

Let All the World in Ev'ry Corner Sing

George Herbert (1593–1633)

Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
 "My God and King!"
 The heav'ns are not too high,
 God's praise may thither fly;
 the earth is not too low,
 God's praises there may grow.
 Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
 "My God and King!"

Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
 "My God and King!"
 The church with psalms must shout:
 no door can keep them out.
 But, more than all, the heart
 must bear the longest part.
 Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
 "My God and King!"

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Christian and Fantastic Literature, Part 10: Magic in Fantasy (Continued)

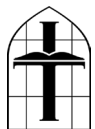
Kevin T. Bauder

The Bible certainly distinguishes sources of the supernatural. Some supernatural events are caused by God. Others are caused by Satan and his forces. Satan is the prince of the power of the air and the god of this age. He and his demons can do things that are beyond natural explanation. Supernatural events that come from God must be acknowledged, and God must be honored for them. Supernatural events that come from demons are to be avoided and even censured.

The Bible distinguishes the sources of these events, but it does not always reflect that distinction in the terms that it uses to designate them. As we have seen, words like *signs*, *wonders*, and *miracles* can be used to designate either supernatural deeds that come from God or supernatural works that come from dark forces. The terms themselves do not identify which is which.

The Bible is equally ambivalent about the term *magic*. In Acts 8:9 and 11, a character named Simon is described as one who "used sorcery" or "practiced magic arts." The Greek verb for practicing sorcery is *mageuo* and the noun for sorcery is *mageia*. The kinship of these Greek words to our English word *magic* should be clear. In fact, Simon is sometimes called *Simon Magus*, because a *magus* or *mage* is a person who practices magic. In Simon's case, these words are obviously referring to occult arts. Simon did not work wonders in the power of God but through the manipulation of other, darker powers.

Yet the plural of *mage* (*magi*) is also used as the title of the wise men who sought Jesus after His birth (Matt 2:1). This label is in full keeping with similar Old Testament usage. In Daniel 2:2, for example, magicians are ranked with sorcerers and astrologers. Yet Daniel himself—surely a godly man—is recognized as the "master" or "chief" of these magicians (Dan. 4:9; 5:11). To the Babylonian court, what Daniel could do was indistinguishable from magic, though Daniel was always careful to give credit to the true and living God.



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All of this shows that our insistence upon a narrow distinction *in words* between “magic” as the work of Satan and “miracle” as the work of God is more finical than the Bible itself. Of course, we are welcome to define our own special vocabulary if we wish. We may insist upon a distinction between *magic* and *miracle* in our own usage. Nevertheless, we must not try to pretend that we are more righteous than the Bible. We are not permitted to judge the way that the Bible uses words simply because it does not measure up to the way that we have chosen to use the same words.

What is true about judging the Bible is also true about judging other literature, including fictional stories and especially fantasies. Simply because their special vocabulary differs from ours does not mean that they are evil or immoral. Fantastic stories also have the right to define their own technical terms. The question is not whether they use words like *magic* (or *wizard*, *witch*, or any number of such expressions). The question that we have to ask is *what they mean* by those terms. When reading fantastic literature that uses such words, we must ask whether those words really designate things that the Bible condemns. They may and often do, but sometimes they do not.

We are not permitted to judge the morality of a work of literature by asking whether it includes things that it calls magic, witches, wizards, and so forth. What we have to do is to look at the things to which those words refer. We must decide whether the things that those words designate are the same things that the Bible condemns, or whether they are something else altogether. For example, the Bible does not tell us what Galadriel meant when she talked about magic. The only way we will know that is by looking at what magic is within Tolkien’s Middle Earth.

A writer of fantasies may invent characters who exercise all sorts of remarkable powers. Perhaps those characters can become invisible; perhaps they can levitate; perhaps they can alter the atomic structure of one element into that of another. To invent such characters is no more objectionable than inventing a talking tree. The writer may choose to call these wonderful activities *magic*, and he may choose to call the characters who do such things *sorcerers*, *magicians*, *wizards*, or *witches*. If so, then the wizard or witch of the story is not the kind of wizard or witch that the Bible condemns in real life, any more than a talking grapevine is the kind of grapevine that God created in Genesis 1.

A story does not become immoral just because it has characters who exercise remarkable powers. It does not become immoral because the writer calls these remarkable powers *magic*. It does not even become immoral if the writer calls the characters who possess these powers *wizards* or *witches*. We must ask what words like *magic* and *wizard* mean in the world of the story, not what they mean in the real world. We must discover the author’s own usage.

There may well be a difference between “literary magic” and real magic. Therefore, we need to evaluate literary magic on a kind of sliding scale. At one end of the scale is real-world witchcraft, while at the other end is a kind of “magic” that is purely fanciful and perhaps even farcical. A writer of fantasy may put magical activities into the story at either end of this scale, or somewhere in between. The closer the magic gets to the end of the scale that resembles real-world witchcraft, the more objectionable it becomes to Christian sensibilities. By the same token, some kinds of literary magic should be completely unoffensive to thoughtful Christian readers.

If a writer glorifies or advocates an activity that the Bible condemns (such as real-world demonic activity), then the story is immoral. If a story were to induce its readers to practice the kind of occult arts that the Bible condemns, then it would clearly be contrary to Christian virtue. If, however, the story merely uses the language of magic to describe something that exists only in the invented world, and if that thing is substantially different to what the Bible condemns, then the story may be completely innocent. Depending on the point of the story, it might even be useful for Christian readers. Whether it is or not will depend not so much upon whether the writer uses words like *magic* as upon the story’s point and how well it is made.



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.
