

Is 'The Hobbit' a 'Christian' film? Yes and no.

by [Kay Campbell](#) and [Greg Garrison](#)

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Travel along, if you dare, with Bilbo Baggins in "The Hobbit" – either in J.R.R.Tolkien's beloved 1937 novel, or through the first installment of Peter Jackson's film trilogy based on the book, which opens in theaters on Friday (Dec. 14).

If you do, you will, essentially, be traveling in a world constructed on Christian principles, says Devin Brown, a professor of English at Asbury University, a Christian liberal arts college near Lexington, Ky.

But that doesn't mean "The Hobbit" should be taken as a kind of subliminally evangelistic work. Brown, for one, will enjoy the film for its own sake as a terrific adventure. But, he said, understanding the work in the context of Tolkien's deep Christian faith can give a deeper appreciation of the tale.

"Tolkien once wrote a friend, 'I am a Christian, and whatever I write will come from that essential viewpoint,'" Brown said.

"The Hobbit" centers around the diminutive Baggins, "an everyman who has no ability, a total dolt who has no skills," as Jane Chance, professor emeritus of English at Rice University and editor of "Tolkien and the Invention of Myth," put it.

At the beginning, it is not clear why the reluctant Baggins has been tapped to help lead the Hobbits' grand adventure. Baggins "does not know his ability," Chance said, "but he knows he has the character to develop into the kind of hero who can rescue a civilization."

Brown, whose book, "The Christian World of the Hobbit," was published in October by Abingdon Press, teaches a class at Asbury on the works of Tolkien and his close friend, Christian apologist C.S. Lewis. He was also one of the consultants on the third movie made in the "Narnia" franchise, Lewis' Christian allegories aimed at children.

Tolkien, he said, was among the influences in Lewis' life that helped the former atheist open his heart to God.

"There's a famous walk they took," Brown said from his home near Lexington.

"Tolkien said to Lewis, 'You like these stories, these myths that tell us who we are and why we are here from Icelandic and the Nordic countries – from everywhere but from the New Testament. Maybe you should think of the stories in the New Testament as myths that became true.'"

Tolkien was a Roman Catholic whose mother converted to the faith and raised him in it. His father died when he was 3 and his mother died when he was 12, leaving him an orphan. Yet he remained a devout Catholic throughout his life and it helped shape his literature, Chance said.

"He blended Roman Catholic influence with Celtic, Anglo and Old Norse mythology," Chance said. "He mixes all that together. You have to see him as a Medievalist and you have to see him as a Catholic."

That's not to say that "The Hobbit" or "The Lord of the Rings" are explicitly "Christian" tales. Chance says there are definite undertones of Christian theology throughout the two Tolkien books – both "deeply religious in their subtext."

"You're not going to find that on the surface."

And that may be the point, said the Rev. Christopher Bryan, emeritus professor of New Testament at the School of Theology at the University of the South at Sewanee in Tennessee. For Bryan, a story can and should be appreciated on its own terms.

"People tell stories because they would like you to enjoy the story. I don't think you have to go looking for Christian meaning or Jewish meaning or anything of the sort," said Bryan, who attended lectures by Tolkien and Lewis in the 1950s as a student at Oxford. "Of course, there are moments when you think, 'Gosh – that's what this is about,' but I think it is absolutely wrong to read for them. And I think it's disastrous to tell stories in order to teach meaning."

Christian themes are more subtle in Tolkien's works than in those of Lewis. In Lewis' "Narnia" series, for example, the kingly lion Aslan is an overtly Christ-like figure, complete with sacrificial death and resurrection.

Tolkien, however, "did not feel you should be explicitly allegorical or Christian," Chance said. "That doesn't mean you can't create a Christian subtext. That's what he does throughout his writing." —RNS