

from *The Sacrifice**George Herbert (1593–1633)*

Hark how they cry aloud still, Crucify:
 It is not fit he live a day, they cry,
 Who cannot live less then eternally:
 Was ever grief like mine?

Pilate, a stranger, holdeth off; but they,
 Mine own dear people, cry, Away, away,
 With noises confused frighting the day:
 Was ever grief like mine?

Yet still they shout, and cry, and stop their ears,
 Putting my life among their sins and fears,
 And therefore wish my blood on them and theirs:
 Was ever grief like mine?

See how spite cankers things. These words aright
 Used, and wished, are the whole worlds light:
 But honey is their gall, brightness their night:
 Was ever grief like mine?

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

*In the Nick of Time***The Christian and Fantastic Literature, Part 6: Fantasy's Function***Kevin T. Bauder*

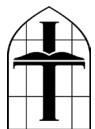
Over the past couple of essays we have seen two biblical examples of fantasy being used in fable. Can we learn anything about fantasy by studying these examples? I believe the answer is *yes*; these biblical fables offer several lessons.

The first is fairly obvious: fantasy goes beyond what is possible in the real world. In the real world we know that thistles and trees do not reason, speak, or hold councils. To represent them as doing these things is an exercise of the imagination. Imagination is the capacity that enables human beings to invent or perceive realities that they have never experienced before. All works of literature depend on imagination, but none more than fantasy.

The biblical fables create imaginative worlds in which thistles can make marriage plans with trees, and in which trees can elect kings. The imaginative world of these fables is like the real world in some respects—both worlds have thistles and trees. The imaginative world is also unlike the real world, for thistles and trees behave differently in the world of the biblical fables than they do in the real world. In other words, the thistle and the cedar in the fable resemble real thistles and cedars, but they are not identical.

Consequently, the imagined realities of the invented world must be understood on their own terms. If we simply dismiss the story because we know that thistles and cedars don't talk, then we are going to miss whatever value the story might have to offer. Within the world of the story, we must accept things that we know would be impossible in the real world. If we encountered a talking tree in real life, we would attribute it to hallucination, trickery, or, in extreme cases, perhaps to demonic activity. To make sense of the invented reality, however, we must reject these same assumptions. We must begin by supposing that within the invented world, such things can happen.

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 also mentions talking trees. In the myths, these trees act and talk because they are inhabited by tree-spirits, or Dryads. A person who was familiar with mythology might be tempted to read Dryadic activity into the



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talking trees of the biblical fables, but this would be misreading. The biblical stories must be read on their own terms, not on the terms of other imaginative worlds. The worlds of biblical fable and Western mythology must be kept separate. To confuse them would inevitably lead to misunderstanding.

The fantastic elements must be accepted as the premise of the story. To participate in the imaginative world, we must suspend our disbelief. We must forget that trees cannot think or talk. If we question *how* such things might be, we will get stuck at the front door and miss the point of the story.

Each invented world uses vocabulary in its own way. To make sound judgments about imagined worlds, we must base our thinking on each world's own usages, those of other worlds—whether metaphysical reality or some other fantasy. The word *bramble* designates one thing in metaphysical reality, where brambles do not talk. The word designates a different thing in the imaginative world of Western mythology, where bramble spirits just might talk. The same word designates a still different thing in the world of Jotham's fable, where it stands as an imaginative symbol.

The definition of the word *bramble* changes in each of these universes. In fact, all fantasy involves some amount of redefining. The author of the fantasy creates an invented world. She or he gets to say what definitions will govern that world. We know what a thistle is and what it can do in our world, but Jehoash gets to decide what a thistle can do in the imaginative world of his fable. We must not export our normal definition of *thistle* into his fable; we must learn what a thistle is in the fable by observing it within the fable's own imaginative world.

What with all the redefining, inventing a fantastic world can take a good bit of effort. Why would a writer go through the trouble? What can fantasy do that ordinary discourse does not?

A fantastic story can be a powerful means of speaking to the real world. Sometimes the fantastic elements allegorize aspects of reality. Other times they operate as symbols for material or moral verities. 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.

By this I mean that they grant us a level of moral distance and abstraction that would not otherwise be possible. For example, when we first enter the world of Jotham's fable, we do not particularly care what happens to the trees. While our curiosity is piqued, we are sufficiently disengaged that we can observe the events as more-or-less impartial spectators.

By opening this distance, fantasy also permits an author to isolate and amplify specific virtues and vices. By singling out these vices or virtues, the author can lead his readers to view aspects of human character in a particularly focused way, one that is not complicated by the all-too-frequent con-

traditions of the ordinary human condition. Readers are thus led to make judgments that commit them to moral positions before they quite realize what is at stake.

Consider Jotham's fable of the trees. This story is not about forestry, but about the kingship of Israel. It intends to offer a particular perspective on the kingship. It presents the kingship as an inferior calling. No right-thinking tree would leave his useful calling to become a king. Only the bramble, the most useless and annoying of bushes, finds the prospect appealing. The irony is rich when he invites the other trees to shelter under his shade. How does an olive tree find shade under a bramble? How could anybody? Jotham is implying that Abimelech's reign will be disastrous. When he finally identifies the real people who correspond to the characters in the story, the lesson is plain for all to see.

Something similar happens with Jehoash's fable. He establishes the image of a thistle acting like the equal of a great cedar. The contrast is humorous, and the humor is even more pointed because the cedar never notices. An unnamed animal steps on the thistle and squashes the upstart. Jehoash isn't just rebuffing Amaziah, he is laughing at him.

This is the power of fantasy. True, plenty of inferior authors merely play with fantastic devices. In skilled hands, however, fantasy can communicate more effectively than plain speech. It can smuggle a message past our guard. It can lead us to form judgments before we even know that we have committed ourselves. By transporting us out of ordinary reality, fantasy has the power to help us glimpse the moral dimensions of our world in their correct proportions.



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.
