

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

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February 18, 2005
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The Christian and Fantastic Literature

Part One

Definitions and Questions

The year was 1971 and I was a junior in high school when, in a fit of boredom, I randomly picked up a copy of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. This was my introduction to a genre of literature that I would later learn to call *fantasy*. In those days, fantastic writing was generally relegated to children's fairy tales. Years passed before I found someone else who had heard of Tolkien. Nevertheless, in the ensuing years fantasy in general and Tolkien in particular have become big sellers.

Some people do not appreciate fantasy. With most of them I have no argument: *de gustibus non disputandum est*. Over the last few years, however, a few Christian leaders have taken to attacking fantasy in general (and Tolkien in particular) on moral grounds. They argue that indulgence in fantastic literature will harm the inner life of the believer. This is the opinion that I would like to examine in a series of several short essays.

Let us begin with a definition. *Fantasy*, as I intend to use the term, is a genre of fictional literature or *belles lettres* involving the creation of an imaginative world through the use of one or more devices. First, the author may attribute human properties to subhuman creatures (animals, plants, or even objects). Second, the author may attribute marvelous powers to humans or other agents. Third, the author may invent creatures that do not exist in the real world. Any work of fiction that deliberately includes one of these elements may rightly be classified as fantasy.

Examples of fantastic writing include the works of Homer (the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), Aesop (the *Fables*), Virgil (the *Aeneid*), the German *Märchen* (exemplified by the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers and imitated by Hans Christian Andersen), Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver's Travels*), Rudyard Kipling (the *Jungle Books* and *Puck of*

Pook's Hill), Edgar Rice Burroughs (*Tarzan of the Apes*), C. S. Lewis (*The Chronicles of Narnia*), and J. R. R. Tolkien (*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*). A specialized form of fantasy is found in science fiction, and it is no accident that bookstores tend to market the two together.

Fantasy, however, is not the same as occult literature. Occult literature may be either fictional or non-fictional. The word *occult* properly means *hidden*, and occult literature attempts to depict the hidden or “unseen” world that is or may be around us in reality. Sometimes the depiction is direct and literal, but other times it may be symbolic. The expression “occult literature,” when it is used to describe a literary genre, is not necessarily connected to witchcraft or demonism. In the literary sense, several of the documents in the Bible could properly be classed as occult literature. They intend to give us a glimpse of the hidden work of God and of spirit beings in the world. Other examples of occult literature include the works of John Milton (*Paradise Lost*) and Frank Peretti (the *Darkness* books).

While fantasy is not the same as occult literature, the two categories are related in that both may deal with the supernatural. Not surprisingly, many works may be classed as both fantasy and occult literature. *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan rightly belongs in both categories, as do the fictional writings of Charles Williams (*Descent Into Hell*, *All Hallow's Eve*, *The Greater Trumps*, etc.).

Given these definitions, we are almost in a position to proceed. Let me state briefly what I do *not* intend to do, and then let me state what I *do* hope to accomplish.

I do *not* intend to discuss the merits or demerits of occult literature. That is a separate conversation. As interesting and useful as it might be, it is not part of the present discussion.

Moreover, I do *not* intend to justify everything that is done with fantastic literature. Anyone who has spent any time at all reading fantasy has discovered that it can be—and often is—used in some very destructive ways. The purpose of this essay is not to offer an apologetic for everything that goes under the name of *fantasy*.

Finally, I do not intend to address the usefulness of fantasy in any medium other than literature. Fantastic elements are employed in many artistic media. The paintings of Bosch and Brueghel are often fantastic. The architecture of the Notre Dame cathedral includes fantastic aspects. Many operas and ballets include fantastic elements. Most recently, Hollywood movie makers have been capitalizing on the popularity of fantasies such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Each of these media communicates in its own way. Conclusions that are drawn with respect to literature may or may not have implications for other media. Drawing the inferences, however, is not part of the purpose of these essays.

What I *do* wish to do is, first, to ask whether *any* fantastic literature can *ever* be fit for consumption by a Christian. Is a Christian ever justified in reading fantasy, or is all fantasy spiritually destructive? Second, I want to extrapolate principles for the evaluation of fantastic literature. Third, I intend to apply those principles to several works of fantasy, including Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Will a Christian be harmed by exposure to the worlds of Narnia or of Middle Earth? What about other imaginary worlds?

I wish to stress again the difference between Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* as a work of literature and Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* as a work of cinema. They are not the same work. They cannot be the same work when they are presented in different media. Even without the differences that are imposed by the media, however, Jackson has fundamentally altered Tolkien's message. Whatever I have to say about Tolkien's writing cannot be applied to Jackson's movie.

Now the preliminaries have been addressed. Our definitions are in place, and the necessary distinctions have been drawn. In the next essay, we will ask whether fantasy can be moral for the Christian. ✠

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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February 25, 2005
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The Christian and Fantastic Literature

Part Two

Evaluating Fantastic Writing

Is fantastic literature ever justifiable and moral? Answering this question is easier than you might think. Imagine a book that includes the following imaginative characters: a dragon, a winged lion, talking trees, a sea-monster, skeletons that assemble themselves, a flying book, multi-headed monsters, and flying women. Such a book would obviously fit our definition of fantastic literature. In this case, that book is the Bible. If the Bible uses fantasy, then all fantasy cannot be wrong.

One example of the Bible's fantastic writing is found in Judges 9:8-15. This passage is a fable in which the trees meet to choose a king. The olive tree, fig tree, and grape vine all decline the kingship on the grounds that they already have important tasks to perform. Finally the bramble bush invites the trees to shelter under its shade, threatening with fire those who reject it. The fable is spoken by Jotham and applied to the regency of Abimelech, who has made himself king of Israel by murdering the family of Gideon.

Can we learn anything about fantasy by studying this example? I believe that we can. In fact, several lessons are apparent.

The most obvious lesson is that fantasy goes beyond what is possible in metaphysical reality. We know as a matter of fact that trees do not reason, speak, or hold councils. To represent them as doing so is an exercise of the imagination, and specifically of the *idyllic* imagination. The idyllic imagination is that capacity that enables human beings to invent new creaturely realities.

This imaginative reality or world must be understood on its own terms. We must not force into it the normal processes and definitions of the real world in which we live. In the real world, we know that trees *by definition* do not talk. If we encountered an automatic tree in real life, we would attribute it to trickery or, in an

extreme case, perhaps to demonic activity. If we are to understand the invented reality, however, we are not permitted to carry these prejudices into the fictional world of the story.

By the same token, we must not read into one invented world the categories that arise from a different invented world. For example, the world of Western mythology contains trees that can act and talk because of the influence of tree-spirits, or Dryads. If we wish to understand Jotham's fable, we must not force Dryadic activity into the biblical story.

In fact, the fantastic elements must simply be accepted as the premise of the story. In order to hear the story, in order to enter into the imaginative world, we must engage in what is sometimes called a "willing suspension of disbelief." We must forget that trees cannot think or talk. If we trouble ourselves with questions about *how* such things might be, we will get stuck at the front door and we will never understand the point of the story.

To put this in other words, each invented world has its own *usus loquendi*. If we are to make judgments about that world, we must form them on the basis of its *usus loquendi* and not on the basis of a *usus loquendi* that we import from metaphysical reality or from some other fantasy. A bramble is one thing in reality; in the invented world of the fable it is a different thing. The two are similar, but not identical. All fantasy involves the altering of definitions. The author of the fantasy is the creator of the invented world, and the creator controls the process of definition in that world.

Inventing a fantastic world obviously takes a good bit of effort. Why would a writer go through the trouble? What can fantasy do that ordinary discourse does not? The fable of the trees also helps us to answer these questions.

A fantastic story can be a powerful means of speaking to the real world. Sometimes (as in the biblical fable), the fantastic elements allegorize aspects of reality. Other times they operate as symbols for material or moral entities. Part of their value is that they grip our attention in ways that ordinary discourse does not. Beyond that, they permit us to adopt a kind of double perspective on reality.

On the one hand, they grant us a level of moral distance and abstraction that is otherwise impossible. In the biblical fable, we do not particularly care what happens to the trees at the beginning of the story. We are sufficiently disengaged that we can observe the events as more-or-less impartial spectators. On the other hand, the fantasy also permits the isolation and amplification of particular virtues and vices. It permits us to view aspects of human character in a way that is not complicated by the all-too-frequent contradictions of the human condition.

Again the fable of the trees provides us with an example. This story is not about trees, but about the kingship of Israel. The story clearly presents the kingship as an inferior calling. No right-thinking tree would leave his useful calling and activities in order to be a king. Only the bramble, the most useless and annoying of trees, finds the prospect appealing. The irony is rich when he invites the other trees to shelter under his shade. How does an olive tree get shade from a bramble? How could anybody? From the outset it is clear that this will be a disastrous monarchy. When the story-teller finally identifies the real people who correspond to the characters in the story, the lesson is plain for all to see.

This is the power of fantasy. While inferior authors merely may play with the form, in skilled hands it can communicate very effectively. By using symbolism and typology, fantasy can get a message past our guard. Before we know that we have committed ourselves, we have already formed a judgment. By transporting us out of metaphysical reality, fantasy has the power to help us glimpse the moral dimensions of our world in the correct proportions.

Because fantasy is a powerful tool, writers of fantasy have a special obligation to use it rightly. They are free to alter the material properties of their world in whatever way they like. They can invent worlds in which the normal rules of physics do not apply. They can populate their worlds with all manner of impossible creatures, but they must never change what is moral into what is not. A world of monstrous appearances is not immoral, but a world of monstrous conduct is. The writer of fantasy never has the right to confuse good with evil. A story in which murder or profanity were virtuous would be an immoral story. A story in which piety was depicted as a vice would also be immoral. Unfortunately, many works of fantasy do exactly these things. They offer an invented world in which morality itself becomes fantastic.

We conclude that fantasy is not *per se* damaging to the Christian. How could anything that the Bible uses freely be wrong in itself? Nonetheless, fantasy definitely can be put to wrong uses. This makes the believer responsible to judge well the works that he allows to shape his consciousness of the world. Of course, that raises a special problem concerning the presence of wizards and magic in much fantasy. That is the topic that we will address in the next essay. ✕

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March 4, 2005
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The Christian and Fantastic Literature

Part Three

Magic in Fantasy

Many Christians who do not see a problem with fantasy *per se* are nevertheless troubled by the presence of magic in some fantastic writing. In the Christian view, real magic has exactly one source: Satan and his demons. To trifle with any form of magic (even the ubiquitous OuiJa Board) is to invite demonic activity and to pollute oneself by contact with unclean beings. The Bible is very explicit that Christians are to avoid all contact with witches, sorcerers, mediums, necromancers, and other practitioners of the occult arts.

For some, this leads to a direct prohibition of any fantasy that includes magic. Even fantasy must not invert morality. Stealing, murdering, or committing adultery are as wrong in fantasy as they are in real life. Why should magic be any different?

The answer is that our civilization uses the term *magic* to denote much more than simply the occult practices that are condemned in the Bible. True, in Christian circles we reserve the word for one form of supernatural power, namely the power that comes from demonic sources. We do not use it to refer to the signs and wonders that were done in the power of God by the apostles and prophets.

This restriction, however, is provincial to us. It is not built into the term itself. We can look up the word *magic* in any standard dictionary and discover that, within our broader civilization, it is used simply to denote supernatural or inexplicable occurrences. We ourselves may prefer not to use the term this way, but we should recognize that the broader use is standard in our language. Think about it: what word would people in our civilization use to describe a bottle of oil that never runs dry, an axe-head that floats on water, or the power to strike one's opponents with blindness? Surely *magic* would be the first word in their minds.

We are uncomfortable using the same word to include both the supernatural activities of God and those of Satan. The Bible, however, does not appear to share our discomfort. Words like *miracle*, *sign*, and *wonder* are used to describe both deeds that are done in the power of God and those that are done in the

power of Satan. 2 Thessalonians 2:9 uses exactly the same terms to describe the deeds of the Antichrist that are used elsewhere to describe the miracles of Jesus.

Acts 8:9, 11 describes Simon as one who “practiced magic arts” (the Greek verb is *mageuo* and the noun is *mageia*). This is an obvious reference to the occult arts. Yet the noun *magi* is used to describe the wise men who sought Jesus after his birth. In Daniel 2:2, magicians are ranked along side of sorcerers and astrologers. Yet Daniel is himself recognized as the “master” or “chief” of the magicians (Dan. 4:9; 5:11).

All of this shows that our insistence upon a narrow distinction between “magic” as the work of Satan and “miracle” as the work of God is actually more particular than the usage of the Bible itself. We are welcome to our own *usus loquendi*, but we must not impose it upon the Bible. We are not permitted to judge the Bible simply because it does not measure up to our fastidious standard.

Neither should we judge a fictional story, including a fantasy, if its usage is different than ours. It, too, has a right to its own *usus loquendi*. The question is not whether it uses words like *magic* or *wizard*. The question is whether the things that it denotes by these terms really do correspond to things that the Bible condemns. We will never learn this by looking at the names, but only by looking at the things themselves.

A writer of fantasies may invent characters who exercise all sorts of remarkable powers. Perhaps those characters can become invisible; perhaps they can levitate; perhaps they can alter the atomic structure of one element into that of another. To invent such characters is no more objectionable than inventing a talking tree. The writer may choose to call these wonderful activities *magic*, and he may choose to call the characters *wizards* or even *witches*. If so, then the wizard of the story is not the kind of wizard that the Bible condemns in real life, any more than a talking grapevine is the kind of grapevine that God created in Genesis.

In other words, a story does not become immoral just because it has characters who exercise remarkable powers. It does not become immoral because the writer calls these remarkable powers *magic*. It does not even become immoral if the writer calls the characters *wizards* or *witches*. We must ask what words like *magic* and *wizard* mean in the world of the story, not what they mean in the real world. We must discover the author’s own usage.

If a writer glorifies or advocates an activity that the Bible condemns, then the story is immoral. If a writer were to induce her or his readers to practice those occult arts that the Bible condemns, then the story would clearly be offensive to Christian sensibilities and destructive to Christian virtue. If, however, the writer is using the language of magic to describe something in his invented world that is substantially other than what the Bible condemns, then the story may still be useful to the Christian. Whether it is or not will depend upon other factors.

Therefore, we need to evaluate “literary magic” on a kind of sliding scale. At one end of the scale is real-world witchcraft, while at the other end is the purely fanciful. A writer of fantasy may put “magic” into the story at either end of the scale, or somewhere in between. The closer the “magic” gets to the end of the scale that resembles reality, the more objectionable Christians should find it to be. By the same token, some kinds of “literary magic” should be perfectly acceptable to the Christian reader. ✠

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March 11, 2005
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The Christian and Fantastic Literature

Part Four

Pilgrim's Progress

Fantasy as a literary form is not in and of itself wrong. In fact, the Bible itself employs fantastic elements. While fantasy can be used wrongly, it can also be a powerful tool to isolate and highlight moral realities. In fact, one particular book proves that reading fantasy may be a genuinely edifying experience.

The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan is one of the best known fantasies in the world. It is also one of the most serious. Bunyan wrote this story while he was imprisoned in the Bedford Gaol for his convictions. The book is a picture of the Christian life, written in the form of an allegory. Bunyan's choice of allegory is particularly important because it allows him to depict characters and events that correspond one-for-one with various aspects of the life of faith. Therefore, the story can be evaluated both for its vision of Christianity and for its use of fantasy.

Bunyan was a master story-teller who understood the capacity of fantasy to capture the imagination. He scatters fantastic elements throughout the book. Captain Beelzebub and his demonic troops fire upon pilgrims from their castle. Apollyon battles against Christian with fiery darts, and when he is defeated he flies away on dragon wings. Hobgoblins, satyrs, and dragons inhabit the valley of the shadow of death. Hobgoblins again beset Christian as he crosses the river to reach the Celestial City. A fiend whispers blasphemies in Christian's ear.

Madame Bubble the witch controls the Enchanted Ground and especially the Arbor. Giants appear in many places throughout the narrative: Pope, Pagan, Grim, Slay-good, Maul, and of course Despair in his Doubting Castle.

These fantastic elements are not merely devices to grip the attention. Bunyan chooses them for specific reasons. For example, Despair is depicted as a giant because despair seems insurmountable and truly enormous in real life. Most of Bunyan's characters are chosen with similar deliberation. The story would be weakened without them.

Bunyan had a knack for creating memorable characters and images, even when they were not fantastic. No one who reads the story can forget the wiles of Mr. Worldly-Wiseman or the malice of Lord Hategood. The man in the iron cage and the man with the muck-rake are images that fasten enduring spiritual lessons in the mind. Bunyan's view of the Law becomes clear as Mt. Sinai looms over the desperate Christian and as Moses batters Faithful to the ground. Speaking of Faithful, what better pictures of Christian encouragement and camaraderie could be found than he and Hopeful?

John Bunyan has become the most successful writer of fantastic fiction in history. His invented world is both memorable and meaningful. More than three centuries after his death, people still relish *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is a wonderful work of literature.

The irony is that Bunyan was not particularly interested in authoring a literary masterpiece. His interests were theology and devotion. Fantasy and allegory were merely the tools with which he hoped to plant spiritual seed in human souls. He intended *Pilgrim's Progress* to be partly an evangelistic tract and partly an enchiridion for the Christian life. His allegory is about the life of faith. The story opens with Christian's experience of conviction as he feels the weight of his burden of sin. He leaves the City of Destruction, falling afoul of many distractions on his way to the cross. At the cross his burden falls away and tumbles into the empty tomb, never again to be seen. Along the way he encounters both tempters who would lead him astray and helpers (such as Evangelist) who keep him on the right path.

For Bunyan, salvation could never be gained through works of the law. The turning point of the story is the cross: that is where God removes Christian's burden of sin. But in *Pilgrim's Progress*, salvation is not a matter of mere profession, either. At the cross, Christian is given a "roll" that he is to present at the gate of the Celestial City. Without it he cannot gain admittance. Elsewhere, Christian identifies this roll as his "evidence," and when he loses it he is obligated to retrace his steps and to retrieve it. Clearly Christian is not saved by his "evidence," but neither is he saved without it.

The bulk of the story narrates the trials and consolations, the failures and triumphs that Christian encounters on his way to the Celestial City. Bunyan clearly understood the dynamics of the life of faith. He knew the shape in which temptations could present themselves, and he knew how to counsel those who were tempted. He grasped the devastating consequences that sin could bring into the life of the believer—but he also knew the paths that led to restoration.

Bunyan's view of the Christian life is substantially correct. He genuinely shows his readers how to live the life of faith. His story still has much benefit for the believer after more than three hundred years. It is a truly edifying work, a masterpiece of Christian instruction.

Pilgrim's Progress meets all the criteria for excellence in fantasy. The fantastic elements are carefully chosen and highly memorable. The author has something genuinely important to say. What he says is true and useful.

Some fantasies are better, and some are worse. Some are appropriate for Christians, and some are hurtful to spiritual wellbeing. The better ones are actually worth recommending. *Pilgrim's Progress* is even better than that. This is one fantasy that should be required reading for every Christian. ✕

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Part Five

The Lord of the Rings

The explosive popularity of fantastic fiction probably owes more to the work and success of J. R. R. Tolkien than to that of any other writer. Before Tolkien, fantasy was rather an esoteric branch of literature. It had its loyal followers, but it was never quite respectable among true *literati*. Beginning with *The Lord of the Rings*, however, fantasy has become mainstream.

Tolkien put enormous effort into the creation of his fantastic world. He invented cultures, civilizations, languages, races and peoples, a mythology, and even a cosmogony. The background material for *The Lord of the Rings* fills several large volumes. That is why the story has a depth and texture rarely found in any fictional writing, let alone fantasy. Readers get the impression that they are treading on ground that fairly oozes with the past. Yet Tolkien manages to do all of this without resorting to the quirkiness and idiosyncrasies that often characterize fantasy.

Some Christians have expressed hesitation over Tolkien’s tale. They point out that one of the protagonists is a wizard, that Tolkien regularly uses magic in the story, and that the antagonists are truly diabolical characters. Sometimes they suggest that Tolkien’s universe, while obviously supernatural, seems to function without the benefit of a God.

Is this hesitation legitimate? Is Tolkien trying to sneak demon worship in through the back door? Is the effect of his work to subvert Christian values? Several observations help to answer this question.

Before those observations can be offered, however, one point must be emphasized. *The Lord of the Rings* as written by J. R. R. Tolkien is not the same work as *The Lord of the Rings* turned into cinema by Peter Jackson. While the two do share a title and certain superficial similarities of character and plot, the moral worlds that they depict are entirely different. What is said of Tolkien's work will often not apply to Jackson's. Therefore, nothing in this essay should be taken as a statement about Jackson's movies. Leaving aside Jackson's films, then, what factors need to be considered in order to evaluate Tolkien's epic?

First, in *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien depicts a moral universe. In Middle Earth, right is right and wrong is wrong. Virtues are uniformly praised and vices are uniformly condemned. Sin produces far-reaching consequences, judgment is necessary, redemption is possible, and sacrifice is essential. There is no moral confusion here. The world that Tolkien invents is morally identical to the real world.

Second, most of Tolkien's inventions are not magical, even though they are remarkable. Middle Earth is populated with hobbits, dwarves, dragons, ents, orcs, and trolls. None of these creatures exists in the real world, but none of them is really magical in Tolkien's story. They are strictly natural in their own settings.

This is not to suggest that all of Tolkien's inventions are natural, however. He creates both objects (the rings and the palantiri, for example) and persons (elves and wizards) that are supernatural within the world of the story. While these inventions are magical by the standards of Middle Earth, however, they do not fit the biblical definition of magic in the real world.

Indeed, Tolkien is very careful in the way that he handles magic in his story. He clearly distinguishes "magic" (Christians would say *miracle*) that comes from divine sources from "magic" that arises from "the deceits of the Enemy." For Tolkien, these are not at all the same thing. He never treats them as equal, and he never induces the reader to seek magical powers in the real world. No fair evaluation of *The Lord of the Rings* should fault it for the presence of "magic" in the tale.

Third, Tolkien's Middle Earth is under the government of a God, though He is only hinted at in *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*. This God (who appears directly in *The Silmarillion*) is opposed by a diabolical figure and his servants (Morgoth and Sauron). There are angelic figures (the wizards) who may fall (Saruman). Middle Earth includes both an unfallen race (elves) and a fallen one (humans). None of this has to be regarded as anti-biblical or offensive to genuinely Christian sensibilities.

The Lord of the Rings is built upon a strong doctrine of Providence. God is in control. His purpose will be accomplished. Yet the freedom of His creatures is never abridged. They may (and some do) even oppose Him. Yet they may also seek to uphold His judgments, and therein lies the crux of Tolkien's narrative.

The Lord of the Rings is a tale of morality. It is an epic of virtues pitted against vices. The protagonists do not know how things are going to turn out, but they do know where to stand

within moral reality. Tolkien uses fantasy to its best advantage, abstracting and enlarging upon specific virtues and vices. This allows him to show the reader how a moral man ought to live. Tolkien does on a grand scale what Jotham does on a small scale with the “Fable of the Trees” (Jgs. 9:8-15).

The moral lessons of Middle Earth are manifold. The weak, acting with resolution and conviction, can oppose and overcome evil when it is strong. Evil cannot be fought with evil. Virtue, in order to triumph, requires genuine sacrifice. Even defeated evils may leave enduring scars.

These are not merely moral lessons, they are Christian lessons. They derive only from the Christian vision of reality. Tolkien’s purpose is to reinterpret the structures of Christian morality within an invented universe of fantastic creatures.

If we grant the assumptions of his world and accept his own *usus loquendi*, we will discover that Tolkien’s epic provides us with one of the greatest tools of moral teaching that has ever been authored outside of Scripture. It rightly deserves to be ranked along side of *Pilgrim’s Progress* or *Paradise Lost*, not only as a work of literature, but as a representative of the Christian world view. Far from frowning when our children read *The Lord of the Rings*, we ought to be reading it to them. ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary’s professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
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American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life’s urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today’s Christian students to become tomorrow’s Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

✘ ✘ ✘
March 25, 2005
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The Christian and Fantastic Literature

Part Six

The Chronicles of Narnia

In any competition for the greatest children’s fiction of the 20th Century, one of the contenders is certain to be *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis. Written around mid-century, the seven volumes of the *Chronicles* have become one of the best-loved series ever written for children. Adult readers find it almost as appealing as children do.

Read simply as stories, these books can fire almost anyone’s imagination. They are filled with adventurous exploits and fantastic creatures. The plots are well designed and the characters are both believable and memorable.

The protagonist of these stories is Aslan. Aslan, as any Lewis aficionado knows, is a lion. In fact, he is *the* lion—and he is not tame. Lewis intended Aslan to be a metaphor for Christ. This allowed Lewis to use the character and activities of Aslan in the world of Narnia to illustrate the person and work of Christ in the real world.

The metaphor works well. Lewis used Aslan to explore a number of serious issues such as the nature of freedom, the relationship between justice and mercy, the problem of evil, and the nature of faith. Of particular importance is Lewis’s treatment of substitutionary atonement, depicted when Aslan takes the place of the traitor Edmund and is sacrificed on the Stone Table (a clear allusion to the Mosaic Law). The episode is a masterful and unforgettable exercise of the moral imagination. Lewis used it for two purposes: first, to help his readers understand the

notion of a substitutionary sacrifice and, second, to move his readers to respond to the sacrifice in an ordinate way.

This means that *The Chronicles of Narnia* does what fantastic fiction is supposed to do. On the surface, these are lighthearted children's adventures. Just beneath the surface, however, runs a deep aquifer of profound meaning.

Some have objected to Lewis's tales on the grounds that they contain magic, witches, and wizards. The objection is ill-conceived. The magic of the *Chronicles* operates according to the laws and principles of Lewis's invented world. It is not the same thing as the real witchcraft that the Bible condemns. At this point, the *Chronicles* must be judged according to their own *usus loquendi*. In concept, Lewis draws a clear distinction between divinely caused supernatural events and those that arise from other sources. The former he recognizes as good and right (indeed, his work turns out to be an apologetic for the supernatural). The latter are invariably the cause of much harm within his narrative.

Narnia is not just a story. It is a Christian apologetic, perhaps the best one that Lewis ever wrote. It is not, however, a system of evidences, for the simple reason that Lewis was no evidentialist. For Lewis, no amount of evidence could compel belief in God. The personal encounter with God in Christ was what would convince the sinner. Lewis wrote so as to help make Christ present to the mind. His tool for doing so was the imagination. Lewis was quite serious about helping his readers to imagine who Christ must be.

This is not to say that the story is without flaws. In fact, it has two defects that sharply limit its usefulness. A discussion of the *Chronicles* would not be complete without mentioning these defects.

First, Lewis sometimes puts profane language in the mouths of his characters. To be fair, Lewis would probably not have regarded these uses as profanity. Most likely he would have argued that the language was not gratuitous and, therefore, was not speaking in vain of holy things. This is not convincing, however. A certain number of oaths serve no apparent purpose other than to add color to the story. They do cross the line into profanity, which is especially disappointing in stories that were written for children. Even though these occasions are rare, once is too often.

Second, some of Lewis's theology was aberrant, and one or two of his quirks do show up in these stories. Probably the most serious is Lewis's inclusivism. In the final story (*The Last Battle*) a young worshipper of the demon Tash is admitted into the "true Narnia" — Lewis's version of heaven. Lewis uses Aslan to explain that whatever worship was offered sincerely to Tash was really offered to Aslan. Such episodes reflect one of the errors of Lewis's theology, namely, that all sincere people can be received by God, even if they have not received the truth of Christianity. This is not a minor error.

The error is compounded precisely because the fantastic presentation makes it seem appealing and palatable. The flaw is magnified further by being offered to children who cannot be expected to recognize it for what it is. Lewis's story has the power to capture the child's imagination and to render it sympathetic to inclusivism before the child ever develops the capacity to think critically about the issue. This is a serious matter.

Are these defects grave enough to place the *Chronicles* off limits? Probably not. While serious, they are isolated. Adults will be able to spot them. Children can have knowledgeable adults point out these defects and discuss them.

One way for children to gain what is valuable from *The Chronicles of Narnia* while avoiding the objectionable is to hear it read aloud by a spiritually sensitive adult, preferably a parent. Such an adult can simply omit reading the profanities and can take time to discuss the errors that occasionally crop up. In fact, this kind of discussion is useful throughout the reading of the entire series. It provides an opportunity to help children understand more clearly the many references to spiritual realities that Lewis includes.

Was it Lewis who opined that no book is worth reading at eight that is not worth reading at eighty? Judged by this standard, *The Chronicles of Narnia* is eminently worthwhile. The more mature the reader, the richer the payoff in the reading. With qualifications, the series is to be recommended. In a few places it is bad, but where it is good, it is very, very good. ✖

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April 1, 2005

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The Christian and Fantastic Literature

Part Seven

The *Harry Potter* Books

Harry Potter has become a phenomenon. These books have provoked unbelievable enthusiasm among both children and adults. They have also provoked unbelievable controversy from some on the religious right.

The enthusiasm is understandable. J. K. Rowling has captured the whimsy of a generation in the *Potter* series, especially in the earlier volumes. Much of the series is simply a delightful romp, almost a parody of the fantastic genre. Witches ride broomsticks, but mainly to play airborne soccer (quidditch). Trolls are discovered to have boogers. Characters move from fireplace to fireplace through the “floo network.” Much of the charm of *Harry Potter* comes from its quality as a spoof. It is a cross between J. R. R. Tolkein and *Mad Magazine*.

The appeal of the series also stems from Rowling's ability to choose themes that resonate with contemporary adolescents. Harry Potter is lonely and alienated. He yearns for the comfort and structure of a world with authority, yet he is suspicious and resentful toward authorities. He wants enough morality to be justified in feeling wronged, but not so much as to keep him from doing wrong when wrong seems useful. These are moods that seem to prevail among juveniles in today's postmodern, no-parent-household, grow-up-too-fast world.

Harry Potter finds his escape (and readers find theirs) in a world populated by fantastic diversity. Rowling has scoured every corner of myth, legend, and literature to populate Potter's world with the richest array of fantastic creatures and objects. She has supplemented her discoveries with a smorgasbord of her own invention, from multi-flavor beans to a flying Ford Anglia (that goes feral, no less), to portraits that can move from frame to frame, to a willow tree that bats everything within reach. The variety is bewildering and (so to speak) enchanting.

The characters in the series are engaging and believable. Who hasn't met a snob like Malfoy, bullies like Goyle and Crabbe, an incompetent like Lockyear, or a "brain" like Hermione? Who wouldn't want a friend like Hagrid? And who would not wish for a wise, old Dumbledore somewhere in his or her life? Rowling introduces us to characters who display depth, texture and even contradiction.

What about the witchcraft in the *Harry Potter* stories? This is where most of the controversy has been aimed. Is it cause for concern?

Nearly half of Rowling's witchcraft is drawn from various mythologies. Trolls, werewolves, vampires, centaurs, pixies, and veela reflect mythology from Greek, Germanic, Celtic, and Baltic sources. None of this is any more objectionable than *Grimm's Fairy Tales* or Homer's *Odyssey*.

Another big part—nearly half—of Rowling's witchcraft is unadulterated malarkey. She invents wry spells in faux Latin. She brings lawn gnomes to life as stupid little creatures which have to be tossed out of the garden. She depicts immature mandrakes as infant-shaped vegetables which utter an incapacitating cry when plucked from the soil. Again, nothing here is objectionable.

That accounts for nearly all of the magic in *Harry Potter*—but not quite all. The bit that is left over seems more serious than most of Rowling's inventions, but lacks the fairy-tale quality of her mythological borrowings. Does she actually employ elements from real witchcraft? Getting an answer to this question would require a person who knew witchcraft. Possibly, however, Rowling may have imported this remnant of magic from the real world of occult observances. To the pure, all things are pure, but the possibility of real world witchcraft should be enough to give Christian readers pause.

What is more disturbing is the stories' lack of a moral base. To be sure, Rowling does present virtues such as loyalty, courage, and compassion. She also depicts vices such as murder and torture. In between, however, the moral ground gets quite foggy. Even the "good guys" engage in a fair amount of deception, larceny, trespass, smuggling, and a variety of other unseemly activities. *Harry Potter* leaves a key question hanging: how much evil can be justified in the pursuit of a good end? In fact, even the virtues in *Harry Potter* appear to be relative. Loyalty to Dumbledore is good; loyalty to Voldemort is bad. Voldemort's followers lie constantly, but they dare not lie to him. Harry and his friends also lie constantly, even to legitimate authorities. The intention of the character seems to be the only consideration that defines the virtue.

The worst flaw with Rowling's work, however, is that it simply has nothing important to say. The tales are amusing, but Rowling is merely playing with the form. She offers

amusement for amusement's sake, without any serious reflection upon the larger issues of the real world. She is skillful in what she does, but she does not turn her skills to good use. In this respect she is poles away from Bunyan, Tolkien, or Lewis.

Does this mean that Christians must not read *Harry Potter*? The answer will vary with the situation. These stories are not good fare for young children whose moral base is still being formed. Even the earlier books are mildly subversive, and as the series progresses the attitudes become uglier and the actions become more violent.

Whether adolescents should read the series is a decision that parents need to make child by child. Much in these books provides a poor model for young people. Still, the series may even provide fruitful material for the discussion of moral complexities. Even bad examples can be turned to good uses (witness any of the historical books of the Bible).

In short, I do not recommend the reading of *Harry Potter* by or for children. I also do not recommend that parents permit younger teens to read any of these books unless the parents have read them first and are willing to discuss their contents. On the other hand, I do not believe that mature readers will be harmed by these volumes. Even should they fall into the hands of our offspring, the damage will probably be minimal. *Harry Potter* is not spiritually healthy fare for the immature, but it is more like junk food than it is like poison. ✖

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