
Epic Fantasy and Christian Theology

by Gary Chartier

Though once snubbed as escapist fare with appeal only for a cult of aficionados, epic fantasy has attracted widespread popular interest in recent decades, as the public reception of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and, more recently, Stephen Donaldson's Thomas Covenant novels make clear.¹ Some Christian thinkers have contended that fantasy is a medium of expression that is especially appropriate to the Christian artist. All of these factors make it worthwhile to attempt a theological assessment of epic fantasy and its significance in light of Christian theology.

Before proceeding further, it will be helpful to define terms. What is epic fantasy? The epic is a genre of literature, Donaldson contends, that is concerned

explicitly with the largest and most important questions of humankind: What is the meaning of life? Why are we here? Who is God? . . . What is the religious and/or moral order of the universe?²

Epic literature is literature that gives us insight into these vital questions of meaning and purpose. "Throughout English literary history," Donaldson says,

the writers of 'epics' have wanted either to say something transcendent about what it means to be human, or to say something about the nature of transcendence itself. The tools and resources of fantasy were formed for just those subjects. . . . [No] other communicative tool would convey the size of what they wanted to say.³

Donaldson defines fantasy as:

a form of fiction in which the internal crises or conflicts or processes of the characters are dramatized as if they were external individuals or events.⁴

In fantasy, the world of objective, sensory experience mirrors that of subjective, mental experience.

Epic fantasy, then, is literature in which the characters confront issues of fundamental importance, and in which their internal struggles are reflected in the personalities of the external world created by the fantasist. It is a literary vehicle uniquely suited to the exploration of the nature and meaning of human existence.

Is the epic vision inherently competitive with the Christian vision? We will conclude that it is not. Epic fantasy would be competitive with a Christian account of ultimate meaning only if epic fantasy pretended to be exhaustive, something it does not do.

What criteria might we employ to determine the compatibility of the epic fantasist's world view with that of Christianity? We find such a standard when we consider what the epic fantasist is trying to do. His or her focus is not on specific questions of history, philosophy, or theology so much as it is upon the nature and meaning of human existence. Thus, it is not reasonable to expect all such questions to be addressed. Further, the epic fantasist employs an overtly mythic framework within which to communicate an understanding of the human situation—a structure that cannot be expected to closely resemble reality as we actually experience it in many particulars.

How, then, does epic fantasy view human existence? What does it say about life's meaning?

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First, that life has significance. The choices that Donaldson's Thomas Covenant makes do have a positive impact on his own life and those of the people he touches. As he transcends his self-hatred he finds value and purpose in his existence. His experience is designed to show the possibility of finding meaning, redemptive meaning, for one's life.

Second, epic fantasy's stress on the heroic underlines the fact that human decisions make a difference. Despite the hesitancy constantly prompted by his self-doubt, Covenant acts decisively, self-sacrificially, to confront his antagonist, Lord Foul. The quest of the One Ring in Tolkien's trilogy *really* has the *responsibility* to overturn the purposes of the Dark Lord. Whether Covenant will surrender his ring to Lord Foul is not a predetermined conclusion; and his choice has consequences with cosmic implications. Especially in a behaviorist, determinist era, in which the reality of human choice is denied; in a bureaucratic, institutionalized era, in which the effect of human choice is minimized, the heroic emphasis of epic fantasy calls attention to the actuality and significance of personal decision.

Third, because choices do matter, because supernatural interventions—whatever they may represent in the mind of the author—do occur in the world of epic fantasy, there is hope. There is almost an *eschatological* note, as in Tolkien's *Return of the King*—where a new age dawns under the leadership of a returned monarch (one who, intriguingly, has been among the other characters of the story, unbeknownst to them, throughout the trilogy). Similarly, Covenant's defeat of Foul ushers in a new era in the Land. And this is really the ultimate message of epic fantasy—human life is meaningful. It is especially meaningful because it can be directed purposefully. It makes sense to act purposefully, because our decisions make a difference. Furthermore, our decisions make a difference, especially insofar as they contribute to or anticipate our eschatological hope.

Is such a vision compatible with Christianity? Clearly, Christians have always made similar affirmations. The doctrines of humanity's creation in the divine image and the inestimable cost

incurred in the course of human redemption both testify to Christianity's high view of human value. Continual appeals for personal decision, the importance of numerous heroic characters in the Old Testament, and of One Hero in the New—all point to the significance of personal choice. And Christianity views the success of that One as proleptic of the decisive victory of God in human history. Thus, the Christian and epic visions share certain basic elements. Insofar as it stresses these elements, the epic vision communicates truth.

The Christian believes that the characters in an epic fantasy do not create redemptive meaning for their lives and for that of the reader; they discover it.

Tolkien may serve as a good example. Probably the greatest writer both of fantasy and of the traditional epic in the 20th century, and a deeply committed Christian; he nonetheless created a mythology in his *Silmarillion* and *Lord of the Rings* that, while it is not anti-Christian, lacks the clearly stated Christianity of, say, Charles Williams. As Tolkien expresses his position in a letter to Milton Waldman,

Myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary 'real' world.⁵

According to Verlyn Flieger, "*The Silmarillion* is Tolkien's gloss on Christianity, illustrating its universals, not its specifics."⁶

Gunnar Urang admits that the occasional oblique reference to an unnamed divine power in *The Lord of the Rings* is

as close as we come in Tolkien's work to the idea of a God. Yet the *patterns* of providential ordering and eschatological crisis are there. What is important religiously in this work is not a faith *in* a 'God' who orders all according to his will but a faith *that there is* such a providential design; not a hope in a God who at the end brings all things to their consummation but a hope that the happy ending will come.⁷

Though Tolkien's mythos does not relate Christian truth as such, the sense of an ever-present

Providence to which Urang alludes qualifies its message as clearly Christian.

Despite this common ground, however, the approach of epic fantasy might legitimately be seen as cause for concern for two reasons. First, epic fantasy has been viewed by some as a kind of “do-it-yourself cosmology”—a means whereby writer and reader join forces to create a mythic framework within which to understand human reality, an imaginative framework that is uniquely theirs.⁸ Donaldson seems to support this when he

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affirms that “it is the responsibility of every human being to create the meaning of his/her life.”⁹

Naturally, Christianity rejects the attempt to do cosmology—in any ultimate sense—on one’s own. The Christian believes that the characters in an epic fantasy do not create redemptive meaning for their lives and for that of the reader; they discover it. The meaning of human existence is independent of the human imagination; it is grounded in God, our Creator and Redeemer. In fact, the Christian theologian is apt to find something quite puzzling about Donaldson’s affirmations of hope, and something even more curious in the following comment from Verlyn Flieger:

[Tolkien] gives us, for however brief a period, a universe of beauty and meaning and purpose. Whether there really is such a universe is less important than the undeniable truth that we need one badly, that we are deeply uneasy at the lack of one, and at the prospect that we may have to make, or remake, one ourselves.¹⁰

While it is certainly true that we do need very badly “a universe of beauty and meaning and purpose,” it is difficult to see how making or remaking one ourselves would help. If our hope is to be more than a delusion, a cunningly wrought fable, it must have a basis in objective fact. Without a real resurrection, Paul proclaims, Christians would be the most miserable of all people. Momentary self-deception might make us feel good for a while, but in the long run it must lead

to an unhealthy and irresponsible engagement with reality.

Thus, the proponents of “do-it-yourself cosmology” are placed in a quandary. Either they must admit that the hope and meaning they wish to communicate have their basis in a realm of meaning that transcends the artistic imagination, or they must concede the truly escapist nature of their work. As we have already suggested, for the Christian epic fantasy is not escapist; it tells us something about the way reality really is. But without such an overarching scheme of meaning, the burden of justifying his or her seemingly extravagant claims for human purpose and hope rests upon the epic fantasist.

A further consideration is appropriate at this juncture, however. The epic fantasist is under no more obligation to be consistent than are the rest of us. He or she can be truthful in communicating the reality of hope and meaning without sensing the need for a transcendent ground for his or her contention. The work of the scientist who develops a cure for AIDS will be no less useful should it happen that he or she is an atheist. Such a researcher’s picture of the world will be incomplete, certainly; but his or her conclusions about AIDS will be nonetheless true. In the same way, should an epic fantasist who promotes a view of reality that is implicitly rooted in eschatological hope profess no faith that might constitute reasonable support for this view, it would still be inappropriate to reject the truth clearly communicated in his work.

Scholars receptive to the possibility of natural theology have supported this position. Jacques Maritain, for instance, contends that there exists a real inspiration, coming not from the Muses, but from the living God. This is a special movement of the natural order by which the first intelligence, when it pleases, gives the artist a creative movement superior to the yardstick of reason, and which uses, in super-elevating them, all the rational energies of art. Its impulse, moreover, humans are free to follow or to vitiate.¹¹

Norman Reed Cary cites the Jesuit critic Harold Gardiner’s belief that “in addition to the conscious purpose the author has in mind (the *finis operantis*) there is ‘an intrinsic finality, a

goal inherent in the work itself (*finis operis*), and this will be operative whether the author thinks of it or intends it or not."¹² And perhaps most surprisingly, the noted American Baptist theologian A. H. Strong writes that "the great poets, taken together, give united and harmonious testimony to the fundamental conceptions of natural religion, if not to those of the specifically Christian scheme."¹³

It is easy to see the relevance of these suggestions for the problems posed by epic fantasy's non-Christian components. If we admit that literary and artistic creation that is not inspired by special revelation may still owe its essence to general revelation, we can better understand how the epic fantasist can affirm an overarching order from which values and ethical principles can be derived, without necessarily comprehending the relationship between Christian faith and the hope and meaning he or she asserts.

The second of our two questions about epic fantasy concerns its stress on the heroic. Does this emphasis, while admittedly compatible to some degree with that of Christianity, compete with the already-won victory of Jesus and the necessity of grace?

Certainly, the possibility exists that the protagonist of an epic fantasy, and thus, vicariously, the reader, might find the answers to life's questions in a ruggedly individualistic heroism. Such a position is not far removed, after all, from that of the do-it-yourself cosmologists, since both approaches stress the ultimacy of individual decision—the one with regard to the definition of meaning, the other in relation to the resolution of real-world problems.

Epic fantasy need not, however, reflect this naive faith in the heroic. And even should it appear to do so, we must be careful that our expectations not exceed the necessary limitations of a work or of the genre to which it belongs.

Donaldson's Covenant stories do not present a naive vision of the invincible hero; far from it. What, then, is Covenant's role? The Creator of the Land cannot himself employ "wild magic" to bring the reign of Lord Foul to an end. To do so would be to risk destroying the "Arch of Time"

and freeing Foul to roam eternity at will. Thus, the Creator—in the form of an old and decrepit beggar—must commission Covenant, and later Linden Avery as well—to confront Foul. Further, Foul has no power to compel Covenant to surrender the white-gold ring that is the source of his power; the decision must be Covenant's alone. Thus, it is true that Covenant assumes almost cosmic proportions: Upon his success rests the future of the Land.

But Covenant is not a traditional heroic figure. Leprous, self-deprecating, destructive of those he loves, he is no model man, no benchmark of humanity, and Donaldson does not present him as such. He comes to the Land not so much to offer salvation as to find it. Covenant's confrontation with evil is ultimately salvific. In Donaldson's word, the "characters or images" of epic fantasy seduce Covenant

away from cynicism and bitterness and hatred; toward love, friendship, and loyalty, toward the willingness to risk himself for things larger than he is. . . . Despite his own sick, stupid, painful, reflected, alienated existence, he learns to accept his life, affirm his spirit to acknowledge the things he loves and believes in. . . .¹⁴

For the epic vision to be Christianly faithful, there [must] be sufficient parallels to these divine realities that the epic hero not appear a self-sufficient superman.

It is the product of his choice, to be sure, but not of his will. He is "elected" to enter the Land by the Creator, and his growth comes, not as the result of either an introspection that reveals all his guilt feelings to have been mere neuroses or one that eventuates in his concluding that his "dark" side is simply to be accepted. Instead, growth occurs as he fights his own evil, represented by Lord Foul, in light of what he slowly comes to realize about the nature of reality.

But while the opportunity for redemption that the Land provides could be viewed as a kind of grace, there is, admittedly no apparent providence or "assisting grace." It would seem important that, for the epic vision to be Christianly faithful, there

be sufficient parallels to these divine realities that the epic hero not appear a self-sufficient superman.

Of course, as Benjamin Warfield reminds us in another context, there is no mention of them in the parable of the prodigal son, either:

There is no atonement in this parable, and indeed no Christ in even the most attenuated function which could possibly be ascribed to Christ. There is no creative grace in this parable; and indeed no Holy Spirit in any operation the most ineffective that could be attributed to him.¹⁵

Even this, the most famous parable of our Lord, is an incomplete picture of the plan of salvation. And yet no one cries “foul” when it is cited as the encapsulation of the most precious of Christian truths. An oft-quoted gem from our own Seventh-day Adventist heritage may help to illustrate the same point:

The greatest want of the world is the want of men—men who will not be bought or sold; men who in their inmost souls are true and honest; men who do not fear to call sin by its right name; men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole; men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.

But such a character is not the result of accident; it is not due to special favors or endowments of Providence. A noble character is the result of self-discipline, of the subjection of the lower to the higher nature.¹⁶

In Adventism’s view, God does not intervene in ways that violate human freedom because to do so would be to confirm Satan’s charges that God is the sort of person who would do just such a thing.

While the passage concludes with a reference to God—the goal of noble character is to be achieved throughout “the surrender of self for the service of love to God and man”—there is still no mention of assisting grace, or of divine providence as a basis for heroic achievement.

The point: just as this passage does not encompass all that Ellen White believed and wrote about character development and related topics, so it should be obvious that the apparently absolute

claims of the epic fantasist about “heroism and transcendental love,” questionable if taken in isolation, may be true when they are relativized by being placed within a larger context. Thus, while the emphasis in the epic is typically on the importance of human decision, the Christian theologian may find in this stress a reminder of the reality of human freedom, not a denial of the priority of grace.

Furthermore, what makes Covenant’s choices important, what renders him heroic, is divine self-limitation, a concept important in many versions of Christianity. While the limitation Donaldson proposes does not correspond with exactitude to those envisioned by Christians, the message is still similar: The fight against evil imposes certain constraints on God’s activity in the world; to ignore those constraints is to risk the loss of a greater good, perhaps even of the “Great Controversy” itself. In Adventism’s view, God does not intervene in ways that violate human freedom because to do so would be to confirm Satan’s charges that God is the sort of person who would do just such a thing. In the Covenant novels, intervention by the Creator risks destroying the “Arch of Time” and thus releasing Lord Foul into eternity. Donaldson’s Creator is a kind of finite deity, resembling perhaps the god imaged in process thought; he does not share all the characteristics of the Christian God, at least as typically conceived. But he does face similar dilemmas in relation to his activity in the world. And it is these dilemmas, rather than any inherent heroic qualities on Covenant’s part, that lead ultimately to Covenant’s involvement in the deliverance of the Land.

It is safe to conclude that, while Donaldson’s cosmos is not that of traditional Christianity, it shares with it certain important affinities. I further conclude that a certain selectivity and even distortion in the parables of our Lord—if taken literally—help us to recognize that the lack of certain features in Donaldson’s cosmos does not by definition classify his work as anti-Christian. The themes that are important in the Covenant novels—the rejection of power and the triumph of love, recognition and rejection of the evil within, the importance of human decision—are essen-

tially Christian ones, even if the ways in which they are worked out in Donaldson's secondary world do not always parallel the manner in which they are exhibited in the primary world.

Of course, it would be perfectly possible to construct an epic fantasy that promoted blatantly anti-Christian themes—the victory of might over right, for instance. But the works of Donaldson and Tolkien reveal that epic fantasy can be a vehicle for the communication of Christian truth. Epic fantasy will not communicate Christian truth in its entirety anymore than other varieties of literature. But it will emphasize the meaning, hope, and ultimate victory that are fundamental components of the Christian vision.

Epic fantasy's fantasy component enables the fantasist to objectify, to externalize the inner conflicts of his or her characters. This use of symbolism is similar to but usually not identical with allegory. Expressed by means of magic and the supernatural, it is what makes fantasy a unique literary genre.

The popularity of the epic reflects the "lostness," the sense of futility and abandonment, that typify the human predicament. The Christian theologian finds in this fact both an empirical index to the state of humankind, and a hint that humans were created for something better, more fulfilling.

The epic vision emphasizes the possibility that human beings can make a difference in the world, that they can "project their passion against the void" successfully. Epic fantasy's anticipation of the eschaton, its emphasis on eucatastrophe, may be its most important contribution to Christian faith and life.¹⁷ Epic fantasy re-presents the fundamental datum of Christian faith that the present order is transitory, that human striving for truth and justice in the present has meaning because of God's promised eschatological future. While, taken by itself, this epic vision might be viewed as competitive with the Christian vision, taken on its own terms it is a powerful symbolic reenactment of the message of biblical apocalyptic.¹⁸ Just as Jesus himself did not address certain themes exhaustively in one sitting, so epic fan-

tasy should not be expected to provide the whole truth about the meaning and purpose of human existence, something it does not purport to do. But this limitation should not prevent us from seeing its ability to convey some portions of the Christian message very clearly.

This communication of Christian truth need not be intentional. Just as Paul's pagans had the

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law without knowing the law, so, too, is it not possible that a writer like Donaldson has sensed intuitively the Christian truth that life is truly meaningful? Not only can the Christian apologist find in epic fantasy a powerful tool for communicating the gospel; the Christian theologian can recognize that truth, albeit in distorted form, in the work of the non-Christian fantasist.

For some, epic fantasy is a do-it-yourself cosmology. The hope and meaning it offers are, according to this view, to be created individually by a writer and his or her readers. Rejecting this view, the Christian declares that only in light of what Jesus has done and will do for us does it make sense to promise hope and meaning. The Christian reader, then, may be the only one who really dares to imagine that epic fantasy, viewed on what we have called its covert level, is really true.

While proponents "of the modern American novel would argue that seduction by epic vision can only lead to stupid destruction," Donaldson is quick to note dryly that this response represents "precisely the attitude Lord Foul takes toward Thomas Covenant."¹⁹ And here the Christian theologian will wholeheartedly agree. Of course, adhering to a vision of the eschatological makes no sense to one for whom "man is a futile passion." But the epic vision will be only natural to one who anticipates the victory of God's love.

Perhaps the sweetest pleasure that fantasy that

has captured the Christian vision of hope and meaning imparts is what C. S. Lewis has called the “baptism of the imagination.” Epic fantasy will have well served its purpose when it imparts to readers, as it did to Lewis, a vision of that which is “more gold than gold.” Writing of his first encounter with the fantasy of George MacDonald, Lewis says:

What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptize . . . my imagination. It did nothing to my intellect nor (at that time) to my conscience. Their turn came far later . . . But when the process was complete. . . I found that I was still with MacDonald and that he had accompanied me all the way and that I was now at

last ready to hear from him much that he could not have told me at that first meeting. But in a sense, what he was now telling me was the very same that he had told me from the beginning. . . . The quality which had enchanted me in his imaginative works turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying and ecstatic reality in which we all live. I should have been shocked in my teens if anyone had told me that what I learned to love in *Phantasies* was goodness. But now that I know, I see there was no deception. The deception is all the other way round—in that prosaic moralism which confines goodness to the region of Law and Duty, which never lets us feel in our face the sweet air blowing from the “land of righteousness,” never reveals the elusive Form which if once seen must inevitably be desired with all but sensuous desire—the thing (in Sappho’s phrase) “more gold than gold.”²⁰

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See Stephen R. Donaldson, *Epic Fantasy in the Modern World: A Few Observations* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 1, 2. According to Donaldson:

My first book, *Lord Foul’s Bane*, has now sold close to 5 million copies around the world. In 1983 I out-sold every writer in the world except Wilbur Smith—in New Zealand. I was the best-selling author in Alice Springs, Australia, for six months, and in the U. S. my last “Covenant” novel, *White Gold Wielder*, was on the *NY Times* bestseller list for 26 weeks, selling close to two hundred thousand copies.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 11. Emphasis in original.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 4.

5. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 144.

6. Verlyn Flieger, *Splintered Light: Language and Logos in Tolkien’s World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. xix.

7. Gunnar Urang, *Shadows of Heaven* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1973), p. 120.

8. I borrowed this term from Ursula LeGuin, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Susan Wood, ed., (New York: Putnam, 1979), p. 125, who employs it in a much more positive fashion than I.

9. Donaldson, p. 17.

10. Flieger, p. viii.

11. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph Evans (New York: Scribners, 1962), p. 66.

12. Norman Reed Cary, *Christian Criticism in the 20th Century: Theological Approaches to Literature* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat, 1975), pp. 109, 110.

13. Augustus H. Strong, *The Great Poets and Their Theology* (Philadelphia: Griffith, 1897), p. vii.

14. Donaldson, p. 17.

15. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 46, 47.

16. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903), p. 57.

17. Tolkien describes the Incarnation as a fantasy: a “fairy story” that “has entered History and the primary world.” That this seeming legend should be true implies a “hallowing” of legends, “especially the ‘happy ending’”—what Tolkien calls a eucatastrophe (J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* [London: Allen, 1964], pp. 60, 62).

18. Frederick A. Kreuziger, *Apocalypse and Science Fiction: A Dialectic of Religious and Secular Soteriologies*, AAR Academy Series 40 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982).

19. Donaldson, p. 16.

20. C. S. Lewis, introduction, *Lilith*, by George MacDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. xi, xii.