



## The Christian Story as Fantasy? Yes! Do Not Domesticate the Gospel

DAVID J. LOSE

**I**n the wake of the popular success of the film adaptation of C. S. Lewis's beloved *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, various commentators have wondered why Lewis's works of fantasy have been as effective as his nonfiction theological work in persuasively communicating the Christian story. I have a hunch that this is because the gospel itself is, at heart, fantasy. This may be a surprising, even shocking assertion to some, but I say it not simply to enrich the present discussion but rather in the hope of aiding contemporary Christian leaders in making their own testimony more compelling.

Yes, the gospel is fantasy. Before dismissing this claim, note that I did not say that the gospel is not *true*, only that it is *fantasy*—as in fantastical, beyond our experience, extraordinary, not of this world. Precisely because it is not of this world, because it *is* beyond our physical and material existence and experience, the gospel has the power to redeem. That is, I believe the Bible not because it tells me of things I have seen and known for myself, but precisely because it describes a reality that stretches beyond the confines of our finite, mortal existence.

Near the beginning of his lengthy Christmas poem, “For the Time Being,” W. H. Auden has the chorus sing: “Nothing can save us that is possible: We who must die demand a miracle.”\* And there it is: when you are on the brink of death—whether from illness or failure, calamity or oppression—you are keenly aware that you are insufficient, that this world and reality is temporary, and that you stand in desperate need of the miraculous, for that which is merely possible cannot save.

That is what the gospel offers—an impossible possibility, a reality that transcends the everyday real, a truth deeper than all else we have been told is true. Some, I know, would call this an escape, a flight from reality and the specter of death. Indeed, this is the great risk, the significant gamble of the Christian life. For the truth the gospel proclaims is not some mere fact that we can prove; rather, it is a claim, a confession—even a wager—that there is a reality and truth beyond the confines of our mortal, meager existence, which we will not fully experience until

\*W. H. Auden, “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio,” in *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945) 411.

(continued on page 216)

# TO FACE

## The Christian Story as Fantasy? No! Do Not “Potter” with the Gospel

FREDERICK J. GAISER

**G**iven the popularity of fantasy literature, why in the world would I knock its use in the service of the gospel? Should I not instead celebrate the possibility that people might hear the old story anew in the stories of Narnia and the *Lord of the Rings*? For that matter, according to some, might not even Harry Potter provide a vehicle to provoke theological questions and draw folks into consideration of the very real struggle between good and evil?

Truth in advertising: I’ve read the books, I’ve seen the movies, and I like them as well as the next guy. Nor do I mean to suggest that Christian proclamation should reject popular images and remain boringly predictable and predictably boring. The story is audacious, and deserves audacious telling; still, it is not fantasy, so some important caveats are needed if we are to consider using the genre of fantasy to tell the gospel story:

1. Fantasy literature is inherently otherworldly; the gospel is inherently this-worldly. The dangers of docetism are always with us—the ancient heresy that denied God’s real presence in Jesus Christ. Jesus only “seemed” to be truly God, said the docetists, and fantasy literature can lead to the same conclusion. Fine, in the world of *fantasy* we might entertain the possibility of God or spirits or transcendence, but the here and now is all too here and now for such things. Unless it’s not—which is precisely the gospel’s claim: “We declare to you what...we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands” (1 John 1:1). Put your finger in his wounds and your hand in his side—the gospel is real. The bread *is* the body of Christ.

2. Fantasy literature is about magic; the gospel rejects magic. There’s way too much magic in Christian thought: Jesus did incredible things, because, basically, he had a better wand. If only we can get enough people on the prayer chain, then it’ll work. If only we believe in Jesus, then we’ll be healthy, wealthy, and wise. But the gospel insists that Jesus emptied himself, refused to hold on to the divine prerogatives, gave himself up to death, became a human like us. No magic, no *deus ex machina*, but real incarnation—real struggle, real pain, real life, real death. No

(continued on page 217)

the world as we know it passes away; then and only then will we see through the glass clearly and understand fully, even as we are fully understood. But make no mistake, it *is* a risk, one that we cannot calculate ahead of time. Ultimately, we believe this story only because we have been taken captive to the word of God, drawn into this world of faith like Lucy through the wardrobe; now, having tasted the promises of God, we cannot return. And so there it is: the gospel is true, *and* it is fantastic, otherworldly, beyond our experience.

Now to the point: I believe much of our preaching and teaching has suffered because we do not appreciate this audacious claim. It wasn't always this way. Only after the Enlightenment did *truth* become equated with *fact*—that is, with that which can be verified by our senses. And ever since the fateful slide from truth to fact, the church has been on the defensive, trying to make the gospel ever more reasonable, rational, even palatable to “the modern mind.” In our quest to justify Christian faith at the bar of human rationality we have domesticated the gospel, transforming the greatest story ever told into just one more self-help story competing for our attention.

But think for a moment just how audacious, even ridiculous, the gospel is, how contrary it is to all our reason and experience. No wonder Paul calls it foolishness—for it isn't simply good news, but rather news that is too good to be true. After all, the biblical witness asserts not only that there is a God who has created and still sustains the vast cosmos, but that this God not only knows that we exist, but actually cares deeply and passionately about us—cares enough, in fact, to send God's only Son into the world to die that we might have life.

That message is, quite literally, *in-credible*, that is, not believable, because, in the face of the evening news, this news is simply too good to be true. Or, maybe it is so good that it must be true. That was the opinion of J. R. R. Tolkien, devout Christian and author of *The Lord of the Rings*, who argued that the gospel story is not only the perfect fairy tale but is actually the root of all fantasy, because it tells the deeply true and ultimately joyful story of humanity—fallen and redeemed—in all of its horror, poignancy, and glory. I have a hunch that if our preaching and teaching could capture just an ounce of the wonder, majesty, and mystery that is inherent to the gospel (and that permeated the work of Tolkien and Lewis), we might find more attentive ears listening to a story that is simultaneously truly fantastical and fantastically true. ⊕

DAVID J. LOSE holds the Marbury E. Anderson Chair in Biblical Preaching and serves as academic dean at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

mythical phoenix, but real re-creation and renewal. Don't count on magic; give yourself up to God.

3. Worst of all: most fantasy literature is dangerously dualistic; the gospel finally is not. In the fantasy literature, it is good versus evil, them versus us, us against the world, white hats and dark hats, apocalypse now. This, of course, is the worldview that gives us holy wars, the crusades, the terrorists (Muslim and Christian), and all the horrors of religion that drive away good and thoughtful people wholesale. To be sure, there is good and evil in the Bible (and in the world—though the Bible is always rather skeptical of our ability to separate them cleanly); but finally this distinction does not dominate the biblical worldview. The log is not in the other's eye, it is in my own. The line between good and evil is not between me and thee, it is within me. We have met the enemy, and he is us. Judge not, that you be not judged. God comes not to condemn the world (not even "them"), but to save it—with all its people, those like us and those not like us.

Make no mistake. These differences matter. I take popular culture seriously enough to think Marshall McLuhan was largely right, that the medium is the message. And if the medium is inimical to the message—as the fantasy medium often is, in regard to the gospel—the message cannot properly be heard. One does not gain "balance" by tuning the radio first to Rush Limbaugh and then to Al Franken. They're the same guy! Cheerleading for my cause by demonizing yours has the same result, no matter which side you choose. It divides. But in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither them nor us. Christ comes to break through all dividing walls of hostility, and the popular culture all too often exists precisely to build them higher. Fantasy literature lives in that world and shares its dangers; though, to be sure, good fantasy writers (like Lewis and Tolkien) will nuance these things with some care, and good preachers or teachers can help people understand that apocalyptic is a literary genre, not historical reality.

So, by all means, tell the story creatively, preach audaciously, put no one to sleep—but know the dangers. The dangers cannot be avoided, I suppose, because they come with the incarnation itself—God's daring entry into a world that will get it wrong if it can. All the more reason, though, to beware of too enthusiastic an embrace of a particular cultural moment or a particular culture genre. The gospel enters the culture—and challenges it; just as the preacher must do day by day, moment by moment, Sunday by Sunday. ⊕

*FREDERICK J. GAISER is professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and editor of Word & World.*