

# A Note on 'A Holy Party: Holiness in *The Hobbit*'

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This note is in regard to the article in the 2018 issue of *Mallorn* entitled 'A Holy Party: Holiness in *The Hobbit*' with the intention to clarify terms and logic. There is also a point to critique the article in aspects that promote a misreading of a passage in *The Hobbit* - specifically when Bilbo negotiates with the Arkenstone with Bard and the Elvenking - and the methods of argument used in the article.

The logic for connecting holiness, Ilúvatar, and Eucatastrophe in Section C is messy at best. It is easy to interpret the arguments as intending to equate the concepts of "holiness" and "eucatastrophe." To conclude that holiness and eucatastrophe are interchangeable terms is incorrect. The intention was to make the argument that Ilúvatar is holy in a way similar to the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition as Tolkien might have understood God and that it is because Ilúvatar is holy that he acts through eucatastrophe, which transforms situations and characters into instances and agents that "shall prove but [Ilúvatar's] instrument..."

At one point in the article it is stated that "Bilbo seeks to achieve a parley with no selfish gain in mind." (Polk, p. 60) Where this might be true in Bilbo's meeting with Bard and the Elvenking (*Hobbit*, xvi), it does not take into consideration the way in which Bilbo acquired the Arkenstone or his thoughts when he pocketed it. In the scene where Bilbo discovers the Arkenstone, Tolkien writes, "Suddenly Bilbo's arm went towards it drawn by its enchantment... he lifted it, shut his eyes, and put it in his deepest pocket. 'Now I am a burglar indeed!' thought [Bilbo]. 'But I suppose I must tell the dwarves about it - some time. They did say I could pick and choose my own share; and I think I would choose this, if they took all the rest!' All the same he had an uncomfortable feeling that the picking and choosing had not really been meant to include this marvelous gem, and that trouble would yet come of it." (*Hobbit*, xiii) This passage brings another level of context about just how complicated this situation with the Arkenstone really is. Not only does the deal with the Arkenstone complicate Bilbo's relationship with the dwarves and the diplomacy between Bard, the Elvenking, and Thorin but it also gives the reader insight into the complicated nature of Bilbo's inner conflict in handling the Arkenstone. With this in mind it does not seem that Bilbo's intentions are all-in-all holy. By a stroke of luck, we know that Bilbo's choices lead to an eucatastrophic end. This does not justify Bilbo's actions, however and, following the article's line of argument, it cannot be concluded that Bilbo's interactions with the Arkenstone were holy in and of themselves.

This article also leans heavily on making its arguments based on a reading of the Assimilation version of *The Hobbit*. Where an Assimilation reading of *The Hobbit* is fitting for the article's purposes, it fails to explore the issues that could arise in trying to point out elements of holiness in the text in a Solo and Revision reading of *The Hobbit*. (Olsen, p. 9-12) The history of the development of *The Hobbit* and its fitting

into the lendarium fails to make an appearance in the article. It would do well to put a higher value of consideration on the entirety of *The Hobbit*'s development and history. To do this would give rise to more potential issues, questions, and proofs of holiness in Tolkien's thought in his writing of *The Hobbit*.

Another point of interest that is needed for inquiry is regarding Ilúvatar's nature and therefore, insight into Tolkien's theology. In Section C it is stated, "Luck would lose its 'luckiness' if it meant coercion. Rather, luck maneuvers in and through all things and circumstances that are good or bad, waiting for a response that 'shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of all things more wonderful.'" (Polk, p. 61) Perhaps this statement about luck (Ilúvatar's providence) is accurate as it pertains to Tolkien's theological commitments, but there is room for an argument to be made that the providence of Ilúvatar is coercive. Taking Tolkien at his word is fine if it is in recognizing his personal theology and how that theology is translated into the lendarium. It is another thing to challenge Tolkien's theology. If the will of Ilúvatar is truly not coercive then why is it inescapable? If there is a fixed end that is located in the foresight of Ilúvatar, is that not a coercive future that is guised under an illusory experience of freedom? There is still plenty of work to do in the realm of Tolkien and theology. This includes inquiry into Tolkien's own theological understanding as well as challenging critique from other theological traditions.

This article serves as a continued conversation about a particular theological aspect of Tolkien found within the lendarium as a whole. Careful reading and analysis are required of any serious inquiry of a subject. If further endeavors to investigate a theology of holiness that is found in Tolkien are to be done with integrity, more work is surely required.

## Works Cited

Olsen, Corey. *Exploring J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit*. (First Edition) (New York: Mariner Books. 2013.)

Polk, Nicholas J.S. 'A Holy Party: Holiness in *The Hobbit*.' *Mallorn*, no. 59. 2018.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. (Revised Edition) (New York: Ballantine Books. 1977.)