

See the Old Dragon From His Throne

Philip Doddridge (1702–1751)

See the old dragon from his throne
Sink with enormous ruin down!
Banished from Heav'n, and doomed to dwell
Deep in the fiery gloom of hell!

Ye heav'ns with all your hosts, rejoice:
Ye saints, in consort lend your voice;
Approach your Lord's victorious seat,
And tread the foe beneath your feet.

But whence a conquest so divine
Gained by such feeble hands as mine?
Or whence can sinful mortals boast
O'er Satan and his rebel host?

'Twas from Thy blood, Thou slaughtered lamb,
That all our palms and triumphs came;
The cross, thy spear inflicts the stroke,
By which the monster's head is broke.

Thy faithful Word our hope maintains
Through all our combat and our pains;
The accents of Thy heav'nly breath
Thy soldiers bear through wounds and death.

Triumphant Lamb, in worlds unknown,
With transport round Thy radiant throne,
Thy happy legions, all complete,
Shall lay their laurels at Thy feet.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Christian and Fantastic Literature, Part 4: Is Fantasy Always Wrong?

Kevin T. Bauder

Is fantastic literature always wrong, or can it sometimes be justifiable and moral? Everybody agrees that fantasy can be written in immoral ways or turned toward immoral purposes. Any kind of art can be used for bad purposes, and fantasy is no exception. I would never suggest that all fantastic writing is good. But is it all necessarily evil?

You might be tempted to think that answering this question is a complicated business. After all, shouldn't we first agree upon standards for evaluating literature in general and fantastic literature in particular? Ought we not at least to have some idea of how fantasy functions?

These are legitimate concerns, but I believe we should consider another approach. What if we could cut straight through such preliminary concerns and arrive at a quick answer to our question? I suggest this possibility because I think that we can. We have been given a way, if only we will use it, to get right to the heart of the issue without any detailed knowledge of literary criticism.

How can we decide so easily whether fantastic literature can ever be moral? As a first step, let me ask you to perform a mental experiment. Imagine a book that features a seven-headed dragon, a winged lion, talking trees, a caprine form of the unicorn, a sea-monster, a green horse, skeletons that assemble themselves from bones, a flying book, mountains of bronze, sundry multi-headed monsters, and women who can fly. Would a book like that fit our definition of fantastic literature? Of course it would.

Such a book actually exists. In fact, the book that I have just described is the Bible. Yes, the Bible contains all these fantastic elements, and even more. The seven-headed dragon figures prominently in the book of Revelation, as do other multi-headed monsters and the green horse (sometimes this character is called the *pale horse*, but the word *pale* is best translated *pale green*). The winged lion and the unicorn goat are key figures in Daniel's prophecies. The skeletons who assemble themselves belong famously to Ezekiel 37. The flying book, the mountains of bronze, and the flying women are in Zechariah



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(Revelation also features a woman who is given wings to fly). The talking trees are found in the book of Judges.

All the fantastic elements that I have listed occur in one of two forms of writing: fable or apocalypse. I will say a bit more about each of these in a moment. For now, I want you to notice that I have not included any of the Bible's miraculous accounts, such as Jonah being swallowed by the great fish, Balaam's donkey talking to him, or Joshua making the sun stand still. I have not included those episodes because I don't think they are fantasy. The text presents them as straightforward narratives. Strange as these events seem, they appear in the text as if they really happened. Because God is truthful, and because the Bible is God's Word, we have no choice but to accept these as accounts of actual events. They are supernatural events, to be sure. They are miraculous events. Nevertheless, they are not fictional and they are not fantastic.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that the Bible is God's Word. According to 2 Timothy 3:16, all Scripture is inspired by God or God-breathed. According to the apostle Peter, Scripture was produced when "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet 1:20-21 NASB). While it is true that the Bible was written by human historians, prophets, and poets, every word is also in the text because God wanted it to be there. Whatever the Bible affirms, God Himself affirms. That is why I have no problem believing that a donkey talked to Balaam, that a great fish swallowed Jonah, or that the sun stood still for Joshua.

So why don't I also affirm that trees talked, that women flew, or that unicorns or dragons exist in real life? The reason is simple: the Bible does not affirm that they do. In the text, the talking trees are a fable. The unicorn and the dragon (and the flying book, etc.) are prophetic symbols. The Bible intends them to stand for something else. To interpret the text literally means not taking those features literally, because the text literally wants us to recognize them as symbolic.

I will be the first to acknowledge that sometimes we have trouble deciding whether a particular element in Scripture should be taken in its straightforward sense, in some figurative sense, or in a symbolical sense. An example might be the locusts of Revelation 9. These fantastic creatures swarm out of the smoke that ascends from the abyss. For five months they sting humans and cause intense suffering. Their appearance is unlike any living thing on earth today. They have a king named Abaddon, who is the angel of the abyss.

Is the description of these locusts a representation of actual demonic beings? Is it a metaphorical depiction of (e.g.) some terrible, military machines? Are the locusts instead symbols of some other reality? Serious students of Scripture defend each of those interpretations. My purpose is not to decide

between them here, but to note one fact. Simply because we may not be certain about the interpretation of *some* elements in *some* passages does not prevent us from knowing that other elements in other passages are either literal, figurative, or symbolic.

Leaving aside this issue of interpretation, one thing remains clear. Because the Bible is God's Word, it is never wrong. The apostles and prophets quoted Scripture as if they thought it was entirely correct and had final authority. Jesus Himself quoted the Bible this way. Jesus used the Bible to resist Satan. He used it to refute the Sadducees. He used it to confound the Pharisees. Whenever He used the Bible, Jesus treated it as if He thought that it was entirely from God and entirely true. He often corrected people's understanding of the Bible, but He never corrected the Bible itself.

The Bible is entirely true. It affirms no errors. It makes no mistakes. It never teaches falsely, and it never commits error.

The Bible never does wrong, but the Bible uses fantasy. It depicts talking trees and flying women. It gives us unicorns and dragons. There is no escaping the obvious fact that the Bible incorporates fantastic literature into its pages.

The Bible uses fantasy. The Bible is never wrong. Therefore, the Bible is not wrong to use fantasy. Obviously, then, fantasy cannot always be wrong. This conclusion really is simple and direct. At least some of the time, and for at least some uses, fantastic literature must be right and moral.

We have discovered that fantasy cannot always be wrong since the Bible itself includes fantastic literature. This conclusion leads to another question: why does the Bible use fantasy? We shall turn to that question in the next essay.



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.
