

What are Christians to do with Harry Potter?

Deuteronomy 18:9-14; Ephesians 6:10-17

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Wizards and Muggles. Hogwarts and Hagrid. Gringotts and Quidditch. Gryffindor and Bludgers. Mail-delivering owls and Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans – from chocolate to earwax! Welcome to the magical world of Harry Potter!

Harry Potter is a bespectacled adolescent who lives in London and attends the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry is the main character in a best-selling series of fantasy books by J.K. Rowling. When Harry was a small child, his parents were murdered by a wizard gone bad, known as Lord Voldemort. He tried to kill Harry also, but his powers simply left a scar in the form of a lightning bolt on Harry's forehead. The evil power bounced back to curse Lord Voldemort himself. This made the evil wizard extremely angry, but very powerless; his mission is to recover his power and kill Harry.

All this is unbeknownst to Harry in the early years of his life, for as an orphan he is taken to live with his aunt and uncle, who despise him. They pretend he doesn't exist, make him sleep in a cupboard under the stairs, and allow their son's favorite form of entertainment to be to bullying Harry. While cousin Dudley receives 39 birthday gifts, Harry's birthdays are forgotten, not even marked with a cake.

Upon his 11th birthday, Harry is quite surprised to receive a letter declaring that he is a wizard and inviting him to attend the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. A half-giant named Hagrid brings him this news and takes Harry school shopping in the village known only to the wizarding world.

Harry's story unfolds throughout six books and three movies and a promised seventh book as the end of the series. The books have been on best-sellers lists for months and years. They are a favorite among many children and adults. The series is credited with reviving an interest in reading among children and youth.

Some have critiqued the books as endorsing witchcraft and black magic. As we heard from Deuteronomy, such practices are not condoned by biblical teachings; instead we are called to seek guidance from appropriately trained spiritual leaders. My experience in reading the books is that they do not foster an attachment to evil powers. As an editorial in *The Christian Century* said, "Harry Potter's world...is a moral one: there are clear

differences between good wizards and evil ones, and the virtues of courage and generosity are pitted against the vices of pride and spitefulness.”¹

One of the valuable effects of fantasy writing is to remove us from the everyday world and prompt us to look at the ordinary in fresh ways. In an essay titled, “The Ethics of Elfland,” “G.K. Chesterton claimed that his own journey to Christian faith began with his childhood absorption in fairy tales. From fairy tales he learned that the world is precious but puzzling, coherent but mysterious, full of unseen connections and decisive truths. The fantasy tales taught him that the world is ‘a wild and startling place, which might have been quite different, but which is quite delightful.’”²

The Harry Potter books have that same appeal. They cultivate children’s imaginations and awareness of a richer and deeper reality. That’s exactly the purpose of religious teaching: to open our eyes to visions of a world full of hope, healing, and love. We can use our imaginations to envision ways to pray even when God seems absent, to feed the hungry when the need is overwhelming, and to empathize with others who are unlike us and to love them. Jesus encourages us to change and become like children, otherwise we may never enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 18:3-4).

Receiving the Harry Potter series as beneficial, as well as just plain fun to read, let’s consider some of the themes from Harry’s story. They may sound surprisingly familiar and even parallel our stories of faith. I will be vague in some details so as not to spoil the fun for those who have not read the books, but fans will likely recognize some of the events to which I refer.

An overarching theme of the series is the triumph of good over evil.³ The evil villain in the story, Lord Voldemort, is trying to seize all power so as to rule over those who firmly hold to that which is good. Harry and his friends understand that there is a fundamental difference between good and evil. To allow evil to prevail will result in destruction of life. They learn that to prevent evil from overpowering the good requires careful attention and cooperation.

On the train that takes students to Hogwarts, one of the first people Harry meets is Draco Malfoy. Draco says to Harry, “You’ll soon find that some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don’t want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there.”

He held out his hand to shake Harry’s but Harry didn’t take it.

“I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks,” he said coolly.⁴

Harry is already discerning between good and evil, choosing his friends by their character, not by popularity or status.

Upon arrival at the school, new students are divided into four different houses for community living. A Sorting Hat is placed on each student's head and it declares which house best suits each student. When Harry places the hat on his head, he hears it debating whether Harry should be placed in the house known for its evil works. Harry himself asks to be placed in the house known for its long line of students who fought against evil. This was his parents' house and this is the house to which Harry is assigned, Gryffindor, largely due to his choice. A wise teacher later affirms Harry's choice, saying, "Our choices show what we truly are, more than abilities."⁵

There are amazing adventures throughout the books which illustrate the triumph of good over evil. Much of the victory comes from the intentional choice of good over evil by Harry and his friends, Ron and Hermione. They also work together, sharing their various gifts and skills, to overcome great challenges and clear the way for good to prevail.

In one of his speeches, the Headmaster Dumbledore, speaks to the need for unity: "We are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open."⁶

Indeed, even today the forces of evil are strong. We need to make a choice against evil and for goodness. We need to unite our efforts in order that goodness will prevail.

Early on Harry learns the power of love, another major theme. When the evil wizard came to kill Harry's parents, his mother loved him so much that she threw herself in the path of the curse to shield Harry. The power of love triumphed over the power of evil, saving his life. Professor Dumbledore reflects, "To have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever."⁷ The experience of this tremendous love early in his life shapes Harry's character. He frequently finds himself in the position of choosing to love his neighbor and save another from the harm of evil. Having known the blessing of sacrificial love, Harry is also willing to offer sacrificial love to others.

At one point Harry is sent on a mission with other students to save several people. Harry is the first to find the victims. While he easily rescues the one for whom he is responsible, he fears that the other victims

may be harmed if their rescuers do not arrive in time. He waits to see if the rescuers arrive, and if not, he is prepared to save additional victims, even though it will hold consequences for himself.

It is reminiscent of Jesus' teachings: "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile....In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 5:41; 7:12a). Jesus' life and ministry was a model of the power of love and nature of sacrificial love. We are called to love one another as God has loved us. That often involves taking risks to serve others and a greater good. The power of love can conquer much evil.

A third theme found in the series is justice. Several characters suffer from enslavement and oppression. Harry himself lives at his relatives' home in a form of bondage, forced to receive meals in his room through a cat flap. House elves are treated as slaves from generation to generation. A student is taken captive by the cunning manipulation of the evil wizard. Beloved characters are wrongly accused and imprisoned for crimes they had not committed.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione, with empowerment from Headmaster Dumbledore, seek to uncover the truth and try to correct some of the injustice. In some instances they are able to save innocent lives and attain freedom from unjust punishments.

The heroes of the series befriend the poor and marginalized. They assist Hagrid, the Keeper of the Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. He was one unjustly accused of wrongdoing years ago; some have not forgotten the false accusations, but Dumbledore knows the truth and has given him a job on campus. Hagrid, however, sometimes forgets the rules of the school and gets himself in trouble. On several occasions his young friends take some dangerous risks to get Hagrid out of "hot water" [aka "dragon breathing fire"].

Even in the world of wizardry, there is prejudice and racism. Pure-blood wizards often disdain those who have only one parent of wizard blood and call them "Mudbloods" or half-breeds. "Muggles" are those who are non-magic people. When a good friend is called names because of her "race," Ron rises to her defense. Our champions often take the side of the oppressed and the underdog. In this way they remind us of Jesus, who willingly sat at the table with sinners and tax collectors, who associated with prostitutes and Samaritans. He included those whom others excluded. Advocating for justice is an important theme in the scriptures.

There are many other minor themes throughout the books that echo our Christian values. There is an emphasis on truth-telling. Dumbledore says, “The truth. It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution.”⁸ “The truth is generally preferable to lies.”⁹

Throughout the books, friendships are developed and tested. Sometimes friends hurt one another, but often there follows an apology and forgiveness. Friends sometimes become jealous of others’ success, causing rifts, but reconciliation prevails.

The students are blessed by leaders at the school who exemplify the values of goodness, love, justice. The Headmaster is a mentor who empowers students, equipping them with just enough knowledge to get them through the next adventure and who sends help to those who ask for it. This encouragement sustains Harry during some of his most difficult challenges, assuring him of what is right, offering him hope, and renewing his courage.

The characters must frequently face the death of a friend. While dealing with death is a difficult experience, it is a reality of life. The normal characteristics of grief are experienced by the characters: shock, denial, anger, sadness. In comforting Harry upon experiencing something of the father he has never really known, Dumbledore says, “You think the dead we loved ever truly leave us? You think that we don’t recall them more clearly than ever in times of great trouble? Your father is alive in you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you have need of him...In a way, you did see your father last night...You found him inside yourself.”¹⁰ Again quoting the wise headmaster, “Death is but the next great adventure.”¹¹ As Christians we trust that death is not the end of life, but the transition into eternal life in the presence of God.

The behavior even of the heroes is not quite perfect. They break the rules, often in the interest of fighting for the good. Sometimes adventures take priority over studies. Teens are allowed to engage in behaviors that are not legal for them in our “muggle” world. Reading the books as a family provides a great opportunity for discussion of good and evil, the choices that are made, and the consequences of evil. The themes might be applied to everyday life experiences of bullies, name-calling, and the temptation to cheat. You will find many parallels between our Christian faith and the Potter stories.

There is much to value in the Harry Potter series. Read, imagine, and enjoy!

¹ “Wizards and Muggles,” *The Christian Century*, December 1, 1999, p. 1155.

² Ibid.

³ A helpful resource in discerning major themes has been Connie Neal, *The Gospel According to Harry Potter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

⁴ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1997), pp. 108-109.

⁵ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1999), p. 333.

⁶ *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 2000), p. 723.

⁷ *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, p. 299.

⁸ *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, p. 298.

⁹ *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, p. 722.

¹⁰ *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, (New York: Scholastic, 1999), pp. 427-428.

¹¹ *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, p. 297.

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