

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΟΥ

## “In the Nick of Time”

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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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February 25, 2005  
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## The Christian and Fantastic Literature

### Part Two

#### Evaluating Fantastic Writing

Is fantastic literature ever justifiable and moral? Answering this question is easier than you might think. Imagine a book that includes the following imaginative characters: a dragon, a winged lion, talking trees, a sea-monster, skeletons that assemble themselves, a flying book, multi-headed monsters, and flying women. Such a book would obviously fit our definition of fantastic literature. In this case, that book is the Bible. If the Bible uses fantasy, then all fantasy cannot be wrong.

One example of the Bible's fantastic writing is found in Judges 9:8-15. This passage is a fable in which the trees meet to choose a king. The olive tree, fig tree, and grape vine all decline the kingship on the grounds that they already have important tasks to perform. Finally the bramble bush invites the trees to shelter under its shade, threatening with fire those who reject it. The fable is spoken by Jotham and applied to the regency of Abimelech, who has made himself king of Israel by murdering the family of Gideon.

Can we learn anything about fantasy by studying this example? I believe that we can. In fact, several lessons are apparent.

The most obvious lesson is that fantasy goes beyond what is possible in metaphysical reality. We know as a matter of fact that trees do not reason, speak, or hold councils. To represent them as doing so is an exercise of the imagination, and specifically of the *idyllic* imagination. The idyllic imagination is that capacity that enables human beings to invent new creaturely realities.

This imaginative reality or world must be understood on its own terms. We must not force into it the normal processes and definitions of the real world in which we live. In the real world, we know that trees *by definition* do not talk. If we encountered an automatic tree in real life, we would attribute it to trickery or, in an

extreme case, perhaps to demonic activity. If we are to understand the invented reality, however, we are not permitted to carry these prejudices into the fictional world of the story.

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 contains trees that can act and talk because of the influence of tree-spirits, or Dryads. If we wish to understand Jotham's fable, we must not force Dryadic activity into the biblical story.

In fact, the fantastic elements must simply be accepted as the premise of the story. In order to hear the story, in order to enter into the imaginative world, we must engage in what is sometimes called a "willing suspension of disbelief." We must forget that trees cannot think or talk. If we trouble ourselves with questions about *how* such things might be, we will get stuck at the front door and we will never understand the point of the story.

To put this in other words, each invented world has its own *usus loquendi*. If we are to make judgments about that world, we must form them on the basis of its *usus loquendi* and not on the basis of a *usus loquendi* that we import from metaphysical reality or from some other fantasy. A bramble is one thing in reality; in the invented world of the fable it is a different thing. The two are similar, but not identical. All fantasy involves the altering of definitions. The author of the fantasy is the creator of the invented world, and the creator controls the process of definition in that world.

Inventing a fantastic world obviously takes a good bit of effort. Why would a writer go through the trouble? What can fantasy do that ordinary discourse does not? The fable of the trees also helps us to answer these questions.

A fantastic story can be a powerful means of speaking to the real world. Sometimes (as in the biblical fable), the fantastic elements allegorize aspects of reality. Other times they operate as symbols for material or moral entities. 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.

On the one hand, they grant us a level of moral distance and abstraction that is otherwise impossible. In the biblical fable, we do not particularly care what happens to the trees at the beginning of the story. We are sufficiently disengaged that we can observe the events as more-or-less impartial spectators. On the other hand, the fantasy also permits the isolation and amplification of particular virtues and vices. It permits us to view aspects of human character in a way that is not complicated by the all-too-frequent contradictions of the human condition.

Again the fable of the trees provides us with an example. This story is not about trees, but about the kingship of Israel. The story clearly presents the kingship as an inferior calling. No right-thinking tree would leave his useful calling and activities in order to be a king. Only the bramble, the most useless and annoying of trees, finds the prospect appealing. The irony is rich when he invites the other trees to shelter under his shade. How does an olive tree get shade from a bramble? How could anybody? From the outset it is clear that this will be a disastrous monarchy. When the story-teller finally identifies the real people who correspond to the characters in the story, the lesson is plain for all to see.

*This* is the power of fantasy. While inferior authors merely may play with the form, in skilled hands it can communicate very effectively. By using symbolism and typology, fantasy can get a message past our guard. Before we know that we have committed ourselves, we have already formed a judgment. By transporting us out of metaphysical reality, fantasy has the power to help us glimpse the moral dimensions of our world in the correct proportions.

Because fantasy is a powerful tool, writers of fantasy have a special obligation to use it rightly. They are free to alter the material properties of their world in whatever way they like. They can invent worlds in which the normal rules of physics do not apply. They can populate their worlds with all manner of impossible creatures, but they must never change what is moral into what is not. A world of monstrous appearances is not immoral, but a world of monstrous conduct is. The writer of fantasy never has the right to confuse good with evil. A story in which murder or profanity were virtuous would be an immoral story. A story in which piety was depicted as a vice would also be immoral. Unfortunately, many works of fantasy do exactly these things. They offer an invented world in which morality itself becomes fantastic.

We conclude that fantasy is not *per se* damaging to the Christian. How could anything that the Bible uses freely be wrong in itself? Nonetheless, fantasy definitely can be put to wrong uses. This makes the believer responsible to judge well the works that he allows to shape his consciousness of the world. Of course, that raises a special problem concerning the presence of wizards and magic in much fantasy. That is the topic that we will address in the next essay. ✕

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.

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