

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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The Christian and Fantastic Literature

Part One

Definitions and Questions

The year was 1971 and I was a junior in high school when, in a fit of boredom, I randomly picked up a copy of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. This was my introduction to a genre of literature that I would later learn to call *fantasy*. In those days, fantastic writing was generally relegated to children's fairy tales. Years passed before I found someone else who had heard of Tolkien. Nevertheless, in the ensuing years fantasy in general and Tolkien in particular have become big sellers.

Some people do not appreciate fantasy. With most of them I have no argument: *de gustibus non disputandum est*. Over the last few years, however, a few Christian leaders have taken to attacking fantasy in general (and Tolkien in particular) on moral grounds. They argue that indulgence in fantastic literature will harm the inner life of the believer. This is the opinion that I would like to examine in a series of several short essays.

Let us begin with a definition. *Fantasy*, as I intend to use the term, is a genre of fictional literature or *belles lettres* involving the creation of an imaginative world through the use of one or more devices. First, the author may attribute human properties to subhuman creatures (animals, plants, or even objects). Second, the author may attribute marvelous powers to humans or other agents. Third, the author may invent creatures that do not exist in the real world. Any work of fiction that deliberately includes one of these elements may rightly be classified as fantasy.

Examples of fantastic writing include the works of Homer (the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), Aesop (the *Fables*), Virgil (the *Aeneid*), the German *Märchen* (exemplified by the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers and imitated by Hans Christian Andersen), Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver's Travels*), Rudyard Kipling (the *Jungle Books* and *Puck of*

Pook's Hill), Edgar Rice Burroughs (*Tarzan of the Apes*), C. S. Lewis (*The Chronicles of Narnia*), and J. R. R. Tolkien (*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*). A specialized form of fantasy is found in science fiction, and it is no accident that bookstores tend to market the two together.

Fantasy, however, is not the same as occult literature. Occult literature may be either fictional or non-fictional. The word *occult* properly means *hidden*, and occult literature attempts to depict the hidden or “unseen” world that is or may be around us in reality. Sometimes the depiction is direct and literal, but other times it may be symbolic. The expression “occult literature,” when it is used to describe a literary genre, is not necessarily connected to witchcraft or demonism. In the literary sense, several of the documents in the Bible could properly be classed as occult literature. They intend to give us a glimpse of the hidden work of God and of spirit beings in the world. Other examples of occult literature include the works of John Milton (*Paradise Lost*) and Frank Peretti (the *Darkness* books).

While fantasy is not the same as occult literature, the two categories are related in that both may deal with the supernatural. Not surprisingly, many works may be classed as both fantasy and occult literature. *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan rightly belongs in both categories, as do the fictional writings of Charles Williams (*Descent Into Hell*, *All Hallow's Eve*, *The Greater Trumps*, etc.).

Given these definitions, we are almost in a position to proceed. Let me state briefly what I do *not* intend to do, and then let me state what I *do* hope to accomplish.

I do *not* intend to discuss the merits or demerits of occult literature. That is a separate conversation. As interesting and useful as it might be, it is not part of the present discussion.

Moreover, I do *not* intend to justify everything that is done with fantastic literature. Anyone who has spent any time at all reading fantasy has discovered that it can be—and often is—used in some very destructive ways. The purpose of this essay is not to offer an apologetic for everything that goes under the name of *fantasy*.

Finally, I do not intend to address the usefulness of fantasy in any medium other than literature. Fantastic elements are employed in many artistic media. The paintings of Bosch and Brueghel are often fantastic. The architecture of the Notre Dame cathedral includes fantastic aspects. Many operas and ballets include fantastic elements. Most recently, Hollywood movie makers have been capitalizing on the popularity of fantasies such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Each of these media communicates in its own way. Conclusions that are drawn with respect to literature may or may not have implications for other media. Drawing the inferences, however, is not part of the purpose of these essays.

What I *do* wish to do is, first, to ask whether *any* fantastic literature can *ever* be fit for consumption by a Christian. Is a Christian ever justified in reading fantasy, or is all fantasy spiritually destructive? Second, I want to extrapolate principles for the evaluation of fantastic literature. Third, I intend to apply those principles to several works of fantasy, including Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Will a Christian be harmed by exposure to the worlds of Narnia or of Middle Earth? What about other imaginary worlds?

I wish to stress again the difference between Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* as a work of literature and Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* as a work of cinema. They are not the same work. They cannot be the same work when they are presented in different media. Even without the differences that are imposed by the media, however, Jackson has fundamentally altered Tolkien's message. Whatever I have to say about Tolkien's writing cannot be applied to Jackson's movie.

Now the preliminaries have been addressed. Our definitions are in place, and the necessary distinctions have been drawn. In the next essay, we will ask whether fantasy can be moral for the Christian. ✕

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis | Contact Us
900 Forestview Ln N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 1-800-827-1043 | www.centraseminary.edu