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HARRY POTTER AND THE LORD OF THE RINGS:
Good Stories or Fantasies That Fail?

The blockbuster films about Middle Earth and Harry Potter have given Christians two opportunities to respond to magical fantasy on the big screen. The first installment of The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and of the *Harry Potter* series were released during the past winter movie season. Christians apparently find it easier to accept the magic and wizardry of J. R. R. Tolkien's Gandalf than J. K. Rowling's Harry.

As news correspondents for the JOURNAL and Christian parents, we saw both *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and multiple Oscar-winning *The Fellowship of the Ring* and interviewed other Christian parents about their views regarding these two movies. We loved both movies. We highly recommend both to most people, but not everyone. *The Lord of the Rings* is a story of a monumental struggle between good and evil, full of war and suffering and death. It is not for small children nor faint-hearted adults. It is also not for people who do not like fantasy — even superb fantasy. As one of our friends commented, *The Lord of the Rings* has a dark shadow of foreboding over it: Tolkien's dark lord casts his long shadow over the whole tale, and the movie conveys this foreboding heartbreakingly, breathtakingly well.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone is a lighter movie (as is the book series, so far), suitable for young children. We took our six-year-old son to see it. He instantly understood the main point of the story: Harry is a brave, loyal boy with good friends, whose mother laid down her life for him and saved his life — twice.

Most Hollywood movies, especially those based on best-selling novels, engender little notice from evangelicals, who generally write off any redeeming value coming from Hollywood. These two movies, and the books from which they spring, have caused some concern among evangelicals because they appear to deal with spiritual issues and are full of references to wizards, spells, and other magical themes. *Harry Potter* seems to be the most problematic since it has no clear theistic, much less biblical, worldview and seems to be advocating a magical approach to reality. *Fellowship* comes from an author who was a devout Christian, an accomplished British literary don, and one of the people most influential in C. S. Lewis's conversion to Christ. *Fellowship* nevertheless also has no overtly theistic or biblical worldview. All of the works (the multivolume book series and the two movies) display a clear conflict between good and evil, with good ultimately triumphing, and focus on the powers of love, loyalty, goodness, and truth in opposition to selfishness, greed, and exploitation.

The Lord of the Rings trilogy and *Harry Potter* series are works of fantasy. In both, the authors create multidimensional worlds peopled with various creatures, many of whom use magical powers to affect physical changes in their world. Some of these creatures are bad and use their powers for evil, and some of these creatures are good and use their powers to battle evil. The "magical" powers are "natural" attributes of the respective fantasy worlds in which they operate. In this sense the magic is more akin to the ability of animals to speak and wear clothes in children's literature such as *The Wind in the Willows* and *Winnie the Pooh*. Within the context of the world of the story, clothed talking animals are not supernatural, occult aberrations but the normal state of affairs. In other words, the magic is mechanistic, not occult: the make-believe laws that govern their use in these make-believe worlds are physical laws,

not spiritual or moral laws. These practices are not the same as the occult-based wizardry and sorcery practiced in the real world by real people and condemned in the Bible (which illumines the real world).

This important distinction between our real world and these fantasy worlds becomes muddled if we confuse the world of fantasy with the real world. Witness the prominent displays of books on charms, potions, and casting spells located next to the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* displays in many bookstores. In our real world, the Bible condemns such practices because they are rooted in our sinful, human desire for control and they make us vulnerable to the demonic influence that ultimately controls the sinful world.

In a culture saturated, as ours is, with New Age beliefs and practices (many of which are demonstrably occult in origin), lost people easily lose the biblical distinctions between good and evil and the psychological distinctions between reality and fantasy. If a danger exists in good children's literature such as the *Harry Potter* books, or in great adult literature such as *The Lord of the Rings* books, it exists for those for whom these distinctions are blurred rather than because of any inherent danger in the works themselves.

Working professionally with at-risk children and young adults, we see this danger frequently. Every week we encounter lost young people who are hungry for love, acceptance, security, and significance. Young people from extremely abusive homes, driven by felt needs, flirt with all of the New Age practices. Such young people should be offered the better way; indeed, the only way that is true and best is our Lord Jesus. Christians can use movies such as those in the *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* series as vehicles to show these youths what they really want and need — a place of love, courage, friendship, belonging, and a chance to lay down their lives in a cause greater than themselves.

The first *Harry Potter* movie, like the books, is not so much about wizardry as it is about friendship and courage to do the right thing. As Harry prepares to face his last and most dangerous test, he and Hermione argue over who is the better wizard. Harry insists his friend is, to which Hermione replies, "Me! Books! And cleverness! There are more important things — friendship and bravery and — oh Harry — be careful!"

What distinguishes good fantasy writing from fantasy that fails is its moral and philosophical underpinnings. The essay "The Fantastic Imagination" by devout Christian George MacDonald, the premiere nineteenth-century writer of fantasy for adults and children, states that when an author invents "a little world of his own, with its own laws," he or she must hold to those laws in order for that world to have consistency and believability.

More importantly, the author must obey the moral law of the real world, or his or her fantasy will fail. "It were no offence to suppose a world in which everything repelled instead of attracted the things around it; it would be wicked to write a tale representing a man it called good as always doing bad things, or a man it called bad as always doing good things: the notion itself is absolutely lawless. In physical things a man may invent; in moral things he must obey — and take their laws with him into his invented world as well."

When we examine works of fantasy, therefore, we look for clues concerning the author's moral values, such as his or her view of good and evil. In *The Lord of the Rings*, we see good and evil as diametrically opposed. We also see biblical themes interwoven in Tolkien's stories, such as the triumph of good over evil by ordinary, seemingly insignificant, "little people," who struggle with their own failures, but who are courageous, loyal, and, ultimately, obedient. We always have a sense that behind the mounting battle a benevolent Providence is subtly at work. Good, for Tolkien, is always much bigger and more real than evil, no matter how the evil swaggers and blusters.

Rowling has made no specific claims of evangelical Christianity, but she has left us hints about her philosophical framework. In *Harry Potter* books, good wizards and bad wizards fight each other, and one

who has given himself completely over to Voldemort, the very worst wizard, has this to say to Harry: "A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it...."

In Rowling's books, too (at least so far), good and evil are implacable enemies, and love ultimately defeats evil. Her characters, like Tolkien's, capture our hearts because they struggle, like we do, with weakness, failure, and insecurity. They also learn courage, loyalty, and love through battles and hardships. In her books, a young boy leaves a terribly abusive world behind and finds a true home with real family and friends in a new, magical world. No discernable underpinning of Providence is in Rowling as there is in Tolkien, but such a worldview is not necessarily contradicted by the stories and can be coupled with the stories if Christian parents discuss it within a Christian context.

The well-intentioned but perhaps misguided attempts by some evangelical Christians to repudiate *Harry Potter* and/or *The Lord of the Rings* instead confuse the general public. What next? Will Christians sponsor a book-burning party for the *Wizard of Oz* books because of their inclusion of good witches? Christians can appear at best silly and at worst ignorantly prejudiced, more like totalitarian Orwellianism than biblical Christianity.

Christians should make a clear distinction between the internally consistent and "natural" world of the story and the occult reality of this world, where evil lures but is ultimately overcome by the Lord of Glory. The evangelist Luke wrote of a group of new converts who formerly practiced sorcery and then publicly burned their sorcery scrolls after coming to faith in Jesus (Acts 19:17-20). This should not be confused with dismissing good fantasy literature simply because of the trappings of its fictional world.

As Tolkien led Lewis to the truth of the gospel through classical mythology, and as the apostle Paul led his pagan hearers to faith in the one true God through their own inscriptions and literature (Acts 17:16–34), so we may use the truths in the *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* series to draw people to their true home in Jesus.

— Mark Ryan and Carole Hausmann Ryan