This holiday season we await the much-anticipated final film in Peter Jackson’s rendition of J.R.R. Tolkien’s classic fantasy trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. It is in *The Return of the King* that all of the great questions of Tolkien’s classic story – the ageless questions that underpin all epic myth – will be answered. Will Good triumph over Evil? Will Frodo successfully complete his hero’s quest? Will the bad guy Sauron get his “just desserts”? Will Aragorn get the girl? Tolkien fans, whose copies of his books have grown threadbare from pleasurable reading, already know the answers. But Jackson’s treatment of them is awaited with considerable interest just the same – with an understanding among the more accommodating of Tolkien’s readership that the story, as in the first two films, is bound to be condensed for the silver screen. What this means, aside from the certainty of purist web sites and chat rooms fretting over the differences, is that most of Tolkien’s incredibly rich backstory for his fabled Middle-earth will not make it into the theaters – including the fascinating glimpses he offers of the star lore of the Elves.

Now matters of star lore are matters of some import, or at least some interest, to those who care about such things – like Elves and planetarians. So it seems appropriate, before the film version of the trilogy passes into cinematic history having spawned a whole new kindred of Middle-earth devotees, to compile and review what we know of how the Elves and the other denizens of Tolkien’s universe perceived that universe through the tales they told of it. For tales they did tell.

As academic an exercise as this may seem, it does have value to the likes of us. If the tales you tell now of the sky are taking on a “same old” quality, if those cosmic egg origin stories and sun-catcher myths and bear tales and all of that “arcing to Arcturus” begin to feel as threadbare as your volumes of Tolkien, then perhaps an Elvish interpretation can offer a fresh perspective and a different spin – not only on the tales we tell, but in reminding ourselves of the purpose and power of myth in ancient lives and in our lives today.

As Frodo reminded the wizard Gandalf at Moria’s stone door, all you must do is to “speak ‘Friend’ and enter ….

Of Creation and Sub-creation

Why is it that *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, has been voted (by readers if not the critics) the greatest twentieth century novel in English? The reasons are probably many: it deals with universal mythic themes that resonate in the human imagination, it’s compellingly apocalyptic, its prose reads like poetry, and it’s a ripping good story. Another reason may be that, for a fantasy work, in many respects it feels “real.” This is entirely on purpose. Tolkien was insistent that his work was neither mere representation nor allegory, but was rather what he termed “sub-creation” – the creation of a secondary world with, as Tolkien put it, an “inner consistency of reality” so skillful that it compels belief (at least “secondary” belief) on the part of the reader. It is a world “which your mind can enter. Inside it what he (the writer) relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world.” One of things this meant was that the sub-created world had to be complete, containing sun, moon, stars, detailed landscapes, and weather as well as the assorted dragons, trolls, talking animals and magic rings that made it fantastical. In Tolkien’s mind, this world had to have a history, a mythology, and a cosmology. And so his does – reinforcing the

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**Elvish Star Lore**

Jim Manning  
Taylor Planetarium  
Museum of the Rockies  
Bozeman, Montana USA

Away high in the east swung Remmirath, the Netted Stars, and slowly above the mists red Borgil rose, glowing like a jewel of fire. Then by some shift of airs all the mist was drawn away like a veil, and therecleaned up, as he climbed over the rim of the world, the Swordsman of the Sky, Menelvagor with his shining belt. The Elves all burst into song.

*J.R.R. Tolkien  
The Fellowship of the Ring*

If the tales you tell now of the sky are taking on a “same old” quality … then perhaps an Elvish interpretation can offer a fresh perspective and a different spin – not only on the tales we tell, but in reminding ourselves of the purpose and power of myth in ancient lives and in our lives today.
Tolkien, in crafting his mythos, would probably have agreed with Joseph Campbell, one of the world’s foremost examiners of comparative mythology, who said that the material of myth was “the material of our life, the material of our body, the material of our environment, and a living, vital mythology deals with these in terms that are appropriate to the nature of the knowledge of the time.” And, Tolkien might have added, appropriate to the nature of the place in which that material exists. For Tolkien that place was Middle-earth, a world that was supposed to be our own in an archaic and unrecorded earlier age. And it was necessary, it seems, for this world to have an astronomy if it were to be truly complete and believable.

In The Lord of the Rings and its prequel, The Silmarillion, Tolkien’s principle of sub-creation is manifested in two ways, I think, when it comes to matters of the sky. First, the sky behaves accurately (and thus realistically) in his stories. And secondly, there is a known cosmology and bits of star lore, attributed primarily to the Elves. We see an example of the first manifestation in the excerpt from The Fellowship of the Ring, the first book of his trilogy, that begins this tome. Frodo and his hobbit companions have encountered a group of Elves after his departure from his home in The Shire at the very start of his long quest. As they all settled down together for the night, they see in the east the Pleiades (Remmirthath, the “Netted Stars”), the star Aldebaran (as Borgil must surely be), and then Orion (Menelvagor) rising above the mists “over the rim of the world.” The time of year is late September, and these stars do indeed rise a little before midnight (Standard Time) at that time of year – at least in the modern day. (Given that the scene is set in a remote age, we must forgive Tolkien the lack of any precessional effect.) Another example is Tolkien’s treatment of the moon. Always meticulous in his chronology, he has the moon moving and phasing correctly as time passes and events of the story occur.

In Tolkien’s sub-created world, the sky works familiarly and believably, and plays a visible role in the detailed descriptions of environment – which is one of the ways Tolkien achieves the story’s sense of realism.

**Of the Elves**

The second way in which Tolkien brings astronomy into Middle-earth is through an invented cosmology, most apparent in The Silmarillion, the prequel to the events of the trilogy. Since all of the myth of Middle-earth is decidedly Elf-centered, it is useful to gain some further understanding of these characters before we consider their perceptions of the universe.

It is first important to understand that Tolkien’s Elves are not the tiny, green-suited pixies who repair shoes, bake cookies, or make toys at the North Pole as they do in popular culture today. Tolkien’s Elves hearken back to the original notion of these creatures taken from northern European mythologies, and perhaps most specifically Celtic lore – and they are made of much nobler stuff. (In fact, Tolkien had choice words for William Shakespeare, at whose feet he laid considerable blame for the diminution of fairies and elves, feeling as he did that Shakespeare’s plays had turned these courtly beings small and silly. We can only guess as to what he would have had to say about Walt Disney and Tinker Bell.)

The Elves of Middle-earth seem in fact to be rather similar to the legendary Tuatha Dé Danann of Irish lore, the “Fairy Folk” who were the first inhabitants of Ireland prior to the arrival of the Sons of Míl, or Milesians, the ancestors of the Irish to come. Like the Tuatha Dé Danann, Tolkien’s creations had of the stature of Men, although more slender than Men and fairer to look upon. They were immortal, but not eternal in the sense that their existence was tied to the Earth, and when the Earth ultimately died, so would they. They could, however, be killed by weapons or grief, but stayed within the “circles of the world” until its end. They were grey-eyed and, contrary to the movies, generally were dark-haired but for a certain kindred and the family line of Galadhríel. And I have never seen a reference suggesting that Tolkien meant for them to have pointy ears as seems required for all elf depictions today.

Tolkien did, however, mean for his Elves to be a representation of some of the higher aspects of human nature (as indeed, all his creatures were meant to “partially represent” human beings). In Tolkien’s words, “The Elves represent, as it were, the artistic, aesthetic, and purely scientific aspects of the Human nature raised to a higher level than it is actually seen in Men.” They had a “devoted love of the physical world, and a desire to observe and understand it for its own sake.” And they especially loved the stars. (In fact, Tolkien surmised, within the context of his myth, that the presence of such characteristics in human beings today is a result of inheritance from the Elves. He defined this as an elfen side or “elfen quality” to human nature embodied in our artistic and aesthetic tendencies. We might further surmise, in the same context, that practitioners, given our love of stars and lore and music and art – and laser pointers – must surely contain a twinkle or two of Elf.)

Tolkien’s Elves, with their artistic bent and their love of the physical world, were clearly the best instruments through which to articulate the mythology – astronomical and otherwise – of Middle-earth. And articulate is exactly the right word, for no part of Tolkien’s mythology is more important than the language he used to tell it, for it is in language that we find the beginnings of Middle-earth.

**Of the Languages**

J. R. R. Tolkien had an affinity and fascination for language from the start. As a child, he made up several languages, and this “secret vice,” as he referred to it, continued throughout his life. It served him well in his eventual vocation as a philologist and professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, where he studied and taught the archaic languages of...
Northern Europe and the literature in which they were by now solely expressed: the telling of epic myths and poetry. Tolkien was steeped in the world of Icelandic sagas, Norse mythology, Celtic legend, the Finnish Kalevala, Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight of Old English tradition. And these informed and influenced (along with other factors) Tolkien's own sagas of Middle-earth.

But for Tolkien, it began with language itself, which he sometimes described as “word-music.” His fondness for the grammatical forms and sounds of Welsh and Finnish, for instance, served as the basis for his two Elvish languages. And once he had Elvish, he needed Elves to speak it. Once he had speakers, he needed tales for them to tell. And out of these tales, Middle-earth grew.

To maintain the linguistic authenticity of a world populated by Elves, Dwarves, Ents, orcs, trolls, hobbits, several races of Men and all manner of other creatures required a lot of languages. Tolkien actually created structural bits and pieces of fourteen different tongues to serve his needs; most were realized only far enough to provide a few names and battle cries and such, but his Elvish languages were considerably more developed. The Elves were fond of naming things (some things more than once) and were liable to slip into poetry or song at any moment. This required a robust and, as Tolkien put it, a “specially pleasant” language to support the naming of names and sizable stretches of verse – as well as to knit his geography and peoples together with a linguistic consistency of nomenclature. And Elvish worked very well in every respect.

The first and contextually older of Tolkien's two Elvish languages is Quenya or “High-Elven.” By the time of the ring saga it had become a sort of Elvish “Latin” used mainly for ceremony and lore. The other language was Sindarin or “Grey-Elven,” the “working” Elvish of Middle-earth at the time. Both tongues provided Tolkien with a format for naming, and in another specially pleasant turn, we find that the nomenclature of Middle-earth is rife with astronomical references. Knowledge of just four root words and their Quenya (Q) and Sindarin (S) equivalents is sufficient to demonstrate this:

- star (Q: elen, S: gili)
- sun (Q: anar, S: anor)
- moon (Q: isil, S: ithil)
- heaven (Q: menele, S: menele)

Armed with this small bit of information, you can begin to appreciate how thickly-threaded are the astronomical motifs in the appellations of Middle-earth, and can subsequently enrich your acquaintance with its lands and peoples.

For example, when we wander into the northern and eastern districts of Gondor, named Anorien and Ithilien respectively, we can now recognize them as being the “Land of the Sun” and the “Land of the Moon.” If we tarry at the Gondorian city of Osiliath straddling the River Anduin, we might puzzle out that its name means “Fortress of the Stars” (from QST for “fortress” and giliath for “star host”). And if we bear in our lapel one of the lovely yellow flowers from Lorien that are called elanor, we might realize that we wear a “sunstar.” Or that if we arrive on the weekday that the Elves call Menelya, we've arrived on “Heavensday.”

People likewise bear celestial names. Isilidur, the hapless prince at the beginning of The Fellowship of the Ring movie, who cuts the One Ring from Sauron's finger and foolishly fails to destroy it, has a name that means “Moon-lover.” (His brother Anarion is “Sun lord.”) And if we rummage through the ancient history of Men, we may notice that one of the kings of Numenor (from whom Aragorn is descended) was named Meneldur, which means “devoted to heaven”. (And so he was, the annals telling us that he erected a tower in the rugged north of his kingdom “from which he could observe the motions of the stars.” He was also called Elentirion, “Star-watcher” – an epithet that might serve equally well for people like us.)

Perhaps my favorite astronomical name is that of Elrond, the half-elvish master of Rivendell, where Frodo heals from his wrath wound and the Fellowship of the Ring is formed. His name literally means “Star Dome.” A case could be made, I think, that elrond could also serve as the Elvish word for “planetarium.”

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If we require any proof that the Elves indeed loved the sky and its lore (as did Tolkien, perhaps, as well), we need look no farther than their words. But if we do look beyond the words, into the legends of Middle-earth, we will find the astronomical mythology that those words have conjured up.

Cosmology

In Elvish cosmology, or more properly “cosmogony,” the creation of the universe is a cross between Genesis and a musical Big Bang. As recounted in The Silmarillion. Eru the One (God), also called Ilúvatar (“All-Father”) created the Ainur, or angelic powers, with his thought and directed them in the singing of three great themes of music which foreshadowed the creation of the material universe, the formation of the Earth within it, and the awakening of the “Children of Ilúvatar”: the Firstborn (the Elves) and the Followers (the human race).

As the blueprint of the universe formed, each of the Ainur adding with its voice that part of the fabric Ilúvatar had revealed to it, the greatest of the Ainur named Melkor (the Elvish Lucifer), in his pride, began to alter the theme to his own desires, creating a turbulence and discord in the music that signaled the beginnings of the eternal struggle.
between good and evil that characterizes the history of Middle-earth as well as that of our own world. At length, Ilúvatar brought the musical themes to a conclusion, and revealed to the Ainur a vision of what they had sung. With a single word (“Eä!” “Let these things be!”), Ilúvatar brought the universe into being based on the musical blueprint, “globed amid the Void” and “sustained therein” but not a part of it. (Clearly, the Elves believed in a closed universe.)

Within Eä, the “World that Is,” was formed Arda, the Earth. Some of the Ainur were so taken with the splendor of the new creation, and so enamored of the vision of the new beings to come that Ilúvatar alone would create, that they were allowed to enter Eä to prepare Arda the Earth for the Children of Ilúvatar and to act as its guardians. These became known as the Valar, the “Powers of the World,” somewhat analogous to the gods of Greek and Roman mythology but serving as agents of Ilúvatar. Melkor was one of those who went, but he served only himself and skulked about apart from the others, attempting to exert his dominance over the new creation. (He would ultimately fail in this personally, but not before doing great damage and sowing the seeds that would keep evil present in the world.) Joining the Valar were the Maiar, lesser angelic spirits who served the Valar, and among whom were numbered Sauron who Melkor corrupted, and Gandalf who was to take wizardly form to rally the Middle-earthers in the final War of the Ring.

The shape of the early universe was also Greek-like: Arda was flat and round, surrounded by an encircling ocean called Ekkai. The air stretched above Arda, and above that was Ilmen (the “star region” or Place of Light), in which the stars, sun and moon moved. All was bounded by the Walls of Night (also called the Walls of the World) which formed an impassable sphere encasing Eä the World and separating it from the Void. The only entrance or exit was the Door of Night, through which Melkor was eventually cast out into the Void, there to simmer presumably forever (or until the Last Battle alluded to in lore attached to the constellation Orion). This door existed in the Uttermost West of the World, where the Valar dwelled in the land of Valinor separated by a great ocean from the western shores of Middle-earth.

But the shape of Arda the Earth did not remain this way, and the Elvish myths include a later transition from a flat world to a round one - “an inevitable transition, I suppose,” Tolkien admitted, “to a modern ‘myth-maker’ with a mind subjected to the same ‘appearances’ as ancient men, and partly fed on their myths, but taught that the Earth was round from the earliest days. So deep was the impression made by ‘astronomy’ on me that I do not think I could deal with or imaginatively conceive a flat world ...”

In Elvish cosmology, or more properly “cosmogony,” the creation of the universe is a cross between Genesis and a musical Big Bang.

Consequently, at the end of the Second Age of Middle-earth as chronicled in The Silmarillion, deluded by the poisonous counsel of Sauron after Melkor had been cast out of the World, the last king of Númenor sailed on Valinor with arms of war to wrest the gift of immortality from the Valar. When he landed, the Valar laid down their guardianship and called upon Ilúvatar, and the World was changed. Númenor was destroyed, sinking into the depths of the sea like Atlantis, Valinor was removed and hidden from the “circles of the World,” and Arda was made round so that a mariner sailing west seeking the Undying Lands would end up circling back round to home. As it is written, in simple but thunderous words:

And those that sailed furthest set but a girdle about the Earth and returned weary at last to the place of their beginning and they said: 'All roads are now bent.'

Yet a "Straight Road" still existed by which the favored could sail west and come at last to the havens of Valinor, if the Valar allowed it; such was the fate of the last of the High Elves to depart Middle-earth, and of the Ring-bearers at the end of their burdens.

The Stars

In Elvish legend, stars were made not once, but twice. And Varda, Queen of the Valar who entered the material universe and spouse of Manwë their chief, had a hand in it both times.

We may presume, based on references in Tolkien’s writing to Varda’s “two star-makers,” that she was the Ainu whose part in the original Music of the universe was to make the stars. At that time, the original stars that graced the sky of Arda were small and dim. The brighter stars were kindled later, in the second star-making, and Varda’s role in that is crystal clear.

In the time just before the awakening of the Elves in Middle-earth, the Valar’s abode of Valinor was illuminated by the light cycle of two trees Telperion which produced a silver radiance, and Laurelin whose light was golden. But Middle-earth itself was dark save for the dim stars shimmering in the constant night. The Valar decided that something more was needed for the coming of the Children of Ilúvatar, especially with Melkor lurking in the darkness of the World ready to corrupt or enslave them if he could. It was Varda who acted, and the following passage from The Silmarillion tells us most of what we know of the stars and constellations of the Elves:
Then she began a great labor, greatest of all the works of the Valar since their coming to Arda. She took the silver dews from the vats of Telperion, and therewith she made new stars and brighter against the coming of the Firstborn … Carnil and Luinil, Nénar and Lumbar, Alcarinquë and Elemmirë she wrought in that time, and many other of the ancient stars, she gathered together and set as signs in the heavens of Arda: Wilwarin, Telumendil, Soronwë, and Anarrima; and Menelmacar with his shining belt, that forebodes the Last Battle that shall beat at the end of days. And high in the north as a challenge to Melkor she set the crown of seven mighty stars to swing, Valacirca, the Sickle of the Valar and the sign of doom.

It is told that even as Varda ended her labors, and they were long, when first Menelmacar strode up the sky and the blue fire of Helluin flickered in the mists above the borders of the world, in that hour the Children of the Earth awoke, the Firstborn of Ilúvatar. By the starlit mere of Cuiviénen, Water of Awakening, they rose from the sleep of Ilúvatar; and while they dwelt yet silent by Cuiviénen their eyes beheld first of all things the stars of heaven. Therefore they have ever loved the starlight, and have revered Varda Elentarí above all the Valar.

When the Elves awakened, the stars were the first things they saw – and their response was quite understandable: they uttered the word “Elé!” which means “Behold!” (If you’ve ever gone outside on a clear night some-where to be confronted by a clear, pristine sky just bristling with stars, you can completely relate to this reaction.) This gave rise to the origin of the Quenya word for star (el) and explains the name they gave to themselves: the Eldar, the “People of the Stars.”

Varda’s action in placing the stars and constellations in the sky is somewhat reminiscent of the Navajo Black God who did the same (for different reasons). But of the lovely names of the stars and constellations in the account of Varda’s star-kindling, the etymology gives us relatively few clues as to which stars and constellations they are, and with some notable exceptions, we are left to speculate about this. Carnil (“Red Point”) and Luinil (“Blue Star”) are obviously bright red and blue stars respectively, but which we can only guess. Nénar means “Water on High” and Lumbar, “Shadow-home,” and these could be anybody. As could Alcarinquë (“The Glorious”) and Elemmirë (“Star Jewel”). The same is true of some of the constellations made by gathering together some of the previously-existing fainter stars: Telumendil (“De-
threw down his sickle and broke it. Seven sparks leaped up from the clanking sickle and flew into the heavens. Varda caught them and placed them in their present pattern in honor of Yavanna, and they now fly in the shape of a sickle around the north pole of the sky.

There are a few other stars and patterns appearing elsewhere in Tolkien’s Elvish lore. The previously introduced Remmirath – the “Netted Stars” (the Pleiades) that the hobbits saw in the east over The Shire, and the star Borgil that rose after it. Some have suggested that this star might have been Betelgeuse, but others say Aldebaran, and I agree with the latter. Based on the context of the passage in which it appears (recounted at the very start of this discussion), it was a red star clearly rising ahead of Orion; Aldebaran is the obvious choice.

Not appearing in Tolkien’s primary works, but showing up several times in the writings of The Book of Lost Tales Part One, are references to a bright star named Morwinyon (“The Glint at Dusk”), which Tolkien definitely identified as the star Arcturus – and as the one that got away, in a manner of speaking. Morwinyon is said in these legends to have been a bright star that Varda dropped “as she fared in great haste back to Valinor” and that it “blazes above the world’s edge in the west.” And oddly, he left it to sit there, as one of the bright unmoving stars that in his early drafts seemed to coexist with more mobile stars, for, as was written in an early tale, Varda had given to the ambulatory ones “a heart of silver flame set in vessels of crystals and pale glass and unimagined substances of faintest colours; and these vessels were made like to boats, and buoyed by their hearts of light they fared ever about Ilwë (Ilmen) ...” The account goes on to say that lesser spirits were assigned the task of sitting in these “starry boats” and guiding them “on many courses high above the Earth.” But some, like Arcturus and Sirius, were “like translucent lamps set quivering above the world, in Ilwë (Ilmen) or on the very confines of Vilna (the atmosphere) and the airs we breathe, and they flickered and waned for the stirring of the upper winds, yet abide where they hung and moved not; and of these some were very great and beautiful and the Gods and Elves among all their riches loved them ...” Tolkien apparently never went on to resolve this inconsistency, or to explain mythically how it was that all the stars eventually began to move across the sky together as they seem to do today.

But a further passage waxes poetic about Arcturus just the same, and hints at a tale involving Orion and Sirius:

Not least did they love Morwinyon of the west, whose name means the glint at dusk, and of his setting in the heavens much has been told; and of Nieluin too, who is the Bee of Azure, Nieluin whom still may men see in autumn or in winter burning nigh the foot of Telimektar son of Tulkas whose tale is yet to tell.

In this bit, Nieluin is an earlier name for Sirius (meaning “Blue Bee”), while Telimektar is an alternate name for Orion. In The Book of Lost Tales Part Two, Tolkien sketches out the star tale to which he may have been referring. In this tale, Melko (Melkor) escapes from the bonds into which he had been placed for his deeds, and the Valar and the Elves hunted him. Telimektar of the silver sword, who was the son of one of the more rough-and-tumble Valar named Tulkas, and his companion Ingil, the son of the High King of the Elves who lived in Valinor, surprised Melko and wounded him. Melko fled and climbed a towering pine tree that reached all the way up to the sky and escaped into the realm of the stars. The pine tree was cut down to keep Melko out of the world, and now he roams the heavens, making trouble for the sun and moon by causing eclipses, and for the stars by occasionally dislodging a few and casting them down – as meteors. (Varda, however, immediately replaces any stars so lost from the sky.) Telimektar and Ingil continue the pursuit, and were placed in the sky to guard the Earth from Melko. Varda gave Telimektar stars to bear aloft so that the gods may know he watches (and these, we may presume, outline his form). And Ingil follows at his heels as the star Nieluin, or Sirius. The tale says that one day Melko will find a way back and the Last Battle will begin (which Tolkien himself said perhaps owes its reference to the Norse Ragnarok, “but is not much like it.”). The sign of the battle will be when Telimektar draws his sword and the diamonds on his sword-sheath turn red.

Tolkien’s Elvish star legends offer another lovely reference to falling stars:

Yet many a time and oft a tiny star-ship of Varda that has dipped into the Outer Seas, as often they will, is sucked through that Door of Night behind the Sun; and some track her galleon through the starless vast back unto the Eastern Wall, and some are lost for ever, and some glimmer beyond the Door until the Sunship issues forth again. Then do these leap back and rush up into the sky again, or flee across its spaces; and this is a very beautiful thing see – the Fountains of the Stars.

My interpretation is that this is an Elvish account of the reason for meteor showers – “fountains” of waylaid stars fleeting across the sky!

**The Sun and Moon**

The stars, both sets of them, are older than the sun and moon who arrived relatively late in the cosmogonical scheme of the Elves – and out of sheer necessity. Varda’s brighter stars were apparently sufficient for the twilight world of the Elves, who were summoned by the Valar to join them in Valinor in any case. Some went (those who continued to call themselves the Eldar), and some stayed in Middle-earth (and came to be called by variety of names depending on when and where they left the journey west; the most notable group were the Sindar who remained in the west of Middle-earth).

But Melkor was ever about his intrigues and disruptions, and it was his actions that brought the Middle-earth lighting issue to a head. As told in The Silmarillion, it was during a festival in Valinor, when the Valar and Elves were off having a good time, that Melkor sneaked into their realm with a
light-devouring monster named Ungoliant. While the residents made merry elsewhere, Melkor struck at the roots of the light-giving trees Telperion and Laurelin, and Ungoliant sucked them dry of all their light, and a darkness came over Valinor.

Melkor and Ungoliant escaped, and the distressed Valar coaxed only a single silver flower from Telperion and a single golden fruit from Laurelin before the Two Trees expired for good. The Valar, who decided it was time to provide Middle-earth with more light anyway to expose and confound the conceits of Melkor, then placed the silver flower and golden fruit into specially-crafted vessels to hold and preserve their light, and selected Maiar to guide these vessels through the lower stretches of Ilmen, nearer to the Earth than the stars. The vessel holding the silver flower of Telperion became the moon (“Isil the Sheen”), and a male Maia named Tilion was selected to guide it. The vessel housing the golden fruit of Laurelin correspondingly became the sun (“Anar the Fire-golden”), to be guided across the sky by a female Maia named Arien. (The genders here are counter to the mythological norm in which the sun is usually male and the moon female, but the Elvish arrangement matches that of the Norse, where the sun was likewise female and the moon male.)

Varda then launched the vessels into the sky, the moon rising first in the west from Valinor, and it began to traverse back and forth across the sky between east and west. Varda having directed that the vessels would be “ever aloft” to light the world. At the end of the moon’s seventh traverse, when it was in the east, the sun was sent rising in the west, and so for a time the two vessels traversed the sky, passing each other in their courses over the middle of the then-still-flat Earth.

But things didn’t stay this way for long. Tilion, as it turned out, was “wayward and uncertain in his speed, and held not to his appointed path; and he sought to come near to Arien, being drawn by her splendor, though the flame of Anar scorched him, and the isle of the Moon was darkened.” (And so began the phases of the moon.) Besides that, several of the Valar complained that with the Earth constantly lighted, there was no sleep or rest. And so Varda changed the traffic pattern of the sky. She directed that, in order to provide both day and night, the sun would set in west below the waters of the great encircling ocean, pass under the Earth, and rise in the east to mount the heavens – creating a westward-only movement and a light-dark cycle that became the day-night cycle.

The moon was directed to move similarly, and to wait to rise until the sun had set, but Tilion still moved at “an uncertain pace,” still drawn to Arien with her sun, “so that often both may be seen above the Earth together.” And so the cycle of moon phases continues. The text goes on to say that “at times it will chance that he comes so nigh that his shadow cuts off her brightness, and there is a darkness amid the day” – as good a mythical account of the cause of solar eclipses as we are likely to find.

There is no account of how the sun and moon must have changed their paths when the world went round, but we may assume that they adjusted by circling around the round Earth, ever in the Ilmen (and so “ever aloft” in the end as Varda desired in the beginning), as any good Earth-centered view of the universe would have them do.

In the Elvish account of the origins of the sun and moon, we can detect a certain Coyote-like flavor in the behavior of Melkor. The Coyote character of Native American tradition was more about mischief than malice, but both Coyote and Melkor proved to be agents of change in their environments. Many of the actions (usually foolish) of Coyote changed the landscape of the world. In this instance, the action of Melkor changed the entire lighting scheme of the Elvish cosmos, and made necessary the advent of the sun and moon.

Tolkien’s Elves recognized and acknowledged this change and its effect on the Earth (just as all myth-telling peoples have recognized the time-marking and life-giving power of the sun). And they did it, as is entirely characteristic, with beautiful turns of phrase:

From this time forth were reckoned the Years of the Sun. Swifter and briefer are they than the long Years of the Trees in Valinor. In that time the air of Middle-earth became heavy with the breath of growth and mortality, and the changing

...and ageing of all things was hastened exceedingly; life teemed upon the soil and in the waters in the Second Spring of Arda, and the Eldar increased, and beneath the new Sun Beleriand grew green and fair.

The sun was made from the flower of the golden tree Laurelin.

The Planets

We have not yet considered Elvish lore concerning the planets, but since, with one important exception, they seem to have escaped mention (if not notice), there isn’t much to tell. I have seen one source suggest that Varda’s bright stars kindled before the coming of the Elves were actually the planets, and this source assigned the star names to them – Mars as Carnil, Jupiter as Alcarinquë, and so on. But I am not aware of any justification for this in the “scriptures,” so to speak, and when the source assigned names to Uranus and Neptune as well (these were, after all, supposed to be bright), the theory fell apart for me.

The one planet for which a mythological origin is clearly given in Elvendom is Venus. And its origin is tied up in the long, involved, and tragic tale for which The Silmarillion is named.

The tale begins in Valinor with the creation of three impressive artifacts by the gifted Elf prince Fëanor: jewels of crystal in which he mingled and preserved the light of the Two Trees before their unfortunate demise. They were called the silmarilli ("White Shining Radiance"), and were among the finest and most beautiful things ever wrought upon Earth. And the trouble began right there, for the power of their beauty made Fëanor uncommonly possessive for an Elf.

When Melkor and Ungoliant sucked the life out of the Two Trees (resulting in the need for the sun and moon), they also stopped on their way out of town to kill Fëanor’s father and steal the precious silmarils, which Melkor also coveted, and which he later placed in his iron crown. Fëanor swore a terrible oath to avenge his losses and recover the jewels whatever the cost, and he and the...
larger part of his kindred stormed back to Middle-earth to make good on his oath, setting events and tragedies into motion that had far-reaching consequences for the history of Middle-earth and which would rival the darkest Greek tragedy or Thomas Hardy novel.

To make a long and very complicated story much shorter, suffice it to say that the stolen silmarils, coupled with Fëanor's and his family's tragic flaws, led to an age's worth of hopeless wars and battles in which the Elves were ultimately and completely defeated by the forces of Melkor, and all the Elven kingdoms of Middle-earth were brought down. In the midst of this epic struggle, however, a somewhat ordinary man named Beren (mirroring the hobbit Ringbearers to come), with the help of his beloved Elf-maid Lúthien, managed to perform a great deed by sneaking into Melkor's stronghold and through strength of wits rather than arms wrested one of the silmarils from Melkor's iron crown. The jewel passed down to Beren and Lúthien's son Dior, and in turn to Dior's Elvish daughter Elwing, who fell in love with another Everyman named Eärendil, the mariner.

With the final defeat of the Elf kingdoms, when Melkor stood supreme upon the shores of Middle-earth and all hope seemed lost, Eärendil and Elwing took her inheritance and together they undertook a dangerous "hero's quest" of their own, sailing westward across the great ocean seeking the Straight Road beyond the circles of the world that would take them to Valinor to intercede on behalf of Elves and Men. By the grace of the Valar, they were allowed to take that path to the Undying Lands, and there they pleaded for the help of the Valar. The Valar heard their plea, and as the tales tell, marched with war upon Melkor and defeated him utterly, binding him and casting him through the Door of Night into the Void beyond the Walls of the World, where he remains until the hinted Last Battle.

As is often the case in epic myth, Eärendil and Elwing succeeded in their quest, but at a cost. They reached Valinor at the price of never being able to return to Middle-earth. Instead the pair remained in Valinor, where Eärendil and his ship were lifted into the heavens where he now "keeps watch upon the ramparts of the sky." The silmaril of Elwing is fixed firmly to his brow, and we see it still today sometimes at morning or evening as the planet Venus, shining in the dusky sky. Or, as the Elvish tale concludes:

Now fair and marvelous was that vessel made, and it was filled with a wavering flame, pure and bright; and Eärendil the Mariner sat at the helm, glistening with the dust of elven-gems, and the Silmaril was bound upon his brow. Far he journeyed in that ship, even into the starless void; but most often was he seen at morning or evening, glimmering in sunrise or sunset, as he came back to Valinor from voyages beyond the confines of the world.

That Eärendil with his shining silmaril represent the planet Venus is certain, for Tolkien himself indicated as much. He said that Eärendil's name was derived from the Anglo-Saxon word éarendel, which, based on its etymology, he realized was an astronomical term referring to the "star" that presages the dawn — in other words, Venus, the Morning Star shining brightly before the rising of the sun. "Or at any rate, that is how I took it," Tolkien wrote. He worked this symbolism into the story, though the small changes he made in Eärendil's name changed its meaning in Elvish to "Lover of the Sea."

Eärendil the Mariner returns with the silmaril (Venus) upon his brow.

It's an appealing image regardless: Venus as the silmaril shining upon the brow of Eärendil, glimmering in the sunrise or sunset as he returns from voyages "beyond the confines of the world."

The primary difference between Tolkien's mythology and that of the real world is that Tolkien's was invented to serve his sub-created world, while the stories and legends of Earth's real cultures evolved over time out of their belief systems about the world. Both sets of ideas serve exactly the same purpose in their respective universes; thus, Tolkien's approach can legitimately offer insight on the value of myth in our own world and our own lives.

Of the Relevance of Myth

Thus is the star lore of the Elves, such as it comes down to us from J. R. R. Tolkien's tales. Now this may all be of intellectual interest as far as it goes, but the nonromantic among us — or perhaps those not so much blessed with Tolkien's "elven quality" — might harumph and remind us that his Elvish mythology is all just an elaborate fiction. And the cynic might then remind the nonromantic that the same might be said of all mythology. But such contentions do little more than deny the value of each. The primary difference between Tolkien's mythology and that of the real world is that Tolkien's was invented to serve his sub-created world, while the stories and legends of Earth's real cultures evolved over time out of their belief systems about the world. Both sets of ideas serve exactly the same purpose in their respective universes; thus, Tolkien's approach can legitimately offer insight on the value of myth in our own world and our own lives.

In a sense, all myth is metaphor — a graspable way to illuminate and internalize the realities of the natural world and human nature and to make us more comfortable in dealing with them. It doesn't have to be true in the real world to nonetheless reveal the truth of the real world. Consider the words of C. S. Lewis, a friend and colleague of Tolkien, who, in reviewing The Lord of the Rings, described how Tolkien's mythology is applicable to the primary world:

The value of myth is that it takes the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the veil of familiarity. The child enjoys his meat, otherwise dull to him, by pretending it is buffalo, just killed by his own bow and arrow. And the child is wise. The real meat comes back to him more savoury for having been dipped in a story; you might say that only then is it real meat. ... By putting bread, gold, horse, apple, or the very roads into a myth, we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it. As long as the story lingers in our mind, the real things are more themselves ... By dipping them in myth, we see them more clearly.

Today we still seek to make the meat of our reality more savory with the seasonings of imagination. And some among us are facilitators in the process.

Several years ago, I produced a planetarium program on the sun, one objective of which was to show how our view of the sun had
changed over time, culminating in the new findings of current solar space missions. I very purposefully introduced each of the scientific sections with a sun myth selected from the world’s cultures which contained some interesting parallel with the scientific material to follow, both to contrast what we “knew before” with what we had learned since – and to prime the imagination of the audience and perhaps to make them more receptive to the harder-edged stories of science.

We conducted audience surveys during the run of the program, and among the questions I asked was what the correspondent liked most and least about the show. Interestingly, among those who chose to specifically mention either the science sections or the myths, equal numbers preferred one over the other. My ultimate goal in the program – and the foremost reason for including the mythologies – had been to engage as much of the audience as I could in actively thinking about the importance of the sun in our daily lives. I had hoped that those I couldn’t reach with science, I might reach with myth. And with a 94% favorable rating from the survey, I considered my approach to have been vindicated.

Not everybody will be moved by science. But there are few who won’t be moved by a good story. This is something we know implicitly as we practice our craft, certainly for those of us who realize that science plays much the same role today as myth has in the past: to explain the world and how it works – and our place in it – in ways that we can understand and accommodate in our daily lives. In our own elrondi – our own planetariums – we recognize that the best programs still are those that tell a story.

Joseph Campbell said: “Getting into harmony and tune with the universe and staying there is the principle function of mythology.” Insofar as J. R. R. Tolkien’s graceful star lore of the Elves of Middle-earth helps us to see anew the fine realities of his world and ours, helps us to freshen our own insights on the value of myth, and inspires us to see the universe in new ways – and to help others to do the same – it will have a place in the exercise of imagination that seasons our perceptions of the world and the larger cosmos.

Insofar as J. R. R. Tolkien’s graceful star lore of the Elves of Middle-earth helps us to see anew the fine realities of his world and ours, helps us to freshen our own insights on the value of myth, and inspires us to see the universe in new ways – and to help others to do the same – it will have a place in the exercise of imagination that seasons our perceptions of the world and the larger cosmos. After all, Myth is the word-music of the universe. Lasto! (Listen!)

**Bibliography**


