Kingdoms and Thrones to God Belong
Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Kingdoms and thrones to God belong;
Crown Him, ye nations, in your song:
His wondrous names and powers rehearse;
His honors shall enrich your verse.

He shakes the heavens with loud alarms;
How terrible is God in arms!
In Israel are His mercies known;
Israel is His peculiar throne.

Proclaim Him King, pronounce Him blest;
He's your Defence, your Joy, your Rest:
When terrors rise, and nations faint,
God is the Strength of every saint.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Christian and Fantastic Literature, Part 5: Reasons for Fantasy
Kevin T. Bauder

In the last essay we answered one question, but we asked another. We learned that since the Bible uses fantastic literature, and the Bible is never wrong, then fantastic literature cannot always be wrong. At least some uses of fantastic literature must be justifiable. The question that this conclusion led us to ask is *why* the Bible uses fantastic literature in the first place.

We have already noted that most examples of fantasy in the Bible occur in one of two settings. One setting is a species of prophetic literature that uses symbolic imagery to comment upon present events or to predict the future. This kind of writing is sometimes called *apocalyptic*. Scholars disagree over the precise definition and boundary of apocalyptic literature, but it is prominent in Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation. Some instances in Ezekiel probably qualify as something like proto-apocalyptic. Many extra-biblical apocalypses were also written, usually under false names. Evidently, the apocalyptic writing in the Bible so gripped peoples' imaginations that it was widely copied.

The other biblical setting for fantastic literature is found in fables. A fable is a short story, often employing personalized animals, plants, or even inanimate objects, that emphasizes a moral point. Scripture does not tell fables in its own voice (although some of Jesus' parables make the kind of moral points that fables do). On two occasions, however, the biblical text relates fables that were told by biblical characters. The fable of the thorn bush and the cedar tree was directed by Joash of Israel to Amaziah of Judah (2 Chr 25:17–19). The fable of the trees electing a king was told by Gideon's son Jotham to the men of Shechem (Judg 9:8–15).

The Bible uses fantastic elements in at least these two kinds of writing: prophecies and fables. I want to discuss each of these, and I intend to begin with prophetic writing. I'll go on to discuss the Bible's use of fables at a later point.

Why does the Bible employ fantastic elements in prophetic writing? The first and most obvious reason seems to be that these elements seize the reader's attention and hold it. Fantastic elements tend to delight us, even when they

seem strange or even frightening. They also make us curious. We wonder what they mean, and we can anticipate either the pleasure of an explanation or the pleasure of working out the puzzle for ourselves.

In addition to gripping the imagination, the imagery of apocalyptic writing is also easy to remember. Once impressed upon the mind, apocalyptic images rise into the memory almost by themselves: a valley of dry bones, a statue of four metals, four successive fantastic beasts, or a seven-headed monster rising from the sea. Such images are almost impossible to forget. Furthermore, because the images are so easily remembered, they virtually demand comparison. For example, do the four metals in the image of Daniel 2 correspond to the four beasts of Daniel 7? How is the little horn of Daniel 7 related to the little horn of Daniel 8? Questions like these arise naturally as the images swirl in the reader's mind.

Another reason is that the symbolic nature of these fantastic elements sometimes allows the writer to say something indirectly and thus more powerfully. Clear hints are sometimes safer than direct language. Furthermore, by drawing the reader into an imaginative world, the indirect nature of fantastic imagery can engage the feelings in a way that bare propositions might not.

Consider an example. Revelation 17 depicts a woman who rides on a scarlet beast that has seven heads. This woman is identified in the text as Babylon, which seems straightforward enough. Yet the reader is also told that the seven heads are seven mountains or hills upon which the woman sits. This description is an unmistakable allusion to the city of Rome, which famously occupied seven hills. By using allusive language, John accomplishes multiple purposes. Where he might have been risking his head to write that "Rome is like Babylon," the use of symbolism allows his readers to reach this conclusion without John saying it directly. It also leads readers to ask just how Rome is like Babylon. Incidentally, I am not addressing the question of whether this reference is to something historical or something future from our point of view. Whichever it is, the vivid picture grips our imaginations, stimulates our thinking, and allows John to imply something without saying it.

Something similar happens in Daniel 4, where Nebuchadnezzar has a dream about a great tree that fills the earth. In his dream, the tree is chopped down and banded with iron and bronze, only to begin growing again after a period of dormancy. In his interpretation, Daniel declares that the king himself is the tree, that God is going to humble him, but that his kingdom will be restored. If Daniel had simply told Nebuchadnezzar that he was growing arrogant and was in danger of divine judgment, the king's reaction might have been severe. The symbolism of the dream, however, provides Daniel with an opportunity to communicate the message clearly, but from a perspective of respect and even sympathy for Nebuchadnezzar.

Evidently, biblical writers incorporated fantastic elements into their prophecies for good reason. Fantastic prophecies were so successful that the technique was widely copied outside of the canon. We can guess that the reasons that made fantasy useful in biblical (and extrabiblical) prophecies might also make fantasy useful in other settings. One of those settings is fable, and we'll look at biblical fables next.

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