

How the Hobbits Saved Civilization

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Two summers ago, it had been almost twenty years since I had read *The Lord of the Rings (TLR)*. Knowing that the first movie was scheduled to appear that next fall, I made time to re-read the first book. Not surprisingly, *The Fellowship of the Ring* was as riveting as the first time I read it, keeping me awake late into the night. Last summer, I read once more books two and three in the trilogy. Again, I found them alluring, enthralling, spellbinding. How do we account for the persistent appeal of Tolkien's writing? First, isn't it true that continued fascination with Middle Earth is due in large part to the worldview Tolkien creates? Second, is Tolkien's worldview compatible with a Christian worldview—and if so, how and where? Actually, one might argue that the collision of Christianity with another worldview is at times not merely something to tolerate, but something to applaud, something, that is, which actually reinvigorates Christianity.

What is it, then, about Tolkien's Middle Earth that captivates us so? One would expect American audiences during the tumultuous decade of the 1960s to identify with the story's battle against evil wraiths, orcs, a Balrog, and the temptation of the ring itself. But today, in the midst of our mainly prosperous and placid culture, I think there are two different, rather compelling reasons for the continuing appeal of *TLR*. First, because we live our lives in self-indulgent suburban isolation, the picture of community in Tolkien's work sets aflame a longing within us. We work in cubicles and do not speak regularly to our neighbors. So, what strikes us in the title of the first book is the phrase *fellowship* of the ring. Yes, the story is about our singular hero, Frodo, but even more, it is about "the Company," the fellowship—it is the story of

a group of loyal comrades who have bound themselves together for good or ill. Together they feast in Rivendell; and together they face the dark, dank mines of Moria. We long for relationships like this, if not for the adventures themselves—which brings me to the second reason why *TLR* intrigues us so. The imaginative adventure that the quest propels us into stands in stark contrast to our stale, stultified suburban existence. While we drive SUVs and wear fashions that imitate exploring gear, while we talk about risk, survival, and *living on the edge*, we mostly watch others take risks while we *live on the edge of our safe seat in the theatre*.

None of our culture's passivity, however, nullifies the real appeal of Tolkien's world for us. The energy and lure that the trilogy exudes derives at least partly from the world and worldview that Tolkien used as a pattern for middle earth—that of the Anglo Saxons. Speaking in broad strokes, here, let me mention three (of the half dozen or so) components of the Anglo Saxon worldview that Tolkien employs.

Let me speak of the first aspect of the Anglo Saxon worldview under the rubric of Vast Expanse. When one enters the land of hobbits, one is immediately thrust into a world that is broad, wild, and uncharted. I recall a speech from the Venerable Bede that one of my college English professors used to narrate. I have altered it poetically in my own imagination over the years, but I think that the main point is still intact. The dryghten's (or lord's) advisor is describing for the dryghten what life in the world is like. Life is like a sparrow flying through a storm in the dark night, says the advisor. The world is dark and vast and cold. The rain slashes and the wind beats against the fragile creature. Then,

suddenly, all is changed. The sparrow flies into the mead hall through an open window where the dryghten and thegns (vassals) are making merry. The firelight spreads light and warmth and cheer throughout the room. Voices are laughing and hearts are singing. Then, after the sparrow briefly experiences light and comfort, it quickly flies out again through a window at the far end of the hall, into the cold dark. The light and cheer were real but brief. So, in the *TLR*, there are moments of peace—with Tom Bombadil, in Rivendell or Lothlorien, or drinking treefrog in Fangorn, or smoking some unexpected vintage Longbottom Leaf amidst the flotsam and jetsam of uprooted Isengard—but the golden moments are only brief respites along the longer, much gloomier path.

In one sense, the expanse is geographical, represented by great blank spaces in the available maps. How does one respond to the fact of such unexplored terrain? At the beginning of the trek, as they leave the lands they know, the hobbits cannot imagine what lies ahead. “They would soon now be going forward into lands wholly strange to them, and beyond all but the most vague and distant legends of the Shire, and in the gathering twilight they longed for home. A deep loneliness and sense of loss was on them.” The world is wide and wild and, unless we are fools, that fact is daunting. As the travelers move on in their quest, there is increasingly more that must be added to their sense of proportion: “the world looked wild and wide from Weathertop;” “they were oppressed by the loneliness and vastness of the dolven halls and endlessly branching stairs and passages” within the mines of Moria. Middle earth just keeps expanding as we continue the journey, and as it expands, it is as if the hobbits grow smaller still. Coming to terms with one’s smallness in the universe means facing finitude. At the recognition of our smallness, a pain both of dread and loss shoots through us. What can our existence mean in relation to all those other unknown lands and lives, let alone the unsought dangers of darkness? All experience of light and joy and beauty fade so fast. Finding the front door to Mordor closed to Frodo, the narrator pities him, saying, “here he was a little hafling from the Shire, a simple hobbit of the quiet countryside, expected to find a way where the great ones could not go, or dared not go.”

In another sense, the vastness stretches not only geographically forward, but also historically into the distant past. One steps out from his or her safe and comfortable hobbit hole and suddenly realizes that one has never fully understood the immensity of time, of eras gone by and full lives lived. As Tom Bombadil told

his stories, the hobbits “had a vision as it were of a great expanse of years behind them, like a vast and shadowy plain over which there strode shapes of Men . . . ,” and similarly at Elrond’s house they heard “histories and legends of long ago,” and so, “visions of far lands and bright things that [they] had never yet imagined opened before [them].” There is a poignant scene in *The Two Towers* where the solitary heroes Frodo and Sam, mulling over the lore of old, suddenly realize that they themselves are living within just such a legend. Sam exclaims, “Why, to think of it, we’re in the same tale still! It’s going on. Don’t the great tales never end?”

There is a strong element of lament connected with this vision of the past, since it instantly awakens one to the passing of all things beautiful: “Baldr the Beautiful is dead, is dead” echoes a plaintive line from an Icelandic poem.¹ “Time like an ever rolling stream bears all her sons away.”² Lothlorien is passing away and elves are moving westward, never to return. In Lothlorien, “It seemed to [Frodo] that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanishing world.” When the last battle in the story is fought and won, almost immediately Legolas sings a traveling lament:

To the Sea, to the Sea! The white gulls are crying,
The wind is blowing, and the white foam is flying.
West, west away, the round sun is falling.
Grey ship, grey ship, do you hear them calling,
The voices of my people that have gone before me?
I will leave, I will leave the woods that bore me;
For our days are ending and our years failing.

This reminds me of leaving college spring of my senior year and knowing that the life I loved there was forever gone. “‘Here then at last comes the ending of the Fellowship of the Ring,’ said Aragorn . . . ‘I fear that we shall not all be gathered together ever again’ . . . Then Treebeard said farewell to each of them in turn . . . ‘It is sad’ [he said], that we should meet only thus at the ending. For the world is changing. I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, and I smell it in the air. I do not think we shall meet again.’ Once again, facing the wide, ever-changing world means facing our own smallness and our own mortality. As we face the darkness of the world, we lose our innocence, we grow and change and can never reverse that process. Speaking with Gandalf as he prepares for his return to the Shire, Frodo admits, “There is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same.”

So a poignant longing is aroused in us when we see the beauty of the world, when we glimpse moments of eternity shining through the temporal, but then they quickly flicker and vanish, disappearing like a delicate bird flying helplessly back out into the cruel night. Suddenly our hearts are broken—especially if we are alone.

The second element of the Anglo-Saxon worldview that Tolkien makes use of is the notion of loyalty (or fierce fellowship). The Anglo-Saxon dryhten/thegn relationship is based on a series of covenant promises and mutual commitments (known better to most of us in the later, more developed social configurations of feudalism). The lord or dryhten promises to lead the band effectively into war and distribute the booty evenly. The thegn pledges to fight and stand steadfast within the group, loyal to his leader. Tolkien calls this group “the Company.” They have pledged mutual support to one another for the purpose of their quest.

About two years ago, I was reading *The Hobbit* to my five-year-old daughter, Annesley. We came to the chapter on Gollum that I had been looking forward to—*A Riddle in the Dark*. When Gollum was chasing Bilbo out of the underworld of the orcs, my daughter began wailing. I tried to explain to her, “Darling, Bilbo has the ring on, he’s invisible now, Gollum has already passed him by and Gollum is now going to inadvertently lead him out of the tunnel—don’t you understand?” She remained inconsolable. I tried to explain again, but she sobbed, “But he’ll have to go find the dragon by himself.” Bilbo had escaped the immediate danger of orcs, but my daughter knew that he was separated from his comrades; he was alone. And it was the fear of being alone that most frightened her. If we have to face the cold wide world by ourselves, no wonder so many plunge into addictions that promise to ease the pain and terror. That is why the message of loyalty within “The Company” is so stimulating for our culture today. If we can face the world’s dangers from within a firm fellowship of friends—a Core group of comrades—then bring on the orcs.

From the start of the journey, Frodo’s friends promise to stay by his side: “You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin—to the bitter end,” says Merry. “We are horribly afraid—but we are coming with you; or following you like hounds.” Of course, at this point, none of them know they are signing up to face ring wraiths and orcs together. Other members of the Company avow the same pledge of loyalty. As the fellowship departs from Rivendell, Elrond reminds the group that they are not bound by any oath, and that each may decide for himself to turn back if the darkness

becomes suffocating. Gimli’s reply functions almost as a lord-vassal fealty ceremony in the narrative.

“Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens,” said Gimli.

“Maybe,” said Elrond, “but let him not vow to walk in the dark, who has not seen the nightfall.”

“Yet sworn word may strengthen quaking heart,” said Gimli.”

As the story progresses, when danger increases, so does the Company’s commitment to one another. Gandalf stands on the bridge of Khazad-Dum to hold off the Balrog so the others can escape. The fleeing Aragorn turns back and shouts, “He cannot stand alone!” Boromir, too, turns ready to face the foe. Courage is multiplied with trouble.

This is emblematic of the kind of loyalty demonstrated within the fellowship from start to finish, and it is symbolized in Anglo Saxon literature in the story of the Battle of Maldon of 911. The story also illustrates the third element of the Anglo Saxon worldview that I would like to highlight, that of heroic (elegiac) courage. The Anglo Saxons are far outnumbered by a hostile band of Viking warriors, but the Saxons have the superior position situated on the mainland. As the fighting begins, the Vikings lose man after man as each attempts to cross a narrow land bridge from the island they have alighted on. After great losses, the Viking dryhten parleys with his Anglo Saxon counterpart, saying something like, “These circumstances are not fair. Let my warriors cross over onto the land and then we will have a true match of courage.” One imagines that the Saxon warriors would prefer their dryhten to decline the offer and keep the military advantage instead. He does not. He graciously allows the Vikings on to shore, whereupon his men proceed to get their Anglo Saxons kicked. But as two thegns are fighting and dying side by side, they refuse to slander their dryhten for mismanaging the battle. Instead, they pledge that they will remain loyal and that their courage (mod in Anglo Saxon) will increase with the danger. One is reminded of Sam’s great courage, against all odds, when he discovers that Frodo has been captured by orcs. “His weariness was growing but his will hardened all the more.” Or we recall Meriadoc Brandybuck, just relegated to the baggage of the Rohirrim, finding himself in battle on Pelennor Fields, at least partly as a fulfillment of his previous pledge to Denethor to serve Gondor—Merry Brandybuck of the Shire facing the Lord of the Nazgul, “and suddenly the slow-kindled courage of his race awoke.”

Loyalty and courage of this stripe is a major theme in *TFR*. Again and again, Frodo is reminded by his

friends: “You are not alone.” At the end of *TFR*, when the Company discusses whether it wouldn’t be wiser to split up, sending a smaller group to Mount Doom, Aragorn says, “It would indeed be a betrayal if we all left him.” In fact, none of the hobbits can bear the thought of being separated from their friend Frodo. Sam, though he is the most fiercely loyal toward Frodo, is nevertheless only an exaggeration of what the other hobbits are committed to. Of course you must go at once, concedes Sam on the last page of the first book, “But not alone. I’m coming too, or neither of us isn’t going. I’ll knock holes in the boat first.” Frodo responds with relief: “I’m glad, Sam. I cannot tell you how glad. Come along! It’s plain that we were meant to go together.”

Now, this worldview that J.R.R. Tolkien created with Middle Earth had tangible parallels in the lives of Anglo Saxons before and during the golden age of Bede (after the mid 700s CE). Let us back up our time line for a moment. At say 362 C.E., barbarians and Christians were essentially in separate worlds. But by the mid 600s, many of the Germanic and Celtic tribes had been reached with the Gospel (St. Patrick, Finian of Clonard, and Columba had evangelized the Irish and the Scots by the mid 500s; Clovis, the Frankish king, had accepted the Nicene faith in 496; and Augustine of Canterbury had converted Aethlberht, king of Kent in Britain in 597). However, when we examine the initial interactions between Christian missionaries and the so-called barbarian tribes in the west (people groups like the Irish, Scots, Angles, Saxons, Lombards, Franks, Frisians, Alemanni, etc.)—when we examine the initial interactions between these two culture groups, we discover a difference of opinion among scholars as to the result or value of the interchange. On the one hand you have a thesis like that of Thomas Cahill, that, indeed, the Irish saved civilization.³ If you ask Cahill how they saved civilization in the west, his answer is not all that sophisticated. He responds: by copying manuscripts; by saving the literature (as our cultural and intellectual heritage). Justo Gonzalez states the case much better. Speaking of the “dark ages,” he maintains:

It would . . . take centuries to rebuild much that had been destroyed, not only in terms of roads, buildings, and aqueducts, but also in terms of literature, art, and knowledge of the physical world. In all these fields, it was the church that provided continuity with the past. She became the guardian of civilization and order. In many ways, she filled the power vacuum left by the demise of the Empire.”⁴

For Gonzalez, three streams converge: Roman Empire, Germanic tribes, and Christian faith. And it is the Christian stream that subsumes the other two in the end. If an illustration to support Gonzalez’s view were required (that Christianity and barbarians were not such a bad mix after all), then St. Patrick would be a good candidate.

But not everyone would agree with Gonzalez. In his book, *A World Lit Only By Fire*, William Manchester negatively evaluates the interface between barbarians and Christians. Pointing to the “brutality, ignorance, and delusions in the Middle Ages,” Manchester concludes: “Christianity survived despite medieval Christians not because of them.”⁵ In his mind, the Christians are even more barbaric than the barbarians. If you wanted an illustration to support Manchester’s view (that the mixture of Christianity and barbarian was nothing to write home about), then Clovis, king of the Franks, might be a good candidate. Suffice it to say, that Clovis likely accepted the Nicene faith in part as a political tool against the Arian Christianity of the surrounding tribes that he opposed. According to historian Roland Bainton, “for Clovis . . . Jesus was a tribal war god.” After the so-called conversion of the Franks in any case, let’s just say manners did not improve a great deal in the royal (recently converted) court. Again, listen to Bainton:

One queen requested that if her two physicians failed to cure her they be executed. She died and the king fulfilled her request. A duke buried alive a servant and a maid because they had married without his consent. One priest who had obdurately refused to surrender some property to the bishop of Clermont was buried by him together with a corpse.⁶

If one was to argue that a Christianity mixed with some form of Germanic or Celtic culture is a good thing, others might say no precisely because of the inevitable dilution or diminishing of the Christianity within that equation. Distortion of pure Christianity is bound to occur with any admixture. For the sake of discussion, it could be posited that Christianity always intersects with its “host” culture, that a blending of elements is not only certain, but sometimes desirable, and if one can affirm that Anglo Saxon Christianity became a daring and healthy new synthesis—orthodox in its understanding of Christianity, yet emphasizing different features of the Gospel with bold new strokes—then might not one also claim—in our postmodern,

post-Christian era—that the worldview conveyed through Tolkien’s Middle Earth has the potential to reinvigorate our culture’s worn and weary conceptions of the ancient-future faith.

I must admit that when I first started writing on *TLR*—before the first movie appeared—I was struck by the contrast between the courage displayed in the story and the complacency of our current western culture. After the tragic events of Sept 11th, however, one imagines that collectively in the west, culturally that is, we have the makings of a new self-awareness and perhaps the opportunity for a new appreciation of Tolkien’s worldview. Certainly, we have a new appreciation for the virtue of courage. We have seen again how it is often the ordinary individual (the hobbit among us) who rises up in times of danger to respond with extraordinary courage. Isn’t it the hobbits after all who often end up saving civilization?

I think we have also begun to admit, in a new and urgent way, our utter dependence on forces outside ourselves—if not upon God alone. Seen through the lens of Tolkien’s worldview, life for us has just become darker, colder, more cruel, and precarious. In reality, we could say nothing has really changed. We were just as vulnerable and susceptible to violence before September 11th. But now perhaps we recognize in a more personal and dramatic way the fragile nature of our existence. As The Psalmist sighs: “You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight. Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.”⁷ Or, as Pascal exclaimed, it takes but a drop of water to kill us. The illusion of our invulnerability has been shattered—especially in America—and shattered illusions can be a good thing. Recognized vulnerability may breed faith. Perhaps a new self-understanding can begin to unravel some of the destructive, selfish, materialistic individualism of our culture.

Perhaps the greatest danger is that nothing will change. Has anything really changed since September 11th? Don’t we only expect a minor interruption of our economy until the military and intelligence specialists can clean things up for us? Don’t we merely perceive the threat as something distant, as something exterior to us, some evil “out there” to quickly conquer in order to resume normalcy? The greatest danger is that nothing will change *within us*. Chances are we will all go to the movies, and instead of hearing the call to courage and community resounding from the *TLR*, we will merely experience Middle Earth as one more “new world” virtual-adventure experience. If so, we will only continue to amuse ourselves to death.

Notes

- ¹ Padraic Colum, *Myths of the World*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1930: 202.
- ² This is a line from the hymn *O God Our Help in Ages Past*.
- ³ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.
- ⁴ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Volume One*. New York: HarperCollins, 1984: 218.
- ⁵ William Manchester, *A World Lit Only By Fire*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1993: xviii.
- ⁶ Roland H. Bainton, *Christianity*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992: 139.
- ⁷ Psalm 39:5-6a, NRSV.