



# the HOBBIT

## Study Guide

by Michael Poteet

For the novel by  
J. R. R. Tolkien



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## Synopsis

Bilbo Baggins is a respectable hobbit—one of a race of small, quiet, country folk who inhabit The Shire, their pastoral corner of Middle-earth—who receives an unexpected visit from the great wizard Gandalf and thirteen dwarves. The dwarves, led by Thorin Oakenshield, have decided to return to the land of their ancestors and reclaim the treasure taken from them years before by Smaug, a terrible dragon. On Gandalf's recommendation, Thorin and his company wish to enlist Bilbo as their burglar. Although the idea of adventure appeals to something deep within him, Bilbo would much rather stay at home where he is comfortable and safe.

Nevertheless, Bilbo is drawn into the quest and soon faces trolls, goblins, and worse as he travels far to the Lonely Mountain, where the dwarves' treasure awaits—as does the dragon.

Bilbo and the dwarves share many adventures and escape many dangers before reaching their destination. When they do, Bilbo must make a discovery on which the success or failure of the quest depends, even as he is making important discoveries about himself.

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The interpretation of the riddles is sometimes obvious, sometimes obscure; but the descriptive power of the poetry is often high, and the imagery is fresh and picturesque.<sup>2</sup>

Riddles can be confusing—and fun—because they commonly use the literary techniques of epithet and metaphor.<sup>3</sup>

An *epithet* is “an adjective or adjectival phrase used to define a distinctive quality of a person or thing,” often “an identifying phrase that stands in place of a noun.”<sup>4</sup> For example, “the yellow, wheel-footed beast” might be an unhappy but poetic student’s epithet for a school bus!

A *metaphor* is a comparison in which one thing (sometimes called “the tenor”) is described in terms of a second, often dissimilar thing (sometimes called “the vehicle”).<sup>5</sup> For example, the prophet Isaiah writes, “Surely the people *are* grass” (Isaiah 40:7c, emphasis added). The “tenor”—the Babylonian exiles—is described in terms of the “vehicle” of grass. The metaphor suggests that the weary, disheartened captives are as frail and feeble as withering grass.

A metaphor differs from a *simile*. While both metaphors and similes compare things, a simile does so by means of the words “like” or “as”—for example, Isaiah 40:6: “All men are *like* grass, and all their glory is *like* the flowers of the field” (emphasis added).

Although Bilbo’s and Gollum’s riddles do not, medieval riddles often end with the phrase, “Tell me what I’m called.”<sup>6</sup>

1. Identify each of the following passages as using *epithet*, *metaphor*, or *simile*:
  - a. “Fly away little birds! Fly away if you can! Come down little birds, or you will get roasted in your nests!” \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. “He is a liar, O truly tremendous one!” \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. “He was watching Bilbo now from the distance with his pale eyes like telescopes.” \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. “[The elves] had called it Orcrist, Goblin-cleaver, but the goblins called it simply Biter.” \_\_\_\_\_

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1. Make a list of other proverbs you know, and explain what they mean.
2. The next time you are watching television or a movie, write down any familiar proverbs you hear characters, news anchors, or others use. Look for proverbs when you read a newspaper or magazine. Add them to your list, and explain what they mean.
3. Skim Proverbs 10–29. Choose at least three proverbs and explain what they mean in your own words.
4. Choose a proverb—biblical or otherwise—and write a story explaining how you imagine it came into being. What caused people, for example, to start saying, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush?”
5. *Poor Richard’s Almanack* by Benjamin Franklin is an important source of proverbs in American literature. You may wish to research and read this historic document. How many of “Poor Richard’s” sayings do you recognize and still hear used today?

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10. Even though Gandalf is a great wizard, he is afraid of the Wargs and goblins. When can fear be healthy? Talk about a time in your life when you have felt healthy fear.

### **Dig Deeper:**

11. Captured by goblins, Bilbo and the dwarves descend into darkness—a common theme in myths and heroic quest stories. As Joseph Campbell explains, the hero's descent into darkness represents a crossing of the first “threshold to adventure.” The hero does not ascend from darkness until either the power of darkness has been conquered or he or she has been changed in some way—sometimes both results occur.<sup>8</sup> The darkness into which Bilbo and the dwarves descend is literal, but darkness in the hero's journey is not always or only physical. It can be spiritual, emotional, and psychological as well.

How does Bilbo defeat various powers of darkness in this portion of *The Hobbit*? How does he emerge from the Misty Mountains a changed person?

Campbell sees the book of Jonah—which you read for the previous section—as an illustration of this common theme. In what ways does Jonah fit the pattern Campbell describes? In what ways does he not?

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In the previous section, we began looking at the Christian life as a hero's journey. Read Acts 9:1–25; 12:1–17. How do these stories about Saul and Peter illustrate the truth that discipleship can involve a “descent into darkness”?

How does the life of Jesus show the same movement? Read Luke 4:1–15, Romans 6:1–14, and Philippians 2:5–11. How do our lives as Christians mirror the pattern of Jesus' life?

Some people may see the stylistic similarity of portions of the Bible with heroic epics or mythology as evidence that it is a fallible human creation. In fact, epics and mythology simply stylize a pattern of *true experience*—for example, that a period or event of hardship (or darkness) changes and often strengthens a person. Tom Brokaw's book about people's experiences in World War II, *The Greatest Generation*, is full of examples of true stories that fit such a pattern. The literary pattern of a story has little to do with its authenticity or truth.

12. Note the various ways in which Tolkien uses images of light and darkness—not only in these chapters, but also throughout *The Hobbit*. How do various characters and creatures react to light? What activities take place in the dark? How might you associate these with Jesus' words in John 3:19–21?

## *The Hobbit Study Guide Answer Key*

to sow dissent between Bilbo and the dwarves—just as the serpent sows dissent between Adam and Eve and God in Genesis 3:1–5 by twisting God’s words and making Eve doubt God’s plan.

### *Chapters 14–19*

#### *Vocabulary:*

##### Part One:

1. to confer, particularly to come to terms of peace with an enemy; 2. the isolation of a fortified place; 3. someone who keeps watch; 4. a coat of interwoven steel rings; 5. a tool shaped like a pick with one pointed end and one flat end; 6. armor composed of interlocking rings or chains; 7. supreme authority; 8. the soldiers who march at the front of an army; 9. a short, curved sword; 10. the right or left side of an army or fleet; 11. a rounded, steel hat worn by a soldier

##### Part Two:

Make sure that the students’ paraphrases deal with each of the underlined words in some manner that demonstrates understanding. The Master’s way of speaking shows that he wants others to be impressed with him.

#### *Irony:*

Smaug’s death is ironic because the strong, powerful dragon is killed because a tiny bird told an archer about a tiny gap in Smaug’s thick, jewel-encrusted armor. Students’ examples of other occurrences of irony in the novel will vary. The largest irony in the book is, of course, Bilbo’s heroic role; as addressed in the first section of this guide, Bilbo began the novel as an unlikely candidate for hero, indeed!

#### *Questions:*

1. The people of the Lake protect themselves by arming for war and by taking advantage of the town’s location on water to quench Smaug’s fire—most especially by destroying the bridge from the land to the town. At the same time, the Master tries to make a private escape.
2. Bard kills Smaug. He gets the help he needs from the thrush, which knows about the unprotected spot on Smaug’s belly.
3. The gathering of the birds after Smaug’s death is meant as a sign of death and approaching war.
4. Roäc is the chief raven and a friend to the dwarves. He sends ravens to bring Dain to Thorin’s aid.
5. The relationship between Bilbo and Thorin changes because Thorin is angry that Bilbo took the Arkenstone and tried to use it to get Thorin to make peace.
6. When the Goblins enter the Battle of the Five Armies, the narrator tells us that the other opponents set aside their quarrels, for no one is a friend with the Goblins.
7. “Dragon-sickness” is greed, as the Master’s later behavior demonstrates.

#### *Thinking About the Story:*

8. There are many definitions for *grim* that might apply to Thorin and to Bard, including “severe,” “stern,” “unrelenting,” “forbidding,” “threatening,” and perhaps even “mirthless.” Answers and opinions will vary.
9. The Master redirects the people’s anger at the Dwarves. Answers to the other parts of the question will vary. Hitler’s treatment of the Jewish people during the Nazi regime is one of many unfortunate and devastating examples of scapegoating in history. Often, scapegoating proves effective because it allows us to avoid facing unpleasant facts about ourselves or allows us to blame someone for things that happen for no apparent reason.