

2019

## “While the World Lasted”: Eschatology in Tolkien’s 1930s Writings

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### Recommended Citation

Larsen, Kristine (2019) "“While the World Lasted”: Eschatology in Tolkien’s 1930s Writings," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol7/iss1/4>

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Tolkien's main works leave us with only a tantalizing taste of what the end of Middle-earth might entail. For example, at the conclusion of the published *Silmarillion* proper we read

If it has passed from the high and the beautiful to darkness and ruin, that was of old the fate of Arda Marred; and if any change shall come and the Marring be amended, Manwë and Varda may know; but they have not revealed it, and it is not declared in the dooms of Mandos. (255)

This rather vague passage comes from a 1950s (post-*LOTR*) reversion of the *legendarium* published in *Morgoth's Ring* in the "Valaquenta" section of *The Quenta Silmarillion*. Fortunately, other versions of the *Silmarillion* texts found in *The History of Middle-earth* volumes include a large number of very specific details concerning the end of the world, especially the so-called Second Prophecy of Mandos (the first being the fate of the Noldor after the Kinslaying at Alqualondë). The most detailed form of this vision of the End Times is the 1930 version included in *The Quenta*. Here it is said that "Tulkas shall strive with Melko, and on his right shall stand Fionwë and on his left Túrin Turambar, son of Húrin, Conqueror of Fate; and it shall be the black sword of Túrin that deals unto Melko his death and final end; and so shall the children of Húrin and all Men be avenged" (*SOME*: 165). As Christopher Tolkien notes in *The Lost Road* (324), the Second Prophecy of Mandos remains largely unchanged in the revisions to the *legendarium* written in the late 1930s, meaning that it was (at the time) deemed an essential part of the mythology. However post-*LOTR* revisions to the *legendarium* removed the prophecy, as well as most other details concerning the End Times, as we see in the published *Silmarillion*.

A detailed examination of the evolution of Tolkien's conceptions about the end of Arda is beyond the purview of this essay, and can be found in Elizabeth Whittingham's book *The Evolution of Tolkien's Mythology* (2008). My interest here is that the time of Tolkien's richest depiction of the End Times of Middle-earth (i.e. the zenith of the Second Prophecy of Mandos) is also the same period of time during which he composed two of his non-*legendarium* works of epic poetry, his so-called "New Lays" of the Völsungs and of Gudrún (published in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*) and *The Fall of Arthur*. Not coincidentally, I maintain, both of these works make direct and repeated references to the End Times, albeit in very different ways. I have no further insight as to why eschatology appeared to be on Tolkien's radar at this particular time, for example whether or not it was influenced by events in his life or world politics (such as the rise of Hitler), so I would certainly invite others to explore his possible motivations. My intent here is merely to report my observations on the topic.

Numerous authors, including Verlyn Flieger (2002), Marjorie Burns (2004), and Andy Dimond (2004), as well as Tolkien's letters themselves (Carpenter 2000: 149), have shown that Tolkien was heavily influenced by Norse mythology, including the concept of Ragnarök, the "fate of the Powers" or "doom of the Gods." In Norse myth, the end of the world features a battle between the gods and various monsters, and the gods do not survive. Instead, the sons of the god Ódin persevere, and earth is renewed and repopulated. Marjorie Burns (2004: 170) points out the clear parallelisms between the battle of Ódin's son, Vidar, against "Fenrir (Loki's wolf son)" and the battle between Manwë's son, Fionwë, and Morgoth at Dagor Dagorath, the ultimate Last Battle. But we find even more fascinating parallels between the end of Middle-earth and the end of Midgard (as depicted in the various poems published as *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*).

While an eschatological theme pervades the entire volume, there are two sections in particular that are based on the Eddaic poem Völuspá, which Christopher Tolkien names as "the most famous poem of the Edda" (*SG*: 183). In the original poem "a wise woman or sibyl, recounts the origin of the world, the age of the youthful Gods, and the primeval war; prophecies the Ragnarök, the Doom of the Gods, and after it the renewal of the Earth" (*SG*: 183-4). Tolkien's poem "The Prophecy of the Sibyl," published as Appendix B in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, follows the classic mythology of Ragnarök

rather closely. The entirety of the sibyl's pronouncements are found in *Upphaf*, the introduction to "The Lay of the Völsungs," and it is here that Tolkien makes a radical departure from the Norse tale. In the original legend worthy warriors are gathered by Ódin over time in order to fight in the final battle; in Tolkien's tale the entire fate of the world in that battle falls upon the shoulders of one particular warrior, Sigurd. In Tolkien's commentary to one of the other poems, "The Lay of Gudrún," we read of Ódin

One family in especial he singles out, the Völsungs, all of whom are his chosen warriors, and one, Sigurd son of Sigmund, is to be the chief of all, their leader in the Last day; for Ódin hopes that by his hand the Serpent shall in the end be slain, and a new world made possible. None of the Gods can accomplish this, but only one who has lived on Earth first as a mortal and died. (This motive of the special function of Sigurd is an invention of the present poet, or an interpretation of the Norse sources in which it is not explicit). (SG: 53-4)

Later in the same note we read "Ódin at times gives expression to this, saying that his hope looks out beyond the seeming disasters of this world. Though Ódin's chosen come all to an evil end or untimely death, that will only make them of greater worth for their ultimate purpose in the Last Battle" (SG: 54).

We find the relevant part of the prophecy concerning Sigurd as the Chosen One in stanzas 14 and 15 of *Upphaf*. Here we read:

If in day of Doom  
one deathless stands,  
who death hath tasted  
and dies no more,  
the serpent-slayer,  
seed of Ódin,  
then all shall not end,  
nor earth perish. (SG: 63)

This prophecy is reprised later in the Lay at Sigurd's death, in stanzas 78-81 (SG: 179-80). The description of Sigurd here is especially interesting, including detail about being armed with "belt and sword" (SG: 179) and having "On his head the Helm" (SG: 180). The first piece ties him with the constellation Orion, the second (as well as his serpent or dragon killing capacity) with Túrin Turambar, who is also closely associated with Orion in various versions of the *legendarium*. For example, as Christopher Tolkien reminds us, in the versions of the *Annals of Aman* published in *Morgoth's Ring*, Menelmacar (Orion) is said to be "a sign of Túrin Turambar, who should come into the world, and a foreshadowing of the Last Battle that shall be at the end of Days" (SG: 185). This is a rather obvious reference to the Second Prophecy of Mandos. However, the Prophecy was phased out during post-*LOTR* revisions, such as those found in *Morgoth's Ring*, and this reference to Túrin does not appear in the published *Silmarillion*, although Orion, "Menelmacar with his shining belt," is one of the constellations created by Varda to herald the awakening of the Elves, and "forebodes the Last Battle that shall be at the end of days" (S: 48). Christopher Tolkien makes the same connection in his commentary to the Lay, but does not analyze the connection further, citing the "editorial limits" he had set for himself (SG: 185).

As a number of authors (e.g. Davenport [2003], Flieger [2002], Whittingham [2008], and Wood [2003]) have noted, the concept of Arda Healed also owes a great deal to Tolkien's own Christian beliefs about the End Times and the eventual triumph of good over evil – the ultimate eucatastrophe. Given the known contact between the Norse peoples and Christianity centuries before their eventual conversion, it has been suggested by some mythologists that there is a definitive Christian influence in the tale of

Ragnarök and especially the resurrection of Balder, son of Ódin, and the regeneration of the Earth. Tolkien's version of Sigurd as a Chosen One, one who can save the world only by dying and being reborn, appears to owe much to his Catholic theology, unless I am vastly mistaken. We see here how Tolkien has taken a pagan myth that already had possible Christian trappings and made it even more obviously Christian in its ultimate message.

We see a perhaps less radical Christian revision of legend in Tolkien's unfinished poem *The Fall of Arthur*. Also written in the early 1930s (Christopher Tolkien suggests possibly directly after his father's work on the Norse poems was completed [FA: 11]), there are a number of apocalyptic refrains scattered throughout the poem. For example, consider the following non-exhaustive list of similar sentiments:

His [Arthur's] heart foreboded that his house was doomed,  
the ancient world to its end falling,  
and the tides of time turned against him. (I. 176-9; FA: 24)

[Mordred knows] Time is changing;  
the West waning, a wind rising  
in the waxing East. The world falters. (II. 147-9; FA: 32)

[Arthur thinks] now they need would know of knights faithful  
to uphold on high the holy crown,  
the west still to wield by the waves' margin,  
walls defending against the world's ruin; (III. 150-3; FA: 41)

There are also a number of references to the end time, specifically "while the world lasted" (e.g. III. 220 [44] ; III. 228 [44]; V. 4 [55]). What is the apocalyptic event being referenced in these lines? Christopher Tolkien explains in his commentary that "It is surely the fall of Rome and Roman Christendom that they see approaching in 'the tides of time'" (FA: 88).

But several refrains appear to refer to the Christian apocalypse rather than simply the fall of Christian Rome. For example,

nobler chivalry of renown fairer,  
mightier manhood under moon or sun  
Shall be gathered again till graves open. (I. 206-8; FA: 25)

Another stanza is highly suggestive of the Book of Revelation and Christian End Times tradition:

from the East hurried evil horsemen  
as plague of fire pouring ruinous;  
white towers were burned, wheat was trampled,  
the ground groaning and the grass withered.  
There was woe in Britain and the world faded;  
bells were silent, blades were ringing  
hell's gate was wide and heaven distant. (V. 19-25; FA: 56)

It is possible that these lines are a nod to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. But there are other more clearly Christian influences on the poem. Christopher notes that "Arthur's great expedition to the Continent" (one of the central actions in the poem) was "without root in history," but is clearly related

to the historical “struggle of the Britons of the fifth century against the Germanic invaders” (FA: 89). Of key importance in this poem is that “the mark of the enemy is that he is heathen” (FA: 89).

In addition, we have the following tantalizing snippet in an uncompleted, barely legible draft of Arthur’s death. Here we read that he is

In Avalon [sleeping>biding].  
While the world w...eth  
Till the world [??awaketh] (FA: 139)

Christopher notes that the word in the second to last line “is not *waiteth* and seems not to be *watcheth*,” but the intention is clear – come the end, Arthur will rise again (FA: 139). This is clearly in keeping with the Christian undercurrents of the poem. Also of interest is the connection between Lancelot and Eärendil in *The Fall of Arthur*, as well as connections between Avalon and both the Lonely Isle and Númenor in the *legendarium*, as noted by Christopher Tolkien himself in his lengthy notes to *The Fall of Arthur*. This again drives home the apocalyptic undertones of the poem.

After all of this eschatological writing in the 1930s, why the turnaround in his thinking after writing *The Lord of the Rings*? Why were details of the End Times downplayed in the *legendarium*, made more shadowy and receding into the background? There do exist vague references to the end of Arda in *The Lord of the Rings*. For example, at his coronation, Aragorn recounts the words spoken by Elendil upon leaving Númenor for the shores of Middle-earth, “In this place I will abide, and my heirs, unto the ending of the world,” while as Gandalf crowns him, the wizard pronounces “Now come the days of the King, and may they be blessed while the thrones of the Valar endure!”, another way of saying until the end of the world (ROTK: 246). It appears it was not only the Elves that were doomed to fade, but memories of the prophecies of the End Times as well.

Perhaps the revisions were related to tensions between the admitted Christian influences on his *legendarium* and Tolkien’s insistence that the Third Age of Middle-earth was not a Christian period of history. We see the beginnings of this tension as early as the first stages of the *legendarium*. For example, in his commentary to the poem “Habbanan beneath the stars” in *The Book of Lost Tales I*, Christopher Tolkien notes that the legend of Arvalin, a purgatory for humans, draws explicitly from Christian theology. He states that “It is disconcerting to perceive that they [meaning direct connections to Christian theology] are still present in this tale” (92). On the other hand, Marjorie Burns notes in “Norse and Christian Gods: The Integrative Theology of J.R.R. Tolkien” that the deletion of the children of the Valar from the mythology post *LOTR* was an integral part of Tolkien’s reduction of the physicality of the Valar, a change that “brought the Valar more in line with his Christian beliefs” by aligning them more with angels and less with the Norse (or Greek) pantheons to which they are often compared (175-6). Again, recall that in the Norse myths it is the children of the gods who survive Ragnarök. We have also seen that Tolkien himself had in a sense “Christianized” pagan myths himself in his epic poetry in the decade before writing *The Lord of the Rings*. In the end, no pun intended, we are left with more mysteries than answers, except for one: Tolkien was apparently deeply and profoundly affected by his belief in the Christian eschatology, and it kept creeping into his work, either consciously or unconsciously, in ways that appeared to both delight and confound him.

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