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“NEW HOPE IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS”: EUCATASTROPHE AS KAIROS IN THE LORD OF THE RINGS

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“NEW HOPE IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS”: EUCATASTROPHE AS KAIROS IN
THE LORD OF THE RINGS

by

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Dedication

To the professors who have gone before
and showed me this vocation’s value:
C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Stephanie Odom.
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Chapter 1

Introduction and General Information

Present-day rhetorical scholarship has largely rectified the neglect of *kairos* James Kinneavy noted in 1986. However, the ancient Greek concept combining temporal-spatial factors, due measure, situational adaptability, and perfect timing has not seen much use in the rhetorical study of fiction. This is due perhaps to the relative scarcity of research in this area, or a deference to traditional narratological understandings of fiction’s structure, or any number of other reasons. The application of *kairos*, a foundational rhetorical device, to fiction has the potential to generate new insights on familiar subject matter. J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings (LOTR)* may seem an unlikely choice for such inquiry, but there are several factors that make it especially suited to such analysis.

First among these is the concept central to Tolkien’s theory of fiction: eucatastrophe. This term has layers comparable to *kairos* in both meaning and depth, intersecting with many of *kairos*’s core components. *Kairos*’s senses of due measure, situational adaptability, and crucial opportunity derive from its earliest uses, with strong parallels in eucatastrophe. A second reason for choosing *LOTR* is its academic author: Tolkien was an expert philologist and respected professor at Oxford University. Few, if any, professors have experienced comparable academic and commercial success. His essay on *Beowulf* remains widely read in its field, and *LOTR* has sold over 150 million copies since its publication in 1954 (Chalton and MacArdle 129). Before his academic career, he fought in the trenches of WWI, a season of his life at the heart of a
biographical movie premiering in theaters May 10, 2019. It is not every day an elite academic’s personal life and published writings both inspire such wide-spread appeal.

In fact, the cultural relevance of Tolkien’s work is possibly the most powerful justification for its examination in academic discourse. Peter Jackson’s movie adaptations of *LOTR* and *The Hobbit* “earned a combined gross of nearly $6 billion worldwide,” with the former winning “a combined 17 Academy Awards in total” (Feldman). Amazon signed a contract in November of 2017 for a five-season *LOTR* show, an investment likely to surpass $1 billion (Pak). In a world increasingly demanding pragmatic justification for scholarly pursuits, dollars speak. Here, they tell the story of a narrative that connects with people across cultural, national, religious, and political barriers. If the commercial success and near-universal appeal of Tolkien’s fiction does not warrant rhetorical analysis, surely his impact on the genre of western fantasy does.

**Literature Review: The State of Kairos and Tolkien Scholarship**

Each wave of scholarly interest in *kairos* has expanded the borders of its meaning. Trapani and Maldonado consider this a benefit within the field, though it does make application of the concept difficult. The work of Mario Untersteiner, James Kinneavy, and Richard Enos laid much of the groundwork for *kairos* scholarship in the last century. However, Hunter Stephenson’s more recent survey of academic views encourages a return to the word’s roots. A survey of *kairos*’s origins reveals three broad, overlapping categories in which it might be understood by scholars today: the mythological, rhetorical, and eschatological.
The adjectival form of *kairos* first appears in Homer’s *Iliad*. Each of its three uses speaks of a fatal weak spot, such as the head or collarbone, and are almost entirely spatial, lacking all rhetorical or metaphorical significance. This literal foundation becomes the foundation for the metaphorical idea of a proper position, as Hesiod uses it in his *Works and Days*. Hesiod speaks of balancing the load of a wagon so that the axles do not break, then advises *kairos* in all things. This integration of space, due measure, and time so easily achieved in a single Greek word finds no adequate English equivalent. John Wilson traces some historical aspects of consequent Greek authors’ work as they built on *kairos*’s meaning brick by brick, with Pindar’s *Odes* applying kairotic evaluation to literary/poetic concerns, Gorgias’s *Defense of Palamedes* equating *kairos* with appropriate rhetorical awareness, and Isocrates’s martial *Archidamus* using *kairos* as the combination of space and time into opportunity for right force to affect crucial change. It was into this milieu of meaning that the mythological embodiment of *kairos*, Caerus, was born.

Caerus is the Greek god of opportunity, the youngest son of Zeus, according to a fifth-century hymn by Ion of Chios studied in Victoria Jennings’s work. The sculptor Lysippus’s renowned representation of Caerus simultaneously embodied the god and the multiple meaning matrices of *kairos*. Though the statue was later destroyed, the numerous references to its features include near-universally noted foot-wings that symbolize horizontal speed, as well as scales and a razor/dagger that speak volumes about the “due measure” and crucial “knife-edge” facets of *kairos*. Dietrich Boschung’s case study of Caerus as Kairos’s personified figuration, or “morphome,” concludes that
Lysippus’s Caerus integrated contemporary ideas of Greek myth with \textit{kairos}’s many meanings, making the Greek god of opportunity an excellent tool for understanding \textit{kairos}.

Though part of the mythological \textit{kairos}’s core features, the rhetorical \textit{kairos} does not concern itself with deity. Plato and Aristotle are credited with creating the \textit{kairos} typically referenced in modern rhetorical criticism. While Aristotle’s writings lean more toward rhetoric and Plato’s toward philosophy, both authors saw the construct as incorporating a variety of factors that includes time, space, and whatever is necessary to capitalize on opportunity. Though Plato is traditionally understood to prioritize time over space, his use of \textit{kairos} in the \textit{Phaedrus} and the dialogue’s framework itself both indicate a more balanced confluence of factors. In \textit{Rhetoric}, Aristotle uses \textit{kairos} to teach the speaker’s need to respond with appropriate rhetorical devices as the “occasion” demands, i.e. if he notices heads nodding, he should adapt his speech accordingly (3.14.9). It is this combination of a speaker’s intent and audience’s need within a temporal experience that largely defines \textit{kairos}’s modern rhetorical understanding. However, the Hellenistic Greeks were not the only ones to create meaning with their unique understanding of time and space.

Philip Sipiora notes that \textit{kairos} occurs at least one hundred times in the Koine Greek New Testament. Many of these instances accord with the rhetorical sense, but in the spiritual/mystic context of early Christianity \textit{kairos} also gained spiritual significance. Paul Tillich is among the first to distinguish the Christian meaning of \textit{kairos}, defining it as an occasion of God’s eternal presence entering temporal human experience. This is
seen in the Gospel author Luke’s use of *kairos* to describe the time of Jesus’s physical presence as God-become-man, God’s spiritual presence in judgment, or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. *Kairos* also came to carry eschatological significance when used to describe end times and was connected to Christian conceptions of God’s sovereignty, presence, and purpose. This eschatological *kairos* became a pillar of Christian narrative and rhetoric, a hermeneutical key to interpreting history. It should be no surprise, then, that these same ideas echo in the caves and castles of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*).

Humphrey Carpenter’s biography of Tolkien is highly regarded for its description of this unabashed Roman Catholic, service member in WWI, professor of Anglo-Saxon and English Language and Literature at Oxford, and renowned philologist. Tolkien considered the Gospels true fairy stories, inventing the term “eucatastrophe” to describe the transformation of tragedy into joy, along with the deep fulfillment of the desire for good to triumph in spite of clear evil. Though leading Tolkien scholar Verlyn Flieger examines this word in light of Tolkien’s life, letters, and narratives, eucatastrophe remains a relatively under-examined concept in current Tolkien scholarship.

Tolkien’s *LOTR* has sparked a variety of criticism, ranging in focus from his spirituality and purpose to inspiration, rhetoric, and theory of fiction. His letters make abundantly clear he did not intend the *LOTR* as Christian propaganda, but rather as an entertaining mythic story. This said, he acknowledged the potential applicability of mythic universalities and the influence of his faith on his narrative. This has led critics to ask how the *LOTR* should be read, with some focusing on the foundations of Tolkien’s
subcreation like Richard Bergen. Others, like Gregory Hartley, have studied the spiritual symbolism of his supernatural beings. Chief among the religious interests’ scholars take in Tolkien is the role of divine providence in Middle-earth.

Tolkien is careful to choose words like “fortune,” “fate,” “chance,” and “doom” throughout *LOTR* to avoid directly stating divine sovereignty. However, there are several key moments where he comes close. These instances fascinate scholars like Janet Croft and Jesse Mitchell, inspiring explorations of free will and the consequences of choice in Middle-earth. Jerry deSpain ties this concept into his argument for interpreting *LOTR* as a piece of persuasive Christian rhetoric. He is among the earliest to take a rhetorical approach to Tolkien, followed by Jay Ruud’s more recent study of Gandalf and Saruman’s rhetoric. However, the study of Tolkien’s fiction as argument remains even more rare than examinations of his eucatastrophe.

Scholarly consideration of literature as a potential subject for rhetorical examination is not new, though its momentum began to grow only several decades ago. Wayne Booth’s *Rhetoric of Fiction* is a foundational text for the integration of rhetorical analysis and fiction. He bases his argument on the premise that fiction is the communication of worlds from authors to readers. He then builds on this by demonstrating how an author’s choice of adjectives, plot sequence, and dedicated amount of text to any subject in the narrative profoundly impacts the audience’s interpretation of that narrative. Authors build empathy through what they portray, creating a space where the lack of description or focus can be just as significant as the subject matter. Booth’s
work is widely regarded as a central beginning to the modern rhetorical analysis of fiction, and though it has its opponents, it has aged well in academic circles.

One of the strongest arguments that emerges from *LOTR* is the theme of hope. Gunnar Urang remarks on this, pointing to the structure of the narrative as a rhetorical argument for hope’s viability. From little happenings that encourage the characters to the great eucatastrophe of the Ring’s destruction, the story of *LOTR* is one of light’s constant progress into overcoming the dark. This is understood by some in explicitly Christian terms, like Susan Johnston’s connection of eucatastrophe to Pope Benedict XVI’s understanding of hope. Holland Rein explores the mythopoeic nature of Tolkien’s faith beside the likes of C.S. Lewis, Madeleine L’Engle, and G.K. Chesterton. Some even criticize the work for this Christian influence, such as Farah Mendlesohn. She argues that the depiction of argument and the interpretation of history in *LOTR* creates an authoritarian, hierarchical structure. However, there are also those who praise *LOTR* for its refusal to explicitly include Christian elements. Catherine Madsen finds Middle-earth to be a place that inspires neutral spirituality, resulting for her in a non-Christian reflection.

Christopher Toner takes one side of the middle road by distinguishing Christian parallels in Middle-earth from Christian allegory. He argues that the eucatastrophic structure of Tolkien’s writings can be understood as the true form of Christian fiction as a whole in its prioritization of the eternal over the temporal and unwavering trust in God’s teleological plan. Gunnar Urang takes the other side of the moderate view, articulating the importance of recognizing Christianity’s influence on Tolkien’s work without
allowing this to become the limit or focus of interpretation. Hope is universal and inclusive, expanding beyond the boundaries of Tolkien’s faith, though it is worth noting that it originates in his faith’s view of the world and history, as Urang admits.

While very few rhetorical analyses of Tolkien exist, I have not found anything that attempts to thoroughly prove an inherent argument in the design of the narrative. There are a number of Tolkien scholars who have considered eucatastrophe, but I have not found any beyond Toner and Johnston who investigate the way eucatastrophe impacts readers’ understanding of the narrative. Finally, I have found no scholarly works examining Tolkien’s fiction as argument through the rhetorical lens of *kairos*.

**Fantasy Fiction as Rhetoric**

Wayne Booth was among the first to explore the nature of fiction as intrinsically rhetorical. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, he begins by defining his subject as “the technique of non-didactic fiction, viewed as the art of communicating with readers,” in which the writer attempts “consciously or unconsciously, to impose his fictional world upon the reader” (xiii). From this perspective, all fiction is rhetorical because as an author presents a sequence of events in a setting, every word chosen or erased impacts the meaning of the narrative’s communication. Simply put, “though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear” (Booth 20). This is because all the elements of composing fiction involve the personhood of an author, though this does not make fiction rhetorical in the Hellenic argumentative sense. Language can only pursue a limited number of ends, Booth notes, which often creates an “incompatibility of interests” between “overt rhetoric” and artistic sensibilities (134).
In his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” derived from a lecture he delivered in 1939, Tolkien reaches similar conclusions for his own theory of fantasy fiction. Key to Tolkien’s discussion is the purpose of what he calls Enchantment, which is an artful use of language that “produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter… but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose” (Monsters 143). This is an essential divide between the persuasive intent of Hellenic rhetoric and invitational nature of Tolkien’s fiction. He argues that fantasy “seeks shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves” (143). He denies any ulterior motive or meaning in The Lord of the Rings repeatedly throughout his letters, asserting explicitly “It is not ‘about’ anything but itself. Certainly it has no allegorical intentions, general, particular, or topical, moral, religious, or political” (Letters 220). This has not stopped many of Tolkien’s critics from arguing for a religious interpretation of his text. After citing his infamous admission that it is a “fundamentally religious and Catholic work,” they go on to build elaborate hermeneutical systems to decode the Christian message Tolkien presumably hid (172). Even if his numerous denials of such explicit meaning are disregarded, Tolkien offers a simple explanation for the echoes these critics mistake for melody: “Myth and fairy story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary ‘real’ world” (144). In this, he and Booth are agreed.

After all, understanding and interpreting narrative as communication requires a moral framework. This is because of the nature of art itself: “When human actions are formed to make an art work, the form that is made can never be divorced from the human
meanings, including the moral judgments, that are implicit whenever human beings act” (Booth 397). Booth even argues that among the great works, “the best of these has always been the spectacle of a good man facing moral choices that are important” (131). Thus, like any communication, narrative relies on morality for interpretation. In some respects, this is especially true for fantasy.

Fantasy worlds are born from the minds of their authors. The view an author presents of his/her world shares the philosophical weltanschauung’s totality of perspective, or worldview. Even depicting pluralistic societies or writing from a relativist point of view would not prevent the author’s coloring of his creation. Though Tolkien can truthfully deny Christian intent, his beliefs are the soil of Middle-earth, which makes walking with Frodo a journey through Tolkien’s world and Catholic worldview. Farah Mendlesohn is not alone in arguing “Fantasy, unlike science fiction, relies on a moral universe” and “is less an argument with the universe than a sermon on the way things should be” (5). For her, portal-quest fantasies are most representative of this moral underpinning. She defines LOTR as a portal-quest fantasy because “Frodo moves from a small, safe, and understood world into the wild, unfamiliar world of Middle-Earth” after leaving the Shire, which for him is “the portal” (2, 3). Tolkien’s beliefs, hidden as they are, become the bones of his creation.

For critics like Mendlesohn, an author’s worldview determines their fiction’s structure and resulting rhetoric. She explains that portal-quest fantasies are often club narratives in which information is conveyed from unquestionable authority figures to a displaced protagonist representative of readers. This creates “a denial of discourse” in
which “history is inarguable” (6, 14). Such narratives use this strategy to “deny the possibility of a polysemic discourse in order to validate the ‘quest’” (12-13). A case could be made for the extended debates of characters in *LOTR* as nothing more than elaborate shams of differing opinions doomed to fall before the highest authority, though such an argument presents equally troubling concerns for discerning meaning. Should Gandalf yield to those who wish to hide or use the Ring? If morality is intrinsically relative or debatable, it is reasonable to speak against “the rhetorical demands of the portal-quest fantasy [since they] deny the notion of ‘history as argument’” (Mendlesohn 14). However, if truth exists objectively, it usually becomes the goal of discourse, making Gandalf’s identity as divine representative a validation of his authority. That he “imparts information and then demands action based on conclusions he considers self-evident” is not domination, but a combination of objective morality and pragmatism (Ruud 148).

Clearly Tolkien’s theological moral ontology has far-reaching consequences for the message his fiction communicates. In creating a world where “Knowledge is fixed and it is recursive,” Tolkien betrays his “peculiar and specific Christian heritage” (Mendlesohn 16). Yet even as the structure is inescapably impacted, and for some impaired, by Tolkien’s worldview, the narrative’s content protects it from true critique as proselytism. Catherine Madsen rejoices that “in *The Lord of the Rings* God is not shown forth, nor does he even speak, but acts in history with the greatest subtlety” (47). This leads to the central question: how should the argument of Tolkien’s fiction be understood? The answer may be beyond exhaustive explanation, but Tolkien’s
eucatastrophe and the ancient Greek rhetorical uses of *kairos* can function as key tools for its exploration.
Chapter 2

Eucatastrophe and the Greek *Kairos*

**Eucatastrophe as *Kairos*: “Due Measure”**

Tolkien invented eucatastrophe because he could not find a word that captured its meaning. This is “the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous ‘turn’” that acknowledges the possibility “of sorrow and failure” but “denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat” (*Monsters* 153). It is connected to the fairy-story’s requisite happy ending, though it should not be confused with a saccharine, immature view of reality. The eucatastrophe creates “a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” that “renders indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through” (153, 154). In a letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien says that the eucatastrophe is “a sudden glimpse of Truth… from those places where Joy and Sorrow are at one,” and is epitomized in the Gospels’ birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ, making them “the greatest” true fairy-stories (*Letters* 100). For Tolkien, the eucatastrophe is a point where opposites are reconciled, hope is vindicated, and the impossible is experienced. Since the Gospel is fairy-story and “the eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function,” it follows that eucatastrophe is the essential technique for creating successful fairy-stories (*Monsters* 153). This aspect, among others, of Tolkien’s eucatastrophe bears remarkable parallels *kairos*.

*Kairos* first appears as a noun in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* c. 700 BC, and Homer uses its adjectival form three times in his *Iliad*. In each case, Homer’s *kairios* was used spatially to describe a “fatal spot” that, once struck by a weapon, would lead to death
Wilson explains that even though “this concretely spatial sense of kairios persists” through other authors, it quickly takes on meanings “figurative in sense” (180). Hesiod’s use demonstrates this metaphorical expansion: “Observe due measure: and proportion (kairos) is best in all things” (694; Evelyn-White 53). Wilson notes “the immediate context is the overloading of a wagon,” and after comparing this instance to other early uses, he defines kairos as a “sense of what is ‘just right,’” analogous to the widely-recognized “due measure” (178, 179). Kairos’s evolutionary acquisition of increasingly complex meaning has continued into present day, with scholars like Mario Untersteiner and James Kinneavy bearing witness to its relevance for modern rhetorical theory. Key to the current discussion is the recognition of kairos’s rhetorical significance several centuries after Hesiod. Philip Sipiora notes that “in fifth-century literature, kairos evolves to represent the ‘best opportunity,’ which is the essential opportunity to arrive at the ‘just measure’ in conforming to whatever is necessary” (5).

In Tolkien’s theory of fairy-story, the rhetorical due-measure for communicating these narratives is eucatastrophe. The quintessential eucatastrophe of LOTR illustrates its significance as due measure. After a year’s perilous journey, Frodo and Sam are in Mordor nearing Mt. Doom. Within its fires the Ring was made, and only within its fires can the Ring be unmade. The Hobbits stagger into “a wall of night at the last end of the world,” their minds, bodies, and hearts wearied to the brink of death (1165). They march on, “small but indomitable,” until they enter the Sammath Naur (Chambers of Fire) and Frodo is finally able to destroy the source of his great torment (1169). But he does not.
a terrifying moment of ruin, Frodo succumbs to the will of the Ring, the evil will of Sauron, and refuses to cast it into the flames. This is Tolkien’s “dyscatastrophe,” the all-too likely, logical disaster of resisting evil beyond one’s own strength (Monsters 153). He explained to a reader that “the power of Evil in the world is not finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however ‘good’ they may be or seem to be (Letters 252). The failure of Frodo is where this story would end, were it a tragedy. Verlyn Flieger says “Katastrophe is the denouement of classical Greek tragedy, coming from katastrophein, ‘to turn down or overturn’” (27). However, this is not the end of the story, for a fairy-tale ending must mingle sorrow and joy.

The eucatastrophe results from Gollum attacking Frodo, his insatiable lust for the Ring overwhelming any sense of self-preservation. He bites off the Ring-bearing finger during their struggle, and in his glee, topples backwards into the fires below. Gollum’s selfishness, magnified by centuries with the Ring, becomes the instrument of the Ring’s destruction. This is where “Tolkien’s addition of the prefix eu, ‘well or good,’ reverses the tragic meaning to transform the word [katastrophe] into ‘the good overturning,’” (Flieger 27). The Towers of Sauron fall, his armies scatter, and his Nazgûl are extinguished. At last, “the joys of eucatastrophe begin” (Hein 209). Only thus can the fairy-story’s “happy” ending be achieved, even as many things continue to crumble. Sam realizes “in all that ruin of the world for the moment he felt only joy, great joy” (LOTR 1180). This is the narrative’s “due measure,” as without this opportunity the story could not have met Tolkien’s requirements for the genre. As such, Tolkien’s eucatastrophe
becomes his narrative’s rhetorical *kairos* by enabling his tale to find the required balance of joy and sorrow in “the Consolation of the Happy Ending” (*Monsters* 153).

The eucatastrophic structure is drawn from the Gospels and strikes, for Tolkien, the perfect symmetry of honesty and optimism in narrative. This is due in large part to Tolkien’s faith. The implications of choosing this structure ripple into any effort to understand the argument of Tolkien’s fiction, as Christopher Toner aptly demonstrates. He argues that “eucatastrophe is the true form of Christian fiction,” when “true form” is defined as “story-telling that most accurately portrays the human condition” (78, 77). This understanding expands the eucatastrophic ending beyond Tolkien’s assertion of it as the “true form of fairy-tale” to all fiction written (or communicated/argued) from a Christian worldview. Toner bases his argument on the foundational tenets of “theism’s belief in a guiding Providence within history, and a saving grace above it” which results in “tragedy baptized” (77). This aligns with Urang’s description of *LOTR* as Tolkien’s “theology of history” (103) since a Christian worldview believes “the human condition in history is to be a protagonist of a eucatastrophic story” (Toner 87). Here, Tolkien’s eucatastrophe intersects with a different facet of the rhetorical *kairos* in its argument of fiction.

**Eucatastrophe as *Kairos*: Tolkien’s Situation**

Building on its meaning of due measure, *kairos* later comes to carry a sense of situational awareness that recognizes the need for adapting to the unique factors of any given juncture in time and space. Gorgias’s use of *kairos* in *The Defense of Palamedes* is cited almost universally when discussing the origins of this meaning. His text imagines
the argument of Palamedes against Odysseus’s charges of treason. The story goes that Odysseus tried escaping his oath to protect Agamemnon’s marriage by pretending to be insane: he sowed his fields with salt to prove himself unfit for the Trojan war. It was Palamedes’ idea to put Odysseus’ son in front of his plow, proving Odysseus’ sanity when he stopped to save his son. In retaliation, once at Troy Odysseus “simply framed Palamedes on a charge of conspiring with the enemy,” and while some accounts include planting “evidence in Palamedes’ tent,” Gorgias operates solely on the “verbal charge made by Odysseus” (Levett 88). This is the context in which Palamedes stands accused, mourning the impossibility of proving himself an innocent man.

Though he recognizes the futility of disproving a fictional act, Palamedes uses all the rhetorical devices in his arsenal. Towards the end of his speech, after citing his good reputation as argument against the act of treason, Palamedes notes that “in truth, it is not my habit to praise myself,” but in his desperate situation, “the present emergency (kairos) compels me” (Palamedes 32, Dillon and Gergel 92). Palamedes must commit what is temporally, rhetorically, and culturally distasteful (i.e. boasting) because the kairos forces him to do so, harmonizing the unusual with the necessary. Hunter Stephenson takes this use of kairos as both temporal and spatial, noting “the appropriateness of a discursive act is largely determined by its timing” and “at least in part, by place… That is, the presence of Palamedes at a specific location – before judges at a court of law – serves to justify the nature of the speech” (6-7). This same compulsion against one’s culture and normal modus operandi is seen in Tolkien’s view of crafting a fairy-story.
Tolkien knew the genre he entered would struggle to gain ground in the critical, hyper-rational climate of modern day. “On Fairy-Stories” is practically Tolkien’s apologetic when asserting “the association of children and fairy-stories is an accident of our domestic history” and confessing that his “taste for fairy-stories was… quickened to full life by war” (130, 135). After removing the association of childishness with fairy-story, he responds to condemnation of such narratives as escapism. Tolkien differentiates between “the Escape of the Prisoner” and “the Flight of the Deserter” because only jailers object to escaping bad situations, whereas true fairy-story is not the abandonment of duty but a temporary reprieve that gives strength for the Primary World’s tasks (148). Fairy-stories can, if ill-made, foster a “fugitive spirit” that denies reality’s responsibilities (153). However, this is prevented by eucatastrophe’s mix of joy and sorrow that reveals “the underlying reality or truth” (155). This unveiled truth is rooted in Christ, making Tolkien’s eucatastrophe “evangelium,” or good news for all that must be shared (153).

The good news of Tolkien’s eucatastrophe is not explicitly Christian in *LOTR*, as previously asserted, and manifests broadly as an enduring hope that this essay will later examine in detail. Crucially, here it must be noted that Tolkien did not see his narrative as a vehicle of allegory or sermon. In the words of Gandalf, Tolkien’s creation is part of his “uprooting the evil in the fields that we know,” and for him, this is best done through fairy-tale (*LOTR* 1095). Despite prejudices against the fairy-tale genre, Tolkien chose its structure for his eucatastrophic narrative because of its unique ability to partly satisfy the desires of broken man in a fallen world, albeit as echoes of the true song.
Tolkien’s faith in the power and necessity of writing fairy-tale is due to several facets of his worldview. First, he believed that the Gospels’ model of eucatastrophic *evangelium* extended to all narrative. He wrote to Christopher that “Man the story-teller would have to be redeemed in a manner consonant with his nature: by a moving story” (*Letters* 100). Second, part of this redemption would include what he called Recovery. Recovery is the “regaining of a clear view” of the familiar as “things apart from ourselves,” which Tolkien argues is necessary since “the things that are trite… are the things that we have appropriated” (*Monsters* 146). Recovery leads to a renewed wonder in the otherness of objects and people, as well as deeper appreciation for their unique particularities. Greek myth, in which “by the making of Pegasus horses were ennobled,” is one such example (147). This recovered perception also pushes back against the modern preference for machinery over nature. Tolkien thinks “the notion that motor-cars are more ‘alive’ than, say, centaurs or dragons is curious; that they are more ‘real’ than, say, horses is pathetically absurd” (149). For him, the power of the imagined living creature or object to change one’s view of the world is greater than that of the factual creature or static mechanical object. His point that “the bridge to platform 4 is to me less interesting than Bifröst guarded by Heimdall” is hard to dispute (149).

Personal experiences were often Tolkien’s justification for his certainty of eucatastrophe’s necessity. One example of this is when, immediately after his discussion of eucatastrophe, Tolkien tells Christopher about an epiphany he had while biking. Notably, he “could not reproduce any argument that had led to this, though the sensation was the same as having been convinced by reason (if without reasoning)” (101). This is
the power of eucatastrophe: to deliver certainty equal to that of logic “without the chain of argument we know in our time-serial life” (101). Like the Gospels, stories that present truth beautifully become their own argument for the reality of their principles. The reality of these stories’ particulars, at least in fairy tales, is inconsequential. This is because “Tolkien’s concept of story in general and of myth, legend, and fairy tale in particular” is “they convey not fact but truth and… are the best vehicles for certain kinds of truth” (Flieger 9). In his understanding of the globe’s competing worldviews, the eucatastrophic fairy-tale was the story most needed. Only this narrative structure could communicate the good news of the Gospels to a disenchanted world, making the need for evangelium the kairos that compelled him. This same kairos then shaped the understanding of hope communicated in LOTR.

**Evangelium, Eucatastrophe, and Kairos: Middle-earth’s Situation**

*Evangelium* is the Latin form of the Greek euangélion (εὐαγγέλιον), which originally meant “a reward for good news” before shortening to just “good news” (Bauer 402). Its extensive use in the Koine Greek New Testament to signify Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection led to its centrality in Christian thought. Tolkien certainly does use evangelium with explicit associations to eucatastrophe in mind, as he makes clear in the epilogue to “On Fairy-Stories.” He believes “the Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy” (156). However, while these explicitly Christian meanings are present, they are never overt in LOTR. This paradox is perhaps best explained in one of Tolkien’s letters to W.H. Auden, in which he says, “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” (Letters 355). Consonance is not equivalence. Tolkien’s earlier definition of eucatastrophe and evangelium as the denial of impending “universal final defeat” forms the foundation of hope in LOTR (Monsters 153).

To understand The Lord of the Rings as a rhetorical narrative, one must first know its setting. Middle-earth is Tolkien’s conception of a pre-historic, mythic time period on this Earth. LOTR takes place in the Third Age (c. 3018) when the evil being Sauron rules Mordor and seeks to conquer the rest of the world to force his will upon all. Dwarves, Elves, and Men are the three most powerful races valiantly resisting the creep of his power. Hobbits, child-sized persons with large, hairy bare feet, largely dwell in blissful ignorance of great happenings. However, when the Hobbit Frodo discovers the Ring he possesses is what Sauron seeks most, he joins the wizard Gandalf’s union of Elves, Dwarves, and Men to destroy the Ring and with it, Sauron’s spirit.

This quest is continually depicted as almost guaranteed to fail. During the Council of Elrond when courses of action are being considered, Gandalf defends his argument for the Ring’s destruction in Mordor by saying “We should seek a final end of this menace, even if we do not hope to make one” (LOTR 330). After this argument is accepted, Frodo calls it a “hopeless journey,” and later the great Elf Galadriel describes her and her husband’s centuries of effort in history as ages they “have fought the long defeat” (337, 443). Even near the end, Gandalf advises a suicidal gamble to attack Sauron so Frodo can sneak through Mordor. He does so because Sauron’s military strength is beyond match,
and he has “hope for victory, but not by arms” (1094). This constant sense of doom is crucial to Middle-earth’s setting because of how it affects the meaning of characters’ actions: all logic points to defeat, but still characters act, as hope’s formula adds an unseen variable. Tolkien’s study of Germanic literature is largely to blame for this incomplete fatalism.

As a philologist and Professor of both Anglo-Saxon and English Language and Literature at Oxford, Tolkien used his knowledge of Germanic culture to describe “Northern courage” in his essay “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” (Monsters 20). This “theory of courage” was defined by “the central position the creed of the unyielding will holds,” and sees Beowulf as the story of “man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time” (20, 21, 18). The gods and men of Northern mythologies were guaranteed defeat at the hands of monsters and chaos. For Tolkien, Beowulf allows readers to “look down as if from a visionary height upon the house of man in the valley of the world” and see its lone light as a black sky’s single star, since “the outer darkness and its hostile offspring lie ever in wait for the torches to fail and the voices to cease” (33). And yet, even with “pagan English and Norse imagination” agreeing about the “final defeat of the humane (and of the divine made in its image),” Beowulf refuses to sit idle (21).

In the Northern theory of courage action is not devalued by inevitable defeat, but rather given as man’s only answer to his doom. Beowulf fights Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and a dragon because this is his duty and due measure, his kairos, in these moments of his story. Similarly, Boromir says to Gandalf during their search for Moria,
“All choices seem ill, and to be caught between wolves and the wall the likeliest chance. Lead on!” (LOTR 372-373). Probable death is no reason to change one’s course of action. Tolkien notes “the worth of defeated valour in this world is deeply felt,” and that Beowulf “is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy” (23, 18). Yet Beowulf is an early fusion of pagan despair and Christian hope. In it, there is a partial shift as “the tragedy of the great temporal defeat… ceases to be finally important” in light of the “possibility of eternal victory” (22). Tolkien’s LOTR completes this transition from temporal to eternal hope by baptizing aspects of Northern mythology’s doom into Christianity’s eschatology. This is because, for Tolkien, “the Christian story, part of worldly history, proposes that the miraculous grace of the happy ending is neither unworlly nor an affront to the mimetic demands of realism” (Johnston 82). In the Christian story, the eucatastrophic denial of ultimate defeat, its evangelium, is the only appropriate message for any ending to communicate. Middle-earth is founded on the Christian Recovery of reality’s nature, creating a world whose kairos demands the message of eucatastrophe: good news.

**Eucatastrophe as Kairos: “Crucial Point”**

The personification of kairos as Caerus unites due measure and situational awareness into “crucial opportunity.” The fifth-century BC Ion of Chios wrote a hymn personifying kairos as Caerus/Kairos, “the very youngest of all children of Zeus,” making him “the younger brother of Apollo, Dionysos, and Hermes” (Boschung 14). This is the only beginning left to history of the transition from kairos as concept to Caerus, god of opportunity. Sadly, this hymn has not survived. Only hearsay from Pausanias, a second-
century traveler and historian, testifies to its existence. In his extensive chronicle of
Greek altars, Pausanias says that in Olympia “close to the entrance to the stadium are two
altars; one they call the altar of Hermes of the Games, the other the altar of Opportunity
(Kairou). I know that a hymn to Opportunity (Kairou) is one of the poems of Ion of
Chios” (5.14.9, Jones 463). This is significant because the location signifies aspects of
the god’s meaning. Victoria Jennings argues that “the athletic connection immediate
through sheer proximity is reinforced by these senses of ‘due measure’, ‘critical moment’
– even ‘opportunity’” (336). Lyssipus’s sculpture simultaneously embodied the god
Caerus and the multiple meaning matrices of kairos.

*Kairos* was a multi-faceted concept even in Ancient Greece, as Lyssipus’s Caerus
demonstrates. While this sculpture was destroyed in 462 AD, it is widely thought to be
“the foundation of all literary and artistic personifications of Kairos ever since” (Jennings
344). Its descriptions survive in the epigram of Posiddippus and writings of Phaedrus the
Fabulist, Himerius, Callistratus, and others. These depict a winged male figure who is
variously described as holding scales and a razor or dagger. These instruments speak
volumes about the “due measure” and crucial “knife-edge” facets of *kairos*. A long
forelock of hair extends over Caerus’s forehead to be seized, while the back of his scalp
is bald, symbolizing the futility of grasping at opportunity past. The near-universally
noted foot-wings signify horizontal speed, while the spinal wings indicate vertical
capacity. In his case study of *kairos*’s personification, Dietrich Boschung says the
statue’s body positioning represents “an extremely short moment of transition from flying
in unattainable heights to fast running on the earth” (27). He adds “it is only in this single
unexpected instance, when the flight has ended and the race has not begun yet, that Kairos is within the reach of man” (27). Caerus, poised between the unapproachable extremes of god-like heights and speeds, represents the singular, unrepeatable nature of kairos.

It is in this sense of a crucial opportunity in time that LOTR’s primary eucatastrophe again aligns with the rhetorical kairos. Tolkien’s descriptive language and his character’s speech surrounding the eucatastrophe of the Ring’s destruction often appeal to this meaning. When nearing their goal, Sam and Frodo are spurred onward by an unknown voice that seems to say “Now, now, or it will be too late!” (1173). Gollum attacks them on the path soon after, and is repelled by Frodo, who says “Your time is at an end. You cannot betray me or slay me now” (1175). Then, when Frodo dons the ring in Mt. Doom, Sauron perceives his presence and realizes “the thread upon which his doom now hung” (LOT 1178). He was distracted at that very moment by the assault of Men, who arrived at this “hour of doom” after Aragorn chose to follow Gandalf “now to the very brink, where hope and despair are akin” (1182, 1096-1097). As Sauron bends his mind to Frodo in the Sammath Naur, his armies waver, and “all the Captains of the West cried aloud, for their hearts were filled with a new hope in the midst of darkness” (1182). Gollum falls with the Ring to their mutual destruction, causing the demise of Sauron’s towers and spirit. Frodo thought it was “the end of all things,” as failing to seize the kairos may have been (1180). But this kairos was a eucatastrophe, Middle-earth’s sole opportunity to transform tragedy into triumph, evil into good, and disaster into design.

**Eucatastrophe as Kairos: “Literary Tact”**
At times, *kairos* also carried a literary dimension. The literary *kairos* applies the concepts of crucial opportunity and situational awareness to texts, as seen in the writings of authors like Pindar, Isocrates, and Aristotle. These men add a dimension to *kairos* that parallels narratological concerns for story structure, length, and interpretation in Tolkien’s eucatastrophe.

Sir John Sandys, translator of the Loeb Classical Library’s *The Odes of Pindar*, introduces Pindar as a Boeotian born in either 522 or 518 BC (vii). A number of his odes celebrating athletes of the national festivals survive, and in several he uses *kairos* when speaking of the appropriate length of speech devoted to a subject. A prime example is when he says, “If you speak in due proportion (*kairon*), twisting the strands of many themes into a brief compass, less blame follows from men” (P. 1.80-81; Svarlien). In his extensive survey of *kairos* usage, Wilson notes that “most instances of Pindaric *kairos* concern either right behaviour[*sic*] in general or right behaviour[*sic*] in the poet, i.e. literary tact” (181). For the artist, literary *kairos* is an awareness of the times for concision and elaboration.

Literary *kairos* also unifies complex meaning into its most compressed form. Pindar writes “to embroider a short account from a lengthy theme is what wise men love to hear. Right proportion (*kairos*) in the same way contains the gist of the whole” (P. 9.76-79; Svarlien). In both quotes Pindar uses weaving imagery to communicate the value of tight-knit, heterogeneous communication in art. Pindar’s use of *kairos* when considering brevity or when to shift subjects is understood as “the appropriateness which comes from the proper selection both of subject matter and of style” (Wilson 181). Boris
Maslov understands such considerations of “the appropriate use of language” as times when “Pindar anticipates the later application of *kairos* in rhetorical texts to the crucial turning point in argumentation” (361). However, this not-fully-rhetorical artistic facet of *kairos* remains distinct and significant at least into Aristotle’s time.

Isocrates would later use *kairos* in similar literary senses. Wilson thinks the “literary *kairos* in Isocrates is extraordinary for its Pindaric technique” because Isocrates also finds it “a reason to abbreviate” (199). Of the thirty texts attributed to Isocrates by scholars today (Mirhady et al. 9), quotes from two should prove sufficient. Isocrates’s *Archidamus* is written from the historical twenty-four-year-old Spartan king’s point of view and is set at a peace treaty council. The recently-victorious Thebes and beaten Corinth urge Sparta to accept a treaty guaranteeing the independence of Messene, a land Sparta had traditionally ruled (Papillon 109). Archidamus finds this treaty shameful because it disrespects Heracles and other mythic Spartan ancestors’ efforts to conquer Messene, which Archidamus explains before declaring “I have not gone into great detail about what was yours from the beginning, for the present occasion (*kairos*) does not allow for a lengthy narrative but rather required me to speak concisely more than clearly about this” (Isoc. 6.24, Papillon 115). Archidamus’s recognition of the moment’s qualities guides him to cut the subject short. Similarly, when thinking of Evagoras’ achievements in his encomium *Evagoras*, Isocrates writes “my speech would perhaps be unsuitable for this occasion (*kairos*), and there would not be sufficient time for it” if he listed them all (Isoc. 9.34, Mirhady and Too 147). In Pindar and Isocrates, literary *kairos* champions pithy prose.
Aristotle ultimately comes to incorporate the literary *kairos* into his own rhetorical theory. Aristotle’s *kairos* “guides the rhetor in determining what, how, and for how long to speak” (Stephenson 22). When he has examined governments “insofar as was appropriate for the present (*kairos*),” Aristotle ends his discussion because any more would be ill-suited for his purpose (1.8.7, Kennedy 74-75). Later, Aristotle’s instruction on the introduction of a speech in *On Rhetoric* considers an audience’s attention span. While listeners should be alert in the beginning, Aristotle advises speakers to, “whenever there is an opportunity (*kairos*),” introduce shocking or novel subject matter to regain their interest (3.14.9, Kennedy 234). The literary *kairos* that began in Pindar as “what the poem demands at any given point” becomes what the audience needs for the communicative act to succeed (Wilson 181).

In Tolkien’s eucatastrophe, this facet of *kairos*’s meaning manifests in his literary theory and narrative structure for fairy-tales. Eucatastrophe is the fairy story’s final *kairos* because the “eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale” (*Monsters*, Tolkien 153). For Tolkien, the happy ending is demanded by nature of the genre, making it the proper means for achieving literary tact. Eucatastrophe becomes literary *kairos* by being right for the author, style, and subject matter, and by compressing the significance of the whole narrative into a particular event. And by virtue of being situated at the story’s end, eucatastrophe functions to abbreviate the fairy-tale. Since “there is no true end to any fairy-tale” in Tolkien’s eyes, the eucatastrophe serves as the appropriate point for the narrative to leave off (153). These aspects of Tolkien’s theory for eucatastrophe are evident in his composition of the six book endings in *LOTR*. 
The Fellowship of the Ring is comprised of two books, the first of which ends with Frodo fainting on the Rivendell-side of the Ford of Bruinen. The Nazgûl mounted atop their steeds have separated Frodo from his allies on foot, chasing so close that “hope faded” and Frodo believed there was “no chance of reaching the Ford before he was cut off by the others that had lain in ambush” (267). The miraculous speed of his elven horse carries him “right before the face of the foremost Rider” and across the river, but the nine Ringwraiths’ combined will forces him to stop and face them (267). His defiance is futile as three ride into the river. The Witch-King raises a hand and snaps Frodo’s sword, silencing the hobbit. Alone, weaponless and powerless before the menace of Sauron’s servants, Frodo waits. It is in this moment of helplessness that “there came a roaring and a rushing: a noise of loud waters rolling many stones” (268). This allusion to similar biblical descriptions of God’s voice is likely no coincidence (Ezek. 43.2, Rev. 1.15, 19.6). A magic flood arose by Elrond’s command “as soon as the captain of the Ringwraiths rode into the water,” though it did arrive until “the foremost of the black horses had almost set foot upon the shore” (278, 268). The three Nazgûl in the river are swept away, and the rest follow as Frodo’s allies attack them from behind with fire and wrath.

The Fellowship of the Ring’s second book ends with a series of minor eucatastrophes. Boromir’s greed for the Ring leads him to attack Frodo. Frodo escapes and resolves to take the Ring to Mordor alone so no one else will be endangered. He has almost escaped with a boat when Sam leaps into the river behind him. The hobbit cannot swim, forcing Frodo to drag him aboard and return to shore. Even as Frodo exclaims “So
all my plan is spoilt!” he adds that “I’m glad, Sam. I cannot tell you how glad. Come along! It is plain that we were meant to go together” (506). Sam’s near-drowning was essential to the success of Frodo’s quest, just as Pippin and Merry’s capture led to the awakening of the Ents and destruction of Orthanc. The attempt by Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas to rescue the captured hobbits led them to Rohan and Gandalf the White, allowing them to defend Helm’s Deep and later call upon the oathbreakers to defeat the corsair fleet. The destruction of the Fellowship was a crucial step to winning the War of the Ring, making it eucatastrophic on minor and major scales. Tolkien’s decision to end both book one and two with a eucatastrophe speaks to his understanding of the device as the literally appropriate conclusion.

This trend continues with the ends of book three and four in The Two Towers. After conquering Saruman’s forces and subduing Orthanc, the remaining members of the Fellowship find a brief respite. Pippin is drawn to the strange stone hurled at them by Wormtongue, leading him to steal it from Gandalf’s care. This Palantír enables the user to communicate with those in possession of the others, allowing Sauron to enter Pippin’s mind. Sauron mistakenly believes he is gazing upon the Ringbearer captured by Saruman. Gandalf believes this is “strangely fortunate,” as he himself may “have been saved by this hobbit from a grave blunder” (739). He was unsure of the stone’s properties and would have been unveiled to Sauron had he attempted to explore the Palantír. What seemed disastrous gave them an advantage.

Sam’s realization after battling Shelob emphasizes different aspects of Tolkien’s eucatastrophe. Sam fights off the monstrous spider outside her cave protecting what he
believes is Frodo’s cocooned corpse. Book four ends with him overhearing orcs explain that Frodo is merely comatose as they carry him into the tower of Cirith Ungol. The final sentence leaves Sam unconscious outside the tower gates, knowing “Frodo was alive but taken by the Enemy” (924). Sam’s victory over Shelob is miraculous, accompanied by glossolalia and “terror out of heaven” burning in the Phial of Galadriel (908). This is an occasion for joy, as is Frodo’s survival. However, these joys are mixed with sorrow as Sam is separated from his beloved at the book’s end. This tension deep in resolution is an essential aspect of eucatastrophe, one that is repeated at the end of book five and in the primary eucatastrophe of book six.

As Frodo, Sam, and Gollum moved to destroy the Ring, Pippin fought outside the Black Gate with the hosts of Gondor and Rohan. Their gambit to draw Sauron’s gaze succeeded: “the men of the West were trapped, and soon, all about the grey mounds where they stood, forces ten times and more than ten times their match would ring them in a sea of enemies” (1111). Mordor’s hordes charged to swallow them, led by monstrous hill-trolls. When one strikes Pippin’s friend Beregond, the hobbit plunges his sword deep into the creature’s chest. Its bulk buries him, and as Pippin falls into a black oblivion, he hears a familiar cry: “‘The Eagles are coming! The Eagles are coming!’” (1113). He believes himself confused, for these were the words of Bilbo’s “tale, long long ago” (1113). Tolkien ends book five with the blinding of Pippin’s consciousness: “his thought fled far away and his eyes saw no more” (1113). This ending serves as Pippin’s personal eucatastrophe and points the reader to a greater eucatastrophe: the Eagles’ aid. The hill-troll that almost killed Pippin becomes his refuge on the battlefield, yet the hobbit is left in darkness until Sam
and Frodo awaken safe in the land of Ithilien. There Gimli speaks of spotting Pippin’s foot “under a heap of bodies” (1191). Tolkien’s delayed revelation of Pippin’s rescue demonstrates a eucatastrophic prerequisite: faith. Any reader who left the narrative at book five’s end would never know Pippin’s apparent demise was his salvation, nor understand the significance of the Eagles’ appearance. The spark of hope in book five’s eucatastrophic ending glimmers all the brighter amidst the darkness preceding it. Its victory is only discovered later, after the completion of Sam and Frodo’s desperate journey.

The Ring’s destruction, previously noted as the primary eucatastrophe of Tolkien’s LOTR, is the weakest example of kairos as literary tact. Though this eucatastrophe does act as the resolution of the main conflict in the narrative, book six continues for some length. Each of the previous books ended with a clear eucatastrophe or strong elements of it, but Tolkien needs more pages to complete his epic’s final dénouement. Be that as it may, it is the Ring’s destruction that begins the end of Tolkien’s narrative, weaving much of his message into a single qualitative moment that anticipates the approach of a new theme. It is no coincidence that Tolkien leaves his readers in Sam’s mix of heartache and domestic bliss on the final page, perhaps hoping that at his story’s end they too will find themselves seated with family and saying with Sam, “Well, I’m back” (1285). Theirs, too, is a world of great tension, even as it rests in the ultimate resolution. To understand the divine’s role in Tolkien’s kairos and eucatastrophe, the New Testament is needed.
Chapter 3
Eucatastrophe and the New Testament Kairos


The prominence of *kairos* in Hellenistic Greek rhetoric is rivaled by its prevalence and significance in the Greek New Testament. With at least one hundred instances (Sipiora 118), *kairos* in the New Testament is too extensive to examine exhaustively here. Even within Luke’s Gospel and Acts of the Holy Spirit/Apostles, the uses of *kairos* might be broadly categorized into narratival/temporal, rhetorical, and eschatological meanings. Examining presuppositions about the New Testament and the context of Luke/Acts within these scriptures is necessary to understand the eschatological dimensions of the Christian *kairos*.

The Protestant New Testament canon’s twenty-seven books consists of the four Gospel accounts of Jesus’s life, the Acts of the Apostles/Holy Spirit after Jesus’s resurrection, thirteen letters from the Apostle Paul, eight letters from other authors, and the apocalyptic Book of Revelation. It was written in the first and second century AD, and today there are “some 25,000 early manuscripts in existence, almost 6,000 of which (many being only recognizable fragments) are Greek texts” (“The Manuscripts”). Ancient Christians accepted the New Testament’s claim to divine inspiration, or being “God-breathed” (Lyons, 2 Tim. 3.16-17, 1 Tim. 5.18, 2 Pet. 3.16), as do many modern Christians, which makes their Bible God’s commands concerning morality, ontology, epistemology, and eschatology.
Luke and Acts are traditionally considered to be written by the same author, a Greek physician named Luke. They are “presented as a narrative unity” and situated within “the mingling of the Jewish and Hellenistic worlds of the reader/listeners, and the accommodation of believers from paganism” (Van Arde 235, 245). George Kennedy notes that the Koine (meaning “common”) Greek of the New Testament “results from the use of Greek as a medium of communication throughout the Near East,” though the highly-educated “Luke and Paul probably could have written Attic Greek if they had wished to” (32). This context shapes Luke’s rhetorical uses of kairos, particularly since he “thinks of himself” as “not a scientific collector of facts, but an interpreter and dramatizer” (Kennedy 114).

In light of Luke’s excellent education and rhetorical situation as a Greek convert in the hostile Jewish/Roman culture, it is fair to assume each use of kairos carries some implicit measure of his intent to communicate specific meanings. The most basic and least prevalent usage of kairos is simply time within narrative. Narratival instances demonstrate Luke’s understanding of kairos as something that “contextualizes or mediates circumstances, usually in making situations conducive for the persuasive act of belief and trust” (Sipiora 120). However, he also understands it to be so much more, which his use in narratives spoken by his characters reveals.

Luke’s gospel begins six months before Jesus’ conception. The angel (Greek “messenger”) Gabriel appears to the childless priest Zechariah, who is “advanced in years,” and tells him he will have a son (who becomes John the Baptist) (1.5-17). Zechariah doubts, asking for a sign, and Gabriel proclaims that he will be mute for not
believing “my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time (kairon)” (1.18-20). The supernatural angel’s appearance, as well as his prophecy against barrenness and impotence, are divine ruptures in the laws of reality. Luke uses this instance of kairos to exemplify two major facets of God’s character: provision and presence. Along with God’s sovereignty, these three broad categories provide lines along which most of Luke’s kairos can be understood.

However, the New Testament kairos does not ignore its Greek origins. After quoting Plato’s definition in the Phaedrus, Philip Sipiora concludes “this concept of kairos – addressing one’s discourse measured to one’s audience – would seem to be a cornerstone of the New Testament” (117). Biblical authors also build on the ancient foundations of kairos as qualitative time according to their conception of God. The primary contrast “in this biblical time consciousness” to its Greek understanding, according to Edmund Perry, is “the plan of God for the many times, his plan to redeem, to reclaim for himself, all the times” (130). Perry’s plural “times” references the typical New Testament conjugation of kairos as the plural kairoi (130). He goes on to add that “chronological time is inseparable from kairological time, even though the two can be distinguished” (128). This accords with the older Greek uses of kairos and chronos in the writings of authors like Pindar, who occasionally used the two interchangeably, but often offered a semi-fluid differentiation between the two (Maslov 361).

Despite the rhetorical commonalities Luke’s kairos shares with that of the Greeks, “there was a discernible shift away from the pagan emphasis on fortune and fate” (Sipiora 117). Indeed, such concepts are incompatible with a sovereign God, making it no surprise
that the Greek word meaning “fortune” or “fate” (*tyche*) “never appears in the New Testament” (Sipiora 118). This is because God “sets the times, all times, both *chronoi* and *kairois,*” and full knowledge of such things is beyond human comprehension (Perry 130). Luke makes this clear in Acts 1.7 when Jesus, asked if the Kingdom of Israel is about to be restored, replies “It is not for you to know times (*chronous*) or epochs (*kairous*) which the Father has fixed by His own authority.” God’s authority is His sovereignty and ability to provide justly, as Luke argues with his portrayal of God’s earthly presence as Jesus.

Paul Tillich, “credited with making the concept of kairos significant in contemporary Christian theology,” provides the essence of the temporal distinction between its Christian and Hellenistic use (Montesano 170). His definition adds to *kairos*’s Greek rhetorical elements the personal agency of the divine. Tillich says New Testament *kairos* “describes the moment in which the eternal breaks into the temporal” (*Protestant Era* xix). The belief in *kairos* as an occasion of God’s presence entering human experience recursively shaped its rhetorical use and impact, as Luke/Acts demonstrates.

**Eucatastrophe as *Kairos*: The One’s Presence, Provision, and Sovereignty in Middle-earth**

The idea of Immanuel, “God with us,” began in Jewish thought long before Jesus (Isa. 7). Matthew’s gospel explicitly links Jesus to the prophesied messiah (Matt. 1.22-23), but Luke uses his narrative to show God present in the form of Jesus and His miracles. In Luke 12 Jesus addresses His audience’s ability to read the sky and foresee
the weather and contrasts it with their blindness to His significance. He asks why they cannot “analyze this present time (kairon)” (12.56), the time of His presence as God-become-man walking alongside them on earth. Even as the sky gives signs of things to come, so the Jews had prophets and prophecies foretelling Jesus, yet failed to “tell the time by the signs which were given to them” (Perry 130). Similarly, Jesus is said to weep at the sight of Jerusalem and predict its destruction during the Triumphal Entry (Luke 19.41-44). He tells the city that these things will come to pass because “you did not recognize the time (kairontes) of your visitation” (19.44). Here, Luke clearly ties God’s physical/temporal presence to kairos. In his article on New Testament myth, faith, and history, Paul Hammer sees Jesus as “chronos and kairos come together, for now the God who has acted, who acts and who will act is personally incarnate within the chronos” (Hammer 114).

Luke continues to connect kairos to God’s presence in Acts. Acts 3 begins with Peter healing a man lame from birth, which leads to a crowd gathering to marvel. Peter takes this opportunity to preach Jesus as the Son of God, asking his audience to “repent and return” so that their “sins may be wiped away” (3.19). The result of this choice would be that “times (kairoi) of refreshing may come from the presence (prosopon) of the Lord” (3.19). The word prosopon here is literally translated as “face” in many other places within the New Testament (Luke 5.12, 9.29, 24.5), making kairoi of refreshing derive from the “face” of the Lord.

Later, Paul’s evangelistic efforts on the island of Paphos are being opposed by Elymas the pagan magician, and Paul’s declaration that “the hand of the Lord is upon
“you” results in Elymas’s blindness (13.11). However, this blindness is mercifully only “for a time (kairou)” (13.11). From these examples, and others, it is evident that Luke’s biblical narratives correlate God’s manifestation with disruptions in physical reality, i.e. miracles and judgments.

In contrast to Luke, Tolkien does not write God, or The Silmarillion’s Creator-God Eru Ilúvatar (The One), into physical form on Middle-earth’s plain. He declares that “the Incarnation of God is an infinitely greater thing than anything I would dare to write” (Letters 237). Even so, Andreth in “Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth” speaks of rumors “that the One will himself enter into Arda, and heal Men and all the Marring from the beginning to the end” (Morgoth’s Ring 321). Her conversation partner Finrod agrees that the One’s presence is the sole cure for Arda’s ills wrought by Morgoth’s evils: “if any remedy for this is to be found… then it must, I deem, come from without” (322).

Tolkien’s refusal to write the One’s incarnation does not contradict his belief in its inevitability, nor disprove the incarnation’s necessity for achieving the telos of Middle-earth. Yet like much of his spiritual meanings, Tolkien leaves the One’s engagement in His world implicit by incorporating divine presence, miracles, and judgments into eucatastrophe.

During his introduction of “eucatastrophe,” Tolkien explicitly connects the word to God’s presence: “the Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation” (Monsters 156). Here specifically, eucatastrophe is an act of God’s presence within the story of humanity to divinely influence a crucial moment. Tolkien’s eucatastrophe absorbs Tillich’s
understanding of *kairos* as the moment when the eternal enters the temporal and adds the miraculous grace resulting from God’s divine presence, which always works to accomplish His purposes. In Tolkien’s mind, the Incarnation was Eru Ilúvatar’s inevitable solution to the evil that pervaded his creation, so it is unsurprising that his presence, provision, and sovereignty manifest indirectly throughout *LOTR*.

One of the clearest examples of divine aid transforming a hopeless situation is Sam’s fight with Shelob. The giant spider wears hide that “could not be pierced by any strength of man,” yet when she tries to crush Sam beneath her bulk, the “driving force of her own cruel will” draws deep the hobbit’s sword (907). Shelob retreats and prepares for a lethal strike. As Sam despairs in the face of a foe beyond his strength, “a thought came to him, as if some remote voice had spoken,” and he finds the Phial of Galadriel within his jacket (908). This gift to Frodo glowed with starlight from the waters of Galadriel’s mirror (468). Tolkien’s description of Sam’s subsequent experience can only be seen as an intervention of the supernatural: “then his tongue was loosed and his voice cried in a language which he did not know” (908). Sam’s elvish invocation of Elbereth, Queen of the arch-angelic Valar, returns him to his senses and reignites his courage. The Phial “blazed suddenly like a white torch” as “terror out of heaven,” driving Shelob back to her dark depths (908). The presence of divinity, here as light, becomes provision through the judgment (defeat) of Shelob, enabling Sam and Frodo to ultimately destroy the Ring.

Scholars have already noted parallels between Sam’s glossolalia here to that Luke describes. Several times in Acts, when the Holy Spirit fills people, they speak in languages foreign to themselves (Acts 2.4, 10.46, 19.6). In his examination of the Holy
Spirit’s role in Middle-earth, Gregory Hartley finds Sam’s experience “the most authentically miraculous instance of glossolalia” (108). Alongside connections between the Holy Spirit and the Wind of the West, Hartley finds the eagles to be a third key element in understanding the spiritual landscape of Middle-earth. He cites passages from *The Silmarillion* to demonstrate “they serve as guardians, they serve as watchful eyes for the Wise, they rescue those in peril, and they are a physical manifestation of the power of the Valar – and therefore of Ilúvatar Himself” (114). He does concede they are not “a theophany – or physical manifestation – of the Holy Spirit,” declaring instead “in form and function, the eagles are Spiritual intercessors” (114, 115). In Tolkien’s mythology, the eagles serve Manwë, King of the Valar. They are almost always miraculous responses to desperate need, as seen from previous examination of the eucatastrophic endings in books 5 and 6.

The eagles are heralds of victory. It was such at the end of *The Hobbit* in the Battle of Five Armies, and again in *LOTR*. Their presence creates spiritual and physical change on the battlefield outside the Black Gate as the Nazgûl flee and “the hosts of Mordor looked up and wondered what this sign might mean” (1181). Here it is not their massive size or ferocity that achieves victory, but their arrival that makes clear to Gandalf what he then announces: “This is the hour of doom” (1182). The victory is already won, as “The Ring-bearer has fulfilled his Quest” (1182). The eagles instead provide a way for Gandalf to rescue Sam and Frodo from “the darkness and the fire” in which they lay on the slopes of Mount Doom (1182). These creatures, like the Phial of Galadriel, symbolize provision through the presence of the divine in Middle-earth to achieve the One’s
purposes. Hartley believes “the eagles may be viewed as an incarnation of
eucatastrophe” because their work is “ordained by Ilúvatar… as an embodiment of
Ilúvatar’s divine will” (115). The result is always the same, for “No one, at any point,
ever successfully thwarts the Divine plan” (Hartley 116). As such, both the Phial and the
eagles function eucatastrophically to communicate the One’s presence, provision, and
sovereignty in the same way as Luke’s kairos.

The Relevance of Luke’s Kairos for Interpreting Eucatastrophe

Both Luke’s eschatological kairos, “wholly defined and determined by God’s
act,” and Tolkien’s eucatastrophe possess ramifications that exceed the level of affected
individuals (Minear 85). Sam’s eucatastrophic aid leads to the collective assistance of the
eagles after his and Frodo’s success. All eucatastrophe takes place in relation to and
within the greater Story of Middle-earth, making it an aspect of history. Tillich’s
description of Christ’s incarnation as “the one unique kairos” that may “happen in a
derived form again and again… creating centers of lesser importance on which the
periodization of history is dependent” suggests a method for understanding the series of
Middle-earth eucatastrophes previously examined (Protestant Era xix). This is because
Christian eschatology views kairos as the good that “appears fully in one moment of
time,” making it “a main category of the New Testament interpretation of history”
(Protestant Era 27, 28). As such, the New Testament kairos has a significant role to play
in drawing meaning from the sequence of events in Tolkien’s LOTR.

After all, Tolkien himself said “Mine is not an ‘imaginary’ world, but an
imaginary historical moment on ‘Middle-earth’ – which is our habitation” (Letters 244).
If Christianity believes time “has a hidden meaning – salvation” and “a hidden goal - the Kingdom of God,” then it follows that the “infinite significance of every moment of time is this: in it we decide, and are decided about, with respect to our eternal future” (Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* 36). This theological framework must result in interpretations of Tolkien’s history of Middle-earth that are fundamentally different from those based solely on the Hellenistic *kairos*. It sees the guiding hand of divinity shaping the course of history and makes the victory of Middle-earth’s free peoples not theirs alone, but ultimately, the victory of the One.

The impact of the Christian *kairos* creates “incommensurable philosophies of history” between secular and Christian understandings (Stark 266). Ryan Stark explains that “God does not operate in terms of worldly *kairos*” because it is “determined by the finite outlook” (266). While “the absence of an awareness of God’s providence” makes the secular “right timing and proper measure” insensible to Christian philosophers, it also presents *kairos* as a “diminished concept… prone to Machiavellian opportunism, sophistry, tyranny, shortsightedness, delusion, and the like” (266). Christian definitions of *kairos* are grounded in God’s provision, presence, and sovereignty. Tolkien’s use of eucatastrophe as *kairos*, with its Hellenistic and New Testament meanings, is only understood in full when viewed through its rhetorical, literary, and eschatologically-Christian meanings. Only thus can Tolkien logically assert that “the conflict is not basically about ‘freedom,’” but rather “about God, and His sole right to divine honour” (*Letters* 243).
Conclusion: The Argument of Tolkien’s Fiction

*Kairos*’s long-held senses of due measure, situational adaptability, and crucial opportunity are key elements in understanding the foundation of Tolkien’s fiction: eucatastrophe. His eucatastrophe combines joy and sorrow to unveil “the Great World for which our nature is made” (*Letters* 101). The concept’s connections to Christianity, the Gospels, and fairy-story make it the due measure for Tolkien both as author and creator of Middle-earth. As such, “[t]o visit Middle-earth is to respond mimetically to the Christian foundation encountered” (deSpain 95). Yet *LOTR* keeps all hints of religion to a whisper. Tolkien’s worldview silently defines the eschatological situation of his world’s characters, resulting in their unconquered hope. This becomes the primary argument of *LOTR*: the need for and ultimate victory of hope founded on the divine.

This has already been hinted at by various scholars. One concluded “the difference between tragedy and *eucatastrophe* is the principle of enduring hope” (Mitchell 108). Johnston makes a strong case that “the joy of Tolkien’s eucatastrophe is best understood as… Christian hope, *spe salvi*, the hope that saves,” because this “structure of fantasy proposes that the opposite of death is not life, but hope” (73). Since the root word “hope” is written over 450 times in *LOTR*, its presence is undeniably pervasive (Johansson, “Keyword Frequency”). However, it is Tolkien’s kairotic use of eucatastrophe that elevates hope from one theme among many to the heart of his fiction’s message. Indeed, it is an understatement to say “Tolkien’s fantasy… declares the viability of hope” (Urang 105). Jerry deSpain recognized *LOTR* as “rhetorical discourse which aims to influence its readers” through “Tolkien’s persuasive influence, as part of the
rhetorical transaction” of his fiction (90, 94). This persuasion is achieved through the portrayal of heroes who act with relentless hope because it is the only due measure for their world, the only situationally appropriate response, and the only answer to the hour of darkness.

Tolkien’s message remains as crucial and timely in present day as it was in his because it comes from a place where despair is never more real than hope. The Lord of the Rings rides alongside the great works of literature because Tolkien’s eucatastrophe continues to breathe life into readers, since “to read of the turn is to experience it, and to undergo a change of mood from despair to joy” (Flieger 29). This rhetorical persuasion is, “to however small a degree, a conversion experience” for readers (Flieger 29). If “[t]he author makes his readers” when he “makes them see what they have never seen before, [and] moves them into a new order of perception and experience altogether,” then perhaps Tolkien’s devout following is proof of his creation’s success (Booth 398). The Lord of the Rings fiction is powerful rhetoric because Tolkien’s kairotic eucatastrophe makes Middle-earth a world in which true despair can only exist in the absolute certainty of defeat. And since no such knowledge is given unto man, it is a world where hope always wins.


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