

# The Death and Resurrection of Bilbo Baggins

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit...

The opening sentence of *The Hobbit* is one of the most famous first sentences in all of literature. Simple and short, like its subject, it ignites the imagination the moment we read it. What on earth, and in its comfortable hole in the earth, is a hobbit?

When we think of hobbits, we think of the juxtaposition of “home” and “habit”. Hobbits are homely creatures and they are creatures of habit. Bilbo Baggins likes tea and toast, and jam and pickles; he has wardrobes full of clothes and lots of pantries full of food; he likes the view from his own window and has no desire to see the view from distant windows, let alone the view from distant mountains and valleys. He is a creature of comfort dedicated to the creature comforts. Worse, and here lies the root of his problem, he is a creature of comfort *addicted* to the creature comforts. He is so possessive of his possessions that he is possessed by them. He is trapped within his own self-constructed comfort zone.

Nothing could be further from Bilbo Baggins’ mind, or further from his desire, than the prospect, or the threat, of an adventure. In Christian terms, Bilbo Baggins is dedicated to the easy life and would find the prospect of taking up his cross and following the heroic path of self-sacrifice utterly anathema. The unexpected party at the beginning of the story, in which the daily habits of the hobbit are disrupted by the arrival of unwelcome guests is, therefore, a necessary disruption. It is the intervention into his cozy life of an element of inconvenience or suffering which serves as a wake-up call and a call to action. Gandalf introduces the reluctant Bilbo to Thorin Oakenshield and the other dwarves in order to

prompt him into an adventure, the purpose of which is ostensibly the recovery of the dwarves' treasure but also, on the moral level at which the story works, the growth in wisdom and virtue, through suffering and sacrifice, of Bilbo himself. In losing his bourgeois respectability, the price he must pay for becoming an adventurer, he forsakes the world and the worldly in favour of the pearl of great price.

The purpose of the journey is not material wealth but spiritual health. The adventure is, therefore, not merely a journey but a pilgrimage. This is made clear by Gandalf at journey's end as he accompanies Bilbo home to the Shire. "My dear Bilbo!" the wizard exclaims. "Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were." The wizard in his wisdom perceives that the hobbit has grown in moral stature, in wisdom, and in virtue.

As Bilbo finally arrives home, more than a year after his departure, he is shocked to find that the contents of his home are being auctioned and that, indeed, most of his treasured belongings have already been sold for next to nothing. The auction was advertised as a sale of the property of "the late Bilbo Baggins Esquire" who was "Presumed Dead". One can imagine the reaction as Bilbo gatecrashes his own vicarious funeral, so to speak, and declares in the words of Mark Twain that the reports of his death have been greatly exaggerated.

We cannot see the "death" and "resurrection" of Bilbo at the story's end purely at face value, which is to say we cannot see it solely on the literal level of meaning. Bilbo is "presumed dead" and yet remarkably rises from his presumed death in the very midst of his *de facto* "funeral". Such "death" and "resurrection" seems to demand an allegorical connection to scripture. Returning to Gandalf's words shortly before Bilbo arrives home, we can see that Bilbo is not the hobbit that he was. He had been "dead" before he set out on his adventure, or at least not fully alive. His journey had changed him. It had brought him to life, or at least to the

fullness of life. It was the death of the old hobbit and the birth of the new. He had been "born again". It was a baptism into a truer, fuller life. In this sense the perception of his resurrection from the dead upon his return is only a literal recognition of a deeper spiritual reality. Bilbo had indeed been dead but is now alive.

In spite of the new life that is in him, or perhaps because of it, Bilbo is considered dead in the eyes of the world. We are told that "he had lost his reputation ... he was no longer quite respectable". The loss of such worldly reputation and worldly respectability means very little to the "resurrected" Bilbo. He no longer cares for such trifles. If he is dead in the eyes of the world, he is also dead to the world. He no longer seeks the things that the world has to offer, having discovered the pearl of great price that the world does not value.

We are told that the new Bilbo "did not mind" the loss of his reputation and respectability: "He was quite content: and the sound of the kettle on his hearth was ever after more musical than it had been even in the quiet days before the Unexpected Party."

Home is sweeter for the absence. Everything is made new, even the smallest things, *especially* the smallest things, such as the kettle on the hearth. The new Bilbo sees the old things with new eyes and he sees that they are good, indeed better than he had ever imagined them to be.

In the final conversation between Gandalf and Bilbo, with which the story concludes, Gandalf reminds the hobbit that he is but a small part of a much bigger providential picture:

*"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 only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!"*

*“Thank goodness!” said Bilbo, laughing, and handed him the tobacco-jar.*

The final paradox, worthy of Chesterton or indeed of Jesus Christ, the latter of whom is the Master of paradox as he is the Master of everything else, is that the purpose of Bilbo’s pilgrimage was to enable him to grow big enough to know how small he is. The greatest gift that Bilbo receives from all his adventures is the poverty of spirit which enables him to inherit the kingdom of the heaven-haven of the Home. And since every true home is but an image and prefigurement of the ultimate Heaven-Haven for which we are all made, Bilbo’s hobbit-sized kingdom is closer than he realizes to the Kingdom of God.

When Gandalf proclaims that Bilbo is no longer the hobbit that he was, we know that he is changed for the better. He no longer places his heart at the service of his worldly possessions but seeks instead those treasures of the heart to be found in wisdom and virtue. He is healed and he is whole, or, as Tolkien the Catholic might say, he is whole because he is holy. The hobbit has attained the habit of virtue and, as befits the hero of any good fairy story, he knows what is necessary to live happily ever after.

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