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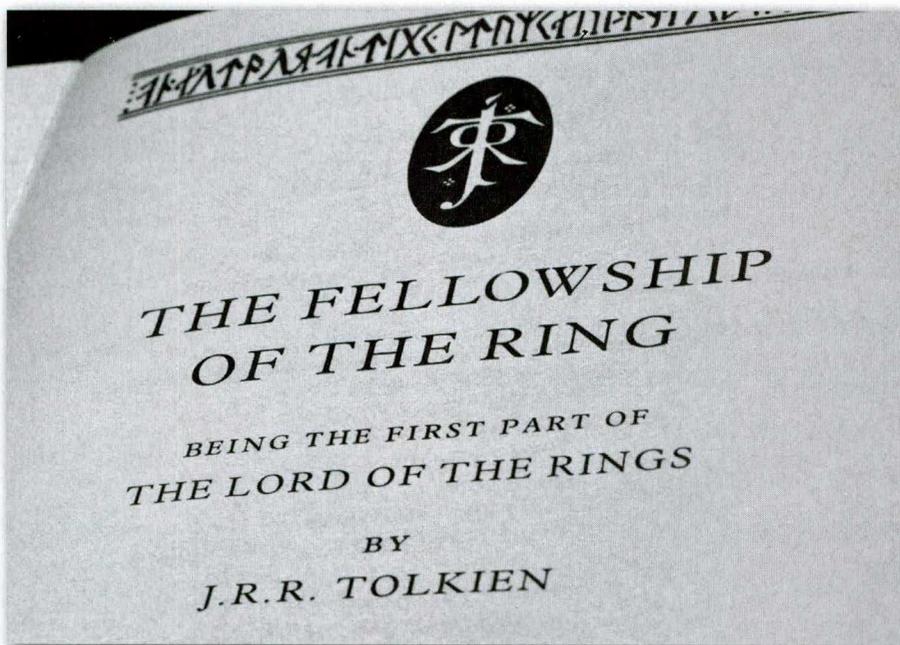
Vaughan, Geoffrey M. and Jennifer Vaughan. "The Hobbit Redemption: Christian Heroism & Humility in the Work of J.R.R. Tolkien." *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* vol. 28 no. 5 (Sept/Oct 2015): pp. 27-31. <http://www.touchstonemag.com/>.

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THE HOBBIT REDEMPTION

Christian Heroism & Humility in the Work of J. R. R. Tolkien

by JENNIFER VAUGHAN & GEOFFREY M. VAUGHAN



AS THE WORLD REMEMBERS what used to be known as the Great War, we would do well to reflect upon how it ended poetic praises of war and heroism. The great poets of World War I, such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, left to the world a picture of war that was anything but heroic. Many will be familiar with Owen's "*Dulce et Decorum Est*" and his line about "children ardent for some ancient glory."

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The opening line of "Anthem for a Doomed Youth" is no less revealing of his feelings about the war that would soon kill the poet: "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?"

And yet, another young man—a contemporary of these poets, who served at the Battle of the Somme, lost friends, and shared their disgust for modern warfare—went on to praise martial heroism in one of the most successful writing enterprises of the twentieth century. Just last year, as we observed the centenary of the war, the sixth blockbuster adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's world, directed by Peter Jackson, hit the theaters. How could Tolkien's

stories of hand-to-hand combat still appeal to us? More charitably, what longed-for and distant heroism do we see in the figures Tolkien portrays?

Tolkien's works are not only set in a time and place far distant from our own; the sensibilities themselves are foreign. In the words of his friend, and critic, C. S. Lewis:

The book is like lightning from a clear sky; as sharply different, as unpredictable in our age as [William Blake's] *Songs of Innocence* were in theirs. To say that in it heroic romance, gorgeous, eloquent, and unashamed, had suddenly returned at a period almost pathological in its anti-romanticism, is inadequate. . . . It marks not a return but an advance or revolution: the conquest of new territory.

While we have moved several score years beyond the age to which Lewis refers as "ours," our age is equally anti-Romantic. Contemporary heroes, such as they are, are haunted and scarcely different from their foes, alone and often persecuted by those they

protect, or disillusioned with the causes for which they fight (as Batman, Spiderman, and Captain America reveal). They reflect the sentiments of the war poets far more than those of Tolkien. Yet the success of his work and its attraction is undeniable. In a 1997 poll, and in numerous polls thereafter, *The Lord of the Rings* ranked among the top works of literary fiction ever published; one even names it the “book of the millennium.” How can a tale of the glories of battle be so popular?

THE GIFTS OF FAERIE

Quite simply, Tolkien expresses the power of the Christian imagination in the face of suffering, death, and horror. In particular, he provides us with the opportu-

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nity to see what happens if one’s imagination has been consecrated by the truth of the Gospels, truths that are open to being expressed in the particular media that they have appropriated. The Christian encounter with the art and music of various cultures is itself a fascinating study.

In this case, Tolkien applied his Christian imagination to an epic in an age broken by the most devastating wars in history. Under these conditions, heroism takes an unexpected turn. In place of power and strength there is *humility*, in place of shrewdness and decisiveness there is *obedience*. These qualities are embodied in the unlikely heroism of the Halflings, particularly Frodo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*. But this brings us to the problem of the fantasy genre, a sticking point for many readers and non-readers alike.

In Tolkien’s analysis, the realm of Faerie offers us several gifts: fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation. Consider two of these gifts in particular: fantasy and recovery. In his essay, “On Faerie Stories,” he explains that fantasy always begins with “arresting strangeness.” It reorients us by taking us out of the familiar, but it does not force us to abandon all that we know when we enter its realm. According to Tolkien:

Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary, the keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make. If men were ever in a state in which they did not want to know or could not perceive truth (facts or evidence), then Fantasy would languish until they were cured.

Cured of what? Cured of that which prevents us from seeing the truth about ourselves and our world. Cured of our contempt, for one thing, and our boredom. Cured of our anxiety, possessiveness, distaste, artlessness, and indeed our despair; the last being, according to the late Stratford Caldecott, “the chief weapon of evil.” These are some of the named troubles that plague our age and make men and women prefer not to know truth. Fantasy can assist us in being healed from them.

“The magic of Faerie,” Tolkien explains, “is not an end in itself; its virtue is in its operations: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires.” Among these desires is the ability to plumb the depths of space and time, and also to enter into communion with all that is living. The broad-winged bird of our imaginations can be let loose from its bondage to preen, soar, and hunt through a landscape that magnifies our inner life. Make no mistake, it is a landscape with dragons, as well as creatures that are more like us than we might wish to admit.

THE LEAST LIKELY OF HEROES

How can one be expected to take a prescription from hobbits in earnest, not to mention from wizards or dwarves or elves? We must first acknowledge that, in being what they are, they are not what they seem. In the words of Verlyn Fleiger, “They are not pixies, or corrigans or leprechauns or boggarts.” Though fantasy, they are remarkably, even disconcertingly, like us. In other words, hobbits may be the most bourgeois characters in twentieth-century fiction.

On introduction, they have small vices and small virtues; they like to garden and drink beer; their chief occupation may be smoking pipe-weed or celebrating a birthday. They aspire to nothing more than a comfortable second breakfast. Travel is discouraged; adventure

is frowned upon. Heroism is quite out of the question. Alexis de Tocqueville could have been referring to hobbits when he wrote, "If the doctrine of self-interest well understood came to dominate the moral world entirely, extraordinary virtues would without doubt be rarer. But I also think that gross depravity would then be less common."

Curiously, Gandalf the Wizard is the only one among the Wise of Middle Earth who cares about hobbits and their lore, or who, for that matter, even notices the existence of them. "Soft as butter they can be," explains the wizard, "and yet sometimes as tough as old tree-roots. I think it likely that some would resist the Rings far longer than most of the Wise would believe." Hobbits, the least likely of heroes, inhabit the very center of both Middle Earth and its story.

Hobbits may be small, they may even be child-like, but they are not childish. Once, outside of all living memory, the hobbits had a good king, and good laws "both ancient and just." This was enough to establish a functioning and civilizing society in which three breeds of hobbits might co-exist for a millennium. By the time we are introduced to their kind in *The Lord of the Rings*,

the Shire had . . . hardly any "government." Families for the most part managed their own affairs. Growing food and eating it occupied most of their time. In other matters they were, as a rule, generous and not greedy, but contented and moderate, so that estates, farms, workshops and small trades tended to remain unchanged for generations.

Enforcers of Shire law, such as they are, tend generally to be more concerned with wayward animals than people. As the time of the story draws near, however, the necessity of "Bounders" increases to "see that Outsiders of any kind, great or small, [do] not make themselves a nuisance." The appearance not only of strange persons, but also of strange creatures stirs the unease of some residents.

FRODO'S HUMILITY & OBEDIENCE

When the Fellowship of the Ring is established at the Council of Elrond, no one can fathom what the result of destroying the Ring will be, not even the ancient host. While the great warriors of the stronger races avoid each other's glances, something happens to the young hobbit:

Frodo glanced at all the faces, but they were not turned to him. All the Council sat with downcast eyes. . . . A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that



he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace . . . filled his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice, "I will take the Ring," he said, "though I do not know the way."

In this moment, Frodo is overcome by the reality of his own vocation. He offers his service not because he planned precisely how to master the situation, or because he desires to be recognized and praised, but because he understands that he must. He obeys his conscience with little consideration of the consequences. He does not even know the way.

At the time he steps forward to fulfill the task and become the Ring bearer, he cannot apprehend the implications or demands of the journey that lies ahead of him. In this one action, he exhibits the virtues that the epic heroes lack: humility and obedience. Frodo is naturally reluctant, not because he is a coward, but because he is realistic about his limitations. Compared to Aragorn, or Boromir, or even the wizard Gandalf, Frodo cannot imagine how he might stand against the forces of darkness he will have to face. Epic heroes like Achilles, for instance, do not exhibit this type of reservation; they plunge headlong into danger, sword drawn, because they are prepared and confident in their abilities. This is what it means, or used to mean, to act heroically. It also means they will overreach, and they will die. According to Dwight Longenecker, "The classic hero lacks the realistic self-assessment on which real humility depends. Frodo is

totally lacking in hubris. Throughout *LOTR* he is full of fear, dread, confusion and doubt.” Bravado might have made him a greater hero, but it would have also made him more of a fool.

While these sentiments might lead others away from such a quest, they fuel Frodo’s persistent obedience to the voice he heard speak through him at the Council of Elrond: *I will take it . . . though I do not know the way*. This obedience is what prevents Frodo from becoming weak, even in the face of paralyzing fear. To draw the distinction again: the wrath of Achilles drives the story of the *Iliad*, the obedience and humility of Frodo does the same for *The Lord of the Rings*.

NOT A SOLITARY HERO

On many occasions along the road, particularly as the Fellowship breaks apart, Frodo is filled with doubt and despair. But the fact that he does not set out alone to bear the Ring gives him courage. This feature of the story cannot be emphasized too strongly: all the heroic deeds that Frodo accomplishes, when they are heroic and not merely necessary, are made possible by the community of friends and strangers, and even the strangest of friends, that forms to help him achieve the ruin of the Ring.

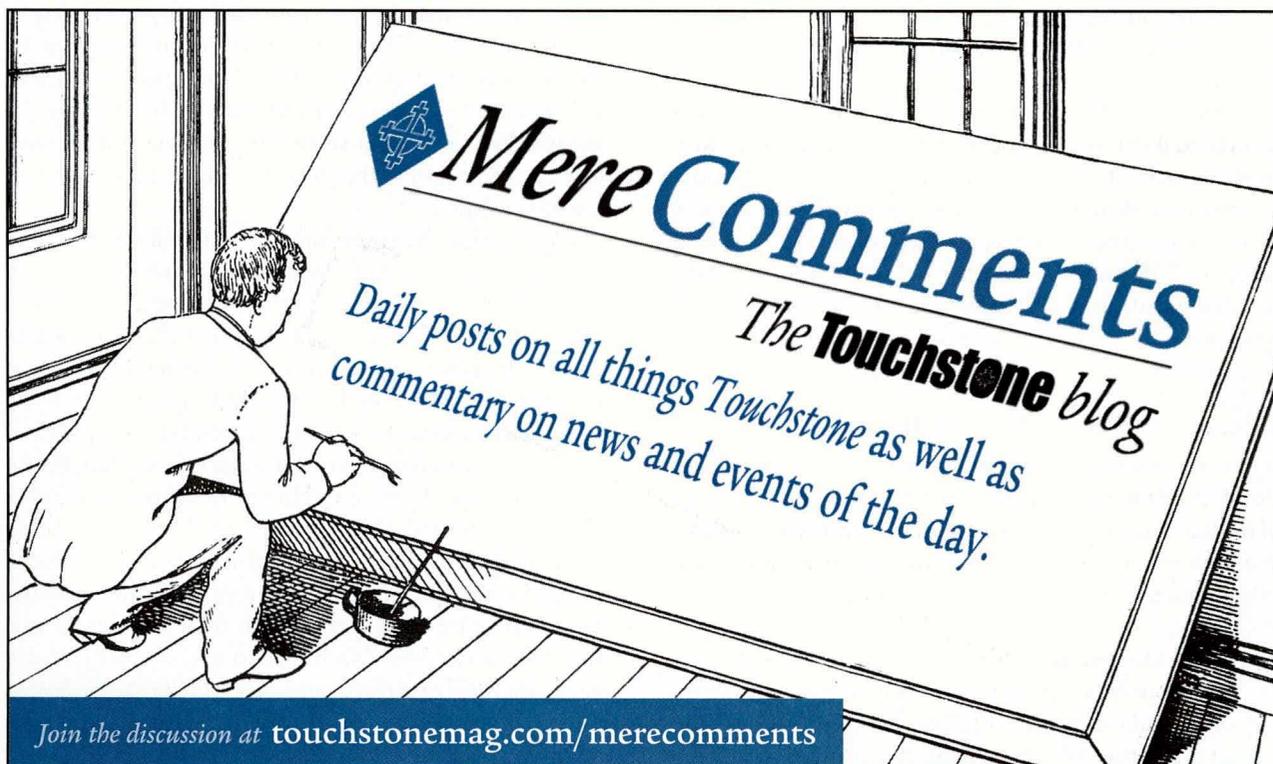
Frodo would never have made it to Mt. Doom to destroy the Ring if it had not been for Samwise Gamgee at his side—according to Tolkien, rendered in the image of

an English Tommy like “the privates and batmen I knew in 1914 and recognized as so far superior to myself”—as well as the others, diverting the attention of the evil forces gathering to descend upon the Ring-bearer. Frodo is not a solitary hero. For that matter, Frodo himself is incapable of finally achieving his task without the direct intervention of his pitiful nemesis, Gollum.

What is particularly humbling for Frodo about the creature Gollum is that the latter represents everything inverted and twisted that Frodo has the potential of becoming—a creature with no remaining free will, loving and hating himself as he loves and hates the Ring. If it were not for both his slavish orienteering of Frodo and Sam into Mordor and his nightmarish attack at the last moment, the Ring would still be in Middle Earth. Frodo does not forget the stories that Gandalf has told him about Gollum’s origin, or about his near-murder at the hands of Bilbo. He certainly cannot forget these things once the deed of destroying the Ring has been accomplished—by Gollum, and not by himself. For these reasons, he remains humble, even after his quest is achieved.

A MERCIFUL HERO

We do see some change in his character once the burden of destroying the Ring has been accomplished. For the Ring, though a tool of the most powerful force of evil in Middle Earth, is by no means the only evil. Upon returning



home after the yearlong quest, Frodo bears scars from the battles he fought: a missing finger and the unhealed wound from the Morgul-blade. And like Odysseus returning to Ithaca, the hobbits find their beloved Shire in a ruinous state. (This the movies omit.) Frodo comes home to find that the works of Mordor have found their way directly into his home and his family. Not only is his house a mess, and the village devastated, but his Uncle Lotho—whom he never had much reason to like—has been dragged out and killed.

It is just too much. Frodo's courage and his will are reinvigorated to defend his own home. And while he makes it clear to those he leads that the shedding of blood in defense of the Shire itself will not be tolerated, he will not spare any who threaten the lives of his people.

The same mercy that spared Gollum's life seems now to possess Frodo, for he wishes neither death nor revenge upon any of the evil invaders of the Shire, not even the wicked and powerful Saruman. Instead, he casts him out of the Shire like a boggart exorcised from a well. Saruman, in wonder, respect, and hatred replies:

You have grown, Halfling. . . . Yes, you have grown very much. You are wise, and cruel. You have robbed my revenge of sweetness, and now I must go hence in bitterness, in debt to your mercy. I hate it and you! Well, I go and I will trouble you no more. But do not expect me to wish you health and long life. You will have neither. But that is not my doing. I merely foretell.

Of course, Frodo never expected to make it home at all, so umbrageous predictions of his imminent, or even his eventual end do not move him. Saruman thinks like any dark heart would think; he assumes that a threatening tone and the portent of death will terrify Frodo, for terror is the best he can hope for in his diminished state. He is lacking imagination, as evil always does, for he simply cannot imagine what it would be like to be good. He is as full of contempt and artlessness as any postmodern man in need of the recovery presented by Faerie.

A MIRROR OF HOPE

The hobbits in this twentieth-century epic hold up before us not a mirror of scorn as Tolkien described it in "On Faerie Stories," but a mirror of hope in what is good and just and worthy of our affection. Fantasy allows us to gaze at the "arresting strangeness" of our own lives reflected back in a new way. Faerie allows us to recover our sight, and from thence to recover our ability to understand the world we live in.

There is no shortage of arresting strangeness to the twentieth century, even without fantasy. Two world wars, 11 million innocents killed under the Nazis, 100 million under various Communist regimes, the threat of nuclear annihilation hovering over three generations, environmental destruction, and apocalyptic terror that can strike from the other side of the world. In Tolkien's words:

Men have conceived not only of elves, but they have imagined gods, and worshipped them, even worshipped those most deformed by their authors' own evil. But they have made false gods out of other materials: their notions, their banners, their monies; even their sciences and their social and economic theories have demanded human sacrifice.

And yet how easy it is to fall into complacency. Evil exists around us and we barely notice.

"Of course . . . [fantasy] stories are not the only means of recovery, or prophylactic against loss," explains Tolkien. "Humility is enough." Even in his blue cloak and great, floppy hat sitting beside the well of *mythopoeia*, Tolkien is not the diviner of this idea. This is the Christian vision: the consecrated imagination that attends to the truth expressed through the eternal *logos*, fashioned into form as *mythos* by storytellers like Tolkien. Tolkien's heroes, not only the hobbits, but the kings and men and wizards of Middle Earth who demonstrate heroic deeds—from the felling of tyrants to the casting out of evil spirits—every last one of them bases action in *kenosis*.

As the Christian gospel demonstrates so clearly, it is only through *kenosis* (self-emptying love) that the hero can offer himself up as the victim in service to others. These fantasy heroes from a "secondary world" do not offer us salvation, but they demonstrate how our imitation of Christ might affect our actions in this "primary world," and redound to the praise and glory of God.

The paradox of self-emptying, joined as it is to humility and obedience, presents the stumbling block that Christ himself promised it would. "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." As a deeply faith-filled Catholic, Tolkien's own sub-creation of Middle Earth and its inhabitants gives witness to the power of an imagination that has been transformed by this paradox. This story, and the heroism portrayed in it, are not mere fantasy; they are truth. Through the imitation of the virtues we witness in humble, obedient, kenotic heroism comes opportunities for recovery in our own age, and even for sanctity for any one of us. Living this hope kept Tolkien from despair after the war; witnessing it in his Faerie can do the same, and more, for us. ♦