



Study Guide and Suggestions for Leading a Discussion Group on *The Christian World of The Hobbit*

The Christian World of The Hobbit was written to help readers understand how J. R. R. Tolkien's faith impacted his fiction, and in particular how it impacted his beloved classic, *The Hobbit*. This Study Guide is designed to help anyone who is leading a reading or discussion group.

Chapter 1 An "Essentially" Christian Story

Snapshot Summary

In a century that decided there was no absolute truth, no such thing as beauty, and no objective right or wrong, and declared that man is all alone in a vast, uncaring universe, J. R. R. Tolkien—without putting blinders on or sugarcoating the harsh realities of the human condition—offered a powerful dose of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

Tolkien's faith influenced the stories he wrote. In his fiction he points to something eternal, something that goes beyond the physical world and at the same time redeems and reenchants it.

Discussion Questions

1. If some readers are skeptical about a book titled *The Christian World of The Hobbit*, they have reason to be. In *The Hobbit* we find none of the elements typically associated with religion. There are no churches, no prayers, nothing like a Bible, and no priests or ministers. Before starting, what are some of your misgivings? Why would it be wrong to turn *The Hobbit* into a series of sermons?

2. Sometimes it is difficult to say exactly what makes a work Christian. What are some aspects that would make you say a work is Christian? What are some aspects that would make you say a work is not Christian?

3. As described in the section titled "I Cordially Dislike Allegory in All Its Manifestations" (p. 28-34), an allegory is a story where every element we find in the story equals something else. For example, in the parable of the sower, the seed equals the word of God and each of the different places the seed lands represents a different type of person. Why is *The Hobbit* not an allegory?

4. Two key statements by Tolkien from this chapter are:

- "I am a Christian and of course what I write will be from that essential viewpoint" (p. 25)
- "I am a Christian which can be deduced from my stories" (p. 26)

Discuss what you think he meant by these as they relate to *The Hobbit*.



Chapter 2 “Luck of an Unusual Kind”: Providence in *The Hobbit*



Snapshot Summary

Tolkien makes so-called luck a key ingredient in *The Hobbit*. It is luck that Elrond has the map at the exact right time to see the runes. It is luck that Bilbo and the dwarves are at Lone Mountain at the exact right day to get inside. Perhaps luckiest of all, Bilbo just happens to put his hand down in the exact right place to find the ring.

In the end, Tolkien has Gandalf say to Bilbo, “You don’t really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit?”



Discussion Questions

1. One way that Tolkien signals that he is writing about something which may look like luck but really is something far greater is by including so many lucky events that they begin to seem implausible or even impossible. Briefly list as many of these so-called lucky events that are found in *The Hobbit* as you can.

2. Gandalf says in the end that mere luck was not the force responsible for all of Bilbo’s escapes. All his adventures were “managed” by something or someone else. Why do you think Gandalf tells Bilbo this only in the end? Why do you think this something or someone chooses to work behind the scenes?

3. If we come to see that the luck in *The Hobbit* is really better called Providence, in what ways is this Providence like the Providence that Christians experience in their own lives? Have you ever had something which may have seemed like mere luck or just coincidence which later you came to see as something more than just chance?



Chapter 3 “Very Good for You”: Purpose in *The Hobbit*

Snapshot Summary

In chapter one of *The Hobbit*, Gandalf tells Bilbo that the adventure will be “very good for you—and profitable too.” At first it seems like Gandalf is referring to the one-fourteenth share of Smaug’s treasure that has been promised to Bilbo. But by the end of the story, it is clear that Bilbo returns home with a very different kind of treasure, one that will never rust and that thieves cannot steal.





The reasons Bilbo is sent on the adventure are twofold. The first purpose of the adventure to help save him from a life bounded and surrounded by his excessive need for safety, comfort, and predictability. The second purpose is because he is meant to do good for the world and help rid the land of the dragon. The two purposes go hand in hand.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the two sides of Bilbo that we see at the start of the story: his Took side and his Baggins side. Like many protagonists at the start of a story, there is something wrong or out of balance in Bilbo. How would you describe this negative state he begins in?



2. List several times when Tolkien has Bilbo face difficulties on his own without the help of Gandalf and sometimes without even the help of the dwarves. While it might not look like it at the time, how might this absence of help be considered to be help? How does this relate to your own experience of growth?



3. Bilbo returns home different in the end. We could say he returns home with a kind of treasure. How would you describe this change in Bilbo? Why should we be careful of merely saying that he has gotten rid of his Baggins side?

4. In going to save Middle-earth, Bilbo is himself saved. The two goals are intertwined. How does this compare to the purpose that we might find in our own lives and our own world?

Chapter 4

“I Don’t Think I Ought To”: The Moral Landscape in *The Hobbit*

Snapshot Summary

Throughout his adventure, Bilbo faces a number of difficult choices—times when he has a hard time deciding what would be the right decision to make and times when even though he knows what is the right thing, he finds it hard to do it.

The moral landscape of Middle-earth is distinctly Christian in its complexity, in the way that there is always a right action, in the manner that right actions are rewarded, and the way the great deeds are accomplished by the meek and lowly.

Discussion Questions

1. In our post-modern world, we often hear there is no such thing as objective right and wrong—right is simply what is right for you. List as many examples as you can from *The Hobbit* where Tolkien either states or implies that there is a right action that should be taken as well as a wrong action that ought not be taken.

2. One of the greatest temptations in *The Hobbit* is the greed that men, dwarves,



elves and hobbits struggle with. List some of these times where Tolkien points out the power of gold. What antidote do we find in *The Hobbit* for it?

3. Some readers of *The Hobbit* have claimed to find something in its moral landscape that is lacking in their own lives. What do you think it might be? How might reading *The Hobbit* serve to make someone more disposed to hear the Gospel?

Chapter 5 Response and Legacy



Snapshot Summary

At times *The Hobbit* is genuinely frightening. At times it is genuinely grim and sorrowful. Tolkien has said that a safe fairy land would be untrue to both worlds. Chesterton argues that fairytales do not give the child the idea of the possibility of evil—they give young readers the idea that there is something more powerful than evil.

The Providence, purpose, and morality in *The Hobbit* go against the grain of the modern mind-set. The same audience who might scoff at the Christian worldview in a different context find themselves embracing it in Tolkien's fictional tales.



Discussion Questions

1. There seems to be little middle-ground about Middle-earth. Readers who like Tolkien's stories really like them. Those who don't, really don't. What do you think it is about Tolkien's fiction that causes these extremes?

2. While there is sorrow and pain in *The Hobbit*, the story does not end in sorrow and pain. How does this correspond to the real world that Christians live in?

3. C. S. Lewis wrote that *The Hobbit* is "a children's book only in the sense that the first of many readings can be undertaken in the nursery." What does *The Hobbit* have that adults would find appealing? What aspect of the story did you most enjoy?



4. What was your favorite or the most important thing you learned by reading *The Christian World of The Hobbit*? Are there any statements that you disagreed with?