

Occult Spirituality Is Not the Answer to Modern Materialism

*Thoughts on the book: **The Gospel According to Harry Potter: Spirituality in the Stories of the World's Favorite Seeker**, by Connie Neal.*

By Christopher J. Patton

Modern, materialistic America is so spiritually dry and devoid of moral substance that just about anything presenting itself as spirituality will attract a significant following. After all, spirituality is to be preferred over materialism, isn't it?

To fill this cultural void, teens and young adults increasingly choose a fun escape into fantasy fiction. Not only is fantasy fiction entertaining, it is often spiritual in content and character. While this genre of literature has been around for decades, new frontiers of popularity were reached with *Harry Potter*. The character of Harry Potter is the most effective, politically correct personality to present spirituality to a confused, materialistically bent world looking for the magic of the mystical moment. Its broad cultural impact affects the church, too.

While some fantasy is relatively harmless to read, is *Harry Potter* spirituality safe? Can it be used to effectively promote the gospel of Jesus Christ, or other valid moral lessons? Or, will Christian youth become more familiar with the spirituality of occult fantasy than they are with the Bible?

Made-up stories have taught character and moral lessons since before Aesop, but some fantasy stories communicate imbedded occult values throughout the fabric of their tales' literary plots, characters and setting. The latter fulfill my definition for "occult fantasy", which I believe to be spiritually dangerous. In this article, I will explain why *Harry Potter* is spiritually dangerous. To do so, I will expose some of the fallacious reasoning used by Christians to justify their families' participation in the wizardly exciting world of *Harry Potter*. My explanation should give you some principles to use in making decisions about other literature, too.

Harry Potter, the character, is a likeable, decent chap, who was soul-scarred for life as a baby and brought up under an abusive arrangement with relatives. Understandably feeling alienated from normal humanity, Harry blossoms when he discovers his true inner self to be the expected hero of a secret world of wizards and magic that exists parallel to and unknown by our own society. He goes to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to learn how to unleash his dark powers – hopefully to be used for good. There he makes friends and struggles with balancing his latent magical powers to do both good and evil. Once a despised outcast, he is now a revered hero.

Harry has the power to make things right for his friends. It is interesting that he uses his magic and not his great wealth to help them. Although incredibly wealthy, Harry is not a materialistic moneybags. He is a spiritual inspiration to his society. His unsought situation of birth forces him to enlarge his powers. To do so, Harry must journey into ever-greater darkness, battling strange creatures and wrestling with the forces of death within their own domain, according to their own rules of using magic powers. So far, Harry has consistently succeeded in seeing to it that "good" vanquishes "evil". While no one would disagree that the "evil" is truly evil, there is a lively debate among Christians as to whether the "good" is truly good - hence, the publication of Connie Neal's books.

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Deceived by Literary Device

Evangelist Connie Neal wants children immersed in the *Harry Potter* fantasy world of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to connect to the Christian gospel message found scattered throughout the story's setting and plot. She presents herself well when challenged on this issue. She is articulate on her issues and seemingly sincere in her faith, but I believe that with her books on *Harry Potter*, Connie Neal has become an unwitting servant of the Adversary. Unfortunately, the Devil's most effective agents are the sincere folks who don't know what they are doing.

Connie's contention is that literary motifs deliver only the interpretive meaning that we consciously assign them. Besides making age appropriate recommendations, she believes that parents can neutralize the occult factor in occult fantasy by studying the Bible with their children on the subject before reading. If parents point out what is wrong - that the Bible says not to do this or that, then our children's minds will be able to re-direct or interpret these dark stories as expressions of the "gospel." In other words, the literary illustrations of the battle of (relative) good against (absolute) evil found in *Harry Potter* are "glimmers of gospel in culture."

I accept Connie Neal's statements that she morally opposes the occult, but I don't think that she recognizes the occult values, themes, or theology in the *Harry Potter* stories when she reads them. For example, she believes that using magic as a literary motif is usually harmless, if understood as a symbolic substitute for something that is good in "real life."

A literary device, or motif, is a symbolic convention that substitutes for reality. For example, some Christian authors use magic as a substitute for miracles performed by God. While many symbols are indeed neutral in their intrinsic value - i.e. the beholder determines their meaning, not all symbols are neutral. Some possess an intrinsic, inexorably entwined capacity to successfully deliver an absolute value, message, or thought regardless of an externally assigned meaning by the reader.

In other words, we need to ask the question, "When is a literary device not a means of communicating a concept, but the message itself?" My answer is, "When it communicates an "absolute value" spiritual message beyond the natural bounds of human control." The Bible does not ask Christians to engage and wrestle with these kinds of messages in some willful struggle of our educated good intentions and desires against the temptations of the spirit or the flesh.

*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, "THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH." But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him. **Flee immorality.** Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. (I Corinthians 6:15-18)*

When it comes to the core weaknesses of the flesh, we are commanded to flee. In Matthew 5:28, Jesus teaches that to look on a woman with lust is to commit adultery in one's heart. Thus, the personally engaged imagination of sin is real sin requiring

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atonement. In the verse above, sexual union is juxtaposed with spiritual union. The joining of bodies is compared to the joining of spirits. I believe the Bible teaches here that not only are Christians to flee fleshly immorality, they are to flee spiritual immorality, too.

The Example of *El Shaddai*

Meanwhile, let's apply Connie Neal's approach in dealing with literary motifs to reading an "adult" magazine. As a parent, I would read the commandments against lust, fornication and adultery to my sons in order to make them aware of the potential to sin.

Next, I should biblically re-interpret modern society's symbol of female sexuality – teasingly revealed or bared. My Bible study reveals that one of God's names is "El Shaddai", which literally translated means "God of my Breasts" (See Endnote¹ for a more technical discussion of this name of God, usually translated "Almighty". Literally, the Hebrew can also be translated "God that is Enough".) This correlation is logical because God does provide all of our needs - just as a mother's breasts provide all of the nutrition an infant requires. Thus, what are otherwise symbols of sexuality become decent motifs of God's goodness through the educational process of re-interpreting their symbolic meaning.

By following Connie's literary methodology, the 'gospel' hidden in what would normally be perceived as an obscene publication becomes revealed and potent to do well, and my teen sons could theoretically look at as many breasts in that magazine as should happen to be pictured on its pages without negative consequences. The biblical warnings and re-interpretation of the adult magazine's "symbols" will keep them from the need to battle bad thoughts of lust, or worse. By hypothetical extension, they could remind themselves "El Shaddai" when weakening or if they should, perhaps, notice the rest of that suggestive body attached to these revealed representations of "El Shaddai". . .

I purposely selected this example to illustrate the faulty reasoning. I am sure that Connie Neal would not apply her approach in this particular occasion. Truly, the only biblical strategy for dealing with pornographic temptation is to reject the noticed magazine cover without opening. We need to mentally flee before our minds have spent too many moments entertaining the implied subject matter. I believe that the Bible teaches an identical strategy for dealing with the occult, which is spiritual imorality.

"Their deeds will not allow them to return to their God. For a spirit of harlotry is within them, and they do not know the LORD." (Hosea 5:4)

In the same way as it is dangerous to linger physically in a compromising environment, so it is dangerous to mentally muse on fantasy temptations of the intellect. Just as Joseph fled Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39:7-12, so we need to flee Potter's witching wizardry.

Repetition Creates Reality

"Do not be deceived: '**Bad company corrupts good morals.**'" (I Corinthians 15:33)

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Repetition is the opposite of avoidance or fleeing. Spending long hours in reading hundreds of pages of occult fantasy is like spending hours in the society of occultists. In fact it is worse, because the imagined realities of the fantasy world are distorted lies. As in much fiction, the natural consequences of sin are left out, and the heroes are so positively desirable to be with.

Role-playing is repetition at work. It's an exceptionally effective training tool. Cards are often used in role-playing to establish characters and circumstances. One imagines that he or she is successfully selling, dealing with a relationship problem, or otherwise schooling the mind and body to perform in a certain manner within a particular context. Vivid repetition of imagined thought and behavior changes how people think and act. We become like those we associate with – in either real life or an imagined virtual life!

The literary context of *Harry Potter* is saturated with the values, symbols, and purposes of genuine witchcraft. Just ask a few honest ex-witches or occult escapees. Some of the externals are changed for fun and interest, but the core message delivered, page after hundreds of pages, is intermediate-to-advanced pagan witchcraft. As adults, we should avoid it, not generally spend time in its entertaining environs, just as we would not hang around cocaine use or harlotry. Children should never be permitted near *Harry Potter*, cocaine use, or sexual immorality.

In Matthew 5:28, Jesus teaches that thoughts are real. Sinful thoughts are real sin because they corrupt the spirit, further separating man from the holy God of Israel. For the Christian, sin violates the image transformation process underway in our spiritual life: We stop becoming more like Jesus and revert to pride's old man, the mortal ego image of our sinful selves.

Furthermore, sin separates the believer from God's power to do God's work, and it cuts the Christian off from God's protection in his outward life. Thus, sinning Christians become ineffective messengers of the Gospel, and they often become the means by which injury and trial is brought into the lives of others – often those they love. At the very least, when we tolerate sin in our lives, we subvert our spiritual stewardship by wasting the precious opportunities and resources God has entrusted us with to fulfill His purpose in our lives.

Christians are instructed to take every thought captive. (II Corinthians 10:5) We don't do this on our own strength, using a self-devised strategy that seems right to us. (Proverbs 12:25) We must rely on the Bible, all of it, to provide us with the strategy to battle evil. It guides all mankind in the only acceptable way to "work out our own salvation."

Flee Spiritual Immorality

Forget the fact, for the moment, that in *Harry Potter's* world, the only "nice people" are witches and other favored weirdos. Normal folks ("Muggles" is J. K. Rowling's term.) are portrayed as ignorant and oppressive. Their lack of occult knowledge makes them lesser beings that need to be managed by the wizard elite.

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In her book, Connie Neal proposes eighty gospel messages or illustrations in the *Harry Potter* story – like the love of Harry’s mother for her baby. Perhaps such a love is indeed remarkable in this age of abortion on demand, but motherly love is natural to mankind and many animals, too. This should not surprise us theologically. In Matthew 5:46, Jesus said that even the sinners love their own; therefore, any relative virtues found in the *Harry Potter* books and movies, such as love or loyalty, are meaningless. They are lures to a false hope paving a path to certain destruction.

In Paul’s day the question facing believers was not about literary devices but about meat. For all practical purposes, secular butchers did not exist in the ancient world. Almost all meat was sacrificed to one god or another when it was prepared for consumption or sale. Since Christianity was mostly an urban movement, early believers had to purchase their meat in public markets dominated by pagans.

In I Corinthians 8:4-6 Paul explains that there is only one God. An idol possesses no life or power of itself: it is neutral. Like an idol, a literary device or motif could also be said to possess no meaning or power except that which is assigned by the individual interpreting that symbol. Here Paul admits that a particular symbol may have a meaning or signify power only to a specific person, an assigned significance does not necessarily reflect or create a reality outside the realm of that person’s imagination.

But does Paul teach that Christians can ignore idols and the meat sacrificed to them? (I Corinthians 10:19-23, 32) No, for two reasons: First, because real demons are associated with the idols, and Christians, being one spirit with the Lord, are not to share in any form of demonic activity, which is the spiritual deception that leads to the merciless destruction of mortal and eternal life; Second, we are not to place any obstacle or offense before another person. The bottom-line definition of an offense is anything that confuses the gospel message of Jesus, anything that misrepresents the nature of the true God of the Bible.

According to the list in Galatians 5:20-21, idolatry, sorcery (witchcraft), and sexual immorality are equally dangerous deeds of the flesh worthy of eternal separation from God. Ezek 14:4-8 condemns idolatry in the heart, which is to say in one’s imagination. Ezekiel 23:37 calls idolatry spiritual adultery, which returns us to the reason why sexual immorality and spiritual idolatry are so often mentioned together in the Bible. God’s strategy for dealing with both is the same, “Flee! Don’t participate in those societal sins so that you won’t receive the terrible sufferings in the flesh and soul that come as a result dabbling in them!” (Revelation 18:4 paraphrased)

The reason is simple. Humans are not truly capable of battling fallen angels or demons. We cannot naturally resist repeated exposure to the values and influences of fallen spirits (real or fictionalized) any better than we can resist addiction by taking cocaine in a controlled context. We are not to tempt God by willfully putting ourselves into a situation that “forces” His intervention to protect us. We are not to take excessive physical or spiritual risks. When faced with spiritual attack from the Enemy, we flee to Jesus and hide behind Him. (See Jude 9.) He is the only ONE who has victoriously engaged the forces of death and darkness and, therefore, is the only WAY to overcome all evil eternally. To be protected by His grace, we must first flee the sinful context because fleeing sin is another way of exercising repentance, which is the doorway to the power of God’s grace.

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Children starving for love and attention should not be left to fantasize that they will find it in the society of the occult. True love is experienced only in fellowship founded on God's Word, His definition of love. Paul taught that this is true whether one is consciously aware of the Bible or not. (Romans 2:14-16) The twisted spiritual message of *Harry Potter* is that life's meaning and power to do good will not be found in the everyday world that most people live in. Occult fantasy encourages youth and adults to turn their backs on Christ and look for spiritual answers in the occult world of hidden (hence dark) knowledge.

In occult fantasies, good eternally battles evil without any final victory. Death is the source of real power, and those who want to battle evil must learn the dark arts to do so. In *Harry Potter*, the person possessing the most power wins. He or she who wins is "good." It is not a matter of genuine moral "right over might." It just so happens that "good" Harry has the most power and, by the way, he is a more appealing character. These stories accurately depict the occult's entangling web of deceptions from which few escape.

The practitioner of the occult feels trapped in an endless cycle of conflict and the endless search for greater and greater power. Unless one is successful in his or her search, the occultist faces immediate personal destruction. Although destruction will ultimately come regardless, desperation drives the devotee to delay it by any means at hand. It's the ultimate spiritual pyramid of cards described in the Bible as "ever learning and never coming to a knowledge of the truth."

The spiritual worldview of occult fantasy is alien to the gospel of Jesus Christ. He alone is the substance. In proclaiming the gospel to the lost and confused, we are to present the substance of Christ and not the external forms of decent behavior and satisfying emotions. The ultimate power of the universe is not darkness or death: it is the resurrection.

A Historical False Spirituality

The Devil has known the power of God's truth from the beginning, and from the beginning he has tried to obscure and neutralize it. It is no surprise that ancient pagan religions repeatedly presented resurrection themes in the context of an earth mother and her child born of a light source, like the sun. When the natural mind views these competing stories externally, it sees no difference between Osiris, Tammuz, or Jesus. Why should the seeker reject any one of them for another? Why not accept all of them as being valid? They all died, which grieved their mothers, who would have done anything for them. And then (surprise, surprise), each came back to life again in order to battle evil, because, somehow, Mother did something powerful and pleasing to Father, when she loved her Son.

Since the strategy of the Enemy is to spiritually confuse mankind, so that the deceived do not differentiate between the sacred and the profane, between the true gospel and competing spiritualities, why should Christians contribute to the lack of distinction between the Christian faith and other religions? Simply, we should not. So, I rhetorically ask Connie, "What is the gospel? It is not *Harry Potter of Hogwarts*. It is the Jesus Christ of the Bible. Furthermore, it's wrong to spend time and effort looking for it anywhere else."

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A Prophesied False Spirituality

Harry Potter epitomizes our modern age's definition of spirituality. He's decent, likeable, wealthy, powerful, a winner, a bit of a nerd, and a loyal rebel. The deceptively deadly spirituality of *Harry Potter* presents the same appealing persona that we can expect from Antichrist, at his revealing. They both incarnate that same lawless spirit now at work in the world. (II Thessalonians 2:7) It is a "discover thy true self" spirituality founded on divining and directing the powers of the hidden knowledge of good and evil. This dangerous error is not new. It has been a basic element of Gnostic heresy and mystical paganism from ancient times.

The only "know thyself" spirituality mankind needs is to know that we are incorrigible and impotent sinners by nature. In recognizing this truth, we can find the faith to repent and believe the true gospel when we encounter it as the substance of the resurrected Christ. The peoples of America and the world do not need imaginatively cast shadows of a "gospel" apologetically extracted from *Harry Potter*. We do not need fictional dreams of escapist deliverance, nor should we risk the minds of a generation by approving their fluency in occult fantasy as we sheath the cutting sword of God's Word, both living and written.

In Rowling's stories, Harry defeats his enemy, Voldemort, by besting him in the use of the deathly dark powers they share. Truly, this is not goodness worth sharing. The real gospel is the miracle of Jesus born in our own flesh by faith. The biblical gospel is pure spiritual power, the eternal essence of love's definition without any darkness in it. Only the resurrected Son of God can conform us to Himself by His Holy Spirit. So, let us repent and flee this deceitful spirituality. We cannot fight it. We can only overcome it by choosing otherwise. Rather than struggling with illusory wisps of wizard smoke, let us embrace the substance of our Savior! (Colossians 2:6-10)

Christopher J. Patton, MA, MBA is an adjunct faculty member of Bethel College & Seminary, Northwestern College and Cardinal Stritch University.

Endnote¹

On "El Shaddai" from *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* by the respected theologians, Harris, Archer and Waltke: 2333 ~` (shadday) Shaddai, (the) Almighty (KJv), is one of God's names in the OT, in some versions left untranslated and simply transliterated, but in the iuv translated as "the Almighty."

It is one of a series of divine names beginning with the element el: `il `ôlām "the God of eternity/God, the Eternal One" (Gen 21:33); `ël `e!yôn "the God most high" (Gen 14:18); el `elOhê yisra'el "God, the God of Israel" (Gen 33:20); `ël bêl-`ël "God of Bethel" (Gen 3 1:13).

Shaddai, as a divine title, is used forty-eight times in the OT. Most often it appears in Job (thirty-one times), on the lips of almost every person in this drama: Eliphaz, 5:17; Job, 6:4; Bildad, 8:3; Zophar, 11:7; Elihu, 32:8; the Lord, 40:2. Of these forty-eight times shadday is prefaced by `el (God) seven times: Gen 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; Ex 6:3; Ezk 10:5. The remaining forty-one times shadday stands alone.

The translation "Almighty" goes back to ancient times, at least as far back as the Lxx, which translates shadday as pantokratōr "allpowerful." This is also reflected in the Vulgate, omnipotens. The rabbinic analysis of this word is that it is a compound word

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composed of the relative she, 'who" and the word day, "enough: she-day," the one who is (self-)sufficient" (Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 12a).

In recent times these earlier suggestions have been all but rejected and new ones have been put in their place. We need to mention only some of the more tenable suggestions. One is that shadday is to be connected with the Hebrew verb shadad 'to destroy," hence my destroyer." A second possibility, and this is the most widely accepted today, is that shadday is to be connected with the Akkadian word, *Jadu* "mountain." Thus El Shaddai would translate into English something like 'God/El of the mountain," i.e. God's abode. The ending -ay is to be understood as an adjectival suffix (and thus the translation "of the), a morphological feature now demonstrated by Ugaritic: for example, one of El's three daughters is called 'rsy ('arsai) and means, "she of the earth." Also related etymologically, in addition to Akkadian *Jadu* is Ugaritic ~d, (Cross, see bibliography pp. 248—250).

As El Shaddai God manifested himself to the patriarchs (Ex 6:3): specifically to Abraham, Gen 17: 1; to Isaac, Gen 28:3; and to Jacob, Gen 35:11, 43:14; 48:3. The context for most of these references is the covenant, more precisely the command for obedience and faithfulness on the part of the vassal and the promise of progeny by God. It is not to the hills (natural phenomenon) that these men of faith looked for confidence but to the Lord of these hills, the Lord of the mountain (Ps 121:1—2).

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