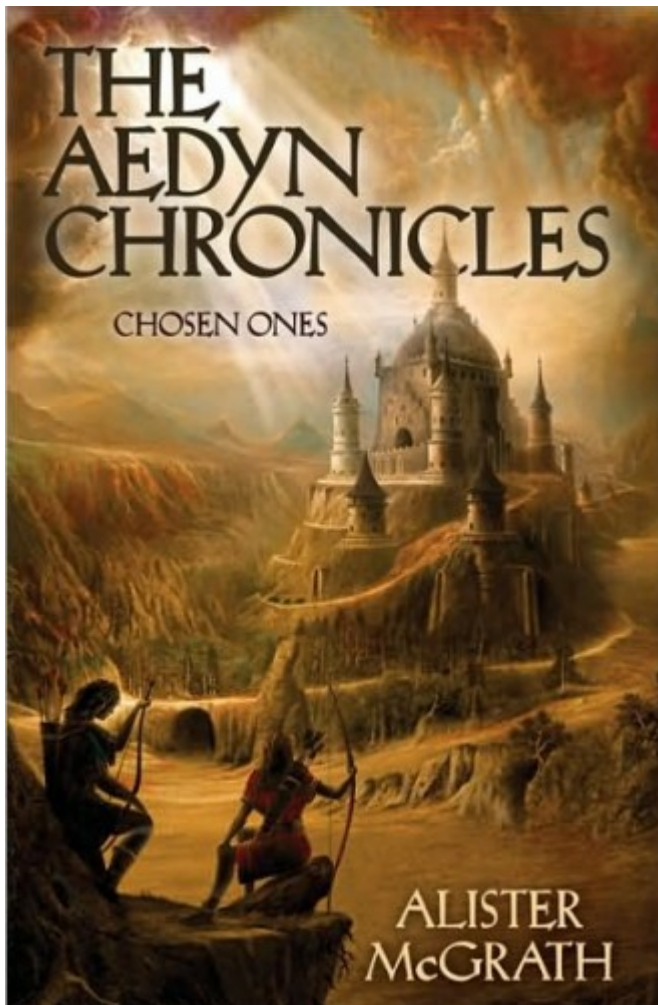


Chosen Ones and Flight of the Outcasts, by Alister McGrath

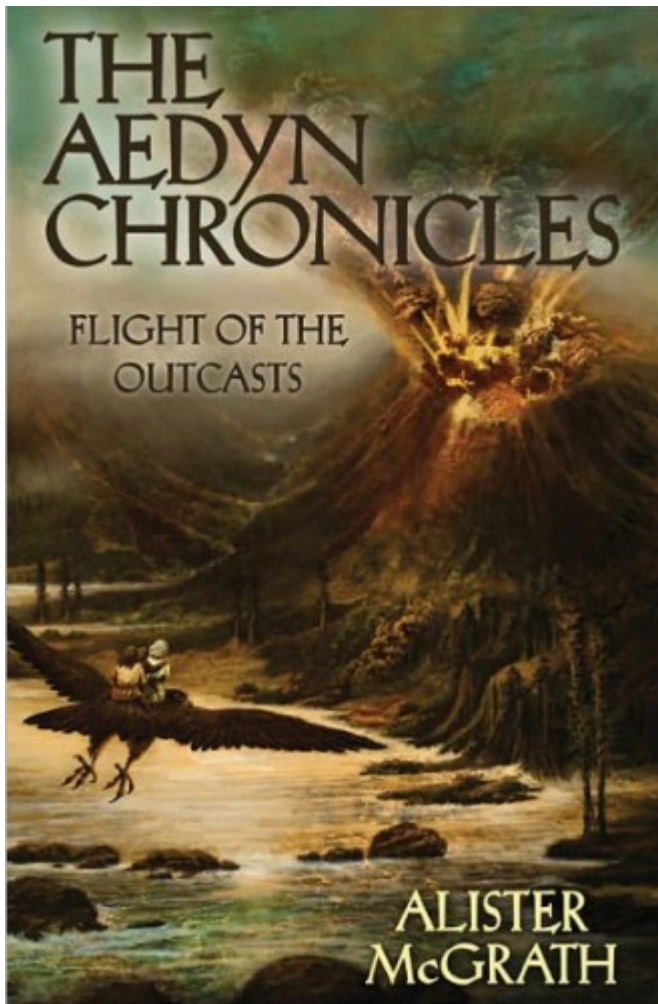
reviewed by [Janet Potter](#) in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Chosen Ones

By Alister McGrath
Zondervan



Flight of the Outcasts

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Alister McGrath, one of modern Christianity's foremost theological voices, is writing children's books. The Aedyn Chronicles are a series in which two British siblings, Peter and Julia, are magically transported to the land of Aedyn, once a paradise, where it is their destiny to set things right.

For obvious reasons, no one gets very far into a discussion of the Aedyn series without mentioning the Chronicles of Narnia, by C. S. Lewis. In both series, a set of siblings living away from their parents journey to another world. In both series, the oldest of those siblings is named Peter. Both Aedyn and Narnia are in the throes of an ideological civil war, and the children's arrival is the fulfillment of a prophecy. And (Lewis and McGrath being eminent theologians) both series are examples of

Christian allegory.

Children's allegorical fantasy has long been a favored medium for theologians. George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien and Madeleine L'Engle wrote the founding classics of the genre and remained its best-selling authors for decades. Then in 1995 Philip Pullman published *Northern Lights* (called *The Golden Compass* in North America), the first book of His Dark Materials, a trilogy that can be viewed as Narnia for atheists. His young heroes, Lyra and Will (British schoolchildren, yes; siblings, no), enter into another world's ideological struggle, fulfilling a prophecy, and in the end defeat God, thereby ridding the world of theism.

Pullman was not the first author to write a children's book without a Christian theme, but his trilogy's worldwide success has made it the most notable antithesis to Narnia and Middle-earth. And while he purports that its message is antiestablishment rather than antireligion, one can't help noticing that the establishment he brings down is the Christian church.

McGrath has never said that the Aedyn Chronicles are meant to strike back at Pullman's trilogy, but I can't help sensing a protective tendency in this venture. Perhaps it's nostalgic of me to assume that McGrath wants to uphold the tradition of Lewis and Tolkien, to make sure that Christian allegory maintains its position in the face of His Dark Materials and Harry Potter; on the other hand, he doesn't go out of his way to avoid the comparison. Either the Aedyn Chronicles are an homage to the Chronicles of Narnia, or McGrath was born under a rock.

McGrath's intended reader is between eight and 12 years of age and won't mind that the story seems cobbled together from the best bits of its predecessors. Narnia parallels aside, McGrath's Aedyn Chronicles are a well-plotted confrontation between faith and reason.

In *Chosen Ones*, the first book of the series, Aedyn is populated by the Khemians, a people whose leaders have abandoned the historic faith in the Lord of Hosts. When the children arrive, Julia joins forces with the insurgent believers, who are planning a rebellion. Peter, a budding engineer—who says things like "We're nothing but lots and lots of atoms, and that's all there is to it. There's no enchantment"—tries to curry favor with Aedyn's leaders by teaching them how to make gunpowder. Although the conflict between the leaders and the rebels eventually takes place, the main question in the story is whether Peter will admit that he's wrong and join his

sister.

In the second book, *Flight of the Outcasts*, Peter and Julia return to Aedyn with their snotty stepsister Louisa, who is accidentally transported with them (quite like Eustace in Lewis's *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*). They find that the Khemians have been enslaved. Although again convinced that they are destined to help, the children become enslaved themselves. In the midst of this much gloomier volume, McGrath starts to think and write on a grander scale.

Chosen Ones is tightly structured and ideologically transparent but lacks the sense of yearning and perseverance that draws readers into Lewis and Tolkien. In *Flight of the Outcasts* McGrath sets up a longer, deeper struggle for the fate of Aedyn. Peter and Julia, rather than bickering about the value of science, begin to question issues of motivation and purpose, and it deepens their faith. When Julia tells Alice, her Khemian friend, that she doubts her ability to be useful, Alice replies, "In the midst of the darkness you cannot understand how the Lord of Hosts is using you."

Theologians do not necessarily make good children's novelists. It's a valuable, enriching happenstance when they do. If McGrath continues this development of his mythology, making theology feel more intrinsic to the narrative than grafted on, the Aedyn Chronicles have the potential to be a significant work of allegory.