

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“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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## The Christian and Fantastic Literature

### Part Three

#### Magic in Fantasy

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 beings. The Bible is very explicit that Christians are to avoid all contact with witches, sorcerers, mediums, necromancers, and other practitioners of the occult arts.

For some, this leads to a direct prohibition of any fantasy that includes magic. Even fantasy must not invert morality. Stealing, murdering, or committing adultery are as wrong in fantasy as they are in real life. Why should magic be any different?

The answer is that our civilization uses the term *magic* to denote much more than simply the occult practices that are condemned in the Bible. True, in Christian circles we reserve the word for one form of supernatural power, namely the power that comes from demonic sources. We do not use it to refer to the signs and wonders that were done in the power of God by the apostles and prophets.

This restriction, however, is provincial to us. It is not built into the term itself. We can look up the word *magic* in any standard dictionary and discover that, within our broader civilization, it is used simply to denote supernatural or inexplicable occurrences. We ourselves may prefer not to use the term this way, but we should recognize that the broader use is standard in our language. Think about it: what word would people in our civilization use to describe a bottle of oil that never runs dry, an axe-head that floats on water, or the power to strike one's opponents with blindness? Surely *magic* would be the first word in their minds.

We are uncomfortable using the same word to include both the supernatural activities of God and those of Satan. The Bible, however, does not appear to share our discomfort. Words like *miracle*, *sign*, and *wonder* are used to describe both deeds that are done in the power of God and those that are done in the

power of Satan. 2 Thessalonians 2:9 uses exactly the same terms to describe the deeds of the Antichrist that are used elsewhere to describe the miracles of Jesus.

Acts 8:9, 11 describes Simon as one who “practiced magic arts” (the Greek verb is *mageuo* and the noun is *mageia*). This is an obvious reference to the occult arts. Yet the noun *magi* is used to describe the wise men who sought Jesus after his birth. In Daniel 2:2, magicians are ranked along side of sorcerers and astrologers. Yet Daniel is himself recognized as the “master” or “chief” of the magicians (Dan. 4:9; 5:11).

All of this shows that our insistence upon a narrow distinction between “magic” as the work of Satan and “miracle” as the work of God is actually more particular than the usage of the Bible itself. We are welcome to our own *usus loquendi*, but we must not impose it upon the Bible. We are not permitted to judge the Bible simply because it does not measure up to our fastidious standard.

Neither should we judge a fictional story, including a fantasy, if its usage is different than ours. It, too, has a right to its own *usus loquendi*. The question is not whether it uses words like *magic* or *wizard*. The question is whether the things that it denotes by these terms really do correspond to things that the Bible condemns. We will never learn this by looking at the names, but only by looking at the things themselves.

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 *wizards* or even *witches*. If so, then the wizard of the story is not the kind of wizard that the Bible condemns in real life, any more than a talking grapevine is the kind of grapevine that God created in Genesis.

In other words, 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 *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.

If a writer glorifies or advocates an activity that the Bible condemns, then the story is immoral. If a writer were to induce her or his readers to practice those occult arts that the Bible condemns, then the story would clearly be offensive to Christian sensibilities and destructive to Christian virtue. If, however, the writer is using the language of magic to describe something in his invented world that is substantially other than what the Bible condemns, then the story may still be useful to the Christian. Whether it is or not will depend upon other factors.

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 the purely fanciful. A writer of fantasy may put “magic” into the story at either end of the scale, or somewhere in between. The closer the “magic” gets to the end of the scale that resembles reality, the more objectionable Christians should find it to be. By the same token, some kinds of “literary magic” should be perfectly acceptable to the Christian reader. ✠

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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