

FRODO, FAITH AND FILM¹

My wife and I have purchased and viewed, coupled with much discussion and analysis, the extended versions of The Lord of the Rings² trilogy, now that the final set has been released. I must say that I have been left wanting. Concurrent with viewing the extra discs, I have reread the books, beginning with The Silmarillion.³ The variations between Tolkien's works and the movies are at times minor, at other times major, at times commonly noted, at other times seemingly overlooked. Do the limitations of the visual medium account for all the changes made? My conclusion: no. My lasting impression is that the transfer from one medium to another accounts for some of the differences between the movies and the books but not for the primary one.

As I began rereading The Hobbit,⁴ but especially The Fellowship of the Ring,⁵ I found my brow furrowing and my heart sinking. I kept hearing in the extra Appendices discs that the limitations and distinctiveness of the medium of film necessitated the changes from the book. I can understand, for example, leaving out Tom Bombadil, the skipping of sections of the "journey," condensing dialogue and/or events, and the omission of some scenes from the cinema versions, which were added back in for the extended versions. However, as I have now concluded rereading The Return of the King,⁶ including Appendices, the differences are more a result of the writers' worldviews and epistemologies rather than simply a reflection of the limitations and distinctiveness of the medium. What bothers me is that Peter Jackson and the writers of this immense work (I am very impressed by their work as a movie production) claim to be basing the film version of The Lord of the Rings⁷ on Tolkien. To some extent they have, obviously, but the movies are a reflection of **their** viewpoints more than a replication of Tolkien's ideas.

I would not call myself a "Tolkien enthusiast."⁸ As a Reformed Christian, I find some of Tolkien's theology lacking. I understand his desire to avoid allegory, and thus, I would say the value of his works is more than C.S. Lewis' in many ways. However, his "works salvation" and qualified Deism in Middle Earth must be acknowledged as major differences between his myth and reality, yet if we were to take Tolkien's works as "truth," or as the "bible," our "hobbits"⁹ in video world have completely destroyed his truth, epistemology and meaning. The real lord of The Lord of the Rings¹⁰ movies is not Tolkien, but the "hobbits." How so?

¹ Written in the spring of 2005. Minor editing in the fall of 2006 after reading through all five of Tolkien's books again.

Since I do not write articles such as this as a vocation, I have done so in my "spare" time. By now, The Lord of the Rings Trilogy is ancient history according to the speed of cultural fads. I hope these thoughts, though applied to these films, can also be applied to future films, such as the forthcoming release of C.S. Lewis' works on film (At the time of editing, The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe film has been released and thankfully does a better job of staying true to Lewis' truth, though, not in all ways).

² Jackson, P. (Director). (2001-2004). The Lord of the Rings. [Film]. New Line Cinema.

³ Tolkien, J.R.R., The Silmarillion (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002). This work is Tolkien's back-story of the First, Second and Third ages of Middle Earth leading up to The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings trilogy.

⁴ Tolkien, J.R.R., The Hobbit (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973).

⁵ Tolkien, J.R.R., The Lord of the Rings Part One: The Fellowship of the Ring (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973).

⁶ Tolkien, J.R.R., The Lord of the Rings Part Three: The Return of the King (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973).

⁷ Jackson, P. (Director). (2001-2004). The Lord of the Rings. [Film]. New Line Cinema.

⁸ A term used by Peter Jackson and the writers on the extended discs for those less than pleased with the movies because of the departures from the books.

⁹ Peter Jackson and the writers on the extended discs have dubbed themselves "hobbits."

¹⁰ Jackson, P. (Director). (2001-2004). The Lord of the Rings. [Film]. New Line Cinema.

Truth, knowledge and meaning are found ultimately in God.¹¹ Our ability to know anything, even for the fallen and unregenerate, originates with God making us in His image.¹² Our “hobbits,” however, have found it effortless to take the clear meaning of Tolkien and subjectively give their own meaning to his works. Truth, knowledge and meaning are now in the eye of the beholder. I am amazed at the ease with which Peter Jackson and the writers say that a scene is different from the book. They believe that as long as they maintain the overall point and “spirit” of the story (the necessary destruction of the One Ring), the variations within it are justified. The “ends justify the means.” I am equally amazed when they openly say that this violation of Tolkien’s truth does not bother them. Though the “hobbits” believe the films are their interpretation of Tolkien, in reality, they have plundered his works and masticated them unto their own ends, creating their own Middle Earth.¹³

For example (this is one of the most significant), they completely change Faramir in the movies. The “hobbits” explanation is that his character is too static and not “movie friendly.” However, it appears the “hobbits” do not have a clue as to the intentions of Tolkien regarding his presentation of Faramir,¹⁴ or perhaps, they simply do not like it. Tolkien’s contrast with Faramir and Boromir his brother is stark. Faramir is a man of lore and Numenorean pedigree, in heart and character, whereas Boromir is of Numenorean strength and valor, in arms only. The “hobbits” latch on to Faramir’s pain of rejection from Denethor his father and cannot conceive of a man being able to overcome that loss. However, Tolkien presents Faramir as superseding his father in every way, because his strength is not in nurture, or lack thereof, but in his “faith” in something beyond himself and his father. This quality of character allows Faramir to reject readily the one ring and to accept immediately the true king (something his father and brother could not do), even though he was the successor to Denethor as Steward of Gondor.

In addition, the corrupting and subsequent scouring of the Shire at the end of the trilogy is completely left out of the films.¹⁵ The excuse of the “hobbits,” of course, is there was not enough time in the film and that it did not fit into the story **they** were trying to tell. However, they could have refrained from adding scenes not found in the book, such as Frodo’s casting away of Sam in favor of Gollum along the stairs of Cirith Ungol, a sharp contrast to the fellowship that Tolkien develops between Frodo and Sam, and included this important theme. My goal is not to draw out every point from this section of the book, but the denigration of the Shire is crucial in Tolkien’s myth. The freedoms in the Shire prior to Frodo’s leaving are fairly Edenic, because they followed the biblical principles of true ownership of property and local and limited rule by the Thain and the Shirriffs, with the primary locus of authority in the family unit.¹⁶ These freedoms are lost as the Boss consolidates power and increases the Shirriffs and the Rules all in the name of taking from the “haves” and giving to the “have-nots,” what Tolkien

¹¹ Some examples include: Genesis 1-2; Psalm 19 and Romans 1:18-23

¹² Some examples include: Genesis 1:26-28, 9:6 and James 3:9

¹³ How ironic and sad. One of Tolkien’s main points in his five books is the evil of possession and domination. The creators of the video Middle Earth are acting like Melkor, Sauron, Feanor, etc., forcing their will upon the world at the expense of others (in this instance, the expense of Tolkien’s truth) and seeking to create a world in their own image.

¹⁴ How can unbelievers fully understand biblical truths? The “hobbits” comprehension, for example, of Gollum, the prophet/priest/king aspects of Aragorn, and the effects of the ring on the ring-bearers (including those desiring it and those who are members of the Fellowship) falls far short of Tolkien’s teachings. They limit their interpretation of Tolkien’s work largely to the phenomenal world.

¹⁵ The allusion to this section at the Mirror of Galadriel is far from sufficient because the “hobbits” only present it as a possibility and never pursue Tolkien’s point there. Saruman’s murder at Orthanc does not suffice either.

¹⁶ Some example include: the 8th Commandment, Leviticus 25:23-55; Numbers 27:1-11; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Joshua 13-21; Romans 13:1-7

(and the Bible¹⁷) calls stealing. In the Forward to the whole trilogy, Tolkien speaks of writing his works, partly, to those “Across the Water.”¹⁸ Though possibly he meant the continent, likely he was referring to America.¹⁹ Since America²⁰ was probably closest to these norms since Israel, even historically called the new promised land and the great experiment, Tolkien sadly sees America in its foreign entanglements, among many other things, having lost almost all resemblance to constitutional, let alone, biblical norms for a nation. It seems, even in light of his denials, that Tolkien was trying to warn all who have fallen into a despotic State system. What a surprise, this teaching was left out of the movies. The “hobbits” focused on Tolkien’s desire, or their own, to create a myth for England instead and do not address the corrupting of our home as we “help” the rest of the world.

Not only this, but if we look at nearly every prominent character, the “hobbits” have portrayed each of them differently than Tolkien did. For example, they cast Aragorn as unsure and indecisive, as a weak and uncertain “king,” except during battle, until Elrond meets him at Dunharrow (which, of course, doesn’t happen in the book), and then, he passes on through the Paths of the Dead. Yet in the book, seen also in Appendix A of The Return of the King²¹ regarding Aragorn and Arwen, Estel/Strider/Aragorn’s only uncertainty is where to go with the Ringbearer after Gandalf falls. Furthermore, though Arwen is his strength in many ways, he is not as ignoble as the “hobbits” present him. One can examine almost every character and see these “variations” between Tolkien’s original portrayals and the film-makers’ interpretations. Their presentation of Gandalf is probably the most true to the book, though incomplete, which is understandable.

After these few, brief examples, you are probably thinking, “Why is this a big deal? You sound like a Tolkien enthusiast.” It is a big deal, because the “hobbits” justify these changes by claiming the limits and uniqueness of the medium, when in fact, these changes reflect a difference of worldview. Non-Christians cannot fully interpret Christian literature because they do not have the spiritual insight.²² Furthermore, by placing the authority of truth in their hands rather than in Tolkien’s, they not only undermine Tolkien’s truth but also Truth itself.²³ Non-Christians do this in life in general; they steal from the Christian worldview for their metaphysics and epistemology. Deep down they know Christianity is the only Truth, explanation of reality and basis for knowledge and meaning, while at the same time, they ignore the claims of God²⁴ and inconsistently try to live with elements of Truth along with elements from their anthropocentric world-view. I am not advocating an exact, 20-film replication of Tolkien’s trilogy; rather I would like to see an approach to the books with integrity to Tolkien’s truth and to Truth. If the “hobbits” could go to such great lengths to reproduce Middle Earth in its cultures, clothing, weapons, surroundings, etc. (I laud them in this monumental and successful

¹⁷ Some examples include: see previous footnote (the 8th Commandment), the Year of Jubilee, the boundary laws, and the laws regarding stealing which assume private property; the communal sharing in the early church does not negate these principles because it was voluntary.

¹⁸ Tolkien, J.R.R., The Lord of the Rings Part One: The Fellowship of the Ring (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973) 12.

¹⁹ I am not a Tolkien expert here, but even if my supposition is incorrect, his point stands.

²⁰ The point of application can be applied to many countries, not just America. I believe this explains, in part, Tolkien’s insistence in not applying his teachings to one contemporary situation only. Furthermore, England never really had a Shire, hence his warning to those who had.

²¹ Tolkien, J.R.R., The Lord of the Rings Part Three: The Return of the King (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973).

²² One example includes: 1 Corinthians 2:14

²³ The argument is true for any “based on a true story” movie that alters the reality of the story, whether or not the original situation or author is Christian.

²⁴ Some examples include: Psalm 19, Romans 1:18-23, Romans 2:12-16

task), then why couldn't they do the same with the story itself?²⁵ They place more authority on themselves and certain artists' visions, than on Tolkien.

And yet, so what?! This is **only** Tolkien!!

When the "hobbits'" principles of reality, truth, knowledge and meaning are applied to films regarding the Bible, the idolatry and eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil expand because of God's higher standards for His Word and for professing believers.

When I was a youth, the leading film was Jesus of Nazareth²⁶ shown on TV every Easter season for several years. Prior to me there was, among others, The Ten Commandments.²⁷ More recent films include Jesus,²⁸ Prince of Egypt,²⁹ and The Passion of the Christ³⁰ ("kids" movies such as Veggie Tales³¹ must be included too). If we add plays, both at Christmas by local churches and major stage plays such as Daniel³² at the "Christian Coliseums" as I call them, we have the whole American Christian community partaking of the visual medium. As Arthur Hunt says in his book The Vanishing Word,³³ this is historically a sign of paganism and a breaking of the Second Commandment. My point, however, is different. When "Christian hobbits" take the same approach to movies, plays, etc., regarding the Bible as the "hobbits" did to The Lord of the Rings,³⁴ the same anthropocentric and unbiblical view of knowledge and meaning, of reality, of Truth and of truth, become a part of the visual version of Truth. Obviously, the result is a contradiction and an implicit denial of the very Truth they are trying to uphold!

For example, when movie writers transfer words that God put on the mouth of someone in the Bible onto the lips of someone else, the "Christian hobbits" have now told us they know better than God. For instance, in Jesus of Nazareth,³⁵ the words of Jesus that all true believers are His mother and brothers are placed on Mary's mouth.³⁶ This shows the bias of the author, rather than the Truth of the Author.

When Mel Gibson, in his film The Passion of the Christ,³⁷ focuses on Jesus' physical suffering and makes it the greatest example of sacrifice, he has rewritten what God has said and greatly added to what God has not said. God clearly says that Jesus sweat drops of blood, not because He feared the crucifixion et al., rather He flinched at the prospect of God's eternal wrath about to be poured upon Him;³⁸ thus, the physical suffering was secondary. God also had the writers of the Gospels give us a very brief description of the flogging and crucifixion because of its brutality,³⁹ yes, but primarily because that was not the main point. The main point was His

²⁵ Because Tolkien's myth is so well done, many of his main points come through anyway, even in spite of their changes.

²⁶ Zeffirelli, F. (Director). (1977). Jesus of Nazareth. [Film]. Bridgestone Group.

²⁷ DeMille, C. (Director). (1956). The Ten Commandments. [Film]. Paramount.

²⁸ Heyman, J. (Director). (1979). Jesus. [Film]. Warner Bros. Though the date of production is not much different than Jesus of Nazareth, this film became a world-wide phenomenon more recently.

²⁹ Wells, S., & Hickner, S. (Directors). (1998). Prince of Egypt. [Film]. Dreamworks.

³⁰ Gibson, M. (Director). (2004). The Passion of the Christ. [Film]. New Market Films.

³¹ Registered Trademark. Veggie Tales.

³² Eshelman, G. (Stage Director). (2002). Daniel: A Dream, A den, A Deliverer. [Stage Play]. Sight & Sound.

³³ Hunt, Arthur W., III, The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003).

³⁴ Jackson, P. (Director). (2001-2004). The Lord of the Rings. [Film]. New Line Cinema.

³⁵ Zeffirelli, F. (Director). (1977). Jesus of Nazareth. [Film]. Bridgestone Group.

³⁶ Mark 3:33-35

³⁷ Gibson, M. (Director). (2004). The Passion of the Christ. [Film]. New Market Films.

³⁸ Luke 22:39-44 and, as one example, Romans 3:21-26

³⁹ Matthew 27:26, 28-30, 35; Mark 15:15, 17-19, 25; Luke 22:63-65, 23:11, 16, 33; John 19:1-3, 23 all deal with the flogging, abuse and crucifixion. There are more references to the time on the cross, but these few specifically address the physical suffering.

penal substitutionary atonement.⁴⁰ Gibson adds incredible detail that may coincide with historical evidence and is likely what “really happened,” but God did not see fit to place it in the Scriptures.⁴¹ Gibson may justify it with “literary license” or the necessities of the visual medium, but in reality, he has said God did not do a good enough job in recording it for us in Scripture. As a result, his film calls our attention away from God’s main point.⁴²

When, for example, Jeremiah shows up in Babylon (the Bible says he ended up in Egypt⁴³) and Nebuchadnezzar is said to have become a believer (the Bible is not clear on this point⁴⁴) in the stage play of Daniel,⁴⁵ we have “literary license,” but we also have the “Christian hobbits” arrogant idolatry. This may seem harsh, but when someone changes or adds to Scripture without qualification or any indication of doing so (apart from the broad “literary license” excuse found in brochures or credits), that person is liable for influencing those who are less knowledgeable of the Scriptures and who will accept it as Truth,⁴⁶ let alone answering to God. The writers have given us “truth” without justifying it. The “based on a true story” line is far from adequate, especially in regard to God’s Word. It must **be** the true story.

Likewise, when Charlton Heston in The Ten Commandments⁴⁷ acts out a large portion of the movie by developing relationships within Pharaoh’s household that are not included in the Bible, he and the “Christian hobbits” have related to the audience a possible reality. However, God did not see fit to tell us anything about it.⁴⁸ Thus, they spend more time on “literary license” than on the main point of Scripture in the account of the Exodus. Who is the Author of Scripture now?

When Sunday School and VBS materials, or other children’s materials, whether written or visual, have, for instance, Noah going to find all the animals when God brought them to him,⁴⁹ who is writing the Bible?

When the writers of Prince of Egypt⁵⁰ place the focus of the movie on Moses and not on “I am Yahweh,”⁵¹ we have another example of claiming to know better than God, in addition to missing the whole point of the Exodus. This becomes a stumbling block to viewers. Could these “Christian hobbits” end up with the proverbial millstone around their necks?⁵² One can continue ad finitum with other movies, plays, materials, etc.

I understand, from a laymen’s point of view, the limits and necessities of the visual medium, but limitations and a disregard for Truth and truth are two different things. In one sense it does not make a bit of difference what “hobbits” do with Tolkien because he is not God. On the other hand, when “hobbits” are unfaithful to the truth of Tolkien, and especially when “Christian

⁴⁰ Some examples include, Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and 2 Corinthians 5:21

⁴¹ I am not denying the necessity of explaining the text of Scripture. I am concerned when a whole movie, in this case, spends so much time on explanation and not much time on what is actually in the text.

⁴² As a Protestant, I am concerned about the obvious Catholic interpretations in the film. The point here is that Gibson places as much authority (if not more) on Catholic tradition and experience as on God’s Word. Thus, God’s word is not enough. He and the Catholic Church have made themselves authors of truth, not merely its only authoritative interpreter (as their theology demands).

⁴³ See Jeremiah 43

⁴⁴ See Daniel 4

⁴⁵ Eshelman, G. (Stage Director). (2002). Daniel: A Dream, A den, A Deliverer. [Stage Play]. Sight & Sound.

⁴⁶ The viewer has their own responsibility too; I am emphasizing the responsibility of the author/writer.

⁴⁷ DeMille, C. (Director). (1956). The Ten Commandments. [Film]. Paramount.

⁴⁸ See Exodus 2

⁴⁹ Genesis 6:20 and 7:9, 15

⁵⁰ Wells, S., & Hickner, S. (Directors). (1998). Prince of Egypt. [Film]. Dreamworks.

⁵¹ Exodus 5:1-2, 6:29 et al

⁵² Matthew 18:6

hobbits” do the same with visual, or even written,⁵³ presentations of the Bible, we have crossed into the Garden and have begun eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil along with Adam and Eve by autonomously making ourselves the final authority regarding God’s Truth and Tolkien’s truth.

God gave us words, **every** word, in a **certain** way, for **specific** purposes. Eve added to and took away from God’s Word and then decided she and Adam knew better than God, becoming His authority, and thereby falling into sin.⁵⁴ When movie/play makers alter or add to Scripture using the excuse of the medium and “literary license,” they have become like Adam and Eve and have said they know better than God.

All these movies I critiqued previously have portions of them that are adequate, if not excellent, portrayals of Scripture. I am not saying that every aspect of the films/plays/etc. is heretical. I am concerned when they change God’s revelation or mix in elements not found in Scripture and pass them off as equal to God’s Word. This is what Satan did with Adam and Eve in the garden.

I have heard numerous professing Christians say that God has now given us this tool of film to use for the spreading of the Gospel, that many have made professions of faith because of them, that the pictures “bring the Bible alive” and that they will cause viewers to read the Bible; thus, it can’t be wrong. I acknowledge that God can use (and has used) anything, including works such as these, to further His kingdom. God used (in fact, ordained⁵⁵) Judas’ betrayal to bring about the death of Jesus, ensuring the salvation of His people. This ability on God’s part did not make Judas’ act righteous, however. Likewise, though God often uses the visual medium to further His kingdom, He does not necessarily endorse its use by doing so.

Furthermore, if viewers do read the Bible because of viewing the movie/play, what happens when they see that the movie version is different from the Truth? Will they be disillusioned and not accept the Truth, or will they accept the image and not the Word?⁵⁶ My contention is that even when we use the visual medium to explain the Truth, are we using it with integrity, or are we claiming to be God and to know better than Him?

Thus, my heavy heart when watching The Lord of the Rings⁵⁷ movies is not because I am a “Tolkien enthusiast,” it is because I am a “Truth enthusiast,” for all the metaphysical and epistemological elements that accompany the Truth of Yahweh, His Living Word, His written Word and for living with integrity in His world. Both “hobbits” and “Christian hobbits,” therefore, must submit themselves to God’s reality and standards and actually become the kind of hobbit Tolkien, and ultimately our Creator, envisioned.

In light of this, let us ponder two questions and one final thought.

Has the Christian Church in America at large exchanged living by faith for living by sight?
And, has the Christian Church in America at large exchanged the Truth of God for the lie of the camera?

⁵³ I am not denying the necessity of systematic theology, confessions, theology texts, commentaries or Christian literature in general, rather the taking of the Truth of Scripture and manipulating it to our own ends, whether carelessly, intentionally or in the name of Art.

⁵⁴ Compare Genesis 2:15-17 & 3:1-7

⁵⁵ One example includes: Mark 14:21

⁵⁶ When we look at a magazine or book with pictures, do we look at the words first or the pictures?

⁵⁷ Jackson, P. (Director). (2001-2004). The Lord of the Rings. [Film]. New Line Cinema.

Before you say, “That’s your opinion” and dismiss my concerns,⁵⁸ remember that that very statement upholds the point I am making regarding epistemology and meaning. Consequently, let us examine everything through the lenses of Scripture, “taking every thought [and image] captive to the obedience of Christ.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ This comment is not meant to imply that you must agree with me and that if you do not you are somehow a lesser person. Rather, my desire is to challenge all of us to think more biblically concerning the use of the visual medium.

⁵⁹ 2 Corinthians 10:4-5