

Jesus, Thy saving name I bless,
Delivered out of my distress,
Thy faithfulness I prove;
I magnify Thy mercy's power;
My refuge in the trying hour
Was Thy almighty love.

Snatched from the rage of cruel men,
Brought up out of the lion's den,
And thro' the burning flame:
Jesus, Thine outstretched hand I see,
Might, wisdom, strength ascribe to Thee,
And bless Thy saving name.

Hereby Thou favorest me, I know,
Because Thou wouldst not let the foe
My hunted soul destroy;
Better than life Thy favor is,
'Tis pure delight, and perfect bliss,
And everlasting joy.

Saved by a miracle of grace,
Lord, I with thankful heart embrace
The token of Thy love:
This, this, the comfortable sign,
That I the first born church shall join,
And bless Thy name above.

TΩ KPONOΥ KAIPΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Christian and Fantastic Literature, Part 9: Magic in Fantasy (Beginning)

Kevin T. Bauder

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 practices. The Bible is very explicit that Christians must avoid all involvement with witches, sorcerers, mediums, necromancers, and other practitioners of the “curious arts” when they are engaged in the pursuit of those arts. Of course, we recognize that complete non-contact is neither possible nor desirable, for “then ye must needs go out of the world” (1 Cor 5:10). Nevertheless, we must not get caught up in their occult practices.

Some Christians believe that this biblical warning against all occult practices implies a direct prohibition of any fantasy that includes elements of magic within its imaginarium. We can understand why some believers might think this way. We have already seen that fantasy must not invert morality. Fantasies that glorified stealing, murdering, or committing adultery would be deeply immoral. Why should stories that glorify magic be any different? Consequently, one finds Christians blasting the Harry Potter stories as an expression of occultism. Some even object to J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth or C. S. Lewis’s Narnia because they include wizards, witches, and enchantments of various sorts.

While we can understand this argument and even sympathize with it to some extent, it is too simplistic to be compelling. The problem with it is that the English language uses the words that designate occult practices to cover much more than just those practices. To focus on only one term, in Christian discussions we like to reserve the word *magic* for one form of supernatural power, namely the power that comes from demonic sources. We do not typically use this word to refer to the signs and wonders that were done in the power of God by the apostles and prophets.

This distinction, however, is really rather parochial to us. It is not built into the term itself. Ordinary English uses the word *magic* in a broader sense. For example, the Cambridge English Dictionary defines magic as, “the use of



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900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

special powers to make things happen that would usually be impossible." Similarly, the Collins English Dictionary offers this definition: "Magic is the power to use supernatural forces to make impossible things happen...." Part of the Collins definition is tautological, because any "impossible thing" (i.e., an event that cannot be accounted for naturally) is necessarily supernatural. Any power that can cause such events is supernatural by definition. Christians may prefer to restrict the use of the word *magic* to invoking evil powers, but this restriction is not built into the word. In general, the word simply designates events that cannot be explained or produced by non-natural means.

Let me illustrate this point. Suppose we wanted to write a fantastic story. We might begin by imagining a powerful seer. Marvelous deeds seem to follow him. He provides a destitute woman with a bottle of oil that will not run dry. When he places a curse on his enemies, they are torn to bits by savage animals. He causes an iron object to emerge from the sunken depths of a river. He throws salt into a foul well, and turns the water sweet and drinkable. He walks through the middle of a river on a dry path. He neutralizes poison in a pot of food. He removes a dread pestilence from one man and places it upon another. He strikes his enemies with blindness.

These are feats worthy of an epic hero. If these marvelous deeds occurred in the world of Homer's *Odyssey*, or in Baum's *Oz*, Tolkien's Middle Earth, Lewis's *Narnia*, or Rowling's *Hogwarts*, we would surely call them *magic*. But they don't occur in those fictional worlds. Instead, these are actual events that occurred during the activity of Elisha the prophet. Since these deeds are recorded in the Bible, we hesitate to call them *magic*. Instead, we prefer to call them *miracles*. The fact remains that they are the same events, whichever label we put on them.

We Christians often dislike using the same word to designate the supernatural activities of both God and Satan. This perplexity is understandable. Similar outward acts may come from very different sources. Different sources may produce apparently miraculous results. Some fantasy writers are aware of this problem. That is why Tolkien has Galadriel say, "For this is what your folk would call magic, I believe; though I do not understand clearly what they mean; and they seem also to use the same word of the deceits of the Enemy." In the English language, words like *magic* are not technical terms that specify good or evil.

The same is true of biblical words that designate the supernatural. Words like *miracle*, *sign*, and *wonder* are used to describe deeds that are done in the power of God. They are also used to describe deeds that are done in the power of Satan. For example, in Acts 2:22 Peter preaches that Jesus' claims were authenticated by "miracles and wonders and signs." In 2 Cor 12:12 Paul says that the ministry of the apostles was authenticated by "signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds." These are the very same Greek words that

Peter uses for the miracles of Jesus in Acts 2:22. This combination of terms occurs at least one other time, in 2 Thess 2:9. This verse describes the marvelous deeds of the antichrist. In other words, the Bible itself uses the same terms to describe supernatural things done by God and supernatural things done by Satan.

The Bible uses words like *sign*, *wonder*, and *miracle* for both holy and unholy deeds. But what about words like *magic* or *magician*? Are those words ever used to describe holy acts or godly people? That is the question we shall address 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.
