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“The Cloud of Unseeing”: Myths Transformed and Pseudo-scientific Interpretations of the Book of Genesis

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As more than one astute reader of *The Silmarillion* has mused, how could life – especially plant life – exist in Middle-earth before the creation of the Sun and Moon? After all, in those early days in Arda after the destruction of the Two Lamps, the Two Trees – the progenitors of the Sun and Moon – only lit the Blessed Lands. Tolkien himself was troubled by these scientific inconsistencies, going back at least as far as 1948. That year he loaned to Katherine Farrer a copy of a radical, experimental version of his creation myth termed by Christopher *Ainulindalë C** (called the “Round World Version” by Tolkien) (MR 39). As Christopher describes, “in C* the Sun is already present from the beginning of Arda... and the origin of the Moon, similarly ‘de-mythologised’ by removal from all association with the Two Trees, is placed in the context of the tumults of Arda’s making... There is no indication whatsoever of how the myth of the Two Trees was to be accommodated to these new ideas” (MR 43). While Tolkien never incorporated this Round World version into his cosmology, he revisited these astronomical inconsistencies after completing *The Lord of the Rings*.

In the so-called “Myths Transformed” essays published in *Morgoth’s Ring* (dated to “the late 1950s”) we find Tolkien’s further experimentations with, as he called it, “the astronomically absurd business of the making of the Sun and Moon” (MR 369-70). In what Christopher labels Essay IIa, his father theorizes that “The Making of the Sun and Moon *must* occur long before the coming of the Elves; and *cannot* be made to be after the death of the Two Trees.... The time allowed is too short. Either could there be woods or flowers ... on earth, if there had been no light since the overthrow of the Lamps” (MR 375; emphasis original). Essay V states “The making of the Sun after the Death of the Trees is not only impossible ‘mythology’ now... it is also impossible chronologically in the Narrative. The Sun existed as part of the Kingdom of Arda. In so far as there was darkness (and diminishment of growth in Arda consequently) when the Valar removed to Aman it was due to obscurations devised by Melkor: clouds and smoke (a volcanic era!)” (MR 389). This idea of a veiling or dimming of sunlight (which had been defiled by Melkor in an earlier attack on the Sun) is more explicitly found in Essay III: “What happened in Valinor after the Death of the Trees? Aman was ‘unveiled’ – it had been covered with a *dome* (made by Varda) of mist or cloud down through which no sight would pierce nor light.... It was removed and Aman was lit by the Sun – its blessing was thus removed” (MR 385-6; emphasis original).

One of the major mythological difficulties of moving up the formation of the Sun and Moon was, as Tolkien noted, “how can, nonetheless, the Eldar be called the ‘Star-folk’?” (MR 375). In Essay IIa, Tolkien endeavors to solve this problem. Here the Sun is created at the same time as the Earth, and the Moon created some time afterwards, fashioned by the Valar in order to keep an eye on Melkor. Later, as quoted in full as B on the handout, the Valar are driven out of Middle-earth, and Melkor darkens the world with great clouds, so that “Day is only a dim twilight at full” (MR 377). Varda and Manwë “strive with the Cloud of Unseeing,” and eventually Manwë creates an opening in the clouds just long enough for the Elves to awaken and see the stars before the cloud veil closes again (MR 377). In writing this scene, Tolkien may have been drawing upon earlier examples in his Middle-earth tales of hopeful light piercing through the clouds (symbolic of light conquering the darkness). The first appears in *The Hobbit*, at the Lonely Mountain on Durin’s Day: “Then suddenly when their hope was lowest a red ray of the sun escaped like a finger through a rent in the cloud. A gleam of light came straight through the

opening in the bay and fell on the smooth rock-face” (194). Next, Sam and Frodo are drawn to look upon the decapitated head of a king’s statue at the Cross-roads in *The Lord of the Rings* when the setting Sun finds “at last the hem of the great slow-rolling pall of cloud” (TT 311). Frodo spies a crown of flowers growing around the king’s head and proclaims of the forces of Mordor “They cannot conquer for ever!” (TT 311). The most famous example appears in *The Lord of the Rings* as well, as Sam and Frodo struggle to cross the desolate landscape of Mordor:

There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. (ROTK 199)

Tolkien’s various unveiling scenarios, and their seemingly supernatural origin, invoked a sense of déjà vu in me last year when I read the 1837 work *The Progress of Creation considered with reference to the present condition of the earth*, by science popularizer and Young Earth literalist Mary Roberts (1788-1864). She advocates a literal interpretation of the Six Days of Creation, and when Genesis and the geological knowledge of her day appear to contradict, she creates an explanation to bring the two into alignment while maintaining the primacy of the Biblical authority (Larsen 2017, 175). One of the key conflicts that she tackles is the creation of Light as a generic concept (and with it Day and Night) on the First Day of Creation, but the Sun and Moon on Day Four.

Referencing earlier Biblical scholars such as Origen, Roberts (3) explains that these bodies were existent earlier, but were not visible due to “a universal vapour” that covered the Earth; thus their light “was diffused in a manner similar to that which we experience during the prevalence of a dense fog.” On Day Two this formed clouds, which still veiled the Sun and Moon. It is only on Day Four that “The obscuring clouds were now to be dispelled, and the sun and moon were to acquire their first visible existence, with relation to this earth... [The Sun] most gloriously broke forth, and sudden was the splendour that illumined this fair world” (62).

More than a century separate Roberts’ book and Tolkien’s first experiments with revising the creation of the Sun and Moon in his legendarium, and it would be foolish to believe that Roberts’ book, as popular as it was in her time (enjoying four editions between 1837-1846), was a direct influence on Tolkien. Instead, I will demonstrate that the idea of the revealing of the Sun and Moon from a veil of clouds was included in a number of popular Biblical commentaries that Tolkien could have read, perhaps planting the seed for his co-opting of a similar concept later in life.

It is instructional to begin with the relevant verses in Genesis that describe the first and fourth days of creation, 1.3-1.5 and 1.14-1.19. As shown on the handout as D and E, both of the versions with which Tolkien was likely to have been familiar, the Protestant King James and Catholic Douay-Rheims editions, are so similar that we can survey both Catholic and Protestant commentaries.

Two different interpretations for these passages were generally used in Biblical commentaries; the first was that the Sun and Moon were made on the first day and veiled until the fourth day, or light as a general entity was created on Day One and organized into the Sun and Moon on Day Four. But without the Sun, how can one define a “day”? One interpretation

can be seen in the Commentary to Gen 1:16 found in the Douay-Rheims edition: "God created on the first day, light, which being moved from east to west, by its rising and setting, made morning and evening. But on the fourth day he ordered and distributed this light, and made the sun, moon, and stars" (1). The idea of the Sun and Moon being created earlier, but being shielded from view, is bolstered by two verses in Job 38 (as shown on the handout as F and G). Note that in neither version is it explicitly stated that clouds blocked the view of the Sun from the surface of the Earth, but they could support such an interpretation.

Nicholas Patrick Wiseman (1802-65), Cardinal and Archbishop of Westminster, addressed his writings to both Protestants and Catholics. His lectures "On the Connection between Science and Revealed Religion" were delivered in 1835, and subsequently published in numerous editions. As in the case of Roberts, Wiseman cites St. Basil and Origen as accounting "for the creation of light prior to that of the sun, by supposing this luminary to have indeed before existed, yet so as that its rays were prevented, by the dense chaotic atmosphere, from penetrating to the earth; this was on the first day so far rarified as to allow the transmission of the sun's rays, though not the discernment of its disk" (284).

But the truth is more complicated. In Basil's *The Hexæmeron*, Homily II, he assigns the day and night for the first three days to God's waxing and waning of some primitive light *prior* to the creation of the Sun. He does, however, explain the initial invisibility of the Earth as due to it being covered with water in the darkness. In contrast, Origen clearly states in his *De Principiis*, "Now who is there, pray, possessed of understanding, that will regard the statement as appropriate, that the first day, and the second, and the third, in which also both evening and morning are mentioned, existed without sun, and moon, and stars" (Roberts and Donaldson 15).

At least one scientist joined theologians in attempting to align Genesis with the known laws of physics. Astronomer and physicist James Challis (1803-82) was the Plumian professor of astronomy and experimental philosophy, and director of the Cambridge observatory. His astronomical claim to fame was his failure to realize that he had actually observed the predicted eighth planet now known as Neptune twice before its official discovery by Johann Galle. Challis tried to align modern science with a conservative religious viewpoint, for example in his 1861 work *Creation in Plan and in Progress*.

Challis argued that "Since the luminaries of heaven are said to have been created on the fourth day to shine on the earth, it may be concluded that when existence was given to light on the first day the earth became *self-luminous*" (19; emphasis original). He further explained that "on the first day a mass of vapour was generated by the action of heat upon the water..." (27-8). It is this cloud deck that emits light and illuminates the young Earth. After the creation of the Sun and Moon on Day Four

a great change had taken place either in the Earth's atmosphere, or in the amount of cloud sustained in it. As the separation between light and darkness is now made by external luminaries, it follows that the Earth had ceased to be self-luminous... From this time plants and animals were dependent for light and heat on the Sun; and the Sun, Moon, and Stars became visible through openings in the attenuated and disrupted cloud-stratum, days and months and years were marked out, and the limits of seasons determined. (Challis 76)

A popular commentary on the King James version was the 1871 work *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, by Robert Jamieson (1802-80), a Glasgow

minister, Andrew Robert Fausset (1821-1910), a York rector, and David Brown (1803-97), minister and Professor of Theology at the University of Aberdeen. The Old Testament commentary was handled by Jamieson and Fausset. Referring to Genesis 1.3, this commentary notes

Whether the sun was created at the same time with, or long before, the earth, the dense accumulation of fogs and vapours which enveloped the chaos, had covered the globe with a settled gloom. But by the command of God, light was rendered visible; the thick murky clouds were dispersed, broken, or rarified, and light diffused over the expanse of waters. (Jamieson and Fausset 17)

According to this commentary, on the fourth day

The atmosphere being completely purified – the sun, moon, and stars were for the first time unveiled in all their glory in the cloudless sky.... [T]hese lights may be said to be ‘made’ on the fourth day – not created, indeed, for it is a different word that is here used, but constituted, appointed to the important and necessary office of serving as luminaries to the world, and regulating by their motions and their influence the progress and divisions of time. (Jamieson and Fausset 17)

Reverend Charles John Ellicott (1819-1905) was the Bishop of Gloucester and edited a Biblical commentary published by Cassell and Company between 1877-1884 and 1905-6. In his preface Ellicott explains that

The scientific difficulties mostly connect themselves with the narrative of the emergence of the world and of the totality of things around us.... We do not disguise that there are difficulties; we do not deny that there are subjects, such, for instance, as the antiquity of the human race, in regard of which our first impressions derived from Scripture do not appear to be coincident with some of the results of modern discovery. (viii)

However, he claims that

the greater portion of the so-called opposition between Religion and Science is due to bias, preconception, and literalism, on one side, and, on the other side, to an elevation, often studiously antagonistic, of plausible hypothesis into the higher domain of universally received and established theory. (viii)

The commentary on Genesis was written by Reverend Robert Payne Smith (1818-95, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford and Dean of Canterbury. Smith offered that

The light was created on the first day, and its concentration into great centres must at once have commenced; but the great luminaries did not appear in the open sky until the fourth day.... the atmosphere grows clearer, the earth more dry; vegetation does its part in absorbing gases; and day by day the sun shines with more unclouded brilliancy, followed by the mild radiance of the moon, and finally, by the faint gleamings of the stars. But besides this, as the condensation of luminous matter into the sun was the last

act in the shaping of our solar system, it is quite possible that during this long fourth day the sun finally assumed as nearly as possible its present dimensions and form. (15)

These explanations of the "Sun problem" as being due to the rending of a veil of clouds continue to be referenced in Biblical discussions today. For example, Dr. Rabbi Zev Farber summaries Talmudic uses of this interpretation on thetorah.com, and Rich Deem of the Evidence for God website (godandscience.org) says of the fourth day "At this point, the clouds present at the initial creation of the earth were completely removed so that the bodies themselves appeared for the first time on the surface of the earth."

Note that in many of the aforementioned biblical commentaries, an attempt was made to align mythological descriptions with scientific observation and theories, something that, by his own admission, weighed on Tolkien's mind in the post- *Lord of the Rings* years. For example, as I explained elsewhere, his various trial cosmologies (including Ainulindale C*) appear to draw from the three competing scientific models for the formation of the Moon extant before the Apollo missions (Larsen 2008).

I understand that the cloud shroud of Genesis is depicted as the will of God, while that in the "Myths Transformed" essays is the machination of the evil Melkor. However, since Tolkien was not a Biblical literalist, and Middle-earth was not overtly "Christian," he was certainly capable of being influenced by Scripture while not being literally faithful to it in his legendarium. It is possible that we see this in all the aforementioned cloud readings that reveal hopeful light in the legendarium. In addition, we read in *The Silmarillion* that Ilúvatar declared "thou, Melkor, shall see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful." Melkor may generate and gather clouds, but Ilúvatar can, and will, rend them at the appropriate moment. Interestingly, the term *apocalypse* literally refers to an unveiling of knowledge. Perhaps this is a fitting metaphor for Tolkien research in general. In particular, the study of Tolkien's endless tinkering with the legendarium illuminates his dedication to and unequal talent for "devising things more wonderful."

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Appendix: Handout

- A) "What happened in Valinor after the Death of the Trees? Aman was 'unveiled' – it had been covered with a *dome* (made by Varda) of mist or cloud down through which no sight would pierce nor light.... It was removed and Aman was lit by the Sun – its blessing was thus removed." (Essay III, "Myths Transformed," *Morgoth's Ring*, 385-6)
- B) Valar "are driven out of Middle-earth by Melkor and his evil spirits and monsters.... Both sides know that the coming of the Children of God is imminent. Melkor desires to dominate them at once with fear and darkness and enslave them. He *darkens the world* [added in margin; for 7 years?] cutting off all vision of the sky so far as he can, and though far south (it is said) this was not effective. From the far North (where [they are] dense) to the middle (Endor) great clouds brood. Moon and stars are invisible. Day is

only a dim twilight at full. Only light [is] in Valinor. Varda arises in her might and Manwë of the Winds and strive with the Cloud of Unseeing. But as fast as it is rent Melkor closes the veil again – at least over Middle-earth. Then came the Great Wind of Manwë, and the veil was rent. The stars shine out clear even in the North (*Valakirka*) and after the long dark seem terribly bright. It is the *dark* just before that the Elves awake. The first thing they see in the dark is the stars. But Melkor brings up glooms out of the East, and the stars fade away west. Hence they think from the beginning of light and beauty in the West.” (Essay IIa, “Myths Transformed,” *Morgoth’s Ring*, 377-8)

- C) [Day 4] “The obscuring clouds were now to be dispelled, and the sun and moon were to acquire their first visible existence, with relation to this earth.... [The sun] most gloriously broke forth, and sudden was the splendour that illumined this fair world. The cloudy covering was thrown aside, and all those fair and floating forms, those rolling masses, and light flying clouds, that beautifully diversify our summer skies, began to vary the clear azure.” (Mary Roberts, *The Progress of Creation*, 61-2)
- D) “3 And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.
 4 And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.
 5 And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day....
 14 And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years:
 15 And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so.
 16 And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also.
 17 And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth,
 18 And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good.
 19 And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.” (KJV, Genesis 1)
- E) 3 And God said: Be light made. And light was made.
 4 And God saw the light that it was good; and he divided the light from the darkness.
 5 And he called the light Day, and the darkness Night; and there was evening and morning one day....
 14 And God said: Let there be lights made in the firmament of heaven, to divide the day and the night, and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years:
 15 To shine in the firmament of heaven, and to give light upon the earth. And it was so done.
 16 And God made two great lights: a greater light to rule the day; and a lesser light to rule the night: and the stars.
 17 And he set them in the firmament of heaven to shine upon the earth.
 18 And to rule the day and the night, and to divide the light and the darkness. And God saw that it was good.

19 And the evening and morning were the fourth day. (Douay-Rheims, Genesis 1)

- F) 4 Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.
9 When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it (KJV, Job 38)
- G) 4 Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if thou hast understanding.
9 When I made a cloud the garment thereof, and wrapped it in a mist as in swaddling bands? (Douay-Rheims, Job 38)
- H) “Since the luminaries of heaven are said to have been created on the fourth day to shine on the earth, it may be concluded that when existence was given to light on the first day the earth became *self-luminous*.... on the first day a mass of vapour was generated by the action of heat upon the water....” [After the creation of the sun and moon on Day four] “a great change had taken place either in the earth’s atmosphere, or in the amount of cloud sustained in it. As the separation between light and darkness is now made by external luminaries, it follows that the Earth had ceased to be self-luminous.... From this time plants and animals were dependent for light and heat on the Sun; and the Sun, Moon, and Stars became visible through openings in the attenuated and disrupted cloud-stratum, days and months and years were marked out, and the limits of seasons determined.” (James Challis, *Creation in Plan and Progress*, 19; 27-8; 76)
- I) “Whether the sun was created at the same time with, or long before, the earth, the dense accumulation of fogs and vapours which enveloped the chaos, had covered the globe with a settled gloom. But by the command of God, light was rendered visible; the thick murky clouds were dispersed, broken, or rarified, and light diffused over the expanse of waters.... The atmosphere being completely purified – the sun, moon, and stars were for the first time unveiled in all their glory in the cloudless sky.... [T]hese lights may be said to be ‘made’ on the fourth day – not created, indeed, for it is a different word that is here used, but constituted, appointed to the important and necessary office of serving as luminaries to the world, and regulating by their motions and their influence the progress and divisions of time.” (Robert Jamieson and Andrew Fausset, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, 17)
- J) “The light was created on the first day, and its concentration into great centres must at once have commenced; but the great luminaries did not appear in the open sky until the fourth day.... the atmosphere grows clearer, the earth more dry; vegetation does its part in absorbing gases; and day by day the sun shines with more unclouded brilliancy, followed by the mild radiance of the moon, and finally, by the faint gleamings of the stars. But besides this, as the condensation of luminous matter into the sun was the last act in the shaping of our solar system, it is quite possible that during this long fourth day the sun finally assumed as nearly as possible its present dimensions and form.” (Robert

Payne Smith, *A Bible Commentary for English Readers* [ed. Charles John Ellicott], 15)

- K) "thou, Melkor, shall see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful." (*The Silmarillion*, 17)