



THE AGRARIAN VISION OF TOLKIEN

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Introduction

My goal in giving this talk is twofold. I want, first of all, to attempt to give a working definition of biblical agrarianism. And second, I want to unpack Tolkien's understanding of biblical agrarianism as it is expressed in his classic mythology, "The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings."

I am prompted to the first task partly because of the confusion that is created when one uses the word agrarian today. It is a rich word, full of deep biblical truths that shaped Tolkien's mythology. But more often than not it is a word that creates confusion because of all the movements that operate under its banner. And the second reason is a bit more personal. Several weeks ago I did some traveling and teaching in New Zealand, and as you know, this twin island on the other side of the world has literally become "holy" ground for those of us who are big fans of Peter Jackson's adaptations of the books. So I'd like to share some insights from the trip and then make the closing argument that Tolkien's Middle-earth, though it is a fictional place, actually portrays an earth that I believe best fits the values of the Creator of the Bible.

Agrarianism Defined

So first off, what is agrarianism? This is not an easy concept to define because it is an idea that has morphed over time. So, for example, if you were to look up the word, you would find that it can be used in at least two distinct ways.

1. The most popular is a political philosophy, a philosophy that values rural society as superior to urban society. And the goal of this philosophy is to translate land stewardship values into social policy. Here in the states this movement found traction with Thomas Jefferson and the Jeffersonian movement that he spawned in the 1800s. It lost traction during the late 1800s and early 1900s with the excitement of the Progressive movement. But it was with the collapse of the economy in the Great Depression that confidence in science and technology started to waiver, and so FDR invited the Jeffersonian thinkers back to the table in order to help create the New Deal. It's at this point that

agrarianism took on the denominational stripes that we see today. For example, today, under the banner of New Agrarianism, you will find all kinds of monolithic groups, each possessing their own agendas. There is the “Conservation Movement,” the “Environmental Movement,” the “Transcendentalism Movement,” the “Animal Right’s Movement,” the “Preservation Movement,” the “Sustainable or Organic Movement,” etc. Each and everyone of these thinks of themselves in some way as an agrarian philosophical movement. And so that is how most people think of the term when it is used. One of these political movements come to mind.

2. But there is a second way to use the term agrarianism. And it is not political. It is rather spiritual and is what I like to call a worldview. Now what is a worldview? In simplest terms, it is a *set of beliefs about the things that matter most* in life. For example, I’m holding this puzzle. If I were to dump this puzzle on the floor, the picture on the box would serve as my worldview. It would in other words provide me with a conceptual framework in which to help me put the pieces together properly. The same is true in life. Every one of us here has a worldview, wisely, or foolishly, that helps us make sense of reality and helps us sort through the many choices offered in life. A Bible-believing follower of Christ calls his or her worldview a biblical worldview. And agrarianism is a part of that worldview. It helps us to understand the interrelationship between God, people, and His created world.

Tolkien’s Middle-earth

And so that leads us to the second point of this talk. What are the values of biblical agrarianism and how implicit are they in Tolkien’s description of Middle-earth? In the past when I’ve done something like this I’ve shown video clips from the movies to create discussion. Since we don’t have the clips I’m going to need you to use your imagination. Think for a moment of the Shire and Hobbits. There is goodness shown here. Most people when they read of the Shire or watch it on the screen they long to go there. They wish they could live in such a place. Why?

- a. Earthy folk. The first thing we learn about Bilbo is that he lives in a hole in the ground. Hobbits are an earthy and simple folk. Their homes are revealing as well. Their best rooms were all on the left-hand side going in, for these were the only ones to have windows. The deep-set round windows looked out over their gardens, the meadows beyond. Tolkien is telling something of their values. Hobbits place value on nature. Their best rooms are not the ones with the most conveniences, the best paintings, largest beds. They are the ones with the clearest views of the created world. You may remember that in Buckland and in Bree some lived in houses aboveground, but for Shire folk that was considered unnatural. Hobbits are close to the earth. They don’t wear shoes. And they can blend in and disappear quietly in nature. Stupid folk like you and me we are told go blundering along.
- b. Love to grow things. We see this throughout. That is why some have paid gardeners. We see no mention of housekeepers and cooks. The names they use for their children testify to their love for creation: Rose, Elanor, Daisy, Primrose, Marigold.
- c. Love simple pleasures. They love to sing songs that rejoice in the simple pleasures of life. They look forward to good food, beer with friends, a quiet walk in the woods, a good smoke in the open air with the sunshine. They

value these things over machines, gadgets, technology, which are in the world somewhere if they desired to have them, but they choose to take delight in the simple gifts of life for the simple things have intrinsic worth and value. They are in other words not a means to an end. That is why Frodo was able to resist the seductive influence of the Ring for so long. They are not preoccupied with the manipulation of power.

These are agrarian values that the Bible presents to those who would desire to live a wise and weighty life. The frenetic lifestyle that we call modern living is counter to this. Simplicity and the love of creation are defining features of the Shire. They do not crave things they do not have. Hobbits enjoy what they have, what the Creator has given them. They do not hoard but give freely. If it's your birthday you don't receive gifts you give gifts! And it's when Bilbo and Frodo and the others travel out of the Shire and face the Orcs or Goblins and Dragons that we learn how special their way of life really is in the Shire.

This is a taste.

Crisis of Imagination and the Loss of Agrarian Values

Here is more comprehensive list of the agrarian values found in Tolkien's work.

1. The world is the work of a divine creator.
2. The created world is good, it has inherent worth and value.
3. Creation has a purpose: to bring pleasure to its creator and to those who dwell in it.
4. Creation is vulnerable to evil.
5. Our mission is to acknowledge the goodness of the Creator and his creation, fulfill its purpose and assist in its restoration from evil.

All five can be derived from Tolkien's Silmarillion and the works that flow from it. A little child was once asked if she was excited about going to heaven. The little girl never hesitated in giving her answer: "Only if it's a lot like Narnia." Children possess amazing imaginations. They love stories. But sadly, growing up can be a bit anti-climatic. The wonder and beauty of life is lost to the pragmatist and exploiter demanding efficiency. Tolkien and his Middle-earth gives us a tale full of life and adventure. The stories are fictional of course, but they communicate as myths do the primordial or foundational truths by which culture defines reality. Though this is mythic in proportion, I would propose to you that it portrays an earth that best fits the values of the Creator of the Bible. Today's crisis is not the absence of ideas or teaching or information. Our crisis in my thinking is one of imagination. We have lost sight of the agrarian values that shape our imagination and enable us to envision a world that reflects the order, beauty, and creativity of God. Tolkien's Middle-earth can be a link to change. He provides just the sort of myth that our world needs today.