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The Cosmic Catastrophe of History: Patristic Angelology and Augustinian Theology of History in Tolkien's "Long Defeat"

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In his letters, Tolkien frequently suggests that the Ainur are angelic powers or guardians of the world.¹ While scholars like John William Houghton touch only lightly on the role of angels as godlike figures in Patristic angelology, there are many more explicit parallels to be found between the Ainur and the angels in the early Christian theology than seems at first glance.²

PATRISTIC ANGELOLOGY

Following Aristotelico-Ptolomeic cosmology, most antique and medieval authors of the Mediterranean believed that the motions of the heavenly bodies required some spiritual motive principle in order to make them move.³ While the pagan authors considered these beings to be gods, a Christian cosmology held that the heavenly bodies were much more properly moved by the messengers of God: the angels. More than just the motive principles of the heavenly bodies, however, early Christian writers saw the angels as ministers of God's providential governance of the universe, with different angels being appointed to guide the development of everything from matter to human beings and the heavenly bodies.⁴

This Patristic belief in the universal governance of angels leads, not unsurprisingly, to a

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- 1 J. R. R. Tolkien, "From a Letter to Sir Stanley Unwin, 14 September 1950," in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 146-147 (speaking of the Valar in general as of the angelic order, "gods" in the imaginative sense); "To Peter Hastings (draft)," in *Letters*, 194 (Valar as an angelic order attended by angels of lesser orders); "To Robert Murray, S.J." in *Letters*, 200-207 (this letter contains an overview of most of the Tolkien's legendarium in this paper, including the characterization of Gandalf as an "incarnate angel" and the perversion of Númenorian monotheism from lacking any priesthood or worship into worshipping creatures); "From a Letter to Major R. Bowen, 25 June 1957," in *Letters*, 259 (as angelic); "To Christopher Bretherton," in *Letters*, 345 (Valar as "angelical"); "From a Letter to Miss A. P. Northey, 19 January 1965" in *Letters*, 354 (Gandalf as angelic messenger of angelic powers); "From a Letter to A. E. Couchman, 17 April 1966," in *Letters* (Valar as angelic); "Drafts for a Letter to Mr Rang," in *Letters*, 387 (Valar as "angelic Guardians"); "From a Letter to Mrs Ruth Austin 25 January 1971," in *Letters*, 407 (Valar as "angelic guardians"); "From a Letter to Robert Lancelyn Green, 17 July 1971," in *Letters*, 411 (Ainur as "angelic immortals," Valar as "regents under God,").
 - 2 John William Houghton, "Augustine in the Cottage of Lost Play: The *Ainulindalë* as Asterisk Cosmogony," in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance, Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture (London: Routledge, 2003), 172-182.
 - 3 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book Λ (XII), ch. 8, 1073a13-1074b15.
 - 4 Jean Daniélou, *The Angels & Their Mission*, (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2009), 3-4

belief that angels were also responsible for the guardianship of human nations. The most important aspect of that guardianship was ensuring that the many nations of the human family worshiped the true Creator and Lord of the universe.⁵ In fact, Origen points to the very fact that the Egyptians, Chaldean, and Hindus have theological speculations (suggestively grounded in astrology) to show that the angels were attempting to elevate the minds of their charges to God through the stars.⁶

It is here where a profound origin of evil comes in. For it is clear that most nations and peoples of the world did *not* stay on the path of monotheism as the mission of the angels required, but instead worshipped man-made images of “birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things.” While Pseudo-Dionysius held that this was no fault of the angels but rather the hard-heartedness of humans, other voices in the Patristic tradition are not so sure.⁷ While many of the Church Fathers held that demons were the cause of the worship of false gods (often identifying the demons themselves with the pagan gods worshipped), St. Justin Martyr and Commodian identify the origin of idolatry in paganism with the angels who lusted after human women and thus fell from grace in Genesis 6:1-4.⁸ For Justin, the angels fell from grace and their children with human women were the daimones, the spirits of the lower airs, and the fallen angels taught humans “to offer sacrifices, and incense, and libations, of which things they stood in need after they were enslaved by lustful passions.”⁹ Like Justin, Commodian held that the fallen angels styled

5 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7, 2; Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchies* 9, 4

6 Origen, *De Principiis* 3, 3, 2

7 Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchies* 9, 3

8 A disputed interpretation that is largely caused by differing translations of Hebrew “sons of God” into Greek “sons of God” or “angels.”

9 St. Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith. From Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0127.htm>>. Chapter 5

themselves as gods, forming the backbone of the ancient polytheistic religions of the world.¹⁰ These false gods taught human being different crafts and shaped human societies.

SAURON AND THE BLACK NUMENORIANS

To the reader of Tolkien's *Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, all of this should sound quite familiar. The fall of the Ainur in the *Ainulindalë* will doubtless be covered in quite some depth by the other presentations at this panel, so I will confine myself to the role of the Ainur in the governance of the world and the evil of Morgoth's coalition on the Children of Illúvatar.

The Ainur have power over various domains of the natural world, granted by their knowledge of the great music that expounds the plans of Illúvatar. Morgoth, the greatest enemy had a share “in the powers and knowledge of all the other Valar” and his greatest lieutenant, Sauron, had great knowledge of the craft of Aulë, the great Valar smith.¹¹ These two beings introduce disorder into their respective domains. Morgoth first interferes with the cosmogony of the other Valar and then attempts to effect what he wanted from the beginning: to be called Lord and Master, not over the elements, but over the free Children of Illúvatar.¹²

It is Sauron, however, that plays the role of pagan demon-god most effectively. After the defeat of Morgoth, Sauron uses his gifts and knowledge to style himself as a great giver of gifts and friend of the Children of Illúvatar.¹³ While many men for whom Beleriand and the Valar are but distant rumors come into his service, Sauron is also able to snare those Elves who ought to have remembered Sauron's evil. They are caught by their desire for knowledge in the crafts of making artifacts of power and Sauron indeed teaches them many things they use to create their

10 Commodian, “Cultura Daimones” in *Instructiones*, The Latin Library
<<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/commodianus/commodianus2.html>>

11 J. R. R. Tolkien, “Valaquenta,” in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, Second Edition, (New York City: Del Rey, 2001), 23.

12 J. R. R. Tolkien, “Ainulindalë,” in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, Second Edition, (New York City: Del Rey, 2001), 8.

13 J. R. R. Tolkien, “Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age,” in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, Second Edition, (New York City: Del Rey, 2001), 343-344.

rings of power.¹⁴ Sauron uses his superior knowledge and power to create the one ruling ring to dominate all others and the Elves see their grave error and attempt to flee. Sauron gathers what rings he can and gives them to some Númenoreans and dwarves, directly binding their wills to his through the gifts of his angelic guardianship.

Not only does Sauron use his knowledge of special craft to ensnare the folk of Middle-Earth, but he also fits the second characteristic of fallen angels in the Patristic account. In the *Akallabêth*, the story of the downfall of Númenor, Sauron is defeated by the Númenoreans and is taken by them in chains to their homeland. Eventually, however, Sauron ingratiates himself with the king Ar-Pharazôn/Tar-Calion by offering knowledge beyond the ability of men and eventually becomes a close advisor. Inflaming the king's grievance with the Valar, convinces the king to turn from honoring Illúvatar, the one God, and instead to offer worship to Melkor.¹⁵ Sauron even convinces them that Melkor has the secret to free them from death and they burn Nimloth, the White Tree, as well as offer blood sacrifices and torments to entreat Melkor to release them from death.¹⁶ Sauron continues this tradition of perverting the worship of the One God (which is not very explicit in Tolkien's texts) into worship of Melkor or even himself. The "Black Númenoreans" mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings*, to whom the Mouth of Sauron belongs, also have forsaken their ancestral ways, become enamoured the with secret knowledge Sauron offers, and pay worship to *him* rather than Morgoth.¹⁷ Sauron uses his knowledge to dominate in the first instance and to pervert others to idolatry in the second.

ST. AUGUSTINE'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Most likely more influential on Tolkien than the general outlines of Patristic angelology,

14 Tolkien, "Rings of Power," 344.

15 J. R. R. Tolkien, "Akallabêth," in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, Second Edition, (New York City: Del Rey, 2001), 324-326.

16 Tolkien, "Akallabêth," 327-328.

17 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 2nd Edition, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 870.

however, is St. Augustine's theology of human history as expounded in *The City of God*.¹⁸ A work intended to present a robust defense of the Christian view of ultimate goods in light of political criticism, St. Augustine provides extensive polemical overviews of classical Roman history and religion in contrast with the Biblical narrative and claims of Christians about God. One of the fundamental ideas of the work is that there are two lineages of humanity that coexist simultaneously in history: the eponymous city of God and the lesser city of man.¹⁹ The city of God consists of the righteous who, by divine help and faith, pursue the greatest spiritual goods and whose community is marked by an internal peace of soul and brotherhood among all members. The city of man is directed toward earthly, temporal goods and so, even if it achieves them, it will not last beyond this world.²⁰ Though he acknowledges that the Fall of Adam caused human nature to inherit a weakness and separation from God's direct working in it through grace, Augustine identifies the founder of the city of man, not as Adam, but as his son Cain.²¹ The firstborn son of Adam, Cain grows jealous and murderously angry at his brother's favor before God and commits fratricide, leaving his brother's bloody body in a field. Augustine points to this original fratricide as both paralleling the fratricide of Romulus and Remus and illustrating the difference between the city of God and the city of man.²² The evil fight against the good, but the city of man is full of internal divisions and strife; earlier in the work, Augustine extensively cataloged the history of Rome's war and peace noting that there were near-constant wars and violence.²³ While his point was that Rome's gods were powerless to either grant Rome victory or keep it in peace, Augustine notes that even in what Sallust calls Rome's period of highest moral

18 As Tolkien studied Greek and Latin in school and then read classics for two years at Exeter before switching to literature, it is highly likely that he encountered St. Augustine's *City of God*.

19 St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, Bk. XV, chs. 1-3

20 Book XV, ch. 4

21 Book XV, ch. 5

22 Book XV, ch. 5

23 See Book III

achievement, Scipio was driven out of Rome by his political enemies and Gnaeus Manlius ushers in a period of “Asiatic luxury.”²⁴ Augustine points to this to show that the city of man always has some dissension, violence, or other evil taking place even when it is at its best. While there can be temporal success, because the city of man is oriented toward glory as its highest virtue, it will not see lasting peace until it is ordained to the One God.²⁵ Though the desire for glory reins in other passions and is better by far than the lust to dominate the world, it must still yield to the desire of justice and true goodness if it is to meet with the favor of divine providence.²⁶

While *The City of God* is far from the only historical or meta-historical influence on Tolkien's philosophy of history, these notes on the development of history have clear parallels in Tolkien's legendarium. It is clear in the *Quenta Silmarillion* that the fall of the Fëanorians begins with the swearing of the great oaths of vengeance and hatred against any who would “take or keep a Silmaril from their possession.”²⁷ Just as in Augustine's analysis, though, the fall is but the beginning of the grievous evils to result from it. It is notable that nearly immediately after the Fëanorian oath, the Fëanorians demand the prized ships from Tol Eressëa and commit the Kinslaying of Aqualondë, the act that truly makes their return to the Blessed Land impossible.²⁸ The Fëanorians swore their oath in order to be the sole “lords of the unsullied light, and masters of the bliss and beauty of Arda.”²⁹ This Fëanorian lust for the Silmarils is a desire to be the possessors of the light of the greatest glory in Arda. Their desire for this glory leads to dissension, severing their good relationship with the Valar. This dissension leads to violence in the Kinslaying. After the Kinslaying, Fëanor almost immediately betrays the folk of Fingolfin by

24 Book III, ch. 21

25 Book V, chs. 14-15

26 Book V, ch. 15

27 J. R. R. Tolkien, “Quenta Silmarillion,” in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, Second Edition, (New York City: Del Rey, 2001), 90.

28 Tolkien, “Quenta Silmarillion,” 94-97.

29 Tolkien, “Quenta Silmarillion,” 90.

leaving them to cross the grinding ice of the Helcaraxë without ships or support. As a result of the Kinslaying, Elu Thingol forbids the speaking of Quenya in his realms and becomes enemies of all the Fëanorians.³⁰ As is well-known, the results of the oath and the Kinslaying follow the Fëanorians to the end of their days, leading to betrayals, the collapse of kingdoms, and the ultimate deaths of the Fëanorian line.

Following this Augustinianism, for Tolkien, there is no ultimate victory in the affairs of men and elves that can overcome the combined power of demonic influence and the inherited sin of the city of man. Where the heroes of Tolkien's legendarium seem to conquer one influence, the other turns to destroy it. Where the heroes are militarily strong against the enemy, the whispers of treachery inflame the influence of the city of man and weakens the secrecy or unity that defends against the dark. Nargothrond, Doriath, Gondolin, Númenor, and nearly Minas Tirith fall through treachery from within. Hithlum, Dorthonion, Arnor, Ithilien, and Osgiliath fall through dividing the allies from one another and leaving them weak. It is no coincidence that Morgoth and Sauron seek so much to divide men and elves. The English word “devil” derives from the Greek διάβολος, from διὰ βαλλεῖν: to scatter.

Between demonic influence and doomed action of the children of Illúvatar, then, Tolkien's legendarium is soaked in evil and defeat. Even in *The Lord of the Rings*, the atmosphere of evil's ultimate triumph dominates. Elrond and Galadriel are witnesses to the ultimate undoing of good in the face of these evil forces. Elrond tells the Council, “I have seen three ages in the West of the world, and many defeats, and man fruitless victories.”³¹ Galadriel, having seen the Light of the Trees and seen firsthand the tale of the Noldor in Beleriand, says of herself and Celeborn to the Fellowship, “I have dwelt with him years uncounted; for ere the fall

30 Tolkien, “Quenta Silmarillion,” 150-151.

31 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 237.

of Nargothrond or Gondolin I passed over the mountains, and together through ages of the world we have fought the long defeat.”³² Tolkien himself uses this last phrase in personal correspondence in 1956 when he says, “Actually, I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat'—though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory.”³³

Where does this final victory come from? In both Middle-Earth and Tolkien's worldview, it comes from a source outside the city of man. When encouraging Turgon to build Gondolin as a refuge and stronghold against Morgoth, Ulmo tells him, “Longest of all the realms of the Eldalië shall Goldolin stand against Melkor. But love not too well the work of thy hands and the devices of thy heart; and remember that the true hope of the Noldor lieth in the West and cometh from the Sea.”³⁴ Against the demonic powers of the world and the infighting of the city of man, there is no earthly remedy. Though they may have moments of joy and seeming victory, true and lasting victory against evil is beyond elven or human power. Eärendil, pleading on behalf of all of the children of Illuvatar, gives the Valar occasion to open Aman and break Morgoth's power.³⁵ When the Númenoreans assault Valinor, Manwë petitions Illúvatar to find the solution, and He sinks Númenor and refashions the world.³⁶ Even *The Lord of the Rings* implies that the hand of divine providence; Gandalf tells Frodo, “Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker.”³⁷ Evil is ultimately undone, but it is not the exclusive role of the heroes to undo it. Clearer in the other mythology than in *The Lord of the Rings*, evil can only be

32 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 348.

33 J. R. R. Tolkien, “From a letter to Amy Ronald, 15 December 1956,” in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 255.

34 Tolkien, “Quenta Silmarillion,” 146.

35 Tolkien, “Quenta Silmarillion,” 299-303

36 Tolkien, “Akallabêth,” 334

37 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 54-55.

truly undone by supernatural intervention. The famous transforming of catastrophe into “eucatastrophe” is the heart of Tolkien's stories. In our world, the ultimate triumph of good over evil is the life of Jesus Christ. As Tolkien states in *On Fairy-Stories*, “The story has entered History and the primary world ; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy.”³⁸ So the city of God is ushered in by Jesus Christ, conquering demonic powers and reordering human nature aright. Though we must wait for the final remaking of the world in Christ, for Tolkien, the joy and hope of that world can enlighten the tragic beauties we experience until that Last Day.

38 J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York City: Del Rey, 1966), 88-89.