

A FORTUNATE LITTLE FELLOW:  
DIVINE PROVIDENCE IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE HOBBIT*

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## Dedication

Dedicated to my wonderful son Tyler C. Schwarz, who shares my love of dragons, faraway places and the magic of reading.

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## |Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the many elements that inspired Tolkien in order to identify a central theme in his Middle-earth tales: Divine Providence. Providence is defined as the protective influence of some higher power in order to bring about an eventuality. Roman Catholicism has long held Divine Providence as central to its theology; while this force is only expressly named three times in scriptures, the doctrine of Divine Providence features heavily in both the Old and New Testaments. First published in 1937, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* is a high-fantasy adventure in the medievalist tradition, complete with the hallmarks of the orthodox Christian interpretation of an intangible evil and a hero protected by forces unseen. Despite Tolkien's insistence that Middle-earth isn't a Christian world, his Catholic influences abound, presenting an orthodox Catholic view of the battle between good and evil; yet it also contains examples of Divine Providence reminiscent of the thought of Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologica* would have been well known to the medievalist Tolkien. Though God is never explicitly mentioned in *The Hobbit*, the unseen hand of Providence is at work throughout the novel; Bilbo Baggins's unusual lineage, the timing of the discovery of the enchanted map, Bilbo's finding of the ring, and the discovery of the Lonely Mountain keyhole, to name a few "fortunate" events, Divine Providence is revealed to be a key element in Bilbo's transformation from humble Hobbit to fated hero.



## | Introduction

The final scene of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* takes place some years after the main adventure. It depicts Bilbo Baggins sitting in his home with Gandalf and Balin, discussing news from faraway Laketown, whose recent prosperity was such that songwriters have begun to say that the "rivers run with gold."

"Then the prophecies of the old songs have turned out to be true, after a fashion!" said Bilbo.

"Of course!" said Gandalf. "And why should not they prove true? Surely you don't disbelieve the prophecies, because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself? You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit? You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!" (Tolkien 330)

Gandalf's response alludes to a theme that is mostly hidden throughout the novel, but which remains present just beneath the surface: Divine Providence.

Providence, coming from the Latin word *providentia*, is defined as the protective influence of some higher power in order to bring about an eventuality ("Providence"). Countless religions and cultures have tales of powerful yet unseen forces governing the universe, directing the "course of human affairs with definite purpose and beneficent design" ("Divine Providence"). Roman Catholicism has long held Divine Providence as a central theme in its theology; while this force is only expressly named three times in scriptures, the doctrine of Divine Providence features heavily in both the Old and New Testaments ("Divine Providence"). Tolkien's *The Hobbit* is a tale of fantasy and adventure

in the medievalist tradition, and despite Tolkien's insistence that his Middle-earth tales are set in a pre-Christian world, his Catholic influences abound. For example, Tolkien arguably presents an orthodox Catholic view of the battle between good and evil, yet his writings also contain examples of Divine Providence, reminiscent of the thought of Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologica* would have been well known to the medievalist Tolkien (Kocher 76-77, Shippey 140-141). Though God is never explicitly mentioned in *The Hobbit*, the unseen hand of providence is at work throughout the book. Through Bilbo Baggins's unusual lineage, the timing of the discovery of the enchanted map, Bilbo's finding of the ring, and the revelation of the secret keyhole on the Lonely Mountain, to name a few "fortunate" events, Divine Providence is revealed to be a key element in Bilbo's transformation from humble Hobbit to fated hero.

## 1 | Biographical Considerations

To understand the road that led to the writing of *The Hobbit*, one must first examine the events surrounding Tolkien's own life and the many elements that would later influence his high fantasy tales. In 1891, an unlikely match was made that would bring forth to the literary world not only one of its greatest authors, but also lead to the creation of one of the richest fantasy worlds of all time. Mabel Suffield, a girl of twenty-one, married Arthur Tolkien, thirteen years her senior, in Cape Town Cathedral in South Africa on April 16, 1891 (Carpenter 19). The couple soon moved to Bloemfontein where they were provided a comfortable home by the Bank of Africa, of which Arthur Tolkien was employed as branch manager (Carpenter 18-19). Less than a year later, on January 4, 1892, the couple would welcome the birth of their first son, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (Carpenter 20); they would have one more son, Hilary Arthur Reuel Tolkien, in 1894 (Carpenter 23). While Arthur Tolkien flourished in the arid African climate, his oldest son's health seemed to disagree with their surroundings, and this, coupled with Mabel's longing for her girlhood home of Birmingham, England, led to what was to be a holiday abroad to improve the boy's health (Carpenter 22-23). J. R. R. Tolkien would bid his father farewell in April of 1895, sailing to England with his mother and baby brother. It would prove to be the last time the family would see Arthur, as he was stricken with rheumatic fever in November of that year and would ultimately succumb of a severe hemorrhage on February 15, 1896, leaving young Mabel a widow (Carpenter 24). Having little in the way of savings, Mabel provided for her children as best she could, and she personally saw to

their education (Carpenter 25; *Letters* 218). It was through his mother's tutelage that Tolkien would form a lifelong love of calligraphy, languages, and botany (Carpenter 29-30; *Letters* 218-221). The family relocated to Sarehole, an idyllic hamlet in the English countryside where Tolkien's vivid imagination would find its setting (Carpenter 28). Tolkien, much to his mother's delight, devoured all the books he could get his hands on. Andrew Lang's Fairy Books filled his boyhood days, particularly those featuring dragons, and the young boy would soon craft his own dragon stories (Carpenter 30).

It was perhaps the hardships that had befallen young Mabel that would lead to her conversion to Catholicism in 1900, which resulted in her ousting from the Suffield family's good graces (Carpenter 32; Mooney 171). The family would move around for the next few years, as Mabel and the children failed to find footing in their new surroundings after leaving Sarehole for King's Heath in 1900. On November 14, 1904, after years of financial struggle and the strain of caring for her two boys alone, Mabel died, having succumb during a diabetic coma (Carpenter 38; Mooney 171). Tolkien would become deeply committed to his faith, viewing his mother's untimely death as an almost Christ-like sacrifice. "My own dear mother was a martyr indeed, and it is not to everybody that God grants so easy a way to his great gifts as he did to Hilary and myself, giving us a mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith" (qtd. in Carpenter 39). The boys were willed by their mother into the care of her friend, Father Francis Morgan, who saw to their Catholic upbringing while they took up residence with their aunt Beatrice, who lived close by (Carpenter 40). Yet Tolkien, having come to associate fairy stories and the rolling English countryside with his beloved mother, loathed living among the factory chimneys of cramped central Birmingham, longing for the tranquil days of Sarehole. The verdant rolling hills of his boyhood home would occupy his

mind and find their way into his stories, as Tolkien would write that “There is no special reference to England in the ‘Shire’ – except of course that as an Englishman brought up in an ‘almost rural’ village of Warwickshire on the edge of the prosperous bourgeoisie of Birmingham. [...] I take my models like anyone else – from such ‘life’ as I know” (Carpenter 40; *Letters* 235).

Tolkien would go on to serve on the Western Front during World War I. After the war, he went to Oxford University to continue his studies on Medieval literature and, following a brief stint teaching at the University of Leeds, he returned to Oxford as a professor of Anglo-Saxon in 1925. During his time at the university, he helped to found and participated in an informal forum for writers known as “the Inklings,” which included his friend and colleague C. S. Lewis (Mooney 171). It was during this time that his notions on the role of fiction and religion came together in his endeavor to “create a new mythology for England,” one that wasn’t explicitly Christian, but which suited the spirit of the place (Mooney 171; *Letters* 144).

## 2 | A New Mythology for England: The Creation of Middle-earth

In a 1951 letter to book editor Milton Waldman, Tolkien provided details pertaining to his Middle-earth fantasy tales:

In order of time, growth and composition, this stuff began with me – though I do not suppose that is of much interest to anyone but myself. [...] I do not remember a time when I was not building it. Many children make up, or begin to make up, imaginary languages. I have been at it since I could write. But I have never stopped, and of course, as a professional philologist (especially interested in linguistic aesthetics), I have changed in taste, improved in theory, and probably in craft.

Behind my stories is now a nexus of a language. (*Letters* 143)

From an early age, Tolkien's love of reading revealed to him the world of English literature that would follow him into his professional years at Oxford. Tolkien's fascinations with language and with mythology inspired him to establish his own fictional world, but unlike Lewis's Narnia, Middle-earth is not so much a fantasy world as a mythical setting for his fantasy. As Tolkien himself noted, the name "Middle-earth" does not refer to some "never-never land without relation to the world we live in," but is essentially the translation of the "Old English *Middengard*: the name for the inhabited lands between the seas," and as such, even though Tolkien did not try to replicate the "real" geography, he insisted that "imaginatively this 'history' is supposed to take place in a period of the actual Old World of this planet" (*Letters* 220).

Taking in the stories of other lands and cultures had introduced Tolkien to a quality of mythological storytelling that he could not find present in the tales of his "own beloved

country” (*Letters* 144). Amateurs would be right to point to the tales of King Arthur as good candidates, but these too were lacking in the eyes of Tolkien: “Of course there was and is all the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English; and does not replace what I felt to be missing.” (*Letters* 144). It was Tolkien’s belief that myths and fairy-stories could and should be based on elements of what he termed as the “primary ‘real’ world,” including setting and “moral and religious truth,” but that these should not be explicitly named. This was the failing he saw in King Arthur, whose tale (apart from also being largely French) was bound too tightly to Britain and Christianity (*Letters* 144). In his adolescence, Tolkien had begun to craft the Elven languages that would be present in all his Middle-earth works; heavily based on Finnish, “Quenya” was created as an Elvish language by the young Tolkien, and as early as 1917, it had grown to vocabulary of hundreds of words (Carpenter 101). As with real-world languages, Quenya had its roots in an earlier tongue that Tolkien called “Primitive Eldarin,” and this in turn would spawn a second contemporary Elvish language called Sindarin, which was primarily influenced by Welsh. Consistent with his passion for and interest in philology, Tolkien understood that the languages necessitated a history, and so he began the framework for a mythology that would find its way into his never entirely completed and posthumously published works, *The Silmarillion* and *The Book of Lost Tales* decades later (Rateliff xxx-xxxi).

During the Great War, Tolkien, then a young second lieutenant, began to pen “The Fall of Gondolin,” a tale that recalls the founding of the Elven city of Gondolin and its sacking by armies of the Dark Lord, Morgoth (Carpenter 100). “The Fall of Gondolin” owes some small part of its inspiration to Tolkien’s own experiences on the battlefield in Somme, yet these were only “superficial influences,” as Tolkien’s love of linguistics and his

childhood of fairy-stories played a larger role in building the world of Gondolin's Elvish and Human protagonists (Carpenter 100, 103). Suffering from "trench fever," Tolkien was sent from France back to England in November 1916, and his convalescence in the village of Great Haywood would also see the preliminary creation of "The Children of Hurin," another of the *Lost Tales*; here too he would draw inspiration both from the mythologies he admired and his boyhood books. While the hero's (Turin's) fight against a dragon draws comparisons to *Beowulf* and his tragic end seems lifted from the pages of the *Kalevala*, Tolkien scholars adamantly affirm that these influences are, again, only superficial (Carpenter 104). A rich merging of Icelandic and Finnish mythological traditions, "The Children of Hurin" went beyond the fantastic storytelling of old tales by providing subtle character development and dramatic complexity not seen in the ostensible source materials (Carpenter 104). As Tolkien recovered, the war began to seem like a distant memory, and he and his wife Edith soon welcomed their first child, John Francis Reuel, on November 16, 1917 (Carpenter 104). The birth of their child brought the young couple closer together; Tolkien would recall idyllic walks through the hemlock woods with his wife, "Her hair was raven, her skin clear, her eyes bright, and she could sing – and *dance*" (Carpenter 105). Their romantic escape into the woods would inspire a love story that would lie at the heart of *The Silmarillion*, the tale of the mortal Beren who falls deeply in love with the beautiful immortal elf-maiden Luthien, enamored by her graceful dance among the hemlock woods (Carpenter 105). Although none of these stories was completed to Tolkien's satisfaction during his lifetime, they represent the most fully fleshed out tales in *The Silmarillion*, and indeed each has now been published as separate volumes edited by son Christopher Tolkien in the last few years.

As the war drew to a close, Tolkien longed to return to Oxford, occupying his time



in assisting in the production of the Oxford English Dictionary, overseeing the history and Germanic origins of words beginning with W (Gilliver et al. 10-28). Tolkien's spare time was dedicated to the completion of *The Book of Lost Tales*; he would workshop "The Fall of Gondolin" at Exeter College's Essay Club, where it was well received by the undergraduate audience (Carpenter 107-109). The early 1920s would see Tolkien take up his first academic post as an English professor at the University of Leeds, where he and his young family fell into a quiet, comfortable life (Carpenter 109-112). In early 1925, following the birth of his second son, Christopher Reuel in November of the previous year, Tolkien saw a vacancy for the Professorship of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University (Carpenter 114). In the spring of 1925, he returned to Oxford University with a fellowship at Pembroke College.

It was during his time at Pembroke that, while grading papers in the early 1930, he found a blank page and, feeling a sudden inspiration, wrote, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit" (*Letters* 215). By 1932, Tolkien had passed along a manuscript of *The Hobbit* to his friend and colleague, C. S. Lewis, and a trusted graduate student of Tolkien's, Elaine Griffith (Carpenter 181, 183). Bolstered by the enthusiasm of his first readers, Tolkien set to work to quickly finish the novel and, on September 21, 1937, *The Hobbit* was published (Carpenter 184-185). Marketed as a children's story, the book was a tremendous success, with the first edition sold out by Christmas Day; reprints were quickly produced, containing Tolkien's own illustrations and Thrór's Map (Carpenter 186). Following the success of *The Hobbit*, his publisher requested that Tolkien write a sequel, and – after some initial reservations (see Tally 180-181) – he began the arduous task of writing what became *The Lord of the Rings*. After nearly 12 years of working on the novel, it was finally finished in 1949 and the first volume saw publication in 1954 (Carpenter 211-212, 220). Decades later, the mythology of Middle-earth has had a profound effect on

the literary world, inspiring its readership to delve deeper into the many underlying influences of Tolkien's epic high-fantasy tales.

### 3 | The Balancing of Good and Evil in Middle-earth

In 1953, Tolkien received a letter from Father Robert Murray, a close family friend of the Tolkiens, who found *The Lord of the Rings* to have “a positive compatibility with the order of Grace” (*Letters* 172). In response, Tolkien asserted that his friend was quite perceptive to the underlying influences and message of his high-fantasy novel, stating that “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision” (*Letters* 172). The Christian ideas introduced to Tolkien on account of his Catholic upbringing are a prevailing influence in the many works of Tolkien, an influence in which the author himself expected to be evident to the reader without his having to spell it out directly (*Letters* 288). In *The Hobbit*, readers can discern various ways in which the idea of Divine Providence guides the hero’s journey to its successful conclusion, and this represents part of the tacit, yet powerful, religious influence exerted by Tolkien’s Catholicism upon his writings.

Since early Christianity, scholars have sought to answer the question of why God allows evil to exist in the world. Medievalist and Tolkien scholar Tom Shippey would point to the orthodox Christian views of evil found in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the influence of Boethius’s *De Consolatione Philosophiae* on Tolkien’s novels (Shippey 140). In Shippey’s estimation, the Boethian view of evil states that evil is the absence of good, “possibly even an unappreciated good,” and that evil does not create itself (Shippey 140). In an essay entitled “The Nature and Origin of Evil According to the Eastern Christian Church,” Marina Luptakova states that “evil is regarded as a deficiency, flaw, imperfection; as something that by its very nature cannot achieve the state of perfection, as a negation or

loss of good” (Luptakova 218). Luptakova goes further with this notion of evil as a lack of substance; influenced by the orthodox Christian origins of evil, devils and demonic beings of Slavic and German tales of old often lacked tangible forms, being able to shapeshift or lacking in faces and names altogether (220). This idea is echoed by Frodo in Mordor, as he states that “the Shadow [...] can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own” (*Lord of the Rings* 893).

Tolkien’s Nazgul or Ringwraiths perfectly embody this idea of evil; once noble human kings and warriors, they saw themselves corrupted by the Nine Rings of Power, given to them by Sauron the Deceiver. In “Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age,” which appears in *The Silmarillion*, the exact origins and nature of the Ringwraiths is revealed to the reader:

Those who used the Nine Rings became mighty in their day, kings, sorcerers, and warriors of old. They obtained glory and great wealth, yet it turned to their undoing. They had, as it seemed, unending life, yet life became unendurable to them. They could walk, if they would, unseen by all eyes in this world beneath the sun, and they could see things in worlds invisible to mortal men; but too often they beheld only the phantoms and delusions of Sauron. [...] And they became forever invisible save to him that wore the Ruling Ring, and they entered into the realm of shadows. (*The Silmarillion* 346)

Enslaved by the rings and their own greed, these kings were eventually robbed of their humanity and physical form; rendered invisible to the naked eye, they could only be seen by those who could look into the wraith realm.

Evil and Providence play important roles in monotheistic religions. In his unfinished *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas examined the philosophical question of

why an all-powerful God would allow evil to exist in the natural world. Thomas would point to the necessity of both physical and moral evils in order to bring about good and righteous deeds; without tyrannical persecution, for instance, the patience of martyrs would not be tested (Thomas I.22.2 ad 2). Divine Providence, therefore, allows for some evil to not only exist but take hold in the world so that it may inspire courage and foster goodness. Evil is a necessity to a hero's quest, one that medievalist scholars such as Tolkien would have understood well. Catholicism teaches that this balance is important, without evil, the nature of goodness would have no meaning. Divine Providence makes allowances for both so that there may always be a savior, guided down a path to defeat an evil handmade for him.

#### 4| Providence and the Hero's Journey in *The Hobbit*

*The Hobbit* begins by introducing the would-be hero, Bilbo Baggins, a respectable Hobbit of the Shire. Bilbo lives a sedentary life in the idyllic rural township of Hobbiton, making his home in his comfortable little Hobbit hole in Bag-End. Yet before his tale even begins, forces unknown to Bilbo have already armed him with the adventurous streak that would transform him from a humble Hobbit of the countryside to the stuff of legends. Bilbo is born of the unlikely union of the stolid Bagginses and the adventurous Took-clan, who were “not entirely hobbitlike,” with one distant ancestor rumored to have at some point “taken a fairy” bride (*Hobbit* 5). Bilbo’s mother, “the famous Belladonna Took,” was one of the three daughters of Old Took, the patriarch who oversaw all the Hobbits who lived across the river that ran by The Hill (*Hobbit* 4-5). Gossip among those of the Shire held that members of the Took-clan would quietly embark upon fantastic adventures, only to return wealthier than when they had left (*Hobbit* 5). It is possible that the Took-clan may have found inspiration in family tales told to Tolkien by his Aunt Grace (Carpenter 26). Fantastic as these tales were, his Aunt Grace insisted they were based in truth; “She alleged that the family name had originally been ‘von Hohenzollum,’” and that one George von Hohenzollum had fought so valiantly during the Siege of Vienna in 1529 that he had earned the nickname “Tullkühn” which meant foolhardy, and that the name and this adventurous nature had stuck (Carpenter 26-27).

The tales of the Tolkien family were likely exaggerated, but Tolkien, much like Bilbo Baggins, gravitated towards the respectability of his mother’s Suffield side of the family (Carpenter 27). While the Tookes are viewed as eccentrics by some, the Bagginses are

exemplary; Bilbo's father Bungo being described as a "solid and comfortable" hobbit (*Hobbit* 5). Upon marrying his once-adventurous bride, Bungo Baggins "built the most luxurious hobbit-hole for her" (*Hobbit* 5). It is by this union that Bilbo came to be, a union brought forth by Providence in order to assure that our hero would have the qualities necessary for the journey ahead of him. Bilbo is as respectable and comfortable a Hobbit as his father, Bungo, but there would be the Tookish thirst for adventure that seemed to wait for a "chance to come out" (*Hobbit* 5). This balance within him allowed for the Took-clan's treasure seeking streak to coexist with the Baggins's restraint to keep Bilbo from ever being too reckless, which itself suggests that Divine Providence put him in the unusual position of being uniquely suited for the hero's quest for which he was being unknowingly prepared.

Bilbo's adventures begin one quiet morning as he stood in the doorway of his comfortable home enjoying an after-breakfast pipe, when the wizard Gandalf appeared at his doorway, bemoaning his inability to find an adventurer for a questing party he was putting together (*Hobbit* 5-7). Uncomfortable with the old wizard's topic of conversation, Bilbo proclaims, "We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can't think what anyone sees in them" (*Hobbit* 7). This is not altogether true, as Gandalf has come to The Hill several times past, always ready with tales of courageous adventures to stir the hearts of the Hobbits, with some joining him on his journeys over the years (*Hobbit* 6). Yet Bilbo is intent to make it clear to Gandalf that he will have none of the troubles of an adventure; politely trying to rid himself of the uncomfortable encounter with the wizard, a hurried Bilbo asks Gandalf over for tea the following day and rushes back into the quiet of his Hobbit home (*Hobbit* 9). So flustered is Bilbo by the unusual encounter that he forgets the invitation he

extended when his doorbell rings the following day, yet it is not the wizard that greets him at the door; one by one, thirteen dwarves enter his home, helping themselves to his stores of food, drink and comfortable furniture, to be joined by Gandalf (*Hobbit* 9-13). The dwarves begin to discuss an adventure that requires a “burglar,” and Gandalf casts the dwarves’ misgivings toward Bilbo aside, assuring them that he has handpicked Bilbo for the task (*Hobbit* 23). While the talk of dangerous dragons and sneaking about frightens Bilbo, he also finds himself excited and interested by the prospect, “Tookishly determined to go on with things” (*Hobbit* 24-25). The following morning, the dwarves have seemingly vanished, and Bilbo is at once disappointed and relieved that the burden of an adventure has been lifted from his shoulders, that is, until he discovers a note left by Thorin, the leader of the company and rightful King under the Mountain, thanking him not only for his hospitality but for extending his services to the party as their burglar-to-be (*Hobbit* 32-33). Rushed along by Gandalf, we find our hero making haste not only to meet the dwarves, but to begin his unexpected journey.

Things don’t begin smoothly for our adventurers; a rash of bad weather stalks their progress and dampens the jovial mood (*Hobbit* 35-36). During the night, the party spies a fire shining through the darkness, and they beckon Bilbo to investigate its origins (*Hobbit* 38). Bilbo’s Hobbit feet afford him the ability to quietly sneak up to the source of the light, a campfire at which three trolls warm themselves (*Hobbit* 39). This encounter with the trolls nearly puts Bilbo and the dwarves’ journey to an end; an overzealous Bilbo, wanting to prove his salt as a burglar, lifts a purse from one of the trolls’ pockets and is found out (*Hobbit* 40-41). One by one, the dwarves are captured as they come to investigate the fire for themselves and all seems lost until Gandalf reappears; through his cleverness, the trolls are stalled, bickering with one another until the dawn turns them to stone (*Hobbit*



47).

The party, now freed, continue their journey and arrive safely in Rivendell, where they meet the wise elf Elrond (*Hobbit* 57-58). Their wounds are mended, and provisions replenished by the generous elves. Elrond, being knowledgeable of “runes of every kind”, inspects their plunder from the trolls’ cave, and then goes on to examine the map in Gandalf’s possession, Thrór’s Map, which indicates a secret entrance to the Lonely Mountain (*Hobbit* 59). Elrond raises the map towards the light of a silver midsummer crescent moon to read and discovers it to contain moon-letters, runes which “can only be seen when the moon shines behind them [...] and what is more,” he adds, “it must be a moon of the same shape and season as the day when they were written” (*Hobbit* 59). Elrond tells the party that the moon-letters were invented by the dwarves ages ago, as a cunning way of concealing messages. The message reads, “Stand by the grey stone when the thrush knocks [...] and the setting sun with the last light of Durin’s Day will shine upon the keyhole” (*Hobbit* 60). Thus, it would seem that the party’s misadventure with the trolls is one of the first instances in which Divine Providence assists our adventurers along on their quest. Had it not been for the hours-long delay, Bilbo and the dwarves wouldn’t have arrived at the opportune moment for Elrond to make the rune discovery on the map. It is this discovery that arms Bilbo and the dwarves with the knowledge of the Lonely Mountain keyhole; had Providence not seen fit to stall them, the keyhole’s existence would have gone undiscovered. The narrator highlights the weight of this by telling us that this unlikely alignment would not occur again until “goodness knows when” (*Hobbit* 60).

Armed with the information gathered in the dwarven map decrypted by the wise Elrond, these heroes make their way towards the Lonely Mountain in search of the keyhole, which will allow them to gain access to its hidden depths. Already Divine

Providence has facilitated their quest by empowering them with the knowledge of the keyhole's existence, yet it goes a step further. The keyhole to the door is only visible by the last light of Durin's Day. In his book, *The Christian World of The Hobbit*, Devin Brown explores the role Providence plays on Bilbo's journey, particularly the discovery of the moon-runes in the months before Durin's Day. "Thorin explains that Durin's Day occurs when the last moon of autumn and the sun are visible in the sky together" (Brown 44). The dwarf Thorin goes on to explain that the knowledge of when this dwarves' New Year occurs has long been lost, a pessimistic proclamation coming on the heels of the party's discovery of the runes only moments before; yet Gandalf, perhaps knowingly, is not deterred, declaring that it "remains to be seen" that this knowledge won't soon come in handy (*Hobbit* 60).

Circumstances would once again see our heroes derailed on their journey to the Lonely Mountain; run-ins with goblins see them spirited away by Gandalf's eagle friends, and an encounter with monstrous spiders in Mirkwood further delay the party's arrival at the Lonely Mountain. Yet the party gets back on track and is soon traveling by river, where they see the towering Mountain, "grim and tall," before them (*Hobbit* 219). Yet after setting up camp at the foot of the mountain, their spirits begin to fall as days and days go by of blindly searching for the keyhole in the vain hope that it will be found by luck (*Hobbit* 219-222). When they do find the door marked on Thorin's map, they push, but to no avail; the keyhole would need to be found in order to open the door (*Hobbit* 224). Bilbo resigns himself to sitting at the doorway and thinking; his daydreaming is interrupted by a sharp cracking noise behind him (*Hobbit* 228). Turning to find the origin of the sound, Bilbo sees that "There on the grey stone in the grass was an enormous thrush, nearly coal black, with its pale yellow breast freckled with dark spots" (*Hobbit* 228). Remembering the runes on

the map, Bilbo cries out to the dwarves to return; upon testing the key under the last rays of sunlight and a rising moon, the door opens for our heroes (*Hobbit* 228-229). Had Bilbo not been at the precise spot to hear the little thrush's knocking on the grey stone, our heroes' tale would have come to an end, and the Dwarves would have lost their chance at glory, "the secret door to the Lonely Mountain would have remained shut forever" (Brown 44). Once again, Divine Providence has seen fit to guide Bilbo along on his quest.

A wonderful example of Divine Providence in *The Hobbit* and perhaps Tolkien's works as a whole stands to be Bilbo's finding of a magic ring; while the ring's significance is revised later on in order to fit the grand narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*, it is still worthy of mention in Bilbo's story as it enables him to continue his hero's quest. Indeed, there's little question that Bilbo or the Dwarves could have survived their encounter with the spiders or their captivity by the Elves of Mirkwood Forest were it not for the advantages, especially the invisibility, given to Bilbo by the magic ring. Bilbo traverses the almost mazelike passages beneath the Misty Mountains after being separated from the rest of his dwarven party. It is here that he blindly touches the magic ring lost by the creature Gollum. "He had heard of such things [...] but it was hard to believe he had found one, by accident" (*Hobbit* 94). It would seem as though Bilbo were divinely ordained in his task of finding the ring, "guided by a force larger than himself, a force that cares about his well-being and care that his mission succeeds" (Brown 48).

## 5 | The Lasting Effects of Providence in *The Lord of the Rings*

The far-reaching effects of providence are at play well beyond the pages of *The Hobbit*, as Bilbo's actions influence the course of the Fellowship's adventures in *The Lord of the Rings*. Following Bilbo's finding of the magic ring and his dubious triumph during the riddle-game with Gollum, Bilbo is rendered invisible by the ring's powers and has a chance to kill the creature, yet he ultimately decides against it:

Bilbo almost stopped breathing, and went stiff himself. He was desperate. He must get away, out of this horrible darkness, while he had any strength left. He must fight. He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him. No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him, or tried to yet. And he was miserable, alone, lost. A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering. (*Hobbit* 96)

Later on, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Gandalf discussed Gollum's role in the events surrounding the ring, with Frodo expressing little pity for the depraved creature, lamenting: "a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had the chance!" Yet Gandalf, perhaps bemused as understands the forces at work, declares that "It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began ownership of the Ring so. With pity" (*Lord of the Rings* 58). This act of benevolent mercy demonstrates the workings of Divine Providence, as Gollum's part in the

story is not concluded in the mazelike caves of the Misty Mountain. It is ultimately this pitiful creature that would inadvertently complete the hero's quest of the destruction of the cursed ring. At the climactic moment of *The Lord of the Rings*, having wrestled the ring from Frodo in the depths of Mount Doom, Gollum dances in victory, at last reunited with his "precious" (*Lord of the Rings* 925). Yet his joy is cut short, as he takes a fatal step too far and falls into the fires below, destroying the ring in the process. Gollum's end is thus a predestined one, decided by Divine Providence. In *The Mythology of Middle-earth*, Tolkien scholar Ruth S. Noel explores the role of fate in Middle-earth.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Guardians of the World, the Valar, invoke certain rules and prohibitions on the peoples of Middle-earth. ...In many cases the Valar determined the pattern of events. This is what Gandalf meant when he said that Bilbo had been meant to find the Ring and that Gollum would still play a fateful part in the Ring's history. (Noel 18)

The lowly Gollum was always destined to be the destroyer of the one Ring; it too was predestined that Bilbo should spare the creature's life so that he would live to play his part. Indeed, what is called 'chance' in Middle-earth seems less serendipitous and points more towards the coaxing of events by the Valar of Middle-earth to bring about occurrences.

In "The Quest for Erebor," Frodo recalls Gandalf's musing about the strange chain of events that led to "the journey to Erebor, why he thought of Bilbo, and how he persuaded the proud Thorin Oakenshield to take him into his company" (Tolkien 335). Troubled by the looming dangers presented by the resurgence of Sauron and his preparations for war, Gandalf journeys to the Shire to seek some respite from the turmoil haunting his thoughts. On the outskirts of Bree, Gandalf would come upon Thorin Oakenshield, who sought his

council on retrieving the treasures of his forefathers and exacting revenge on the dragon Smaug; eager as Gandalf is to see Smaug defeated, for fear that the dragon would join Sauron's growing forces, the wizard sees no clear path to victory. Seemingly without aim, Gandalf takes his leave of the dwarf to continue his wanderings through the Shire; "It was a strange business. I did no more than follow the lead of 'chance,' and made many mistakes on the way" (Tolkien 336). Yet in his travels, Gandalf would recall the strange little Hobbit Bilbo Baggins, whose communing with dwarves and thirst for wild tales made him the missing piece of Gandalf's plan to defeat Smaug. Yet having the battle-ready Thorin and the soft-footed Bilbo would not have been enough, had it not been for Gandalf's uncovering of Thrór's map and key some years before; "I had not thought of them for years. It was not until I got to the Shire and had time to reflect on Thorin's tale that I suddenly remembered the strange chance that had put them in my hands; and it began now to look less like chance" (Tolkien 338). Gandalf himself realizes that nothing is truly left to chance; Providence saw fit to equip the wizard with the tools needed for the journey to Erebor long before the need for such a journey had even crossed the wizard's mind. In reflecting with Frodo over how differently events might have gone, Gandalf paints a grim picture of "dragon-fire and savage swords...", a fate that was averted "because I met Thorin Oakenshield one evening on the edge of spring not far from Bree. A chance-meeting, as we say in Middle-earth" (Tolkien 340).

## | Conclusion

The invisible hand of Providence not only played a role in the very creation of Middle-earth by Tolkien, but also shows itself in the many instances we encounter as readers throughout *The Hobbit*. The unusual circumstances which lead to the union of the adventurous Took and the respectable Baggins families bring about Bilbo Baggins, who would go on to play an important role in the events of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The serendipitous timing of Elrond's discovery of the moon script on the map, the finding of the ring by the lost little hobbit, and the happenstance of the party's arrival at the location of the Lonely Mountain keyhole were moments that made our heroes into legends. Even the mercy shown by Bilbo to the creature Gollum has a profound effect on events well after Bilbo's own adventures have come to an end; as Gandalf wisely tells young Frodo, "the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many" (*Lord of the Rings* 58). Bilbo's transformation is not left up to chance, having been facilitated by Divine Providence. It makes itself known to the reader and Bilbo when Gandalf declares that Bilbo's "adventures and escapes" were never the result of luck, least of all for his "sole benefit" (*Hobbit* 330). It is apt that the wise Gandalf should act as a messenger for the unknown forces of Providence in Middle-earth; "Miracles are clearly from God. Providence is always 'perhaps,' except when God in Scripture tells us He is working behind the scenes" (May 69). Tolkien leaves us with the knowledge that Divine Providence is at work "supporting, [and] nourishing us" in ways that we cannot see or perhaps comprehend (Brown 79). Tolkien lends credence to the notion that, in spite of Bilbo's being "quite a little fellow in a wide world," these unseen forces of providence guide our hero with great care and compassion (*Hobbit* 330).

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