


Tolkien's Old English *Exodus* and the Problematics of Allegory

David Lavinsky¹ 

Published online: 28 November 2016
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Abstract This article reconsiders Tolkien's presumed inattention to the allegorical content of the Old English *Exodus*. It does so, first of all, by situating allegory in the broader context of Tolkien's letters and fictional compilations. His reception of the poem is then addressed through textual notes and an incomplete translation Tolkien used in lectures as *Exodus* became a regular feature of his teaching throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Reconstructed by Joan Turville-Petre and published in 1982, this material shows how Tolkien often departs from standard patristic and early medieval readings of key episodes in the biblical book and their parallels in the poem itself; this is developed in comparison to more recent editorial and textual scholarship stressing the interpretive preeminence of allegory in *Exodus*. Nevertheless, it is finally argued, the poem also becomes for Tolkien the occasion to imagine a *rapprochement* of sorts between the historical and the allegorical, something crucial not only to his own fictional sensibilities and aspirations, but also to how we understand current theoretical constructions of *allegoresis*.

Keywords The Old English *Exodus* · Tolkien · Allegory · Anglo-Saxon history · Medieval Biblical Writing

✉ David Lavinsky
lavinsky@yu.edu

¹ Yeshiva University, New York, NY 10033, USA

Although he may not have invited allegorical readings of his work, literature for Tolkien needed larger frameworks, in keeping with his “historically minded” way of thinking (Carpenter 1981, p. 239).¹ His extended composition process and deep roots in earlier mythology were crucial components of this outlook; both help to account for an effect scholars have sometimes referred to as Tolkien’s “impression of depth” (Drout et al. 2014, p. 167; Nagy 2003, 2004). The phrase itself assumed prominence in his reading of *Beowulf*, where it was meant to underscore the poet’s “use of episodes and allusions to old tales, mostly darker, more pagan, and desperate than the foreground” (Tolkien 1984a, b, p. 27).² Responsibility therefore rested with the translator to discover the poem’s “essential kinship” with “our own” language and to avoid “[a]ntiquarian sentiment and philological knowingness” (Tolkien 1984a, b, pp. 33–34, 56). But while the “impression of depth” entailed immediate obligations for the *Beowulf* scholar, it also describes how Tolkien’s use of background material produces, according to much recent criticism, “the sense that the world extends both temporally and physically beyond the text” (Drout et al. 2014, p. 169).³

Such a concept has the advantage of explaining a historical mode in Tolkien’s fiction that does not always abide by the strict exclusion of allegory. Nor is allegory necessarily out of place with respect to compilations such as *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the disparate parts of which, we might assume, only fit together according to some superordinate level of signification or intentionality.⁴ Outside the curious episode of *Doworst*, a brief Langlandian parody set in contemporary Oxford, references in Tolkien’s writings to *Piers Plowman* are few, but his disdain for “any ‘interpretations’ in the mode of simple allegory”—those, he

¹ Tolkien adds in the same letter that “Middle-earth is not an imaginary world” but an “objectively real” one set in “this earth, the one in which we now live” (p. 239). Allegory has long been a key issue in Tolkien scholarship; see, for instance, Flieger and Shippey (2001).

² See the brief discussion of this reference in Drout et al. (2014, p. 196n2). This quote follows Tolkien’s observation that *Beowulf* as a whole “must have succeeded admirably in creating in the minds of the poet’s contemporaries the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and fraught with a deep significance—a past that itself had depth and reached backward into a dark antiquity of sorrow” (Tolkien 1984a, b, p. 27). For comparable remarks, see Tolkien (1984a, b): Old English poetical worlds “come down to us bearing echoes of ancient days beyond the shadowy borders of Northern history” (p. 50).

³ Drout et al. (2014) focuses on the Túrin episode(s) in particular.

⁴ Beginning as early as 1914, when he mentions a composition called “Earendel” in a letter to Edith Bratt, Tolkien labored more or less continuously on compiling what would become an epic cycle of history and legend, later describing *Lord of the Rings* as the “continuation and completion” of this work (Carpenter 1981, p. 8; see, too, p. 149). His remarks concerning *The Lord of the Rings* in this context occur at pp. 136–137. On the genesis of the *Silmarillion* in this moment, see Bowers (2011, p. 25). On this process more generally, see Kane (2009). Yet it was only after Tolkien’s death that an edited volume finally appeared in print. Recounting the process of collecting his father’s disparate materials into “publishable form,” Christopher Tolkien writes in the foreword to his 1977 edition that “complete consistency...is not to be looked for, and could only be achieved, if at all, at heavy and needless cost,” adding that

my father came to conceive of *The Silmarillion* as a compilation, a compendious narrative, made long afterwards from sources of great diversity (poems, and annals, and oral tales) that had survived in age-long tradition; and this conception has indeed its parallel in the actual history of the book, for a great deal of earlier prose and poetry does underlie it, and it is to some extent a compendium in fact and not only in theory (Tolkien 1977, pp. vii–viii).

explains, privileging “the particular and topical”—suggests a more nuanced understanding of *allegoresis* than one might suppose from an author who routinely disparaged it (Carpenter 1981, p. 212).⁵ And certainly, the historicizing gestures so characteristic of his fiction, its ruptures and discontinuities, its recurring allusions to discursive backgrounds and source materials beyond our immediate frame of reference, but nonetheless still important to our ethical apprehension of events—all these variously presuppose sophisticated forms of allegorical thought and application, Tolkien's memorable comment in the foreword to *The Lord of the Rings* notwithstanding:

But I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse ‘applicability’ with ‘allegory’; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author (Tolkien 1987, p. xvii).⁶

We are entitled to ask here if allegory has a place in the tradeoff between true and “feigned” history, as indeed it sometimes did in higher criticism's historical approach to the same medieval authors Tolkien taught, edited, and translated.⁷ “After all,” he wrote in a 1951 letter to Milton Waldman, “I believe that legends and myths are largely made of ‘truth,’ and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode” (Carpenter 1981, p. 147). With this in mind, I want to reconsider Tolkien's response to a text often taken as a centerpiece of medieval allegorical writing, the adaptation of *Exodus* found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11.

Tolkien taught the Old English *Exodus*, a set text in the Oxford English School curriculum, regularly throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The poem seems to have interested him for reasons other than its various allegorical dimensions, which had been outlined by earlier scholars such as Samuel Moore and J. W. Bright.⁸ Although his lecture notes, incorporated into an edition published by Joan Turville-Petre in 1982, frame the poem as “an allegory of the soul, or of the Church of militant souls, marching under the hand of God, pursued by the powers of darkness, until it attains to the promised land of Heaven,” Tolkien's textual commentary as it is

⁵ On *Doworst*, see Scull and Hammond (2006, vol. II, p. 214).

⁶ A similarly suggestive remark occurs in a 1951 letter to Milton Waldman. Repurposed as a preface to the 1977 *Silmarillion*, the letter registers Tolkien's disdain for “conscious and intentional Allegory,” in theory providing for an unintended allegorical mode, or that which issues precisely from the reader's—rather than the author's—efforts at application (Carpenter 1981, p. 143).

⁷ On higher criticism, see Shippey (2000, p. 235). Relevant here is the discussion in the introduction to Klaeber's *Beowulf* concerning the “primitive mythological signification” of episodes underlying the poem's main characters, and the question of whether *Beowulf* himself belongs “in part to history” or “historical legend” or some “substratum of historical truth” (Fulk et al. 2008, intro., p. 1).

⁸ Tolkien's edition is variously critiqued in Lucas (1983, pp. 243–244) and Irving (1983, pp. 538–539). For earlier scholarship, see Moore (1911) and Bright (1912). More recent studies premised on the poem's allegorical content include Cross and Tucker (1960), Earl (1970), Lucas (1970), Trask (1973), Lucas (1976), Luria (1981), Martin (1982), and Shippey (2003). Much information relevant to the question of allegory is synthesized and expanded in the introduction and notes to Lucas (1994).

reconstructed here betrays little interest in the allegorical implications of individual words and passages key to such a reading (Tolkien 1982, p. 33). If his professional obligations as a teacher and editor (to say nothing of his own deeply-rooted Catholicism) could be expected to override any reflexive distaste for the poem's allegorical content, it is also worth noting just how particular and topical that allegorical content actually is.⁹

Focused mostly on the escape of the Israelites from Pharaoh's army and Moses' role as a valiant commander (*freom folctoga*) and heroic protector of his people, the poem invites a specific interpretation of its biblical source by compressing its action around the same episodes (derived from chapters 12 through 15) that were necessary for patristic writers to construe escape through the Red Sea as a figure for baptism or salvation, to take just two examples, and leaving aside various other parallels made possible by the adaptation of material from elsewhere in the Old Testament, including a wholly conventional reference later in the poem to Abraham's beloved son (*swasne sunu*) who is to be sacrificed in victory (*sigetibre*) (14, 402).¹⁰ At the same time, the pacing and formal patterning of the text allow for a density of allegorical reference within individual passages, as, for example, in the description of the Israelite camp near the city of Etham.¹¹

⁹ On the relevance here of Tolkien's Catholicism, see brief remarks in the review by Irving (1983, p. 539).

¹⁰ I cite Lucas (1994) throughout for the Old English text, comparing it to Tolkien's edition (which is incomplete) where appropriate. Parenthetical citations refer to line numbers. Comparison should also be made to Irving (1953) and Krapp (1931). All translations derive from Love (2002) unless otherwise noted. For modern discussion of sources, contexts, and interpretive tradition, see Earl (1970) and Frank (1988). Significant patristic reference points concerning the reading outlined here include Origen's interpretation in his homily *De profectioe filiorum Istrahel* of the cloud as the Holy Spirit and the crossing itself as a figure for baptism (Borret 1985, p. 150, ll. 29–32), as well as Augustine's interpretation in sermon 213.9 of the passage through the Red Sea as an escape from sins (signified by the Egyptians) allegorically equivalent to the cleansing of the soul that occurs for Christians in the waters of baptism (Morin 1930, pp. 448–449). In addition to the sermons, see Augustine's *Tractates on the Gospel of John* (tractate 45.9) in Willems (1954, pp. 392–393). Yet another important early contribution to this background of patristic thought and figural exegesis includes Tertullian's comments on Exodus 14:27–30 in his discussion of baptism. Among the scriptural episodes governing the sacramental use of water, "the first is that one when the people [of Israel] are set free from Egypt and by passing through the water escape the yoke of the Egyptian king, the same king [who] with all his forces is wiped out by water. This is a type made manifestly clear in the sacred act of baptism" ("Primo quidem cum populus de Aegyptio liber et expeditus uim regis Aegypti per aquam transgressus euadit, ipsum regem cum totis copiis aqua extinxit. Quae figura manifestior in baptisimi sacramento?") (Reifferscheid and Wissowa 1890, p. 208, ll. 7–10). On salvation, Earl (1970) quotes Cassiodorus, P. L. 70, 1059 (545); Earl also suggests a parallel within the poem's broader "theology of baptism" between the Red Sea crossing and the harrowing of hell, drawing especially on Origen and Gregory (pp. 567–569). For a broad overview of such matters as they relate to the biblical narrative itself, see Daniélou (1960, bk. 5).

¹¹ Like many biblical place names, Etham was the subject of sometimes ingenious etymological speculation. According to Origen, for instance, "they say that Etham is rightly translated in our language as 'signs for them'" ("Othon uero in nostram linguam uerti dicunt signa iis"), and so it is there, and not at their first two encampments, that the Israelites encounter divine signs such as those described in the quoted passage (Borret 1985, p. 154, ll. 27–28). Although it is difficult to know whether the poet had this etymology in mind when composing the poem, since it would depend on understanding the derivation of the term "Othon" in the Latin text of Origen's commentary, the setting itself naturalizes the allegorizing depiction of events there.

Ðær halig God
 wið færbyrne folc gescylde,
 bælc eferbrædde byrnendne heofon,
 halgan nette, hatwendne lyft.
 Hæfde wederwolcen widum fæðmum
 eorðan ond uprodor efne gedæled,
 lædde leodwerod, ligfyr adranc
 hate heofontorht. Hæleð wafedon,
 drihta gedrymost. Dægsceldes hleo
 wand ofer wolcnun; hæfde witig God
 sunnan siðfæt segle ofertolden,
 swa þa mæstrapas men ne cuðon,
 ne ða seglrode geseon meahton
 eorðbuende ealle cræfte,
 hu afæstnod wæs feldhusa mæst,
 siððan He mid wuldre geweorðode
 þeodenholde (71–87).

[There holy God
 shielded His folk from the frightful heat:
 arched a roof-beam over the burning heaven,
 spread a sacred canvas against the scorching air-
 a soaring cloud had split heaven
 and earth asunder with its awesome mass,
 directing the troops as it drank the surging
 fire of heaven. Folk gazed up
 joyfully wondering. Daylight's warden
 shifted over the sky: God had stretched
 in his wisdom a sail over the sun's course-
 though no man could have made out the mast-ropes
 or the sail-yard cross that shipped it there,
 no man on earth for all his craft,
 or how the mighty pavilion was pitched
 when He gave this glory to grace the Lord's
 faithful followers (Love 2002, p. 624).]

The allegorical shadings of this passage have figured prominently in editorial, textual, and linguistic scholarship on the poem.¹² For instance, the “roof-beam” (*bælc*) and “sacred canvas” or curtain (*halgan nette*) that make up the “mighty pavilion” (*feldhusa mæst*) can be understood symbolically as the Mosaic Tabernacle, the material components of which became a focal point in early figural

¹² See, most recently, Olsen (2002, pp. 191–192). The same passage has been discussed in notably different terms by Ferhatović (2010, pp. 518–519).

exegesis for numerous similitudes and mysteries.¹³ Lucas, who has done much to illuminate these patterns, emphasizes that veil and curtain imagery here (e.g., *nette*, *segle*) derives coherence in relation to the description of the sanctuary from Exodus 26.33 (“And the veils shall be hanged on with rings, and within it thou shalt put the ark of the testimony, and the sanctuary, and the holy of holies shall be divided with it,” to quote the Douay Rheims translation) and thus implies both “a scale of values (earth/heaven; holy/holiest),” and the desirable “progression” from one to the other. The journey “through life on earth to heaven,” he writes, “is the allegorical equivalent of the Israelite exodus” (Lucas 1994, p. 88). The term “sail” (*segle*) therefore also corresponds to the Ship of the Church (later recapitulated in reference to Noah’s ship), and the more specifically nautical image of the “sailyard” (*segrode*), or the cross-bar of the mast, to the holy cross itself (Lucas 1994, pp. 89–90, and, more fully, pp. 47, 68).¹⁴ All these are in turn distilled into a closely related image a few lines later described from the vantage point of the assembled troops:

Forð gesawon
lifes latþeow lifweg metan;
segl siðe weold, sæmen æfter
foron flodwege (103–106).

[Over them they saw
the beacon of life beckoning them on:
the sail at their head, the seamen followed
along life’s floodway (Love 2002, p. 625).]

From this point on, the Israelites are frequently referred to as *sæmen*—seamen or seafarers. The term is confusing at first, since their flight from the Egyptians is initially halted at the shore (126–129), and it is only when the dry seabed yields a “silvery path” (*haswe herestræta*) and the earth’s “ancient foundations” (*ealde staðolas*) are laid bare that they venture forth (284, 285).¹⁵ The first “tribe” to go is Judah’s, “traversing green ground,/hastening across the unheard of path/before their kinsmen” (“Þa þæt feorðe cyn fyrmest eode,/wod on wægstream, wigan on heape,/ofer grenne grund, Iudisc feða,/on onette uncuð gelad/for his mægwinum”) (310–314; Love 2002, p. 629). Assuming the material drawn from Genesis is an

¹³ Here I am drawing on Love (2002, p. 624, as well as 636n73–74, who leans heavily on Lucas [1994], pp. 88–90). For more detailed discussion of the cloud and pillar imagery, see Lucas (1970). On the Tabernacle as figure, see Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, in Roberts and Donaldson (1986, pp. 452–454); Origen’s homily *De Tabernaculo*, from his homilies on Exodus, in Borret (1985, pp. 278–305); and, most extensively, Bede’s *De Tabernaculo*, in Hurst (1969, pp. 5–139).

¹⁴ Zacher (2014) follows Lucas 1994 (p. 90) in describing the compound term *segrode* as “the simplex rod, meaning ‘rood, or cross’” (p. 63). For later commentary on the ark as the ship of the church, see Hugh of St. Victor, *De Arche Noe*, in Sicard (2001, p. 23 ff.).

¹⁵ Here I follow Lucas’ suggested translation of *haswe* as “silvery” (Lucas 1994, pp. 114–115), echoed in Love (2002, p. 629).

original feature of the poem and not merely an interpolation, the story of Noah in lines 362–376 makes these initial references to seafaring less confusing by encouraging the progression from a literal and historical understanding of the term to a figurative and allegorical one, restaging the same progression from earthly to spiritual already suggested with respect to the Tabernacle and its sanctuary.¹⁶

To think of the Israelites as *sæmen*, however, also reminds us that all allegory, in Gerald Bruns' words, is a kind of "radical interpretation," a rewriting of one tradition in terms of another, whereby "an alien system of concepts and beliefs" is calibrated to a new cultural context (Bruns 1992, p. 83). However "natural" it may have been for an Anglo-Saxon religious poet to recast Exodus in Christian terms, seafaring cannot be explained solely by reference to allegorical tradition, except in the very general sense implied above by the term *lifweg*—literally, according to Bosworth and Toller, who cite this instance, "[a] way which leads to life, way of life, one's path in life" (104).¹⁷ Broadly speaking, of course, this and related terms (e.g., *floodwege*) function allegorically in suggesting that throughout the poem exodus "stands for the journey...which all Christians take through this life towards the Promised Land of heaven" (Lucas 1994, p. 92).¹⁸ And yet such an emphasis only begins to suggest the openness to history that constitutes the *alleon* or *alienus* of allegorical signification.¹⁹ It is this supplementarity that I now intend to discuss in connection to Tolkien's editorial scholarship.

For Tolkien, the "key to the poem" was to be found in its opening lines, where the word *bealusiðe* suggests "not only the troublous passage through life, but the journey of the Israelites to the Promised Land, a symbol of that weary passage" (1982, p. 36).²⁰ More specific evocations of allegorical meaning later in the poem, however, are rarely pursued in his discussion. Commenting on the line "Faraones cyn,/Godes andsacan, gyrdwite band" ["Pharaoh's race, the enemies of God, he

¹⁶ On the question of whether lines 363–446, which also include the Abraham and Isaac episode, constitute an interpolation, see Lucas (1994, pp. 30–31), Irving (1953, p. 29), and, from a more thematic point of view, Hauer (1981).

¹⁷ Bosworth and Toller (1898–1921), s. v. *lifweg*. Cf., Lucas (1994), who takes what is in fact the allegorical meaning of *lifweg* ("The road to safety") for its suggested literal translation (p. 92). According to Cross and Tucker (1960), it was "natural" for those brought up in an allegorical tradition defined by Isidore's question—"Quid mare Rubrum, nisi baptismus est Christi sanguine consecratus?"—to recast the Exodus story in Christian terms (pp. 122–123, quoting Migne [1850a, col. 296]). See, as well, their comments on the translation of *floodweg* (p. 125). For more recent attention to the various Anglo-Saxon mentalities informing metaphorical language in OE *Exodus*, see Wilcox (2011). As Lucas (1994) says, "[t]he real 'source' of *Exodus* is the Christian tradition in which the poem must have been written" (p. 53).

¹⁸ See, more fully, Lucas (1976, p. 195). Love (2002) articulates the poem's overarching allegorical meaning with slightly more precision: the Israelites' flight from Egypt "could be seen figuratively as a journey from the pagan past through the waters of baptism to salvation, a homeland and, ultimately, heaven" (p. 636n105–106).

¹⁹ This formulation derives from the so-called *Letter to Can Grande*, in Haller (1973, p. 99). Clarifying the allegorical treatment of his subject matter, Dante briefly alights on the different scriptural senses as they would conventionally apply to Psalm 113:1–2, which recounts the departure from Egypt and its aftermath. The allegorical signification of these verses, he argues, concerns "our redemption through Christ" (p. 99).

²⁰ On *bealusiðe*, see Earl (1970, p. 546).

constrained with the plagues of his rod,” in Tolkien’s own translation], he neglects to mention the traditional interpretation of Moses’ staff as a symbol of the cross, or tie it to the word *seglrode* later in the text (83)—a key term, as we have seen, for scholars more sensitive to the poem’s local allegorical resonances (14–15; 1982, p. 20). This lacuna in Tolkien’s commentary is even more interesting because the very thing that makes the term *seglrode* linguistically noteworthy—it is a *hapax legomenon* formed through incorporation of the term “rood”—also calls attention to its significance within the allegorical framework of the poem. Moreover, unlike Love, whose translation of the same lines refers to Moses’ “scourging rod,” an image-concept crucial to the allegorical interpretation of *Godes andsacan* as the devil, and thus Egypt as hell, Tolkien’s translation does not encourage readers to decipher the rod’s meaning beyond what is already suggested by the literal historical level of Exodus, the plagues, and the promised delivery of the Israelites (Love 2002, p. 635).²¹ Later, when Moses smites the ocean tide using his *grene tane*, or “green wand,” Tolkien, adducing conspicuously *unallegorical* criteria, explains that his emendation of *tacne* to *tane* is supported by the latter’s “native magical associations,” leaving aside any speculation regarding the wand as a figure for the cross or, as also seems possible here given the term *grene*, the tree of life (281; Tolkien 1982, p. 60).²²

We can discern a similar pattern in Tolkien’s notes concerning the other textual cruxes mentioned above. Commenting on lines 71–85, he draws attention to the imagery of the canopy and the sail, the latter used with “fine effect” towards the end of the passage:

... hæfde witig God

sunnan siðfæt segle ofertolden,
 swa þa mæstrapas men ne cuðon,
 ne ða seglrode geseon meahton
 eorðbuende ealle cræfte,
 hu afæstnod wæs feldhusa mæst (80–85; Tolkien 1982, p. 42).

The term *segle*, writes Tolkien, “is apt at describing the *texture* of something woven which a cloud may imaginatively be thought to possess; its *whiteness* shining with sunlight and yet absorbing the sun’s heat; and also its *onward motion*, directing the march” (Tolkien 1982, p. 42, emphasis his). The concreteness of Old English poetry is by now a commonplace, but Tolkien’s reading enhances this effect by imbuing *segle* with phenomenological presence and specificity, so that what would

²¹ According to Origen, “the rod, however, by means of which all these things are accomplished, by which Egypt is subjugated and Pharaoh overcome, is the cross of Christ, by which this world is vanquished, and the ‘prince of this world’ is defeated, with his principalities and powers” (“[v]irga uero, per quam geruntur haec omnia, per quam Aegyptus subigitur et Pharaon superatur, crux Christi sit, per quam mundus hic uincitur, et ‘princeps huius mundi’ cum principatibus et potestatibus triumphatur” (Borret 1985, p. 130, ll. 7–10, and cited in Martens 2012, p. 217). For a detailed summation of Origen’s readings of the “rod” or “staff,” see Hanson (1959, pp. 105–107).

²² See notes in Love (2002, p. 636n281, drawing on Hall (1991). For more on the question of its color, see Hermann (1975) and Luria (1980). It should be noted that while Tolkien accepts a suggested emendation to *tane*, it is rejected by Lucas (1994, p. 114).

otherwise be a fixture of the poem's overarching allegorical meaning contributes instead to the sensory effects of language: texture, color, and motion. If allegory places us beyond the text, features such as these attune us to its surface, or "what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see through" (Best and Marcus 2009, p. 9, emphasis theirs).²³

In his comments on the *feldhusa mæst* itself, Tolkien similarly stops short of enumerating allegorical topoi, despite the structure's implied parallel to the Tabernacle, itself the subject of extensive commentary in Bede's exegetical writing; this and other early medieval sources also stressed the allegorical and spiritual significance of the *beamas twegen* occurring a few lines later in the poem, when the Israelites look up and see "broad pillars/dividing between them the days and nights,/ high-thanes of the Holy Ghost,/for the whole breadth of the brave men's journey" ("beamas twegen,/þara æghwæðer efngeðælde/heahþegnunga Haliges Gastes/deor-modra sið dagum ond nihtum") (Love 2002, p. 625; 94–97).²⁴ If this translation diverges somewhat from Tolkien's own ("...two pillars that each in turn did equally divide the high service of the Holy Spirit, waiting upon the journey of those bold-hearted men by day and by night") it also unfolds more precisely against the backdrop of allegorical tradition by emphasizing the boundary between day and night, or light and dark, with all its typological resonance (Tolkien 1982, p. 22). Tolkien was no doubt familiar with early investigations into the question of the poem's sources that had cited Bede's conclusions regarding the symbolism of the *beamas twegen* or their equivalent in Exodus: "These two columns figure the two churches, that is the Old and the New Testaments" ("Duae quoque columnae duas Ecclesias figurant, id est Veteris et Novi Testamenti").²⁵ Situating lines 249–251 in the same continuum of pillar imagery, Tolkien nevertheless associates the phrase "siðboda sæstreamum neah/leoht ofer lindum lyftedoras bræc" with "something bright appearing above the horizon," which in turn prompts him to dwell on the two *beamas* as *natural* phenomena, and secondarily as "emblems of God's protection and guidance," controlled as they are "by an angel" (250–251, my emphasis; Tolkien 1982, p. 58).

Turville-Petre finds Tolkien's arguments about lines 249–251 "unconvincing," though not specifically because they fail to address the question of allegory; in any case, she cautions readers that his commentary "was never intended as an edition" (Tolkien 1982, intro., v).²⁶ As an interpretation, however, they almost entirely circumvent Christian allegorical tradition as represented in patristic commentaries on Exodus and in the poem itself, which relies on the same material in its treatment

²³ For discussion of this idea and the possibilities for a critical practice no longer dominated by the goal of ideological demystification, see Rosenberg (2015). See, too, recent comments by Holsinger (2011, esp. pp. 610–614) on critical methods oriented towards the "surface" of literary texts.

²⁴ On Bede's understanding of the tabernacle and the temple, see DeGregorio (2010, pp. 136–139).

²⁵ Migne (1850b, caput xiii, col. 310, cited in Moore [1911, p. 102]).

²⁶ However, Tolkien apparently inquired with Oxford University Press as to that possibility in October, 1932, noting his commentary on *Exodus*, according to Scull and Hammond (2006, vol. 1., p. 165). He was also later urged to publish his teaching text for exactly this purpose (p. 369). See, as well, p. 499 and vol. II, p. 681.

of particular images such as the great pavilion and the two pillars; this is the case even when Tolkien connects the former to its recapitulation in lines 103–106:

Forð gesawon
lifes latþeow lifweg metan;
segl siðe weold; sæmen æfter
foron flodwege (103–106).

Here he instead concludes that “the combined influence of ancient native poetry with its gallant sea-rovers, and the imminence of the passage of the Red Sea, is filling the poet’s mind with old sea-language, until he can actually call the Israelites *sæmen*” (Tolkien 1982, pp. 42–43). Theoretically, at least, this emphasis would also encourage allegorical *thema* foreshadowing 1 Corinthians 10:2 (“And all in Moses were baptized, in the cloud, and in the sea”), according to which, as Challoner notes, following patristic writers, the Israelites had “received baptism in figure, by passing under the cloud, and through the sea” (1847, p. 142). But Paul’s words, reasoned Chrysostom, had also introduced the type for baptism (*ideoque adducit baptismatis*), and from this point on the typological and allegorical associations inhering in the connection between Exodus 14 and I Corinthians 10:2, as well as related biblical episodes, would be widely attested, both in commentaries predating the poem and in a range of later sources (Migne 1862, p. 191); they are given detailed visual representation, for instance, in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. M. III.13, a fifteenth-century “blockbook” illustrating selected New Testament scenes together with their Old Testament antecedents, all part of an extensive network of textual parallels and correspondences. In one page from the manuscript, a central panel depicting the baptism of Christ is flanked by two others, the first showing Moses, rod in hand, leading the Israelites through the Red Sea, and the second showing the spies from Numbers 13 and 14 carrying the cluster of grapes back across the river Jordan. This cluster of images, not necessarily to be “read” from left to right but selectively related according to the varying needs of devotional reading and biblical commentary, reasserts longstanding allegorical associations extending from the same scene so dramatically rendered in the Old English *Exodus*.

Tolkien habitually suggests alternatives for words central to the allegorical conception of this moment in the poem. Noting the repetitive pairing of *life* and *lifweg* in line 104 of the passage quoted above, for example, he argues that the latter word could have been a mistaken rendering (presumably the fault of the scribe) of *lyftweg*, which he characterizes as “more forcible” even if *lifweg* seems a better fit with the symbolism of the Israelites’ perilous journey through the sea (Tolkien 1982, p. 45).²⁷ But while he does not always pursue them where we would expect, Tolkien certainly grasped these associations, and elsewhere in his commentary shows himself quite alert to specific allegorical motifs, most notably in his remarks concerning the liturgical origins of the poem’s “excursus” on the patriarchs at line 351 and following. Apparently recalling an earlier essay by J. W. Bright, Tolkien situates this episode in relation to the sequence of Old Testament readings used for

²⁷ Cf., Sedgefield (1922, p. 88, l. 104).

“the instruction of catechumens about to receive baptism” during Holy Saturday services (Tolkien 1982, p. 64).²⁸ According to this reading, what seems to be an interpolation of disconnected material from other parts of scripture, especially Genesis, actually reinforces the thematic and allegorical coherence of the poem. In this respect, the representation of Noah as a wise seafarer (*snotter sæleoda*) makes sense on allegorical and historical levels simultaneously, underscoring both the spiritual valences of nautical imagery as it pertains to the Red Sea and the cleansing waters of baptism, and the significance of the same imagery in the context of Anglo-Saxon migration and cultural identity (374). Seafaring, as differently emblemized by Noah and Moses, is the dominant image of a historical and cultural context inseparable from the poem's figural evocations of baptism and salvation. Indeed, Tolkien's speculation on the liturgical underpinnings of the poem, perhaps his most topical and specific concession to allegorical interpretation, keeps the focus firmly on the heroic *gesta* of the Israelites, their sea-crossings, and the “feigned” history by which the poet imagines his Northumbrian ancestors participating in the larger biblical drama of exodus and arrival in the promised land. In other words, the allegorical register Tolkien initially seems to neglect is in fact already encompassed by the historical perspective of a poet “familiar with this island and English traditions” (Tolkien 1982, p. 44).²⁹

This conclusion seems consistent with the argument that *Exodus* and other Anglo-Saxon migration narratives sanctioned what Nicholas Howe has referred to as “mythmaking” for an incipient English nation (Howe 1989; Michelet 2011). Perhaps, then, the poem as we have it here is just another instance of allegory's oblique incorporation of the historical, as well as Tolkien's own indulgence in a form of textual scholarship adequate to an author whose literary ambitions announced themselves under the sign of “historically minded” fiction. Broader contexts and constructions of allegorical interpretation, both medieval and modern, are also implicated in this work, however. From a traditional standpoint, allegory concerned *credas*, or what one should believe, rather than *gesta*, thereby subordinating plot lines and narrative temporalities to a concept located beyond the literal historical level of the text; and in its selectivity, its contrived systematicity, implied that the story itself could be evacuated of meaning, the written page treated as a source of themes and figures of thought rather than something valuable on its own terms.³⁰ “The mere stories were the thing,” Tolkien

²⁸ Anlezark (2005), while acknowledging a liturgical influence on the poem, also situates its treatment of Noah and Abraham in a broader intertextual network that includes both biblical sources in which the two were closely linked as well as Aldhelm's account of the flood in riddle LXIII.

²⁹ To allegorize the poem in more traditional terms would presumably detract from what made the story of *Exodus* universal. As Tolkien wrote in his letters (Carpenter 1981): “In a larger sense, it is I suppose impossible to write any ‘story’ that is not allegorical in proportion as it ‘comes to life’; since each of us is an allegory, embodying in a particular tale and clothed in the garments of time and place, universal truth and everlasting life” (p. 212), and that “the only perfectly consistent allegory is a real life; and the only fully intelligible story is an allegory” (p. 121).

³⁰ For recent and illuminating discussion of the medieval mnemonic from which these terms derive, see Simpson (2015, pp. 35–36). “Allegorical interpretation,” writes Boitani (1999), “is by its nature infinite: every object, event, or word in a discourse can be attributed with any number of ‘other’ meanings as long as they have cohesion as a system” (p. 91).

once wrote in terse reply to just such an allegorical reading of his work (Carpenter 1981, p. 145).³¹

It is not so much that Tolkien's response to this poem disregards its allegorical possibilities, however, but that his interpretation understands *allegoresis* as something already embedded in the traditional subject matter of "ancient native poetry," and its accompanying modes of narrative emplotment. In Tolkien's reading, no shift in register is required to understand the poem in its properly allegorical sense or to grasp what it actually "represents." If, as Thomas Pavel writes, a referential paradigm such as allegory "generalizes realist schemata to fictional activity," then we can imagine a counterpart "wherein poetic intimacy between a text and a [sic] idiosyncratic world is generalized to all types of knowledge" (Pavel 1986, p. 74). The readerly attunement encouraged here is not symptomatic, focused on a hidden or obscured set of correspondences, or what modern literary criticism, including that devoted to Tolkien's fiction itself, has often understood in terms of subtext, depth, or political unconscious³²; nor is an allegorical interpretation of the text therefore even necessarily hermeneutic. Perhaps a parallel can be drawn to the topographical maps Tolkien began to formulate for his *legendarium* at roughly the same time he first occupied himself with the poem.³³ Like contour lines indicating depth and elevation, the allegorical application of the biblical story unfolds in the foreground of the text, where we then survey its features. The veil of language and the external form of things: textual surface has its own kind of depth, its allegorical planes and relative gradients of meaning. The *gesta* inscribed there for us in the form of a story are, for Tolkien, themselves material to the same allegorical subject matter that lends *Exodus* its historical character.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank Scott DeGregorio, as well as the journal's reviewer, for thoughtful insights and advice offered during the revision process.

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³¹ Tolkien's own allegorical inclinations, such as they are, seem closer in some respects to personification, a view cautiously broached in Tolkien's remarks on Tom Bombadil, whom he describes in one letter as embodying an exemplary meaning (Carpenter 1981, p. 192).

³² As Rosenberg (2015) has recently observed, "literary theory has been reading every story like an *Exodus*: for the symptom of something that cannot be represented" (p. 802, discussing Best [2012, p. 461]). Relevant here, of course, is a rich tradition of critical and theoretical work extending from Jameson (1982) and de Man (1979).

³³ For this particular convergence in Tolkien's career, I am relying on Scull and Hammond's chronology (2006, vol. I, pp. 134, 138), which traces the first *Silmarillion* maps to the same period of time, roughly 1926 to 1930, during which *Exodus* became a regular topic of Tolkien's scheduled lectures, beginning with Michaelmas Full Term, October, 1926.

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