



November 20, 2001

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL  
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

Nashville, Tennessee DEC 03 2001

(01-96)

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**Christians stir the debate on  
heaven, hell and Harry Potter**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Will reading the Harry Potter books or seeing the movie cast an evil spell over your child?

The evangelical Christian community is divided over this question, which now looms larger than ever with the Nov. 16 opening of the movie based on the first book in the series, "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone."

A pastor's wife in Oklahoma feels torn by the debate that swirls around her like bats flying out of a cave. Her elementary-age children have read the best-selling books and enjoyed them.

They -- and she -- see no harm in the fictional world of magic and witches and spells created by author J.K. Rowling. The stories, from their perspective, are really about classic themes of good and evil, and they just happen to be set in the make-believe world of a school for young wizards.

But one of her children's Sunday school teachers is on a campaign against the books, regarding a pathway to evil. A nearby school district has banned the books, and "concerned parents" have been urged to attend the showing of a video that purports to demonstrate links between Harry Potter and real occult practices.

The Arkansas Baptist Convention passed a resolution condemning the Harry Potter books and movie Nov. 7, labeling the literature "anti-Christian."

Yet the first four books in the planned series of seven have set new records for sales of children's books. And the movie had one of the most successful opening weekends ever.

Teachers report the books have inspired more children to read more than ever before. Parents report amazement that their children actually fight over who gets to read a 700-page book first.

Sounds like a good thing, right?

Absolutely not, warn some Christian commentators. They see Harry Potter as the devil in tennis shoes -- cleverly spun stories that actually desensitize young children to the occult and make them more susceptible to being led astray.

For example, promotional literature for a Christian-oriented video, "Harry Potter: Witchcraft Repackaged," warns: "Because many don't recognize occult symbolism or understand witchcraft, thousands of

young readers by inference are led to accept them as whimsical and harmless, aided by Rowling's repackaging of witchcraft in probably its most dangerous form -- children's fantasy literature."

John Andrew Murray, headmaster of St. Timothy's-Hale School in Raleigh, N.C., warns on the Focus on the Family Web site that media influences like Harry Potter, "Sabrina, the Teenage Witch" and "Buffy, the Vampire Slayer" are causing a generation of children to be "desensitized to the occult."

The influence of Harry Potter alone, he wrote, has the potential to reap "grave spiritual consequences."

"By disassociating magic and supernatural evil, it becomes possible to portray occult practices as good and healthy, contrary to the scriptural declaration that such practices are detestable to the Lord," he continued. "This, in turn, opens the door for less-discerning individuals -- including but not limited to children -- to become confused about supernatural matters."

The difference of opinion on this matter, however, is illustrated by the content of the Focus on the Family Web site where Murray's article is published. The conservative para-church ministry does not dismiss Harry Potter outright. Instead, "family.org" offers somewhat contrasting opinions and reviews.

"From every indication given in both her books and in her interviews, author J.K. Rowling has no intention of drawing children into the occult," wrote Lindy Beam, a youth culture analyst for Focus on the Family. Beam quoted Rowling as saying, "I don't believe in the kind of magic that appears in my books."

In reality, Beam suggested, "children who read about Harry will probably discover little about the true world of the occult. That's why some Christian leaders and Christian publications find these books to be more fantastical than threatening."

Some Christian leaders and publications, however, are diametrically opposed to the openness expressed by Beam.

Jeremiah Films, producer and seller of the anti-Potter video, called the books "accurate in their presentation of witchcraft."

In an article published by Baptist Press, one of the video's narrators added to this warning: "The incantations Rowling has written are whimsical, but the principles of witchcraft are accurately presented."

This warning by Robert McGee of Merritt Island, Fla., appeared in one of eight Baptist Press stories issued in the days leading up to the movie opening. All the Baptist Press stories included strong warnings about a slippery slope into the occult presented by Harry Potter.

While many other critics of the Potter books and movie abound, Jeremiah Films is one of the most prevalent voices crying foul. The company has produced a number of other videos on conservative causes, including homosexuality, the dangers of public education, the threat of globalization and, best known, "The Clinton Chronicles," a video that attempts to link former President Bill Clinton to multiple conspiracies in his home state of Arkansas.

Not all conservatives find fault with Harry Potter, however.

In 1999, just as the third book in the series was published, conservative Christian commentator Charles Colson wrote a column telling parents it's OK for their children to read Harry Potter books.

"It may relieve you to know that the magic in these books is purely mechanical, as opposed to occultist," he wrote. "That is, Harry and his friends cast spells, read crystal balls and turn themselves into animals, but they don't make contact with a supernatural world."

A recent column in the conservative political magazine National Review went so far as to say the new Harry Potter movie may actually do the nation good. The movie "will have much to say about good and evil and the necessity and nobility of fighting evil for the sake of justice," wrote Thomas Hibbs, associate professor of philosophy at Boston College.

Christians who object to the use of magic in the Harry Potter books cast aspersions "absurdly wide of the mark," he said, adding that "none of the critics I have encountered gives evidence of having read the books with care."

Rather than casting a negative spell on today's youth, the Harry Potter books and movie "are remarkably timely, offering precisely the sort of lessons and examples young persons need to prepare them for life in a nation at war with the evil of terrorism," Hibbs said.

Brett Younger, pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, and father of young children, agrees that there's good to be found in Harry Potter.

"The stories are not about potions, cauldrons and sorcerers so much as they are about loneliness, love and loyalty," he said. "What's magical about Harry Potter is that it takes readers into the world of the imagination and the wonder of story. We can all be joyless muggles (non-magical people in Potter's world) who need to exercise our hearts and minds. Stepping into a fictional world helps us see our own world in a new and different way."

And it is a fictional world, insisted Marion Hogan, a Baptist pastor's wife and seventh-grade English teacher in the Houston area who has read the books and has talked about them with her students.

"If you declare all stories that have witches and wizards as evil, then you have to throw out every fairy tale there is," she explained. "Some people want to take this to the point where you can't even have a fairy tale story."

Harry Potter is "a simple children's story of fantasy," Hogan said. "I see Harry Potter as fiction and having no relation to Satanism at all. . I don't see any way a child could read Harry Potter and come out being a Satanist as a result. If children read it and think it's real, there may be some danger there. But I can't imagine children would think it's real."

Her students certainly don't think it's real, she said. "They're amazed that anybody could think these are negative books. They're amazed that anybody would think there's evil there."

So how can committed Christians come down so far apart on the Harry Potter issue?

The answer may be found in differing worldviews, said Cliff Vaughn, associate director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn. Vaughn holds a doctorate in American cultural studies from Bowling Green State University.

"Worldviews are like lenses," he explained. "They affect the way we see the world. In broad terms, people speak of two worldviews. One is objective, whereas the other is interpretive.

"In the case of Harry Potter, one worldview sees an evil. No bones about it. It must be eradicated. The other worldview says not necessarily. The world isn't that tidy, and the book's malevolence isn't a foregone conclusion.

"In the final analysis, Christians who see Harry Potter as evil probably find less room for discussion about Potter. For them, Potter is an evil waiting to be discovered. Other Christians don't see evil in the heart of Harry. Any evil they see there is the evil people make of it."

Finding one's way between these two opposing positions may not be easy, but it may be possible, he insisted. It's certainly worth a try, because the basic issues involved in the Potter debate won't dissipate.

"Years ago, the Smurfs were public enemy No. 1. Then it was He-Man. Now it's Harry Potter. This wave of concern demonstrates yet again there's nothing new under the sun."

The best advice for parents is to be well informed and discerning, suggested John Echols, a veteran children's minister, consultant and author of children's curriculum pieces who lives in Chattanooga, Tenn.

"I'm not going to read this book with my 5-year-old who has trouble distinguishing between reality and non-reality," he said. "But by the time a child is in fourth or fifth grade, they've had that lesson about fiction vs. non-fiction.

"When things happen in the story that are fantastical, like the troll coming in or flying on a broomstick, at the end of that chapter, you say, 'That was a really great story. Too bad it can't be true.' That's the parents' job to remind them it can't be true."

While acknowledging valid concerns about exposing children to the reality of Wicca and the occult, Echols insisted the Harry Potter stories are far-fetched.

"I don't think modern-day witches and wizards are like Harry Potter," he said. "Maybe they do put spells on people and curse people and those kinds of things, but the things Harry Potter does are fantastical. Magic wands and magic potions are not true. They're just not true.

"If you get really upset about that as an adult, I want to say to the adults: 'It's not true. This is a fantasy. Even modern-day witches and wizards don't fly around on broomsticks.'"

From a theological perspective, Echols said, he finds more to fault with some standard Disney fare, such as "Anastasia" and "Pocahontas" and "Atlantis."

"There are a lot of theological issues in 'Pocahontas' that nobody complained about. She's a historical figure, and it's harder to say to children, 'This is a historical figure but it's a fantasy.' Which part of it is real and which part is not real? With Harry Potter, you can say the whole thing is a fantasy."

Echols said concerns about Harry Potter could create more opportunities for children and parents to read and talk together.

"If your child wants to read it, read it together and talk about it while you're reading. If there's a place that makes you uncomfortable, articulate that in front of your child."

And as for the movie, "If you're concerned about it, go to it by yourself before you take your children."

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## **New Testament scholar contrasts biblical sorcery to Harry Potter magic**

By Mark Wingfield

LA MIRADA, Calif. (ABP) -- While some Christian parents object to Harry Potter because the Bible condemns sorcery as a sin, a New Testament scholar says magic in the Bible took a different form than that in the popular children's books and movie.

Clinton Arnold, professor of New Testament at Biola University's Talbot School of Theology, has done first-hand research on ancient sorcery scrolls from the Middle East. He believes they are manuscripts similar to ones described in the Book of Acts.

Acts 19 describes the Apostle Paul preaching in Ephesus in the first century. The Bible says, "a number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly" as part of their conversion to Christianity.

"Archaeologists have uncovered 250 papyri in Egypt representing the same kinds of practices all over the Mediterranean world," said Arnold.

Arnold said the sorcery practiced in Ephesus involved "a vibrant belief in the spirit realm."

"[They believed] there were good and evil spirits . that could cause a famine, could cause your crops not to grow well, keep your animals from being fertile, give you headaches," he said.

"A lot of the texts were recipes on how to make curses. . Archaeologists have uncovered hundreds and hundreds of curse tablets."

Fundamental to this practice was an "intentional calling on spirits that could go out and do these curses," Arnold added. "It was a very animistic view of the world."

He said that is different than what is portrayed in the Harry Potter books. "With Harry Potter, you do have people doing spells, . but you don't see the spirit emphasis there."

From his perspective, Harry Potter is closer to Disney's Fantasia than to ancient sorcery practices condemned in the New Testament. "There's a lot of difference between that and ancient magic," he said.

Arnold said the whimsical elements of Harry Potter, such as flying broomsticks and giants and dragons and a game called quidditch, have nothing to do with ancient magic. These themes, he said, actually come from medieval legends.

All this doesn't mean that Arnold takes the demonic lightly. He team-teaches a course in spiritual warfare at Talbot, a course where professors help students "try to make sense of modern phenomena" related to demon possession.

The course was featured in a recent issue of Christianity Today in relation to a larger set of stories on exorcism.

He has dealt with students -- often from non-Western cultures -- who report they hear voices or see strange apparitions.

This is serious business, he insisted. "We see the evil one as trying to exploit people in the areas of their weakness and vulnerabilities."

And at this point, he agrees with critics of the Harry Potter books.

"We can give a place to the devil. If we as believers keep turning our backs to the Lord, willfully in our behavior, we open ourselves to a deeper level of spiritual bondage," he said. "I don't want to be superstitious, but on the other hand I have a Scripture that tells me this stuff is real."

So can reading Harry Potter books or seeing the movie open a child to demon-possession?

Arnold said it's unlikely.

"It would be possible if it arouses interest in wanting to find more about supernatural reality," he acknowledged. "I see that as a potential real danger.

"On the other hand, I see in those books a whole other set of things that are really attractive. They illustrate dynamics of human relationships, . themes of the power of friendship, bringing good from adversity, a lot of relational themes."

And the magic portrayed in Harry Potter is "very stereotypical," he added.

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## **Internet tale labeled hoax**

By Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Onion has taken a bite out of Harry Potter, and many Christians have unwittingly swallowed the satirical tale as truth.

The Onion is an Internet publication that specializes in parody, satire and humor. In this vein, it published a piece titled "Harry Potter Books Spark Rise in Satanism Among Children."

The article was thoroughly satirical and fictional, other than using the real names of characters and places found in the Harry Potter books written by J.K. Rowling. But somewhere in the mystical world of the Internet, the satirical article began to be circulated as a real news account.

Soon, e-mails were flying across the nation warning Christian parents of the evils of Harry Potter revealed in this article.

The e-mails picked up made-up quotes from the satirical article such as this one attributed to a 9-year-old girl named Ashley: "I used to believe in what they taught us at Sunday school. But the Harry Potter books showed me that magic is real, something I can learn and use right now, and that the Bible is nothing but boring lies."

The e-mails also quoted Rowling as saying her books are intended "to guide children to an understanding that the weak, idiotic Son of God is a living hoax who will be humiliated when the rain of fire comes, . while we, (the Dark Lord's) faithful servants, laugh and cavort in victory."

According to the urban legends tracking Web site TruthorFiction.com, Rowling never said any such thing. The entire article is a farce, as evidenced in the disclaimer found on The Onion's Web site.

"None of it is true," TruthorFiction.com warns. "Some people have read or been forwarded the original article and apparently not recognized the satire. Others have used quotes from the article to write what sound like legitimate e-mail alerts. None of the people, quotes or stats in the story are true."

One version of the bogus e-mail carries a warning that "open applicants to Satan worship" have increased from 100,000 to 14 million since 1995. This, too, was taken from The Onion article and is not true.

Cliff Vaughn, associate director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., urges Christians to be discerning in what they believe and to check for accuracy before believing everything that comes across the Internet.

"It's important to make decisions based on credible information," he said. "Unfortunately, the phenomenon of Harry Potter is clouded by misinformation and urban legends."

The Onion's satirical piece, for example, spread through one e-mail hoax signed, "In service to the Lord Jesus, his honor and glory, Roger Lynn."

"In fact, there's a pastor named Roger Lynn at a United Methodist church in Minneapolis," Vaughn explained. "However, that Roger Lynn did not author the e-mail. Nevertheless, the confusion forced Lynn's church to add an "Our Roger Loves Harry Potter" link to its homepage. The link contains a special message disclaiming authorship."

The bottom line for Christians, Vaughn urges, is this: "We must learn to evaluate our sources. Discernment never goes out of style."

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## **Professor sees Christians themes embedded in Harry Potter series**

By Mark Wingfield

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- While some Christians see Satan lurking behind the Harry Potter phenomenon, Scott Moore sees some surprising correlations to Christianity.

The Baylor University philosophy professor is the parent of five children, the oldest of whom is 12. His two oldest children have read all four Harry Potter books, as has he.

"I don't know if this woman is a Christian or not," Moore said of author J.K. Rowling, "but there's something very interesting about the texts."

Language and symbols used throughout the books, he said, "are in fact the symbols of Christendom."

He cited several examples:

-- The phoenix belonging to Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of the school Harry Potter attends. The creature plays a pivotal role in the story, at one point providing Harry an escape from certain death.

In the ancient Christian tradition, the phoenix symbolized rebirth, Moore noted. Although originally a pre-Christian symbol, Christians in the Middle Ages appropriated it as a symbol for Christ.

-- The unicorn that Harry and his friends find in the forest near the school. Moore said the unicorn was another ancient symbol of Christianity, sometimes used to represent Christ's vulnerability.

-- The life-giving blood of the unicorn, reminiscent of Christian communion. At one point, the evil Voldemort attempts to slay the unicorn and drink its blood so he can continue to live. "This is a very rich and evocative symbol," Moore noted. "Parents who are reading this with their kids can talk about this."

-- An emphasis on truth-telling. Although some critics of the books complain that Harry and his friends sometimes get away with telling lies, Moore said the the overall message is that truth always is the best course.

He cited a passage where Harry,, in a confrontation with Voldemort, tries and failes to escape by lying. "Harry has a conversation with Dumbledore, in which he asks him some questions. Dumbledore says truth is a beautiful and terrifying thing. 'I will tell you what I can. I will not, of course, lie,' he says."

"Part of Harry's education is about the fact that truth is a beautiful, wondrous thing," Moore said. "While Harry sometimes lies about trivial matters and it gets him into trouble, he's learning what it means to tell the truth."

-- Dumbledore's and Harry's willingness to call Voldemort by name. Because he is so feared, most people in Harry's world will not say his name, instead referring to him as "He Who Must Not Be Named."

"One of the most pernicious examples (of lack of character) we have in our culture is the failure to call things by their proper name," Moore said. "Harry is having the courage to call Voldemort by his proper name. That's an evidence of truth telling."

-- The overarching virtues taught at Hogwarts Academy. "What they are learning is the classical and Christian virtues -- courage, prudence, self-control, justice," Moore said. "In addition to that, faith, hope and love are exemplified. Hope that while things seem very bad, it is not the end. Faith, not Christian faith, but faith in the good in this cosmic struggle between good and evil. And love, which is one of the most pervasive elements here."

Among Christians who are friendly toward the Harry Potter books, frequent comparisons are made between this series and C.S. Lewis' "Chronicles of Narnia."

"We don't have here a kind of easy allegory like with 'The Chronicles of Narnia,'" Moore said. "But we do have rich images that are part of these children's education that's going on."

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