

# REST AND REEMERGENCE: RIVENDELL AS A SANCTUARY

Zak Schmoll on Healing and Pressing on

As Bilbo Baggins and company arrive in Rivendell in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, the reader is met with an almost heavenly description of Elrond's sanctuary. "His house was perfect, whether you liked food, or sleep, or work, or story-telling, or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all. Evil things did not come into that valley."<sup>1</sup> This sentiment is echoed in *The Lord of the Rings* as Gandalf tells Pippin, "Evil things do not come into this valley; but all the same we should not name them."<sup>2</sup> Rivendell, however, is a part of Middle-earth, and it engages with the evil around it. Rivendell was founded by Elrond as a "stronghold" and "refuge" shortly after Sauron wielded the One Ring and the Elves took off their rings to avoid his influence.<sup>3</sup> It stood against the emergence of an evil threat that had

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1995), 51.

<sup>2</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 226.

<sup>3</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1977), 299.

arisen in Middle-earth. Rivendell's purpose was not purely defensive, however. "In that house were harboured the Heirs of Isildur, in childhood and old age, because of the kinship of their blood with Elrond himself, and because he knew in his wisdom that one should come of their line to whom a great part was appointed in the last deeds of that Age."<sup>4</sup> The last deeds of the age, the final triumph over Sauron, required a reemergence from the refuge of Rivendell. Sauron could not be defeated from afar; he had to be engaged. In addition to serving as a sanctuary and refuge, Rivendell was a place of preparation. When Frodo laments that he has encountered evil before he has left the borders of the Shire, the elf Gildor reminds him, "The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot for ever fence it out."<sup>5</sup> Rivendell was founded as a response to a threat, but Elrond's wisdom prevented it from becoming the kind of defensive outpost Gildor found ineffective. Rivendell, instead, became a station of restoration that allowed those who entered to return to the road better prepared to face whatever they might encounter. As a sanctuary, Rivendell not only provided refuge and protection, but it also encouraged re-engagement.

Etymologically, it makes a great deal of sense to consider Rivendell a sanctuary. Many of the root words "sanctuary" is derived from speak to holiness, sacredness, and places set apart.<sup>6</sup> Consider, as one example, the

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<sup>4</sup> Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 307-308.

<sup>5</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 83.

<sup>6</sup> "sanctuary (n.)," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, retrieved January 2, 2022, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/sanctuary>.

Hebrew term *miqdāš*, often translated as sanctuary in the King James Version, which Strong's Concordance defines as "a consecrated thing or place, especially a palace, sanctuary (whether of Jehovah or of idols) or asylum: - chapel, hallowed part, holy place, sanctuary."<sup>7</sup> Sanctuaries are places that are set apart. They are different from the world around them. In the turmoil of the ordinary, sanctuaries provide peace. This term has been secularized even to refer to animal sanctuaries, but the term originally had heavy religious connotations. Sanctuaries were not just set apart, but they were set apart for religious purposes. Tolkien's work is not explicitly religious or allegorical, but its portrayal of a perfect place of refuge demonstrates the role that sanctuaries ought to play in the lives of Christians.

Rivendell is described simultaneously as a "fortress" as well as "a cure for weariness, fear, and sadness."<sup>8 9</sup> Sanctuaries must serve in both capacities. They must fight the darkness and sustain those who seek refuge within. Tolkien's emphasis on the need for sanctuaries likely stemmed from his view of history. He wrote to Amy Ronald, "Actually I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat' – though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory."<sup>10</sup> Like the Heirs of

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<sup>7</sup> "H4720 - miqdāš," *Blue Letter Bible*, retrieved January 2, 2022, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h4720/kjv/wlc/0-1/>.

<sup>8</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 226.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>10</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 255.

Isildur needed somewhere to be both trained and protected for years before it was time for Aragorn to surface and assist in the ending of Sauron's dominion, Christians must have sanctuaries, like Rivendell. If the line of Isildur had not been both cultivated and protected, the final victory would not have come. However, at the right time, Aragorn had to come out of hiding and claim his destiny. The sanctuary of Rivendell made that possible. Sanctuaries are not only places to retreat to but also to reemerge from.

Rivendell possesses a quality that stimulates physical and spiritual rejuvenation. Before the Fellowship is formed, Rivendell's restorative effect prepares Frodo and his companions for the road ahead. "For a while the hobbits continued to talk and think of the past journey and of the perils that lay ahead; but such was the virtue of the land of Rivendell that soon all fear and anxiety was lifted from their minds."<sup>11</sup> Once they were able to find this rest, "Health and hope grew strong in them, and they were content with each good day as it came, taking pleasure in every meal, and in every word and song."<sup>12</sup> The sanctuary prepared the eventual members of the Fellowship to reemerge when the time was right and continue on their journey with both health and hope. Their physical and spiritual needs were met so that hope returned to them.

Many monastic communities were built on a similar foundation. Consider the opening to *The Rule of St. Benedict*, "Listen, O my son, to the precepts of thy master, and incline the ear of thy heart, and cheerfully receive

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<sup>11</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 274.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

and faithfully execute the admonitions of thy loving Father, that by the toil of obedience thou mayest return to Him from whom by the sloth of disobedience thou hast gone away."<sup>13</sup> Monastic life may appear to be purely a retreat from the world. A full retreat would be similar to the Fellowship arriving in Rivendell and simply not leaving. There must be that reemergence, and Benedict writes, "To thee, therefore, my speech is now directed, who, giving up thine own will, takest up the strong and most excellent arms of obedience, to do battle for Christ the Lord, the true King."<sup>14</sup> Life in the sanctuary provides the strength, in this case, necessary to engage in spiritual warfare.

Like Christians need strength cultivated by community, the Fellowship needed what Rivendell provided to prepare for the journey ahead. Frodo needed health and hope after trekking through the wilderness and being stabbed. Frodo thought that his journey was simply bringing the Ring to Rivendell, and upon his arrival, he did not necessarily realize that his journey would continue to Mordor. He arrived exhausted, but he reemerged rejuvenated and prepared to continue bearing the Ring further.

It is precisely because Frodo recovered from the injuries sustained on Weathertop that he is in a position to volunteer to continue his quest with the Ring. At the conclusion of the Council, Elrond makes a bold prediction, "This is the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and

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<sup>13</sup> St. Benedict, *The Rule*, trans. Boniface Verheyen (Atchison, KY: Planet Monk Books, 2013), Prologue, Digital Edition.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

counsels of the Great. Who of all the Wise could have foreseen it?"<sup>15</sup> Had Frodo been unable to recover, he would not have been able to continue on this journey, and it would not have been the hour of the Shire-folk.

The fate of the world was held by some of its smallest hands. It was entirely unexpected, and it set the stage for those same hands to persevere to the edge of disaster. The restoration in Rivendell began a journey that turned the darkness into light. Tolkien defined "the sudden joyous 'turn'" as a eucatastrophe.<sup>16</sup> It is an unexpected salvation when evil seems prepared to triumph. Sanctuaries are often connected to eucatastrophes. Frodo was about to turn into a wraith, but he could be healed. Although this is not the ultimate eucatastrophe of the story, it is a mini-eucatastrophe that miraculously pulls Frodo back from the edge of darkness. The healing in Rivendell enables Frodo to continue on his quest toward the ultimate eucatastrophe, defeating evil in the fires of Mount Doom.

Sanctuaries in our world serve a similar function. They provide places for people when they hit rock bottom. When everything seems dark, sanctuaries provide comfort. They enable Christians to persevere against the darkness they face either by providing immediate healing or preparation for future trials. They are connected to eucatastrophes here as well. The word sanctuary is used throughout the Old Testament to describe the tabernacle. An important function of the tabernacle was that it was the site of the altar that provided a way for there to be a form of reconciliation

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<sup>15</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 270.

<sup>16</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 86.

between God and man. Granted, it did not perform the ultimate reconciliation that was achieved on the cross by Jesus Christ, but it provided an opportunity for people to atone for their sins. Even in a world full of sin and darkness, the altar within the sanctuary of the tabernacle provided hope. This action of sacrifice pointed towards the future, great hope of Jesus Christ; Tolkien referred to the birth of Jesus Christ as "the eucatastrophe of Man's history" and the resurrection as "the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation."<sup>17</sup> In the epilogue to his essay "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien connected his definition of fairy stories to the Gospel, suggesting that the Christian story is "a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories."<sup>18</sup> The sanctuary provides hope in the world that a true Redeemer would arrive one day.

Rivendell is not the only sanctuary in *The Lord of the Rings*, but it is described in unique terms. It is also significant that the Fellowship departs from Rivendell on December 25. The hope of the world was born on Christmas Day; the hope of Middle-earth began as the Fellowship moved towards the ultimate destruction of the Ring. Despite being in the world, Rivendell is not the same as the rest of the world. As a sanctuary, it provides a model for modern Christians who may be seeking rest in the darkening world. It is not enough to simply build a wall and fence out the world. As Gildor points out, the world is eventually going to get through. However, if the sanctuary is the kind of place that provides healing and prepares people for engaging the darkness, it will survive as Rivendell did. It will stand firm as Rivendell did. J.R.R.

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<sup>17</sup> Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader*, 88-89.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

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