NT 591: Tolkien’s Apocalyptic Imagination
Sean McDonough
Mon 9-12
smcdonough@gcts.edu

Introduction
The three words in the title provide a synopsis of the course content:

Tolkien
Tolkien’s philological expertise, coupled with his lifetime commitment to the project of “sub-creating” Middle-Earth, distinguish his work from others in the genre of fantasy literature. And because he worked from an explicitly Christian world-view, his writings merit sustained biblical and theological reflection. Tolkien’s early drafts of the Silmarillion are of particular interest here, since they address in a very direct fashion theological questions concerning creation, fall, death, predestination, and redemption. [Mission Statements 2-6]

Apocalyptic
One of the central questions for interpreting apocalyptic literature is this: Why is it what it is? Why would God choose to communicate with these strange images rather than in a more straightforward fashion? A central assumption of this course is that apocalyptic is precisely what is called for when discussing heavenly and future realities. The majesty of what is in view transcends “reality” as we know it (or think we know it), and a different mode of discourse is necessary to even approach these truths. While a book like Revelation certainly contains much didactic theology (particularly in chapters 2 and 3), this is enhanced by narratives and pictures which speak to the imagination. Tolkien’s work will be assessed in light of this: does he make a legitimate appropriation of an “apocalyptic” mode of discourse, conveying biblical truth with vivid imagery? This leads to the further question of … [MS 1]

Imagination
Are the arts and literature legitimate vehicles for conveying biblical truth? If so, how have Protestants fared in this arena over the last half-millennium? What are the limitations of “Christian fiction”? As we move into more practical areas, we will also consider how pastors and teachers can strike a balance between traditional (and necessary!) exposition of texts and other means of communicating biblical content both to their parishioners and to those outside the church. [MS 3]

Textbooks
It is assumed that students will have already read The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings before taking the course. This will permit us to focus on other, less well known primary and secondary source material. Students who have not yet done so may read The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings during the course of the semester, but this will be in addition to the required reading. Students should also note that Morgoth’s Ring and The Lays of Belierand contain some extremely detailed accounts of manuscript variations, etc. most of which can be quickly skimmed without great loss.

Required Reading
T. Shippey, The Road to Middle Earth
H. Carpenter, Tolkien: A Biography

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T. Shippey, Author of the Century
V. Flieger, Splintered Light
J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*

**Assessment**
The course will focus on lectures and reading. Assessment will be via a take-home mid-term examination (40% of the final grade) and a final examination (60% of the final grade).

**Lectures**

Sept 10: Lecture 1: The Man and His Myths: A Relevant Biographical Sketch  
Childhood – the looming presence of death and devastation  
The Great War  
The Academic  
  Tolkien’s academic discipline  
  Nature of the literature  
  Comparisons with OT/NT contexts: focus on creation epics  
Tolkien’s faith  
  Background  
  Explicit theological statements in letters and essays  
Tolkien’s art  
  Language gives rise to story  
  Leaf by Niggle  
  On Faery Stories  
  *Reading: JRR Tolkien: A Biography; “On Faery Stories” in The Tolkien Reader; begin reading The Letters of JRR Tolkien, to be completed by the final exam*

Sept. 17: Lecture 2: The Creation and Fall of Middle-Earth  
Creation in the *Valaquenta*  
  Developments in the accounts  
  Questions of purpose, mediation, materiality  
  Comparison with ANE, Greco-Roman, Jewish accounts  
  Comparison with biblical accounts  
  *Begin reading The Silmarillion, to be completed by the mid-term exam*

Morgoth’s Ring – the Fall of Middle Earth  
The Fall of Melkor – development of the story  
  Effects on world of Valar  
  Effects on creation  
Comparison with biblical, post-biblical accounts (esp. Paradise Lost)  
  *Read Morgoth’s Ring*

Sept. 24, Oct.1: Lectures 3-4: The Question of the Elves  
Description of their history and nature  
  Special questions concerning immortality and “death”  
  The language and lore of the Elves  
Elves as surrogate for humans  
  Creation and Fall  
  Redemptive motifs  
Elves as *tertium quid*  
  A haunting memory – of the “recent” and distant past  
  The embodiment of creation  
Elves and the role of tragedy in Christian experience  
  The Curse of the Sons of Feanor  
  Hidden strength and visible brutality  
  From the grinding ice to the burning hand
Can mythical creatures address biblical truths?

Oct. 8: NO CLASS, READING WEEK

Oct. 15: Lecture 5: Akallabeth – A Fall of Men
The Story of Numenor and Its Biblical Resonance
  Sauron as Satan
  Pride goes before a Fall
  Atlantis and Babel
  The Seed of Hope

Mid-Term Exam

Oct. 22, Oct. 29, Nov. 5, [Nov. 12 NO CLASS], Nov. 19: Lectures 6-8: The Kingdom of God is like this…Reading the Gospel in The Lord of the Rings
  Circumstances of composition: WWII
  The Central Story
    We are not alone: Gandalf
    The hidden kingdom: Aragorn
    Weakness and the defeat of Evil: Frodo
  Under the Surface
    The departure of the Elves
    The groaning of creation
    A longing for home, and the pain of separation
  How deep can Christian pain go?
    Reading: Shippey, The Road to Middle Earth

Nov. 26: Lecture 9: Reflections on Christian fiction: What hath Tolkien wrought?
  Christian fiction and apocalyptic – heirs of Revelation?
  Horrible Protestant fiction? If so, why?
  The role of literature in pastoral ministry and biblical exposition

Dec. 3: Lecture 10: Relentless Sorrow, Enduring Hope: Turin and Beren
  The Two longest tales, with good reason
  The Tale of Turin
    The Tale
    The Norse brooding doom
    Turin and Original Sin
  The Lay of Leithian: Release from Bondage
    The Tale
    Scenes of matchless beauty – Tinuviel beneath the stars, Tinuviel beneath the throne
    Scenes of despair – the death of Beren
    Resurrection
    Reading: The Lays of Belieriand.

Dec 10: Final Exam