

## THE BIBLICAL SYMBOL OF LIGHT IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE SILMARILLION AND THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

Susan Robbins

Associate Professor of Humanities and Philosophy  
Department of European Languages  
Faculty of Humanities and Education Sciences

Klaipeda University  
S. Neries St. 5-101  
LT-92228 Klaipeda, Lithuania  
Email: ekk.humf@ku.lt  
Telephone: +370 46 398511

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**Summary.** *In the Bible, light has always been a symbol of holiness, goodness, knowledge, wisdom, grace, hope, and God's revelation. By contrast, darkness has been associated with evil, sin, and despair. J. R. R. Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic, and claimed in a letter that *The Lord of the Rings* was "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work." He explained that the Christianity to be found in it was "absorbed into the story and the symbolism." Not much scholarly attention has been paid to light as a biblical symbol in Tolkien's mythology. Accordingly, I argue that the light in Tolkien's works is presented as biblical light, and serves the story in much the same way as light serves to communicate and symbolize the revelation of God in the Bible. Three focal points are addressed: first, the creation of light and the distinction of the holy light of the Two Trees from the natural light of the sun and moon; second, the ways that light, darkness, and fire are used as symbols, and their effects on various characters; and third, the fantasy characters who are associated with the holy light. The comparisons of Tolkien with the biblical presentation of light will show that Tolkien's Christian faith and worldview permeates Middle-earth.*

**Keywords:** *light, darkness, symbol, spirit, myth, Silmaril, representation.*

## 1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that Tolkien is the author of *The Lord of the Rings*. What is not so commonly known is that he was a philologist and a professor of Anglo-Saxon (Old English) at Oxford University, and that he was a Roman Catholic. Both of these aspects of his being were highly influential in the invention of the myths and legends of Middle-earth that make up the backstory to *The Lord of the Rings* (hereafter referred to as *LOTR*). Tolkien considered *LOTR* to be not only “*fundamentally linguistic* in inspiration”<sup>1</sup> but also “a fundamentally religious and Catholic work.”<sup>2</sup>

Tolkien’s interest in myths—especially the myths of Northern Europe that came to us from the Middle Ages—was aroused by his love of the old Northern European languages, in which he was one of the world’s foremost scholar. One normally expects a myth to have been penned by an anonymous bard ages ago. However, Tolkien believed that a myth, like a language, could be a work of literary art, composed by a specific author. He once wrote to a friend, “But an equally basic passion of mine *ab initio* was for myth (not allegory!) and for fairy-story, and above all for heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history . . .”<sup>3</sup> He continues, “I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic to the level of romantic fairy-story . . . which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country.”<sup>4</sup> This mythology, edited by his son Christopher, was published four years after Tolkien’s death, and is entitled *The Silmarillion*.

As a Catholic, Tolkien claimed, “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion’, to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.”<sup>5</sup> There are rudimentary hymns and invocations in *LOTR*, but nothing resembling formal or organized worship.

The main reason all religious practices were excluded from his mythology was twofold. First, Tolkien aligned Middle-earth with our own Earth, so the landscapes, plants, constellations, and so on would be thoroughly familiar to anyone from the northeastern part of Europe. He said, “Middle-earth is not an imaginary world. . . . The theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore: “The story is really a story about what happened in B.C. year X.”<sup>7</sup> Tolkien did not want to include any heathen or pagan worship practices from the ancient cultures of this world, since the settings of Middle-earth were to have a true flavor, and Tolkien considered all ancient religious beliefs outside of those of Christianity to be false. Second, the story of Middle-earth is set in a time before there was any special revelation from God concerning

1 Tolkien J. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by H. Carpenter & C. Tolkien. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, p. 219.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 172.

3 Tolkien, J. *The Silmarillion 2/e*, edited by C. Tolkien. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001, p. xi.

4 *Ibid.*, p. xii.

5 *Supra* note 1, p. 172.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

7 *Supra* note 1, p. 246.

worship and salvation. "B.C. year X" is before the call of Abraham, before the book of Job, and before the Law of Moses is revealed; it is before any communication pertaining to the coming of Christ as the Redeemer. In Genesis, between Adam and Noah, we have the line of Seth in whose time "men began to call on the name of the Lord." (Genesis 4:26)<sup>8</sup> In this line, several generations later, we find Enoch, of whom it is said, "And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him." (Genesis 5:24) Noah also listened to God, but nothing is told of their worship practices. If pagan ways of worship are ruled out, and nothing has yet been revealed from God regarding correct worship "in spirit and in truth", then formalized worship cannot be included at all. Tolkien accordingly left out all formal religious practice, but he did make clear the difference between those whose hearts and minds are turned toward God and those who are turned away. More than a decade after *LOTR* was published, he wrote, "I don't feel under any obligation to make my story fit with formalized Christian theology, though I actually intended it to be consonant with Christian thought and belief."<sup>9</sup> It is to the story and the symbolism one must look to find the religious element.

Many scholars, notably Ralph C. Wood and Bradley Birzer, have developed and interpreted Tolkien's work according to his claim that it is fundamentally Christian, and have elucidated themes thereof found in *LOTR* such as divine providence, grace, pity and mercy, compassion, friendship, evil, courage, hope, and joy.<sup>10</sup> But these scholars do not specifically address Tolkien's use of light as a biblical symbol; neither do more recent authors who focus on the sacramental world of Middle-earth or the transcendent beauty found there, such as Craig Bernthal and Lisa Coutras. Bernthal comes close to this in his chapter on the fall of Fëanor, and draws associations between events in *The Silmarillion* and principles in the Bible; however, he doesn't specifically address the question of the Christian symbolism of light.<sup>11</sup> Coutras is even farther afield from this topic, even with an entire chapter devoted to a discussion of light, since she is concerned with theology—especially that of Balthasar—in relation to Tolkien's works.<sup>12</sup> Her emphasis is on equating light with beauty, and it is in terms of beauty that she conducts her discussion. She says: "For Tolkien, the light of being was a revelation of God's glory. . . . The transcendental light suggests that beauty is a significant element in Tolkien's imagination, offering an interpretive lens for his creative work."<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, she addresses the question of light in terms of beauty rather than for its own sake. "Beauty is a fundamental expression of the 'light of being,' the unifying splendor between the material and the spiritual."<sup>14</sup> They all have some excellent insights on light in Tolkien's mythology, but they don't address the central issue of this article.

8 All quotations are taken from the New King James Version.

9 *Supra* note 1, p. 355.

10 See Wood, R. *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, p. 75ff; also Birzer, B. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth*. Wilmington: ISI Books, 2002, p. 67ff.

11 Bernthal, C. *Tolkien's Sacramental Vision: Discerning the Holy in Middle-Earth*. Kettering, OH: Second Spring, 2014, pp. 106-112.

12 Coutras, L. *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty: Majesty, Splendor, and Transcendence in Middle-earth*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 47-64.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

My purpose here is to present the view that light in Tolkien's mythology is a central and an essential symbol, and that this symbol is biblical in its portrayal in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. I shall do this in three stages: the first section deals with light as an essential symbol in the creation myth; the second addresses how light, darkness, and fire can be symbols that serve both good and evil; and the third section looks at three major characters in *LOTR* that are figures of light in a biblical way.

## 2. The Creation of Light in Tolkien's Myth and in the Biblical Account

Tolkien's creation account begins with the creation of great angelic beings: "There was . . . Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of His thought."<sup>15</sup> Those of the Ainur who are granted the privilege of understanding the mind of the creator and assisting with the creation and government of the world are called the Valar, who are the greatest of them, and the Maiar, a lower order of angels than the Valar. The ideas of the creation were proposed to them first as themes of music, and they sang and performed the music according to Ilúvatar's themes. Then they were given a vision of what it would look like. Melkor, the most powerful of the Valar, fell into pride and rebellion even before the world came into being, while it was still music and vision in the minds of the Valar. He also corrupted a good many of the lesser angelic beings, the Maiar, who became Balrogs (fire demons) and other evil beings.

Then the creator, Ilúvatar, brought the music and vision into being, actual existence, by setting the Flame Imperishable, the Secret Fire to burn at the heart of the world.<sup>16</sup> Birzer, among others, identifies the Secret Fire as "Tolkien's mythological equivalent of the Holy Spirit."<sup>17</sup> There were periods of war between the Valar and Melkor which caused destruction to the world in the way of floods, earthquakes, and the like, but in the periods of peace, the Valar gradually made Middle-earth a lovely and fruitful place, lit with two great lamps, one in the North and one in the South. It was their task to make Middle-earth a welcoming place for both kinds of the Children of Ilúvatar—the Elves (the Firstborn), and later the Men (the Followers). After one war that was particularly ruinous to the lands and destroyed the lamps, the Valar decided to retreat from Middle-earth to a land across the western sea; here, they made for themselves a dwelling place called Valinor, also known as the Undying Lands or the Blessed Realm. Melkor was later defeated and chained up so that he could no longer ravage the lands or corrupt or seduce anyone to his side. Then the Valar could work in peace to make the Blessed Realm beautiful. "In that guarded land the Valar gathered . . . all the fairest things that were saved from the ruin; . . . and there naught faded nor withered, neither was there any stain upon flower or leaf in that land, nor any corruption or sickness in anything that lived, for the very stones and waters were hallowed."<sup>18</sup> For light, using all of

15 *Supra* note 3, p. 15. "Ilúvatar" is the primary name of Tolkien's creator; this is a monotheistic fantasy world.

16 *Supra* note 3, p. 20, 25.

17 Birzer, B., *Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth*, Wilmington: ISI Books, 2002 p. 69.

18 *Supra* note 3, p. 37-38.

the holy elements they could muster, the Valar sang the Two Trees of Valinor into existence. Each tree was a source of holy light: one gold and the other silver. Even the dew of the Two Trees emitted light in liquid form that could be collected and stored in large vats. Since Middle-earth now had no light, and the coming of the Elves was foretold to be near, Varda (Elbereth)—one of the Valar also known as the "star-kindler"—used this dew to make large and beautiful stars to light Middle-earth for the Elves. Although Tolkien gives different names for them, they are constellations we know, such as Orion and the Big Dipper. There were still no days or nights, or months or years in Middle-earth.

All of this is thoroughly consonant with the first two verses of Genesis 1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." (Genesis 1:1-3) Both creation accounts begin in darkness; both start with formlessness and chaos (although in Tolkien's story, the chaos is attributed to the fall of Melkor); and both involve the Holy Spirit (although again, in Tolkien's myth "He" is referred to as the "Flame Imperishable" or the "Secret Fire"). In both accounts, the first light created is a holy light, coming directly from God (in Tolkien's case through the agency granted to the Valar, the Holy Ones); it is not the natural light of the sun and moon. The sun and moon are created some time after the original holy light. One difference is that in the biblical account, the fall of Satan happens shortly after the seventh day of creation, whereas in Tolkien's myth, the fall of Melkor occurs while the creation is still in the conceptual forms of music, before it is given reality on its own.

Sometime during the ages of the Two Trees, the Elves awoke in Middle-earth. The first things they saw were the stars, and starlight was the only illumination there. The Valar, for love of the Elves and fear of what Melkor might do to them, invited them to come to live in the Blessed Realm. Many accepted the invitation, and arrived in Valinor in various groups, aided by the Valar. Tolkien wrote: "Now the Three Kindred of the Eldar [the Elves, 'People of the Stars'] were gathered at last in Valinor, and Melkor was chained. This was the Noontide of the Blessed Realm, the fullness of its glory and its bliss."<sup>19</sup> The Elves who lived there were taught by the Valar and invented and made many things, including letters and poetry, jewels, and other arts and crafts. In that time, Fëanor, the greatest craftsman among the Elves, created the Silmarils: three great jewels that had the light of the Two Trees embedded in them. "Therefore even in the darkness of the deepest treasury the Silmarils of their own radiance shone like the stars of Varda [Elbereth] . . . And Varda hallowed the Silmarils, so that thereafter no mortal flesh, nor hands unclean, nor anything of evil will might touch them, but it was scorched and withered."<sup>20</sup> The Noontide of the Blessed Realm lasted several ages, and many Elves were born and raised there, including Galadriel, the greatest Elf in *LOTR*.

Eventually, Melkor persuaded the Valar that he had repented of his evil ways and was turned free. He lusted after the Silmarils and, with the help of a light-devouring, evil spider demon, he destroyed the Two Trees, stole the three jewels, and fled to Middle-

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<sup>19</sup> *Supra* note 3, p. 63.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

earth. There, he corrupted captured Elves into Orcs, bred the great dragons, and basically produced all of the evil creatures of Middle-earth. This ended the Noontide of Valinor, and plunged the whole world into nighttime, with the only light being from the stars.

Along with his sons, Fëanor swore a terrible and blasphemous oath of vengeance and hatred against any who withheld a Silmaril. He persuaded a great host of Elves from Valinor to go back to Middle-earth and try to recover them, against the will of the Valar, and named Melkor “Morgoth”, the “Black Foe of the World”. But driven by the Oath, he and his immediate followers engaged in killing other Elves and committing other acts of betrayal. This was known as the fall of the Elves, though most of the Elves from Valinor (including Galadriel) did not fall from goodness with him. Martina Jurickova sees similarities between being driven from Eden and being banned from the Blessed Realm. She also sees similarities between the murder of Cain and the Elves being killed by Fëanor and his followers:

But when they listened to the Devil’s suggestion and ate fruit from the forbidden tree, they were cast out from Paradise and banned from returning. And it is said that at that time Paradise was removed from the Earth and hidden from people, who cannot reach it during their life. Similarly, when Tolkien’s Elves started to listen to Melkor, their evil qualities began to grow. This finally resulted in murdering members of their own race, which is reminiscent of the biblical fratricide of Abel by Cain. And although the decision to leave Valinor was originally by their own will, as a punishment for this killing, they were banned from returning.<sup>21</sup>

No one is immune from the possibility of falling into evil. Tolkien keeps this possibility open for Valar, Elves and Men, just as it is open in the Bible for angels and human beings.

In Valinor, the Valar did their best to revive the Two Trees with the dew, the liquid light that they had collected earlier. That, combined with some of their tears, was enough for the Gold Tree to produce a single fruit and the Silver Tree to produce a single flower before both trees died altogether. The Valar set the fruit and the flower to sail in the skies with Maiar to guide them, and they became the sun and the moon. It was about this time in Tolkien’s myth that Men first appeared in Middle-earth. They never experienced the light of the Two Trees—only the lesser light of the tainted sun and moon. Verlyn Flieger notes that even after the Two Trees are destroyed and the Undying Lands are literally darkened, the Elves still look to Valinor as “metaphorically and symbolically the place of the light.”<sup>22</sup> The Valar are still there, still ruling the world under the direction of Ilúvatar. Another epithet for them is still the “Blessed Realm.”

Tolkien is very clear that the light of the sun and moon is a lesser, diminished light compared with the light of the Two Trees and the Silmarils. It is the ordinary, physical light of days and nights. It is not even pure light, since the fruit and flower bore the taint of Morgoth’s evil attack on the Two Trees. “But neither the Sun nor the Moon can recall the light that was of old, that came from the Trees before they were touched by the poison of Ungoliant [the spider demon]. That light now lives in the Silmarils alone.”<sup>23</sup>

21 Jurickova, M. Tolkien and the Myth of Creation. [interactive]. [accessed on 30-Dec-2017] <<https://fellowshipandfairydust.com/2017/10/02/tolkien-and-the-myth-of-creation/>>

22 Flieger, V. *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien’s World*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002, p. 120.

23 *Supra* note 3, p. 101.

Furthermore: "A marked difference here between these legends and most others is that the Sun is not a divine symbol, but a second-best thing, and the 'light of the Sun' (the world under the sun) become terms for a fallen world, and a dislocated vision."<sup>24</sup>

This account of the sun and the moon is also consonant with the Bible. They are created on the fourth day, later than the light of the first day, and are included in the fall of creation. Biblical scholars have remarked that in Genesis 1: "The sun and moon, principal deities in ancient Near Eastern pagan pantheons, are not even named, effectively demoting them and emphasizing that they serve mankind according to God's design."<sup>25</sup> The whole book of Ecclesiastes uses the phrase "under the sun" to indicate a fallen creation, and the futility of all the work done there. "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind." (Ecclesiastes 1:14). Paul also speaks of the fallen state of the world: "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will also be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God." (Romans 8:20-21) Tolkien's Blessed Realm, along with the descriptions of the New Jerusalem, or heaven, have no need for the sun or moon since they have the holy light. "The sun shall no longer be your light by day, / Nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you; / But the Lord shall be your everlasting light." (Isaiah 60:19) "The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light." (Revelation 21:23) Even Tolkien's exemption of the stars from being sullied by evil is not in discord with the Bible, since the holy angels are sometimes referred to as stars: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? . . . / When the morning stars sang together, / And all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4, 7)

As to the fate of the Silmarils in Middle-earth, one of them was wrested from Morgoth on a magnificent quest and eventually became a star identified with the Morning and Evening Star, which we know as the planet Venus. At the end of the First Age, the last two sons of Fëanor finally recovered the other two gems, but the Oath had corrupted them, so they could not hold the Silmarils in their hands without being burned by them. One Silmaril ended up in the ocean, the other in the depths of the earth.

### 3. Light, Darkness, and Fire

Even though the Two Trees were destroyed before the sun and moon were made, their light had long-reaching effects, and could be felt all the way into the Third Age and the story told in *LOTR*. To begin, the Elves won their first battle against Morgoth in Middle-earth easily, because the light of the Two Trees "was not yet dimmed in their eyes, and they were strong and swift, and deadly in anger, and their swords were long and terrible."<sup>26</sup> Tolkien also wrote that "Elves and Men were of like stature and strength of body, but the Elves had greater wisdom, and skill, and beauty; and those who had dwelt in the Blessed Realm and looked upon the Powers as much surpassed the Dark Elves in

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24 *Supra* note 1, p. 148.

25 Sprout, R., Gen. Editor, The New Geneva Study Bible. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995, p. 7.

26 *Supra* note 3, p. 106.

these things.”<sup>27</sup> These Elves who came to Middle-earth either with Fëanor or after him were known as High Elves, due to enhanced abilities they had gained from the light of the Two Trees. They were also known as the Exiles, since they left the Blessed Realm against the will of the Valar and were banned from coming back. In fact, no ships trying to get to Valinor ever made it while the ban was in effect. It was lifted at the end of the First Age.

The holy light here is symbolic of blessings of strength, courage, and fierceness in the fight against evil, along with wisdom regarding how this opposition should be carried out. Of all of the High Elves in Middle-earth, only the sons of Fëanor, corrupted by the Oath, did not have knowledge of good or the guidance as to how to pursue it. So apart from them, the light of the Two Trees functioned as a kind of intuitive revelation for the Elves in the ages before there was any direct communication from God. “Your word is a lamp to my feet / And a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105) This mention of light is purely metaphoric or symbolic; but Tolkien’s interest in myth was expressed by rendering spiritual metaphors and symbols into concrete things that still retain their spiritual qualities. So the light of the Two Trees does enable created beings to see physically, as well as to “see” spiritually. When there was no word as yet, the light served as wisdom, guidance, and vision.

The sun and moon do not carry this spiritual depth in their light, since their light is part of the fallen creation in Tolkien’s myth. However, evil creatures cannot bear even the natural light of the sun. Trolls turn to stone, and goblins and orcs faint and cannot run or fight in ordinary daylight. “Get out, you old Wight! Vanish in the sunlight!” says Tom Bombadil in rescuing the hobbits from the barrow-wight. He recommends that they “let warm sunlight heat now heart and limb”<sup>28</sup> while he goes in search of the ponies. Sunlight assists in lifting the spirits of ordinary people. Theoden gains strength and finishes healing when a shaft of sunlight comes through the clouds.<sup>29</sup> At the intersection of the roads to Mordor and to Osgiliath, Frodo sees a statue with its head on the ground to one side. A beam of sunlight catches the head, which is encircled with flowers like a crown. Frodo’s reaction is one of hope: “They cannot conquer forever!”<sup>30</sup>

The Elves enjoy a clear night as much as day, since they love (the unsullied) starlight and they can see just as well by night as by day. The Elves of Middle-earth lived under starlight alone for ages before the sun and moon were created.<sup>31</sup>

Just as there are two kinds of light— holy light and natural light —there are also two kinds of darkness: the ordinary darkness of night and the Shadow of Morgoth. Due to the stars, the ordinary darkness of night is not completely dark, especially for the Elves. However, the Shadow of Morgoth shuts out all light and causes psycho-spiritual reactions of terror and despair. Morgoth himself is described as falling into evil and descending into darkness at the same time, as if the descriptions were both synonymous and symbolic, and literally true. “He began with the desire of Light, but when he could not possess it

27 *Supra* note 3, p. 104.

28 Tolkien, J. *The Lord of the Rings*, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994, p. 144, 146.

29 *Supra* note 3, p. 515.

30 *Supra* note 3, p. 702.

31 Caldecott, S. *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision Behind The Lord of the Rings*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2012, p. 84.

for himself alone, he descended through fire and wrath into a great burning, down into Darkness. And darkness he used most in his evil works."<sup>32</sup> Sauron, one of the lesser angels that fell with him, became the Dark Lord of Middle-earth. He is described as the greatest of Morgoth's servants: "But in after years he arose like a shadow of Morgoth and a ghost of his malice, and walked behind him on the same ruinous path."<sup>33</sup>

In the Second Age of Middle-earth, Sauron forged rings of power to bind a few of the peoples of Middle-earth to him. He gave seven of these to Dwarves, and nine to Men. The Men were overcome by them, and became Sauron's slaves. They did not die, but merely continued, and life became torment for them. They eventually became invisible and could only be seen by their black clothes and black horses. Their darkness was so complete that it seemed to swallow any light shining on them, so that when they attacked the hobbits on Weathertop in the darkest part of the night, "So black were they that they seemed like black holes in the deep shade behind them."<sup>34</sup> They were called the "Ringwraiths", or "Black Riders", and their greatest weapon was to strike terror, dread, and despair into people's hearts. The dread is practically irresistible: the hobbits are overcome by it on Weathertop. Later, the Ringwraiths are mounted on flying beasts, and they are felt by those on the ground every time one passes over. In the great battle at the end of *LOTR*, their leader is described as "a spear of terror in the hand of Sauron, shadow of despair," and a little later as the "Captain of Despair" since that is the effect he has on the soldiers on the ground.<sup>35</sup> The Ringwraiths "bring with them the power of despair, and it is more deadly than any other weapon they wield."<sup>36</sup> Before the battle, Sauron was actually able to send a darkness into the sky that blotted out the sunlight, so that his orcs would be able to fight. "It was dark and dim all day. From the sunless dawn until evening the heavy shadow had deepened . . . devouring light."<sup>37</sup>

In the Bible, darkness represents evil: "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." (1 John 1:5) Walking in darkness is a metaphor for choosing to sin and turning to evil ways: "men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed." (John 3:19-20). Believers are called to leave the darkness and walk in the light, a symbol for truth, holiness, and goodness. "But you are a chosen generation . . . His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9) The holy light brings with it not only goodness and cleansing of sin, but also strength, courage, hope and confidence. Tolkien takes this metaphor and presents it in a mythical setting in which it is both spiritual and physical at the same time.

In the Bible and in Middle-earth, fire is also a symbol for both good and evil. In the Bible, fire is used to portray God's presence and guidance in the pillar that led the

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32 *Supra* note 3, p. 31.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

34 *Supra* note 28, p. 195.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 818-819.

36 Dickerson, M. *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Vision in The Lord of the Rings*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003, p. 140.

37 *Supra* note 28, p. 807.

Israelites by night (Exodus 13:21-22), to signal God's revelation in speaking to Moses out of the burning bush (Exodus 3:2), and to indicate the gift of the Holy Spirit, seen as tongues of fire on the believers' heads at Pentecost (Acts 2:3). On the other side, hell is portrayed as a lake of fire, a symbol of God's all-consuming judgment (Revelation 19:20, 20:10, 15).

Tolkien also used fire as such a symbol. Gandalf, a messenger from the Valar (the angelic rulers of the world), called himself a "servant of the Secret Fire."<sup>38</sup> The creature he fought was a fire demon, one of the followers of Morgoth when he descended into darkness. Aragorn called it "both a shadow and a flame," and Legolas the Elf identified it as "a Balrog of Morgoth."<sup>39</sup>

One reason *The Lord of the Rings* resonates with so many readers is that Tolkien took symbols they are already familiar with and embedded them into his myth in such a way that they take on both physical and spiritual reality in the mythical world. Thus, the symbols express their nature to modern readers in a much stronger way that they do in other kinds of literature or in everyday life. Reading Tolkien helps the receptive Christian feel the reality of the faith more keenly.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Characters Associated with Light

The character most associated with the holy light is Eärendil. He is central to the whole presentation of Middle-earth as a transition between the myths of *The Silmarillion* and the history in *LOTR*. The offspring of Elves and Men, he represents them both. He is the subject of a song composed by Bilbo in Elrond's house in Rivendell, as a matter of legend occurring centuries ago in the First Age, and is also the father of Elrond himself. He is the only possible intercessor with the Valar on behalf of Elves and Men regarding aid in the battle against Morgoth in Middle-earth, simply because he possessed a Silmaril, which gained him a hearing in the Undying Lands. The Silmaril enables him to become the Morning and Evening Star, a symbol of holiness and grace, and a source of hope and strength to all who look at the star in later ages.

On a magnificent quest, Lúthien, an elf-maiden, and Beren, a human, wrested a Silmaril from the crown of Morgoth. It came to Elwing, their granddaughter, who married Eärendil after the fall of all the Elf kingdoms in Middle-earth. They lived in a settlement by the sea, and Eärendil became a great mariner and sailed the seas for many years with the goal of finding a way to the Undying Lands to plead for help for the peoples of Middle-earth. Due to the rebellion of Fëanor, the Valar had banned the Elves from sailing back to the Undying Lands; the Valar had also said they would not hinder the Elves in their war against Morgoth, but would not help either. However, with Middle-earth in such dire straits, the Elves losing the war, and all their kingdoms being overrun, Eärendil set off with Elwing and the Silmaril and made it to the Undying Lands to intercede for Middle-earth. His request was granted, and the Valar assembled a great army of Elves to go with them to Middle-earth and defeat Morgoth.

38 *Supra* note 28, p. 330.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 356.

40 *Supra* note 31, p. 5.

Several commentators have noted the Christ-like characteristics that Eärendil displays, such as being able to represent both Elves and Men before the Valar, or being an intercessor for them.<sup>41</sup> Others have observed that Eärendil is more like a precursor announcing hope, rather than the savior himself, on the lines of John the Baptist. "The image that goes with it [Eärendil] is people in sorrow looking up from the darkness and hoping both for rescue and for light. . . . Tolkien's *Silmarillion* closes with an analogue of intercession, forgiveness, and salvation coming necessarily from outside a ruined Middle-earth."<sup>42</sup> Tolkien's allusion is to Isaiah 9:2: "The people that walked in darkness / Have seen a great light . . . Upon them a light has shined." Eärendil's ship was hallowed by the Valar, and he was given the task of sailing it in the heavens as the Morning and Evening Star. Those who first saw the star gave it the name "Gil-Estel", meaning "Star of High Hope", and recognized it as a Silmaril.<sup>43</sup> It is so bright that even 6,000 years later, in the Third Age, it casts a shadow at night.<sup>44</sup>

The sight of stars in general, and this star in particular, lifts the spirits and gives hope to the Elves and the few mortals who have befriended them. At the beginning of their journey, Frodo and Sam encounter High Elves walking under the starlight in the Shire, singing a song to Varda (Elbereth), the maker of the stars, and remembering her starlight in the Undying Lands. Frodo greets them with a typical Elven greeting, which treats starlight as a kind of blessing: "A star shines on the hour of our meeting."<sup>45</sup>

Later, nearing the end of their journey in the land of Mordor, Sam sees a star that gives him peace and hope. It is not clear whether it is Eärendil, but the description of the effect it has on Sam is the same: "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 forever beyond its reach. . . . putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep."<sup>46</sup>

Two other characters that carry the light with them and use it in the fight against evil are Galadriel and Gandalf. Galadriel is one of the few High Elves left in Middle-earth at the end of the Third Age. She was born in the Undying Lands during the time of the Two Trees, and was a cousin of Fëanor. Her tresses shimmer of silver and gold, seemingly capturing the marvelous light of the Two Trees; it was her hair that gave Fëanor the idea of making the Silmarils. The element *galad* in her name means "light" or "radiance". Her primary association with the light of the Two Trees is her imitation of Fëanor. As he caught the light and embedded it in the Silmarils, she caught the same light from Eärendil's star, the Silmaril, in the waters of her fountain, and put it in a phial for Frodo. She told him, "It will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places when all other lights go out."<sup>47</sup> The light is not only for strengthening the faithful—it is

41 See Harvey, D. *The Song of Middle-earth: Tolkien's Themes, Symbols and Myths*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016, p. 143; also Flieger, V. *Green Suns and Faerie*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2012, p. 225-226.

42 Shippey, T. J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002, p. 257-258.

43 *Supra* note 3, p. 250.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 365.

45 *Supra* note 28, p. 79-81.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 922.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 376.

also a powerful weapon against evil creatures and servants of the Dark Lord. Sam used the phial to conquer the spider demon Shelob, and then used it again to get past the magical Watchers to enter the tower where Frodo was being held captive. As Sam held up the phial, he felt the malice of the Watchers “which made him quail; but slowly he felt their will waver and crumble into fear.”<sup>48</sup> Louis Markos comments that “Light, like the Word of God (Hebrews 4:12) is a double-edged sword that cuts both ways, shattering those who resist it but healing those who embrace it.”<sup>49</sup> In referring to this scene, Markos calls to mind John 1:5: “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”

Gandalf, too, has a white light to use in battling evil beings. He is an angelic messenger from the Valar to Middle-earth, and his function is “to assist the rational creatures of Middle-earth to resist Sauron, a power too great for them unaided.”<sup>50</sup> As such, he and the other wizards were sent to “train, advise, instruct, arouse the hearts and minds of those threatened by Sauron to a resistance with their own strengths; and not just to do the job for them.”<sup>51</sup> As embodied beings, they were susceptible to pain, weariness, fear, failure, and falling into evil. Tolkien says that of all five wizards, “Gandalf alone fully passes the tests.”<sup>52</sup> Even upon coming back from death after the battle with the Balrog, Tolkien explained that he “is still under the obligation of concealing his power and of teaching rather than forcing or dominating wills, but where the physical powers of the Enemy are too great for the good will of the opposers to be effective he can act in emergency as an ‘angel’ . . . He seldom does so.”<sup>53</sup> There are six occasions where Gandalf does “act as an angel” and uses his angelic power, revealed as white light. The first is during an all-night battle on Weathertop with all nine Ringwraiths. The hobbits and Aragorn only see that battle from far away, as flashes of light, “like lightning that leaps up from the hill-tops.”<sup>54</sup> Gandalf reports at the Council of Elrond that “such light and flame cannot have been seen on Weathertop since the war-beacons of old.”<sup>55</sup> The second is during the duel with the Balrog (a fire demon) in the Mines of Moria. He is killed in that battle along with the Balrog, but his mission is not yet accomplished, so he is re-embodied, “sent back,” to finish it. The third occasion in which he shows the holy light of his angelic nature is when he reappears as Gandalf the White to Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli in the Forest of Fangorn. There he tries to keep it hidden, but it keeps peeping out throughout the encounter. At first, “His white garments shone.” Then he put on his grey cloak, and “it seemed as if the sun had been shining, but now was hid in cloud again.”<sup>56</sup> Later his hands “seemed to be filled with light as a cup is with water,” and then he looked to Legolas and Gimli as “an old figure, white, shining now as if with some light kindled within . . . holding a power beyond the strength of kings.”<sup>57</sup> The fourth time Gandalf revealed himself was during the healing

48 *Supra* note 28, p. 902.

49 Markos, L. *On the Shoulders of Hobbits*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012, p. 169.

50 *Supra* note 1, p. 237.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 202.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 202.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 202-203.

54 *Supra* note 28, p. 183

55 *Ibid.*, p. 264.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 494-495.

57 *Supra* note 28, p. 500-501.

of King Theoden in the Golden Hall, and the last two times were in rescuing Faramir from the flying Ringwraiths before the gates of Minas Tirith. On both of those occasions, the Ringwraiths were driven away by a white beam of light coming from Gandalf's hand.<sup>58</sup> Only the High Elves who had lived in the Undying Lands under the light of the Two Trees before the First Age, such as Galadriel and Glorfindel, also had this ability to shine with the holy light at need, or to use it as an offensive weapon against the powers of darkness.

Tolkien drew a similarity between Gandalf's rescue of Faramir and the release of St. Peter from prison by an angel, in Acts 12:7-10.<sup>59</sup> In the Bible, angels sometimes do battle with the powers of darkness (see especially Daniel 10:12-14, 2 Kings 6:15-17, and Revelation 12:7-9). However, angels are most often messengers, bringing news, encouragement, warning, or rescue.

Fëanor's fall began with a kind of forgetfulness: "For Fëanor began to love the Silmarils with a greedy love, and grudged the sight of them to all save to his father and his seven sons; he seldom remembered now that the light within them was not his own."<sup>60</sup> This was not a trap that any of the faithful characters fell into. "Gandalf, as Servant of the Secret Fire, and Wielder of Narya the Ring of Fire, is a light-bearer. But he is not the source of light."<sup>61</sup> This is the main reason he is not a Christ-figure. Christ is both announced as the Light (John 1:4-5, 9) and claimed to be the Light of the World: "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." (John 8:12) Tolkien wrote that even though Gandalf (or Eärendil) may remind one of Christ, "it is not really the same thing at all. The Incarnation of God is an *infinitely* greater thing than anything I would dare to write."<sup>62</sup> Light itself—the holy light of the stars, of the Two Trees, and of the Silmaril—is the symbol of the revelation of the creator to the peoples of Middle-earth, not any of the characters in the story. In the mythology, "the actors are individuals—they each, of course contain universals, or they would not live at all, but they never represent them as such."<sup>63</sup> Tolkien wrote this way deliberately, so that his characters and other elements would be symbolic but not allegorical. He wanted readers to be able to take their own meaning from the story and the mythology, rather than have it be dictated to them.

## Conclusion

The source of all goodness, wisdom, courage and hope lies with the creator. The Bible speaks of how this is communicated: "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son." (Hebrews 1:1-2) The Word, both written and Incarnate, is the special revelation from God that gives light, life, understanding, and salvation to those who believe. Tolkien, in his mythology, placed the world in an imaginary time before

58 *Ibid.*, p. 810, 820.

59 *Supra* note 1, p. 203.

60 *Supra* note 3, p. 69.

61 Harvey, D. *The Song of Middle-earth: Tolkien's Themes, Symbols and Myths*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016, p. 157.

62 *Supra* note 1, p. 237.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

there was any Word from God. The replacement for the Word turns out to be light; it stands in relation to Middle-earth as the Word stands in relation to this world. In Tolkien's mythology, the light is mediated through the Valar, the guardian angels and rulers of Middle-earth. In the Bible, the revelation is much more direct. The prophets were inspired by the Holy Spirit, so the Scriptures they wrote are the Word of God. And Christ is the great Mediator who brings forgiveness, grace and new life to believers through His sacrifice.

Light is a biblical symbol in Tolkien's works in that the light of the Two Trees and the Silmaril of Eärendil communicates the essential character and will of the creator, as well as the grace and mercy of God that the Word communicates. "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son." (Hebrews 1:1-2) Light is the symbol of holiness, goodness, truth, and life in both Middle-earth as well as the Bible, and stands for the revelation of the holy character of Ilúvatar in Middle-earth.

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## BIBLINIS ŠVIESOS SIMBOLIS J. R. R. TOLKIENO KŪRINIUOSE „SILMARIJONAS“ IR „ŽIEDŲ VALDOVAS“

Susan Robbins

Associate Professor of Humanities and Philosophy  
Klaipėda University, Lithuania

**Santrauka.** J. R. R. Tolkien – žinomas filologas, senosios anglų kalbos ir jai giminiškų Šiaurės Europos kalbų ekspertas. Jis taip pat žinomas kaip uolus katalikas. Daugelis autorių, tokių kaip Flieger, Coutras ir Bernthal pažymi, kad Tolkien mitologijoje daug krikščioniškų įvaizdžių ir temų. Bet nei vienas iš minėtų autorių giliau nepalietė šviesos, kaip biblinio simbolio temos, nors ji persmelkia visą Tolkien mitologiją.

Šventajame Rašte šviesa visuomet yra šventumo, gėrio, pažinimo, išminties, malonės, vilties ir Dievo apreiškimo simbolis. Tamsa Biblijoje atstovauja blogį, nuodėmę, nevirtį, atskyrimą nuo Dievo malonės ir palaiminimų. Viename iš savo laiškų Tolkien rašo, kad „Žiedų valdovas“ iš esmės yra religinis ir katalikiškas veikalas. Pasak autoriaus, krikščionybė persmelkia visą kūrinio siužetą ir simboliką.

Ir nors daug autorių studijavo krikščioniškas temas Tolkien kūryboje, šviesos, kaip biblinio simbolio, tema dar nėra pakankamai atskleista. Drįstu teigti, kad šviesos įvaizdžiai knygoje „Silmarionas“ ir „Žiedų valdovas“ yra susiję su bibrine šviesos simbolika ir taip pat, kaip Biblijoje, įkūnija ir simbolizuoja Dievo apreiškimą. Kadangi šia tema yra daug daugiau medžiagos, negu galima sutalpinti trumpame straipsnyje, čia apsiribojama trimis esminiais punktais.

Pirma, mitologinė šventoji sukūrimo Šviesa, perduota per du medžius ir Silmarilus, yra ta pati pirmapradė Šviesa, apie kurią kalbama Šventojo Rašto Pradžios knygos pirmo skyriaus ketvirtoje eilutėje. Apie natūralios saulės ir mėnulio šviesos sukūrimą kalbama vėliau. Idėja apie dvi skirtingas šviesos rūšis suteikia galimybę žiūrėti į šviesą kaip į dvasinių dalykų apraišką arba natūralų dalyką. Natūrali šviesa, tamsa ir ugnis atstovauja gėrį arba blogį. Antra, kadangi natūrali šviesa ir tamsa atstovauja gėrį ir blogį, jų poveikis skirtingiems veikėjams taip pat atspindi Biblinę simboliką. Trečia, Tolkien herojai: Earendilas, Galadrielė, Frodo ir Semas, susiję su Šventa šviesa, iliustruoja kaip Dievo Šviesa yra stiprybės ir vilties šaltinis.

Šie trys punktai apie šviesos simboliką atskleidžia, kad nors Tolkien krikščioniška pasaulėžiūra ir tikėjimas knygoje „Silmarionas“ ir „Žiedų valdovas“ nėra aiškiai įvardyti, tačiau, yra visiškai akivaizdūs.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** šviesa, tamsa, simbolinis, dvasinis, mitinis, Silmarilas, reprezentacija.

**Susan Robbins**, Klaipėdos universitetas, Humanitarinių ir ugdymo mokslų fakultetas, Europos kalbų katedra, Docentė. Mokslinių tyrimų kryptys: filosofija, Kanto etika, krikščioniška etika, Naujojo Testamento studijos, dorybių etika, praktinė filosofija, dorybės ir nedorybės, septynios mirtinos nuodėmės, metafizinis blogis, Tolkien studijos, Tolkien fonetinė estetika, Tolkien ir senosios germanų kalbos, Tolkien poezija, religinis simbolizmas Tolkien mitologijoje.

**Susan Robbins**, Klaipėda University, Faculty of Humanities and Education Sciences, Department of European Languages, Associate Professor. Research interests: philosophy, Kant's ethics, Christian ethics, New Testament studies, virtue ethics, practical philosophy, virtues and vices, the seven deadly sins, metaphysical evil, Tolkien studies, Tolkien's phonaesthetics, Tolkien and ancient Germanic languages, Tolkien's poetry, religious symbolism in Tolkien's mythology.