

Some reading notes on Tolkien's *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*, a metaphysical debate between the elven king Finrod Felagund¹ and the wise woman Andreth on the role of human mortality in Creation and in Eru's divine plan. Page numbers are from the 2015 HarperCollins paperback edition of *Morgoth's Ring (The History of Middle Earth, Volume 10)*. I assume some familiarity with the *Silmarillion* and with Christian theology, but I provide a basic glossary for the former, and the latter is not required for most of these notes.

- The elves believe that death is fundamentally part of Eru's design for man: "...must we not believe that your [human] brevity is also part of your nature?" (p. 308) This saddens the elves, who consider men their close kin, although Finrod concedes that some elves look down on men as lesser because of it.
- Men, on the other hand, believe that death is a curse given to them by Morgoth: "We were not made for death, nor born ever to die. Death was imposed upon us" (p. 309). Accordingly, they fear and flee from death, although Andreth herself doubts that they can ever escape it, even if they come to Valinor.
- Finrod disagrees with this wound theory, believing that the wound of Morgoth was only the fear of death, and not death itself.
- Elves might be slain, but they remain in Arda, and they may be reborn (e.g. Glorfindel). Andreth sees this as fundamentally different from human death, for two reasons: (1) elven death is not permanent, and (2) elves only die due to some misfortune, which one might hope to escape, whereas human death is "death ineluctable; death the hunter who cannot in the end be escaped"² (p. 311). Finrod sees only a difference in degree, not in kind, for elves, bound as they are to Arda, must pass away when Arda itself eventually passes.
- Finrod points out that the difference in mortality leads elves and men to appreciate Arda differently. "To me the difference seems like that between one who visits a strange country, and abides there a while (but need not), and one who has lived in that land always (and must)" (p. 315). The elven imagination is thus bound to this world, whereas men in their nature yearn for something beyond it. "But you are not for Arda. Whither you go may you find light" (p. 326).
- Finrod muses on the union between the hröa and fëa of men and supposes that, if their fëar are not bound to this world, then neither can their hröar be. He speculates that men therefore have a special role in the restoration of Arda: "This then, I propound, was the errand of Men...to heal the Marring of Arda" (p. 318). In doing so men will enlarge the Music and deliver the elves from death also.³
- Finrod says that elves distinguish between two kinds of hope: *Amdir* (a basic expectation of some good outcome) and *Estel* (a deep trust in the goodness and sovereignty of Eru).

¹ For those interested in adaptations of Tolkien's work, Finrod is briefly portrayed in the Amazon series *The Rings of Power*. He is one of the brothers of Galadriel.

² This was not for want of trying. Ar-Pharazôn, the last king of Númenor, the greatest civilization of men, sought to win immortality by force by sailing to Valinor with one of the greatest armies ever assembled, in defiance of the Ban of the Valar. This led ultimately to the Fall of Númenor and the Changing of the World.

³ In Tolkien's mythology, one sees many traces of this special role of men in the eschaton. Cf. "Men shall join in the Second Music of the Ainur; whereas Ilúvatar has not revealed what he purposes for the Elves after the World's end" (*Quenta Silmarillion, Of the Beginning of Days*).

The latter is an unshakeable faith: “It is not defeated by the ways of the world, for it does not come from experience, but from our nature and first being” (p. 320). Andreth says that, as a result of their rebellion,⁴ men cannot have Estel; in their despair, men cannot see the sovereignty of Eru but consider the Shadow of Morgoth to rule the world.

- Andreth acknowledges that even if there is some abstract, theological hope in the face of mortality, it does not soothe the present pains experienced now. “I did not say that it was ever my hope...and even were it so, I would still cry: why should this hurt come here and now?” (p. 323) Andreth speaks here of the mutual love between herself and Aegnor, who is Finrod’s brother. They could not wed because of the war.⁵
- In a moment of foreshadowing, Finrod says that “if any marriage can be between our kindred [elves] and thine [men], then it shall be for some high purpose of Doom⁶” (p. 324). Indeed, the most significant union of elves and men was the marriage of Beren and Lúthien, major figures in the *Quenta Silmarillion*. From them was descended Eärendil⁷ the Mariner, who sailed to Valinor and won the War of Wrath by slaying the dragon Ancalagon. (He was also the father of Elros and Elrond, from whom were descended Aragorn and Arwen respectively.)
- Andreth describes the remarkable Old Hope held by some of the wisest of men: “they say that the One will himself enter into Arda, and heal Men and all the Marring from the beginning to the end” (p. 321), but she does not understand how the Creator may enter his Creation, any more than an author may enter his story. The parallel to Christ is obvious.⁸ Tolkien’s commentary on the *Athrabeth* develops the Christian themes even more explicitly than in the text itself, referencing the doctrine of the hypostatic union and possibly even the Trinity: “Finrod therefore thinks that He will, when He comes, have to be both ‘outside’ and inside; and so he glimpses the possibility of complexity or of distinctions in the nature of Eru, which nonetheless leaves Him ‘The One’” (p. 335).

If I had to summarize the dialogue, I would say this: men see death as a curse dealt to them by Morgoth, and they despair because of it. Elves see death as fundamental to the nature of man and not at all a curse, calling it instead the [Gift of Ilúvatar](#).⁹ For elves are fundamentally bound, body and soul, to Arda, and they must eventually die when Arda ends. But men, in their fate and wills, are not bound to Arda or to the Music, and they go on to an existence beyond Arda that even the elves know not of.

⁴ Andreth alludes to but refuses to elaborate on some great sacrilege done by men as a race against Eru in ages past, probably a swearing of allegiance to Morgoth or a denial of Eru.

⁵ Andreth lived during the Siege of Angband, when the forces of the Noldor temporarily held Morgoth at bay for several centuries. The siege was eventually broken by Glaurung, the first dragon.

⁶ Tolkien often uses “doom” in an archaic sense, meaning “fate” without implying good or bad. Cf. the Doom of Mandos (the judgment of the Valar against the Noldor) and Túrin, who ironically took on the name *Turambar* (meaning “master of doom”).

⁷ Besides being very important in-universe, Eärendil has a beautiful out-of-universe story. The name comes from the Old English *ēarendel* (“morning star”), a title for Christ in the poem [Christ I](#). The poem deeply moved Tolkien: “Hail Eärendel brightest of angels / Over middle-earth sent to men.”

⁸ It is oddly fitting that I should write this shortly before Christmas, when Christians celebrate the high mystery of the Incarnation.

⁹ The language “gift of Ilúvatar” is not used in the *Athrabeth*, but footnote 4 (p. 326) makes the connection with the “gift” mentioned in the *Ainulindalë* (cf. p. 37).

I'll also provide a brief glossary for those unfamiliar with the *Silmarillion*:

- *Arda* is Elvish for “realm” and refers to the totality of the world. It sits within *Eä*, the universe. Elves consider it fundamentally wounded as a result of the actions of Morgoth, a state known as *Arda Marred*, analogous to the Christian idea of a fallen world.
- *Eru Ilúvatar* is the omnipotent but distant creator deity. He is analogous to the Abrahamic God but differs in several important ways. He dwells in the Timeless Halls outside of *Eä*, delegating the governance of Creation to the *Valar*, the greater angelic host analogous in power to the gods of Greek mythology.
- *Morgoth*, previously known as *Melkor*, is a fallen *Vala* and the master of evil in *Arda*. He is analogous to Satan in many ways. (Of interest to fans of *The Lord of the Rings*, he was Sauron’s old master, although Sauron did not become important until long after the events of this story.)
- *Hröa* is Elvish for “body” and is contrasted with *fëa*, meaning “soul.” The deep union of the two is the characteristic quality of the *Mirröanwë* (“incarnate”), those beings created directly by Eru to be embodied souls. This is in contrast to the angelic *Ainur* (e.g. Gandalf), who are beings of spirit only but may choose to inhabit a body. Originally, the Incarnate referred just to elves and men (the “Children of Ilúvatar” proper), with dwarves grafted in; how other sentient creatures, like ents and orcs, fit in is more complex and in some cases was never settled by Tolkien during his lifetime.
- *Ainulindalë* is Elvish for “Music of the Ainur” and is the creation account of the world. It is said that *Eä* was sung into existence by Eru and his *Ainur* at the beginning of time, and that this Music formed the vision for the world, which unfolds in obedience to it. The Music was corrupted by the discord of Melkor, and yet Eru will show that even this discord has its end in his glory in due time.
- *Valinor*, the Undying Lands, was the dwelling place of the *Valar* in *Arda*. Mortals were forbidden by the Ban of the *Valar* from entering it. The *Noldor*, the faction of high elves to which Finrod belonged, were also forbidden from returning to *Valinor* by the Doom of Mandos because of their rebellion.

There are lots of obvious connections with Christian theology; Tolkien was a devout and very learned Catholic whose faith profoundly shaped his thought. Tolkien himself noted many of these similarities and in some cases worked to make the connection a little less blatant.¹⁰ For example, in a note on an earlier draft of the *Athrabeth*, dated around 1955, Tolkien decided to remove Andreth’s explicit description of the fall of man, stating that “already it is (if inevitably) too like a parody of Christianity” (p. 354).

¹⁰ Tolkien famously disliked how explicit the Christian allegory of *Narnia* was, though of course C.S. Lewis would deny that it was allegory in the first place. In one of his letters, Tolkien writes that “myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit” (p. 355).