this (*TLOTR*, p.237); he quotes Frodo's being wounded beyond recovery, but for Frodo, as in Christianity, there is an afterlife that compensates for this. He is simply inaccurate when he says there is 'no hearkening back ... to a Golden Age', and no time 'when the "Great Darkness" did not exist somewhere'; Bombadil is used by Tolkien to recall such a time (*ibid*, p.129).
[106] A similar coexistence of the old Northern heroic ethic and the Christian vision appears in Tolkien's poem 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son'.
[107] Moorman, *ibid*, p.62.
[108] *TLOTR*, p.829.
[109] *Ibid*, p.927.
[110] *Ibid*, pp.834-36.
[111] The chief Black Rider is the 'Captain of Despair' (*ibid*, p.801); cf. p.805.

- [112] *Ibid*, p.198.
[113] *Ibid*, p.1032.
[114] *Ibid*, p.503.
[115] *Ibid*, p.859.
[116] *Ibid*, p.723.
[117] *Ibid*, p.1036. Tolkien sometimes uses 'hope' and 'despair' in a sense more directly related to the external probabilities, but the intention is still the same. Frodo watches the powerful army of Mordor leave Minas Morgul: 'Despair had not left him, but the weakness had passed.... What he had to do, he had to do, if he could' (p.692). Aragorn challenges the Company after Gandalf's fall in Moria, 'We must do without hope.... We have a long road, and much to do' (p.324).
[118] *Ibid*, p.264; cf p.240.
[119] *Ibid*, p.359.
[120] *Ibid*, p.388.
[121] *Ibid*, p.861.
[122] *Ibid*, pp.764, 240.
[123] *Ibid*, p.767. This passage, incidentally, is a most effective piece of narration in its own right, and is a good example of Tolkien's ability to create his own legends, almost by way of ornamentation, as he goes along.
[124] To this we should perhaps add the impulse to 'go on' for the honour of one's people (eg. *ibid*, p.860).
[125] Gunnar Urang, 'Tolkien's Fantasy: The Phenomenology of Hope', in Hillegas, *op.cit.*, p.105.
[126] J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, reprinted in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York, 1966), p.68. We explore this further in the appendix to this study.
[127] *TLOTR*, p.446.
[128] *Ibid*, p.950.
[129] *Ibid*, p.893. Tolkien possibly intends an echo here of Matthew 6:34, 'Take therefore no thought for the morrow... Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof' – though this in context is a statement of faith in the care of providence (cf. verses 25-33).
[130] *Ibid*, p.897.
[131] *Ibid*, p.903.
[132] *Ibid*, p.887.
[133] *Ibid*, pp.703-04.
[134] *Ibid*, p.712.
[135] *Ibid*, p.897.
[136] *Ibid*, pp.899-900.
[137] *Ibid*, p.361.
[138] *Ibid*, p.915.
[139] *Ibid*, p.897.
[140] *Ibid*, p.916.
[141] *Ibid*.
[142] *Ibid*, p.273.
[143] *Ibid*, p.917.
[144] *Ibid*, p.918.
[145] *Ibid*, p.919-20.
[146] *Ibid*, p.921.
[147] *Ibid*, p.922.
[148] *Ibid*.
[149] *Ibid*, p.58. Gollum has also found himself at the mercy of Frodo, the wood-elves, Faramir, and Sam (pp.600-01, 248-49, 670-71, 609, 923); it is a collective act of pity that makes possible Gollum's crucial intervention at Mount Doom.
[150] Spacks, in Isaacs and Zimbardo, *op.cit.*, p.95.
[151] Urang, *Shadows of Heaven*, p.160.
[152] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, pp.68, 71.
[153] *TLOTR*, p.791.
[154] *Ibid*, pp.484, 581.
[155] *Ibid*, p.655.
[156] *Ibid*, p.481.
[157] *Ibid*, pp.483-84.
[158] *Ibid*, p.490.
[159] *Ibid*, p.491.
[160] *Ibid*, p.569.
[161] *Ibid*, p.749.
[162] *Ibid*, p.930.
[163] *Ibid*, p.742.
[164] *Ibid*, pp.484-85, 488, 950.
[165] *Ibid*, p.489.
[166] Edmund Fuller quotes Tolkien as saying that 'Gandalf is an angel'. ('The Lord of the Hobbits', in Isaacs and Zimbardo, *op.cit.*, p.35.)
[167] Urang, in Hillegas, *op.cit.*, p.107.
[168] The idea of characters that partially embody the characteristics of the ultimate Messianic figure forms a key part of the Jewish-Christian understanding of the Old Testament; David and Solomon, for example, can both be seen as partial foreshadowings of the Messiah. What Tolkien is doing is in this respect not especially novel.
[169] *TLOTR*, p.167.
[170] *Ibid*, p.845.
[171] *Ibid*, p.971.
[172] *Ibid*, p.942.
[173] *Ibid*, p.691.
[174] *Ibid*, pp.705,712.
[175] *Ibid*, pp.882,894.
[176] Kilby, *op.cit.*, pp.57-58.
[177] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, p.72.
[178] *Ibid*, pp.348-49.
[179] *Ibid*, pp.359, 696.
[180] The absence of any such sense of

foreboding is one reason why the 'Scouring of the Shire' episode at the close comes as something of an anticlimax.

[181] *Ibid*, p.123.

[182] *Ibid*, pp.579-81.

[183] *Ibid*, p.1053.

[184] *Ibid*, p.1013.

[185] *Ibid*, p.262.

[186] *Ibid*, p.1002.

[187] *Ibid*, p.1006.

[188] Letter to Father Robert Murray, quoted Kilby, *op.cit.*, p.56.

[189] TLOTR, p.xvi.

[190] Quoted Humphrey Carpenter, *op.cit.*, p.221.

[191] *Ibid*, p.222.

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