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A THIEF IN THE NIGHT:
The Christian Ethic at the Heart of The Hobbit

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SYNOPSIS

The director Peter Jackson is making J. R. R. Tolkien's classic fairy tale, *The Hobbit*, into a film. Three films, to be precise. Tolkien's son, Christopher, guardian of his father's flame, objects to what he sees as the filmmaker's "commercialization" of the story. If he is correct and Jackson is cashing in, allowing mercenary motives to override esthetic considerations, the situation could not be more ironic because *The Hobbit* is above all a story about greed and the overcoming of greed. The dragon Smaug, the avaricious dwarves, the addicted Gollum—they are all in thrall to gold. On the other hand, Gandalf and the eagles and Beorn the bear-man are free from its power, as is Bilbo Baggins, the appointed "burglar" of the story, a hobbit with a disarmingly innocent attitude to wealth. It is Bilbo who breaks the logjam caused by dwarvish cupidity and he does so in a surprisingly Christlike fashion. Tolkien's tale shows us that the love of money, the root of all evil, can only be overcome by a "thief in the night."

When the director Peter Jackson announced that his movie adaptation of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* would come in two parts, I suspect most people were surprised but basically approving. *The Hobbit* is sufficiently rich in invention to be able to survive a two-movie treatment, and the tale falls rather naturally into two sections in any case. The first part consists of Chapters 1 through 9 and tells of the hobbit Bilbo Baggins's enrollment as official "burglar" to a party of thirteen dwarves who intend to recapture the gold stolen from them by the dragon Smaug, and of their early adventures escaping trolls, goblins, wolves, spiders, and elves; also of their meeting with the eagles and with the bear-man, Beorn, and of Bilbo's discovery of a ring of invisibility. When the ninth chapter ends with the protagonists floating downriver in barrels, "but whether alive or dead still remains to be seen" (161),[1] Tolkien is deliberately signaling the end of Act One and the beginning of Act Two. Of course, they *are* still alive, and the latter half of the story is entirely concerned with the adventures surrounding Smaug and the getting of the gold.

Moreover, as Tolkien's friend C. S. Lewis noted, there is a distinct change in "tone and style"[2] as the story progresses. Its flavor at the start is that of a fairy tale "dressed up as 'for children'" with plenty of knowing asides about two-headed trolls, the origin of golf (a feature that Tolkien later regretted), and so on. By the end, the tone is almost that of a tribal bard chanting an ancient epic: "Ere long the vanguard swirled round the spur's end…and already their cries and howls rent the air afar" (238).

Given that *The Hobbit* falls neatly into two parts, both in its action and in its tone, Peter Jackson's initial decision to make a two-part film adaptation seemed not only excusable, but sensible.

But then, just five months before the release date for the first film, Jackson changed his mind. Two films would not be enough: it would now be a trilogy! In a Facebook statement, Jackson said that three films would "allow us to tell the full story." While fans rejoiced, the media reaction was more skeptical and Tolkien's only surviving son, Christopher, who has spent decades working on his father's manuscripts, was appalled. In a rare interview, with the French newspaper *Le Monde* (Christopher has lived in France since the 1970s), he revealed that the Tolkien family had been invited to meet Jackson but declined. Explaining his reaction, Christopher Tolkien said:

*They eviscerated [*The Lord of the Rings*] by making it an action movie for young people 15 to 25. And it seems that* The Hobbit *will be the same kind of film. Tolkien has become a monster, devoured by his own popularity and absorbed by the absurdity of our time. The chasm between the beauty and seriousness of the work, and what it has become, has gone too far for me. Such commercialization has reduced the esthetic and philosophical impact of this creation to nothing. There is only one solution for me: turning my head away.*[3]

Christopher may well be right to diagnose "commercialization" as the underlying motive behind so much of the "Tolkien industry." It is certainly hard not to be cynical about the decision to turn *The Hobbit* into a trilogy. A tale told in less than three hundred pages is to be adapted in as many releases as *The Lord of the Rings*, which is well over a thousand pages long.

If Christopher is correct and this is a case of the filmmakers brazenly cashing in, allowing commercial considerations to override esthetic judgments, the irony could not be more complete, because *The Hobbit* is above all about greed—and the overcoming of greed. Christians who may wonder whether *The Hobbit* has a moral message worth engaging with should look to this aspect of the tale, for Tolkien's diagnosis of the sinfulness of greed and his description of its cure are both central to the story and presented with brilliant imaginative skill.

CHAINS OF GREED

Tolkien described "the Quest of the Dragon-gold" as "the main theme"[4] of *The Hobbit*, and it is a quest that is clearly motivated by greed. Of course, the dwarves, led by Thorin Oakenshield, don't present their quest as a greedy undertaking. They say they want to retrieve what is rightfully theirs. But if we pay attention to the way Tolkien

characterizes the dwarves, and Thorin in particular, we will see that things are not so simple. Thorin relates how, long ago, Smaug over-ran the dwarves' home in the Lonely Mountain and how "we have never forgotten our stolen treasure. And even now, when I will allow we have a good bit laid by and are not so badly off"—here Thorin stroked the gold chain round his neck—"we still mean to get it back, and to bring our curses home to Smaug" (29).

The gold chain round Thorin's neck is not merely a personal adornment, it is a moral symbol. Thorin and his companions are chained to their gold; it has them in its thrall. Tolkien tells us that dwarves "are not heroes, but calculating folk with a great idea of the value of money" (183). Elrond, wise elf-lord that he is, "did not altogether approve of dwarves and their love of gold" (52). Bilbo, the hero of the tale, had not reckoned "with dwarvish hearts. Long hours…Thorin had spent in the treasury, and the lust of it was heavy on him" (223). Indeed, Thorin is "quite ready to sit on a heap of gold and starve" (229), rather than give any of his wealth away.

Not that the dwarves are the only characters with this lust. It is a fever even more rampant in Smaug himself—naturally, for all "dragons steal gold and jewels…and never enjoy a brass ring of it" (28). Smaug is "a most specially greedy, strong and wicked worm" (28), "the Worm of Dread" (222), whose vermiculate passions infect many of the characters in the book.

Gollum, a fairly minor figure in *The Hobbit* compared with his role in *The Lord of the Rings*, is nonetheless the one most fully possessed with cupidity, after Smaug. We hear tell of "a ring, a golden ring, a precious ring" (75) with which he is utterly absorbed, and although it is not revealed that this is *the* Ring, the One Ring, the Ring of Power, Bilbo "had a feeling that anything Gollum wanted so much could hardly be something good" (76).

Descending from Smaug and Gollum, we come to the Master of Lake-town, a venal politician who devotes "his mind to trade and tolls, to cargoes and gold, to which habit he owed his position" (169). At the end of the tale, having been given "much gold for the help of the Lake-people," the Master "fell under the dragon-sickness, and took most of the gold and fled with it, and died of starvation in the Waste, deserted by his companions" (255).

Even elves are not immune. Tolkien usually approves of his elven characters and it is a sign of the elf-king's goodness that he wears "a crown of leaves" and not a jeweled crown "upon his golden hair" (134). But still, "if the elf-king had a weakness it was for treasure, especially for silver and white gems; and though his hoard was rich, he was ever eager for more, since he had not yet as great a treasure as other elf-lords of old" (145).

The noblest warrior in the tale, grim Bard, the archer of Dale, who kills Smaug with a well-aimed arrow, is himself susceptible to the same temptation. "Even as [Bard] was speaking, the thought came into his heart of the fabled treasure of the Mountain lying without guard or owner, and he fell suddenly silent" (214).

HEAVENLY HONOR

It is, then, not just a dwarvish problem that the story is relating; greed for gold contaminates characters at every level. But not *every* character at every level. Balancing the compulsively greedy, Tolkien gives us a number of figures with a healthier attitude.

Chief among them is Beorn, who pays little attention to the dwarves' conversation because "they spoke most of gold and silver and jewels and the making of things by smith-craft, and Beorn did not appear to care for such things: there were no things of gold or silver in his hall, and few save the knives were made of metal at all" (112). Beorn's life is simple and natural, almost Edenic. He values wealth of a kind other than that found in coins and trinkets, notably the sunshine that "fell golden on the garden full of flowers" (106) and the huge honey bees that suck from those same flowers, "the bands of yellow on their deep black bodies shone like fiery gold" (104).

Gandalf the wizard is another character who is free from avarice. When he announces that he is leaving the quest to go off on important business elsewhere, the dwarves bribe him to stay, offering "dragon-gold and silver and jewels, but he would not change his mind. 'We shall see, we shall see!' he said, 'and I think I have earned already some of your dragon-gold—when you have got it'" (102). But though he may have earned it, he never claims it. Indeed, he has a refreshingly dismissive attitude to the whole adventure, mocking the downhearted dwarves on the edge of Mirkwood: "Cheer up Thorin and Company! This is your expedition after all. Think of the treasure at the end" (120).

The Lord of the Eagles joins Beorn and Gandalf in the ranks of those who are uncorrupted. He becomes the King of All Birds "and wore a golden crown, and his fifteen chieftains golden collars (made of the gold that the dwarves gave them)" (101). Eagles do not scorn gold, as Beorn does, but they appear to value only what is given them, not what they acquire by their own efforts; and the fact that the *dwarves* have given them this gold makes it all the more truly a gift. Tolkien seems to be saying that, once the notion of generosity enters the equation, gold is disinfected of its corrupting power. We will see shortly how the liberating effect of a gift is skillfully (and paradoxically) brought into the story by means of a theft.

But before we leave the eagles, we ought to note that, according to mythic tradition, eagles are the only creatures who are able to look straight into the sun. This is another indication that they are free from greed, for the sun and gold are intimately related, symbolically speaking. As a good medievalist, Tolkien was steeped in the old belief that the sun's influence could turn base metal to gold, and clearly the source of gold in the heavens must be more important than derivative golden things on earth. For this reason it should come as no surprise that the goblins "don't like the sun" (82), that Smaug takes his naps at "noon" (189), that the golden ring of invisibility works except in bright sunshine, when a shadow may be cast (75, 82). In short, the sun exposes greed and only the pure in heart can withstand it. When Bilbo wakes in the eagles' eyrie and finds "the early sun in his eyes" (100), it is a good sign. His eyes are open to the source of gold, not turned idolatrously away to its mundane reflections.

BILBO AS BURGLAR

Famously, the book begins: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms." As we have seen, dragons are worms and Bilbo wisely lives free of them and their ends, which is only to be expected, for hobbits are typically "free from ambition or greed of wealth."[5] Bilbo loves simple, domestic, nourishing, organic things: flowers, breakfast on the lawn, a comfortable chair, a good pipe, a pint of ale. His healthy attitude doesn't consist merely in *not* being greedy for gold: it consists in a positive set of natural likes and attachments, proportionate, moderate, ordinate desires.

Nonetheless, Bilbo is not perfect and he experiences twinges of greed on certain occasions. An example is when he first sees Smaug's pile of treasure: "Bilbo had heard tell and sing of dragon-hoards before, but the splendor, the lust, the glory of such treasure had never yet come home to him. His heart was filled and pierced with enchantment and with the desire of dwarves" (184). It is hard not to hear an echo here of 1 Timothy 6:10: "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which…some coveted after…and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."

Generally, however, Bilbo, as a true hobbit, is both unpossessive himself and charitably disposed to those who are possessive. He pities the addicted Gollum (79); he gives a necklace of silver and pearls to the elven king as recompense for his unwitting "hospitality" (247); he offers the trolls' gold to Gandalf (252); and he ends the adventure with just two small chests of treasure, one of gold and one of silver, which, he says, will be quite as much as I can manage" (246) and which is "largely spent in presents, both useful and extravagant" for his nieces and nephews (254). One of his nephews, Frodo, will turn out to have inherited his uncle's generous heart.

It is his wholesome approach to gold that qualifies Bilbo to be the perfect "burglar." And this is where we come to the spiritual heart of the novel. Some Christians might disparage Tolkien for having made his hero a burglar, but that would be to overlook what kind of burglar Bilbo is. If his burgling were limited to depriving Smaug of his hoard in service of the dwarves' greed and vengeance, one could legitimately question whether Bilbo's burglarhood were a good thing. But "little Bilbo Baggins [is] *the* burglar, the chosen and selected burglar" (27), and the language here suggests almost a vocation, which is what, indeed, it turns out that Bilbo has. His vocation is not to satiate dwarvish avarice but, quite the contrary, to challenge and redeem it. The chapter in which this becomes clear is entitled, significantly, "A Thief in the Night," an obvious allusion to Christ's own description of Himself in Matthew 24:42–51, a description taken up in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 and 2 Peter 3:10. Tolkien's decision not only to allude to these Scriptures, but to give the allusion the prominence of a chapter title, suggests that Bilbo is a great deal more than a common thief.

I am not implying that Bilbo is an allegorical Christ-figure. As is well known, Tolkien had a hearty distaste for allegory. But he did value what he called "applicability" and it is quite fair to apply Bilbo's character and actions to a Christlike kind of role, especially when one notes the various scriptural glances in the novel. For not only is Bilbo a "thief in the night," he also opposes Thorin's "stiff neck" (227) and it is his discovery of Smaug's weak spot that means that this "wolf among sheep" (193)

can be defeated. In a remarkable passage, Bilbo even says, "I am he that buries his friends alive and drowns them and draws them alive again from the water" (190). He himself is "Presumed Dead" (253) but returns unexpectedly, to the considerable annoyance of some, and "it was quite a long time before Mr Baggins was in fact admitted to be alive again" (253).

Bilbo's burglarious activities come to a head not when he steals *for* the dwarves but when he steals *from* the dwarves—when he appropriates to his own use the extra-ordinary gem called "the Arkenstone," which "is worth more than a river of gold in itself," says Thorin, "and to me it is beyond price" (226).

It is this priceless gem that Bilbo finds atop Smaug's pile. Its beauty causes him to catch his breath, for it "took all light that fell upon it and changed it into ten thousand sparks of white radiance shot with glints of the rainbow" (201). He slips it inside his pocket: "Now I am a burglar indeed!" thought he (201). What he has acquired is "the Arkenstone of Thrain…the Heart of the Mountain; and it is also the heart of Thorin" (229).

Bilbo hands over the Arkenstone to Bard in order to break the impasse between the besieged dwarves and the men of Lake-town. Although Bilbo could claim ownership of the stone himself, he is prepared to let it stand against his fourteenth share in Smaug's treasure. He yields it up "not without a shudder, not without a glance of longing" (229), but ultimately finds it "a relief" (246) to forego his claim: "I may be a burglar—or so they say: personally I never really felt like one—but I am an honest one, I hope, more or less" (230). Having renounced his own entitlement to the Arkenstone, Bilbo returns to camp and sleeps soundly, dreaming not of gold but of bacon and eggs.

As Bilbo planned, this giving away of the Arkenstone is more than Thorin can bear: he furiously denounces Bilbo as "the descendant of rats" (233) and only reluctantly does he become willing to grant Bard's very reasonable demands, though even now, at the very moment of agreeing to the settlement, "so strong was the bewilderment of the treasure upon him, [Thorin] was pondering whether…he might not recapture the Arkenstone and withhold the share of the reward" (234).

However, before this double-crossing can come about, Thorin and Bard, together with the Elf-king, find themselves all united against a common foe, namely the goblins and the wolves. Thorin's martial wrath is terrible: "In the gloom the great dwarf gleamed like gold in a dying fire" (239). And Thorin's fire is now truly dying—in at least three senses. First, his war aims are dying, for the goblins and wolves turn out to be unconquerable—until the eagles and Beorn save the day, those characters who, unlike dwarves and men and elves, are untainted by the dragon-spell. Second, Thorin is himself dying; he suffers a mortal wound in the battle. And third, Thorin's greed is dying with him. In his final speech he says to Bilbo: "Farewell, good thief. I go now to the halls of waiting to sit beside my fathers, until the world is renewed. Since I leave now all gold and silver, and go to where it is of little worth, I wish to part in friendship from you…If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world" (243).

As Randel Helms notes, "The real climax of *The Hobbit* is not Bilbo's *finding* the Arkenstone, but his *renouncing* the Arkenstone."[6] It is this daringly generous act that breaks the dragon spell. Tolkien's story from first to last shows us the scriptural truth that "the love of money is the root of all evil." And who can deliver those in thrall to such a distorted love? Only the thief in the night.

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NOTES

1 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit or There and Back Again* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982).
2 *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: Allen and Unwin, 1990), 218.
3 Online: http://sedulia.blogs.com/sedulias_translations/2012/07/was-first-felt.html.
4 *Letters*, 159.
5 Ibid., 158.
6 Randel Helms, *Tolkien's World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 61.