

#800 Pop-Cultural Theologies of Glory

For the four hundredth Thursday Theology, we bring you a short essay by Dr. Peter Keyel, an immunologist and Crossings board member whose writing has appeared several times in this space, most recently in [Thursday Theology #771](#). In this piece, he considers the differing soteriologies (of a sort) in the novel and recent film version of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Along the way, Peter sheds some light on the theological implications of our current pop-cultural preferences for how to get saved.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* vs. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*: Are we heroic enough?

I've liked Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and the Lord of the Rings Trilogy ever since my dad convinced me to read past an introduction I thought was too boring and get to the trolls. I was cautiously hopeful when Peter Jackson produced the Fellowship of the Ring, and so I saw it in the theaters. As one who might be described as a "purist," I was horribly disappointed by the movie. I could point to all of the things I thought they did wrong, all of the characters I thought they got wrong, but it took watching Jackson's *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* to realize what I didn't like about Jackson's vision for Tolkien's epics: the soteriology, or how people get saved.

Peter Jackson's soteriology is a theology of glory. He changes

the story to reflect that. Indeed, one good thing about seeing Peter Jackson's work is that it makes one realize how thoroughly Tolkien's epics are *not* about glory. To examine this comparison, consider a few examples *The Hobbit*. (There are more.)

As I mentioned, the encounter with the trolls is what hooked me on the novel. The dwarves, who are tired, wet, and hungry, see a campfire and send Bilbo over to investigate and hoot like an owl, depending on what he finds. Bilbo finds trolls, steals from one of the trolls, and gets caught. When the dwarves come to investigate, they each get ambushed, caught, and stuffed into sacks, though Thorin puts up something of a fight. The only thing that saves the trolls is Gandalf, who keeps them fighting amongst themselves for so long that they stay out too late and get turned to stone. There is no glory in this version of events. There is no heroism here. Bilbo is caught stealing from someone. The dwarves all attack the trolls because everyone knows that trolls are just evil. Worse, the dwarves fail to prevail in their contest of arms against the trolls. In fact, it's not even much of a contest.

Now consider how Peter Jackson shot this encounter. The dwarves lose their ponies and send Bilbo out to find them. It turns out the trolls have stolen the dwarves' ponies, with the intent to eat them. Instead of getting caught stealing, Bilbo gets grabbed by the trolls accidentally. The dwarves all roll into battle with the trolls, and put up quite the fight. So much fight, in fact, that the trolls must resort to using Bilbo, who has just nobly rescued the ponies, as a hostage in order to force the dwarves to lay down arms.

There are not major changes here, but the changes are to the soteriology—how the dwarves are saved. The dwarves lose against the trolls in the movie because of their honor: the trolls use the old hostage tactic to subdue an otherwise superior foe. The

dwarves are so righteous that they have no choice but to lay down arms, even though they could have prevailed had they chosen to. They did the Right Thing. And for good reason: although Bilbo seems incompetent, he at least means well enough to free the ponies. He certainly wouldn't steal, even from someone as evil as trolls, unless it was to protect lives. Both the dwarves and hobbit are heroic in this depiction. They may need some help, but not that much. Gandalf only shows up to crack the rock and let the sunlight in; he doesn't even do much to distract the trolls. Were it not for Bilbo, the dwarves could have saved themselves. It's only because they were looking out for someone weaker that they needed any help. So, in a way, they deserved the help they got.

A second such example arises in the contrast between the book's and film's depictions of dwarves' journey into the Misty Mountains. In the novel, they are captured by goblins, and Gandalf rescues them by dousing the lights and murdering the Goblin King in the dark. The dwarves all then flee in the resulting confusion. They fight a little when they get caught, flee some more, get ambushed again, and lose Bilbo. Bilbo finds his way to Gollum, where he successfully answers some of the riddles only through luck (grace?): Gollum knocks a fish out of the water to give him the answer to one riddle, and Bilbo's request for more time inadvertently comes out as the answer to another riddle.

The movie is again different. Gandalf enters in a blaze of light and empowers the dwarves to take up arms against the goblins. Thorin knocks the Goblin King back. The dwarves slay a whole mess of goblins on their way toward the exit. They may be outnumbered, but each dwarf kills dozens of goblins. The Goblin King blocks their way and attacks, forcing Gandalf to kill him in self-defense. Bilbo finds his way to Gollum, but solves the riddles by thinking hard on the spot. No grace or luck needed.

For all that Bilbo may be a city-hobbit, he has what it takes to save himself.

Here, the soteriology is also different. In the movie, the dwarves are heroes: they may need some help out of tough spots, but they can mostly take care of themselves. Bilbo can handle the riddle game; there is no dependence on grace or luck or outside help. The book is a lot more desperate: the dwarves do not have what it takes; they are reliant on help. Bilbo is saved by "luck," not by being a master riddler.

The final, climactic battle scene in the movie lays out Peter Jackson's theology most clearly. In the novel, the dwarves climb up trees to avoid the wargs. *[Editor's note: wargs are vicious, wolflike creatures, adapted by Tolkein from Norse mythology.]* Gandalf lights some of the wargs on fire with flaming pinecones. Goblins soon arrive and then use that fire to set the trees ablaze. Right before Gandalf is about to go down fighting the goblins and wargs, the eagles swoop in and save everyone. The dwarves don't really do much of anything except try to climb as high as they can in the trees and hope they don't get eaten.

The movie scene is quite different. Azog (a goblin chieftain who in the novel was beheaded by Dain one hundred fifty years prior to the events in *The Hobbit*, but who in the movie was instead disarmed by heroic Thorin and presumed dead) shows up, and there is a climactic fight between dwarves, wargs and goblins. The dwarves are driven back, and Thorin has a big duel with Azog. Thorin does lose this duel, but Bilbo heroically saves him at just the right moment. Only after the dwarves and Bilbo have fought the valiant fight do the eagles show up, scatter goblins and wargs, and take everyone away.

Once again, the dwarves are fighting the glorious fight in the

movie, whereas they're pretty helpless and unheroic in the novel. In the novel, the eagles save them because the Eagle Lord is curious and because he owes Gandalf. Gandalf does not owe the dwarves anything; their rescue is a free gift. In the movie, the dwarves did a reasonable share of their work. They tried and fought the good fight.

Looking forward, it will be especially interesting to see how Peter Jackson changes the Battle of Five Armies. In the novel, Thorin has a glorious entrance into the battle and rallies the elves, dwarves, and men. However, he fails to fight through even the bodyguard of Bolg (Azog's son and leader of the goblins) and instead is mortally wounded by the bodyguard. He doesn't even rate a showdown with the goblin leader. It is Beorn, in the form of a giant bear, who scatters the bodyguard, recovers Thorin's body and squashes Bolg like a bug. My prediction is that Thorin will still die, but he will take Azog with him. His glorious charge will get him much further in the movie than it did in the novel. Beorn might help, but it will be Thorin's show.

So what? These are the messages that our culture sends to us: theologies of glory. We don't like being incapable, unheroic, or dependent on someone else. It doesn't sell. It's not the example we want, or look up to. The dwarves *should* be heroic. In a movie we can sell that image. We can show a heroic Thorin, and dwarves deserving of glory, and we can hold this up as an example. In reality, of course, we don't quite cut it. We're not heroic, much as we try to tell everyone that we are, and much as we burn ourselves up trying to live up to that example.

However, we also have a different example. This example is much closer to Tolkien's work. In a way, we are Tolkien's dwarves, the Noris, Bifurs, and Bofurs. We're on a quest, but we cannot accomplish this quest by ourselves. Honestly, we don't really have much of a part to play in the success of our own quest. We

don't just need some assistance, we need total assistance. Only instead of Gandalf or the eagles, it is Jesus to whom we look. Not Jesus-the-empowerer, but Jesus our Savior. We don't have to be heroic or glorious. Jesus has handled all of that, except that he wasn't heroic or glorious either. He was killed as a criminal. Yet this is where God's glory came, in resurrecting Jesus from the dead. This is where God's glory comes to us, the unheroic and the inglorious. We're not transformed into superheroes as a result. It doesn't matter how miserably we fail, either on our own or even when trying to do it "with the help of God." We will still die. What's different is that we're free to pursue our quests, confident that Jesus will see us through all of the perils, even that of death.