

Harry Potter – Harmless Fantasy?

A recent US consumer research survey states that over half of children between 6 and 17 have read at least one Harry Potter book with thousands reporting multiple reading of all the books. The Grand Rapids Press recently stated that the Harry Potter web site receives over 8 million hits daily from within the United States and another 2 million from other countries. The Harry Potter movement is such that it can't be ignored. No longer is this a little fantasy series that attracts children. The movie industry has put Harry out in front of the whole world!

The public's response to the movie and the books by author J. K. Rowling are varied. Seemingly, most of the public adores Harry and sees him as a model for our children. Some Christians have objected to the witchcraft in the stories, but a surprising number have said that the books are "harmless fantasy." Educators, even Christian educators, have been heard to support Harry Potter and encourage their students to read them. Valerie Shafer, a teacher at Eastern Christian School in Wyckoff, NJ was recently quoted in Calvin Spark:

"My key point in defending the idea is that kids are reading the books anyway. We can ignore it or we can go over it with them. If we are not teaching discernment to our kids, who is? We need to expose our kids to what's in the world. The Bible says we have to watch, look and get to know the enemy, so if kids are reading it, I'm going to use it."

Parents are asking for a perspective on Harry Potter that helps them make decisions as to how much they are to allow their children to participate in this craze. This article hopes to give such a perspective.

A Helpful Way to See the Issue

After reading books 1 and 4 of the Harry Potter series and reading article after article of critique both for and against the series, my head was swimming. How can we approach this issue? The critique writers can make it so complicated! I think there are three helpful measures we can use to approach this issue: Understanding of literary fantasy, Scripture, and the Holy Spirit's work in our consciences.

Understanding of Literary Fantasy

Harry Potter is fantasy and there are different levels of fantasy. The first level is *safe* or *moral* fantasy. This kind of fantasy has a clear distinction between good and evil with a healthy worldview that allows for a higher power to ultimately win over evil. Also, the author's intentions and worldview are clear. The second level is *dangerous* fantasy. This fantasy may divide between good and evil, but the power source for the good side is confusing, and the good characters display an ability to use the same means of power as the bad characters. The author's worldview and intentions are not clear. The third level of

fantasy I call *occult* fantasy. This fantasy is occult evangelism. The aim of this fantasy is to immerse people in the enticing power of the occult.

Books like C. S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia fit into the *moral* fantasy category. Here we have a world created by C. S. Lewis that has witches, dragons and spells in it – as well as little children for heroes. Yet, the author has a lion in the story [Aslan] that is completely good and is the source of all good power. The children's acts of power are subject to the good lion's will and authority. Evil power cannot match or ultimately win over the lion's unconditional love. With a clear sense of good and evil where the good's power source is found in a single, completely loving character, the plot is laid out. When the characters fall into an evil manner of action, they don't have success, and instead, they must have a change of heart – repent if you will – and submit to Aslan's way.

I would categorize the Harry Potter series as *dangerous* fantasy. The story line is seemingly clear as a struggle of good versus evil. Harry is a victim who conquers his persecutors. Harry is a victim of the evil Lord Voldemort who kills his parents. However, Voldemort is unable to kill baby Harry because of Harry's mother's sacrifice. A scar on Harry's forehead reminds him of this battle throughout the books. Harry is also a victim of his uncle and aunt who bring him up as a "muggle" (a nonmagic person, but Harry is really a wizard). Harry is forced to sleep in a closet and treated rather unfairly and cruelly. In the end, through the use of magical power, Harry conquers his persecutors. The good wins over evil. Why would I categorize this as dangerous fantasy? Two reasons: worldview in relationship to power, and confused morality.

J.K. Rowling describes a worldview that does not have a clear sense of God. Oh, there is definitely an understanding of religion. Harry once comments that one of his professors looks a bit like a "vicar." There is an apparent understanding that the church exists, but like what has happened across England, the historical church is viewed as powerless and archaic. Since God is powerless, there must be other power that young children can grasp on to. That power is seen in the world of magic. Harry is an actual wizard – he is special, different, gifted. Not like the muggles, they are "ignorant." It's as if the wizards and magical people really run the world and the muggles just plod along in their powerless ignorance. Rowling's worldview allows for both the natural world and spiritual world, and she has got it right – the spiritual world has power and the natural world has human strength.

The danger of Rowling's worldview is the lack of God's ultimate power and therefore the confusion of good and evil's source of power. Harry uses the same power source as his archrival Voldemort. They use magical wands from the Phoenix, a powerful mythological bird that in human mythology represents resurrection. The phoenix bird "lived 500 years," according to legend, "burned itself to ashes on a pyre, and rose alive from the ashes to live another period." (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1988. p.883) You see, Rowling's worldview sees the need for resurrection power. The Devil has been envious of the

“power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms far above all rule and authority, power and dominion...” (Ephesians 1:19-21)

The true source of resurrection power is Jesus Christ! This power is given to all who are believers in Jesus! Rowling's worldview doesn't allow for God but wants the resurrection power – and she gives it to both “good” and “bad.”

Part of this worldview danger is Rowling's clear use of ties to what is part of human history, linguistics, mythology or occult history. Rowling has an educational degree in mythology and it shows in her intelligent writings. Some examples:

- Hermione Granger – Harry's female close friend could represent Hermione who was the daughter of Helen of Troy and Menelaus the king of Sparta. Hermione was abandoned when she was 9 years old and later in life married Orestes who with his sister Electra avenges his father by killing his mother and her lover Aegisthus. (WNNCD, p. 831).
- Draco Malfoy – Harry's arch student rival could represent Draco – a cruel ruler in Ancient Greece who held to and framed a severe code of laws (from which the term “draconian” is derived). Malfoy could be taken from the French language: mal (bad), foi (faith).
- Fluffy – the three headed pet of Hagrid the groundskeeper who keeps guard over the sorcerer's stone could be a version of Cerberus, the three headed dog that, in Greco-Roman mythology, guarded the entrance to Hades (WNNCD, p. 222).
- Diagon Alley – the magic shopping district where Harry and Hagrid went to find school supplies and to find Harry's wand could mean “Diagonal ley”. Ley is defined as “grassland.” It's a French word used in old English contexts. In Britain, a ley line is a line connecting ancient sites of Britain and was thought to have magical powers.
- Professor Minerva McGonagall – the professor who worked with the first year students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry could represent Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, medicine, the arts, dyeing, science and trade, but also of war. As Minerva Medica she is the patroness of physicians. Minerva is believed to be the inventor of numbers and musical instruments. She is thought to be of Etruscan origin, as the goddess Menrva or Menerva. Later she was equated with the Greek Athena. (Source of information on this is from the internet: Witch Weekly.com – I don't suggest anyone goes there...)
- The Evil Lord Voldemort – the murderer of Harry's parents and source for the lightening mark on Harry's forehead could represent the French “vole” meaning, “to fly”, “de” meaning “from”, and “mort” meaning “death”. Putting it together:

“Flying from death.” This is exactly what Voldemort does. At one point in book one, Voldemort is possessing Professor Quirrell who is an accomplice to Voldemort’s need for life and power. “ See what I have become?” the face said. [The face is Voldemort’s on the back of Quirrell’s head which he usually covered in a turban] “Mere shadow and vapor...I have form only when I can share another’s body...but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds...” (Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone, Scholastic. p. 293) Quirrell enters the forbidden forest cloaked to disguise himself and he finds a unicorn. “The cloaked figure reached the unicorn lowered its head over the wound in the animal’s side and began to drink its blood.” (HPSS. p. 256) The need for blood is straight out of the occult. It’s Satan’s desire to mimic the Lord Jesus. Voldemort says later, “...Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks...you saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the forest...and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own...” (HPSS. p. 294) In book 4, Voldemort flies from death by drinking a vial of Harry’s blood in order to be resurrected with a new body. (Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Scholastic. Pp. 642-643.)

There are many more examples of how Rowling has tied her story to her knowledge of mythology or even occult characters and practice. The issue with these examples is Rowling’s worldview. In it, there is no God, and all these ties represent power attained by other means than by God. The danger lies in the effect this kind of fantasy has on the young mind. The commercial industry has capitalized on this curious young mind with such things as Harry Potter Trading Cards. Each card features spells, charms, characters and creatures from the book series. It is all a little too real and therefore...dangerous.

Another reason Rowling’s fantasy is in the dangerous category is its confused morality. Harry has been heralded as an example of morality. Yes, Harry is giving and kind. He has compassion for poor Neville who is struggling just to keep up with everyone else. The confusion arises because Harry seems to be “righteous” in his actions. He is a victim so what he does seems right – even if he exacts revenge over his “muggle” family, or breaks the school rules to accomplish what is good. Charlie Rutter, eight, from Kent, England says, “I really like the funny parts, especially when Harry blows up his aunt” (Book magazine, May/June 2000. p. 42) Really, the reason for confusion is because God is out of the picture. Human morality without God is going to be confusing. Without absolute truth, whatever means we need to use to conquer that which persecutes us will seem moral.

Scripture’s Perspective

What does the Bible have to say about the Harry Potter series? Nothing directly of course - Harry is a fictional character out of the mind of J. K. Rowling. The Bible does however talk about witchcraft. Deuteronomy 18:10-12 is a challenge from God to the nation of Israel as they move into the promise land:

“Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you.”

Yet, by reading the books or watching the movie is one actually “engaging in witchcraft?” Not necessarily. Passages from Scripture that have a bigger impact on this problem are those dealing with a Biblical worldview, such as Romans 8:9-11:

“You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.” Romans 8:9-11

In a Biblical worldview, man is greatly influenced by the spiritual world. If man is controlled by the sinful nature, the devil and his dark world will have control. If man has a life in Christ, he is controlled by the Spirit of God who lives in Him. However, in our western world, we elevate man to a place of power. We look for man’s achievements, we honor his ingenuity, and we praise his ability to harness power. For man to be controlled by anything is weak. In contrast the Bible calls for us to be weak. Jesus says, “*Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 5:3). Man doesn’t conquer power, man submits to God the ultimate power. God uses man for His kingdom and therefore empowers man. But, the power lies in God.

Harry conquers power. Harry in his ingenuity grasps good power and uses it to conquer evil. Harry doesn’t first submit, then become empowered. Harry conquers power.

The Holy Spirit’s Work in Our Consciences

Hopefully, you’ll have seen that the intent of this article is not to tear apart Harry Potter. J. K. Rowling is clearly a talented author with a load of creativity. The question is, what is God calling of you? 1 Peter 1:13-16 says it beautifully:

“Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’” 1 Peter 1:13-16

If we have a relationship with Christ, we can make decisions about what to do about Harry Potter. As God calls those who are His children to “be holy,” through the conviction of the Holy Spirit within us, we can know if it’s healthy for us to enjoy Harry Potter.

When I read some of the dangerous aspects of this engaging fantasy such as the drinking of blood to gain life, and the equal power of good and evil, I made a conscious decision to be cautious. Having seen a number of people messed up for life by witchcraft and the occult has shown me that even though Harry Potter is fantasy and impossible, in the realm of the dark kingdom, it is real. In a testimony recently written, a woman who has been highly entwined in the occult writes:

“I don’t like what I see in the future for our children because of Harry Potter. I know what kind of a living hell my own life is because I’m a real life Harry Potter...I don’t understand why they don’t bother to show you what happens to Harry Potter’s soul after every time he casts a spell...Another little piece gets torn away until your soul is eventually torn to shreds and you turn into any empty shell of a person. They don’t show the torment that you have to endure from demons because you talk to them and use them for your own purposes, exacting a price each time you call on them. Yes....people...magic is real.”

Yet, we do not live as victims if we are in Christ. We are “*more than conquerors through him who loved us*” (*Romans 8:37*). We don’t have to be afraid of being taken over by an uncontrollable desire to become witches and wizards. We just need to let the Holy Spirit lead and be wise about it! Caution is the key. Spiritual wisdom is needed! What is God saying to you?

If you and your children have been reading the Harry Potter series, I suggest you simply talk about the worldview from which J. K. Rowling writes, and make sure you have a healthy perspective. If you or your children haven’t read any of the series yet, I suggest that if you must do anything, as a parent, read the first book yourself. Understand that it is fantasy that fits the dangerous category and needs to be approached in caution. Let the Lord direct you on what to do next.

David Huizenga
December 7, 2001