

I to the Hills Will Lift Mine Eyes*Scottish Psalter, 1615*

I to the hills will lift mine eyes:
 from whence doth come mine aid?
 My safety cometh from the Lord,
 who heaven and earth hath made.

Thy foot He'll not let slide, nor will
 He slumber that thee keeps.
 Behold, He that keeps Israel,
 He slumbers not, nor sleeps.

The Lord thee keeps; the Lord thy shade
 on thy right hand doth stay;
 the moon by night thee shall not smite
 nor yet the sun by day.

The Lord shall keep thy soul; He shall
 preserve thee from all ill;
 henceforth thy going out and in
 God keep for ever will.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

*In the Nick of Time***The Christian and Fantastic Literature, Part 3: What Is and Is Not the Goal***Kevin T. Bauder*

This is the third in a series of essays that try to answer the question of whether Christians can make use of fantastic literature and, if so, what use they can make. To this point the series has offered a working definition of fantastic writing, has distinguished it from occult literature, and has marked out two ways in which any literature can be good or bad. All these considerations will eventually be brought to bear upon the main question. Before moving into that discussion, however, I should state clearly what I do *not* intend to do in these essays. Then I will explain in a bit more detail what I *do* hope to accomplish.

What do I *not* intend to do? First, I do not intend to discuss the merits or demerits of occult literature. As we have defined the expression, occult literature attempts to depict a hidden or unseen world that is or may be around us. Occult literature assumes that reality includes more than we can see, and that beings and powers inhabit a world beyond our senses. Occult literature takes this unseen world seriously. It tries to pull back the curtain and to give us a glimpse of whatever creatures or powers are believed to dwell within this hidden world.

This is a very specific definition of occult literature. Furthermore, it is not one that requires occult literature to favor involvement with what the Bible calls *curious arts*. Indeed, given this definition, certain passages of the Bible qualify as occult literature, for God grants revelation that enables humans to understand what is taking place in a spiritual realm that cannot be glimpsed by human senses. John Milton also writes occult literature when, in *Paradise Lost*, he tries to help his readers fathom the workings of Satan's mind in his fall and his subsequent temptation of humanity. Of course, books do exist that are written to attract people to become involved in occult activities (*curious arts*), and these are deeply immoral. Nevertheless, they do not exhaust the category of occult literature.

From what I have said, it should be clear that I think lines can be drawn between good occult literature and bad occult literature. To draw those lines would be an interesting and useful thing to do, but it is not the thing that I



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www.centralseminary.edu | info@centralseminary.edu
 900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

intend to do in these essays. It is a separate conversation and not part of the present discussion.

Second, 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. Indeed, all species of badness to which literature can be turned will show up somewhere within fantastic literature. When we get around to discussing specific works, I intend to point out some fantastic literature that I do think is bad. While I enjoy reading fantasy, the purpose of these essays is not to offer an apologetic for everything that goes under that label.

Third, I do not intend to evaluate any fantastic literature that would be morally problematic on other grounds. For example, at one point I bought and began to read the first three volumes of the *Game of Thrones* series by George R. R. Martin. Within pages I found the work so vile that I threw the books away. It was bad literature on the face of it; I did not need to read further to understand that it would be harmful to Christian sensibility.

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 Breughel are often fantastic. Gothic architecture (for example, the Notre-Dame de Paris 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. I do not intend to point out those implications, however, even where they do exist.

What, then, do I wish to accomplish? I have already stated my purpose in several ways. Let me rehearse it again. First, I intend 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? Might some of it even be helpful? Second, I want to extrapolate principles to help readers evaluate fantastic literature. I want to articulate criteria for knowing whether a particular work is good, in both senses of that term. Third, I intend to apply those principles to several works of fantasy, including Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Will a Christian be harmed by exposure to the worlds of Narnia, Middle Earth, or Hogwarts? 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 (the difference is even more marked with *The Hobbit*). The books and the movies 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 must not be applied to Jackson's movies.

Can the same be said about *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *Harry Potter*? In neither case is the contrast as sharp. No one has completed a sustained, full-length film version of the Narnia series. In the case of the Potter movies, the differences are partly mitigated by circumstances that I shall discuss when I evaluate Rowling's work. With Tolkien and Jackson, however, the contrast is both vivid and deep.

I believe that I have now taken care of the preliminaries. Our definitions are in place and the necessary distinctions have been drawn. In the next essay, I begin to explore whether Christians can ever rightly enjoy fantastic literature.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
