

THE FAR COUNTRY: CS LEWIS'S VISION OF HEAVEN IN THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA

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AFTER TWO THOUSAND YEARS IN WHICH THERE HAS BEEN A SHEER ABUNDANCE OF BRILLIANT CHRISTIAN THOUGHT AND IMAGINATIVE CREATION IS THERE ANYTHING NEW AND FRESH TO SAY? CS Lewis showed there was, as he communicated to a modern world. He introduced a new dimension in understanding Christ and the universe he created when he made a story for children that gave us Narnia and Aslan. In my view, the making of the Narnian stories is Lewis's crowning achievement. As well as great stories, they are profound theology. Lewis can be considered one of the great theological voices of our times, and Narnia, I believe, bears this out. What is remarkable is that his non-Christian readers of Narnia around the globe almost certainly outnumber his Christian readers today.

In the Chronicles, you get the presence of Lewis, and not only as a narrator who comes over much like a kindly uncle. You get the cast of his mind in a way that is perhaps unequalled in any of his other books. Lewis once said that the 'imaginative man' in him was more fundamental than any other aspect. In the Chronicles, every part of him was brought into play: the depth of his intellect, the scope of his scholarly knowledge, the richness of his imagination. They all worked organically together, achieving this remarkable series of not one, but seven connected books.

CS Lewis's provocative big idea about the value of restoring a 'paganism' in the vacuum of modern society as preparation for coming to Christian faith, if correct, applies still more today, half a century after the Narnian books were published. He recognised that we live in a post-Christian world, and for him that was the most basic category when trying to understand present society.¹ In order to write to a post-Christian culture, Lewis used pre-Christian, pagan ideas, retracing his own pilgrimage to Christ via his love of myth and pagan dreams of a dying god. The Narnian Chronicles are replete with many layers and levels of meaning.² One important part of the spell that Lewis weaved was a compelling vision of heaven.

Lewis's conversion to Christ was very much shaped by the arguments of his close friend Tolkien that the Gospel narratives fulfil the very best of human storytelling and myth. They bring into clarity and sharp focus insights that are found throughout the world, arising in the depths of human experience of reality. Even these stories of shadow and blurred sight, he realised, cast an enduring spell upon their audience. By receiving an alternative world imaginatively, he discovered, you actually can experience a different kind

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of consciousness, which gives you a perspective on your own world and may change you. Sometimes the change is so marked that Lewis calls it 'undeception', the state of becoming undeceived. A biblical example of undeception through hearing a story is that of David, who realised his sin against God when told by Nathan of the rich man who took the poor man's only lamb.³

In his understanding of the power of a story to deceive Lewis was hugely influenced by Tolkien. Tolkien saw story as fundamental as language itself. In a significant lecture on fairy stories, he spoke about language and story (and the human mind) as being coeval.⁴ Lewis made much of the power of story to make tangible and concrete what is normally abstract. A story has an ability to give us experience we may never have had before as we imaginatively enter into it. It can provide new objects and sensations that enlarge our real experience and perception of meaning.⁵

What Lewis came to see as a vision of heaven played an important part in his own undeception. He did not become a Christian until half way through his life, before which he was for many years an atheist who relished nevertheless the enchantment of Balder, Fáfnir, and Irish folklore (such as Tír na nÓg, the Land of Youth). He embodied the themes of his pilgrimage in the Narnian Chronicles, themes that included heaven, and the attendant experience he called 'joy'. These themes arose more or less naturally out of the stories of Narnia because they were so close to his central vision of the nature of God, Christ and reality. These were themes that might be abstract in a work of philosophy, cosmology or systematic theology, but which become concrete and tangible in Narnia. A reader who is unaware of their Christian framework may experience these momentous themes through the stories of Narnia, just as Lewis, as a 17-year-old atheist had, as he says, his imagination 'baptised' by reading George MacDonald's *Phantastes*. Under the influence of the story, he saw all common things transformed as they were 'drawn into the bright shadow' of holiness as it came out of the book and rested in 'the real world'.⁶ It is significant that, a little over a year before that baptism, the lad entered a snowy pine wood near Bookham, where he was staying with his tutor, WT Kirkpatrick.⁷ In that silent wood the youthful atheist, his imagination full of myth and poetry, found himself almost expecting a hasty 'march of dwarfs' to pass. In that same period, he dreamt – or at least had a mental picture – of a faun in a snowy wood, complete with umbrella and parcels – the seed, he later revealed, of the Narnian stories.

JOY

The theme of what Lewis called 'joy' threads its way through the Chronicles, as it does through many of his writings. It is perhaps his hallmark. Lewis saw joy as an unquenchable longing of the spirit. The longing or unsatisfied desire was a sure sign that no part of the created world, and thus no aspect of human experience, is capable of fulfilling fallen humankind. We are dominated by a homelessness, and yet by a keen sense of what home means. 'The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers,' he writes, 'the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret.'⁸ Joy, in fact, is a foretaste of ultimate reality, heaven itself, or, the same thing, our world as it was meant to be, unspoiled by the fall of humankind, and one day to be remade and restored to us. 'Joy is the serious business of Heaven.'⁹

In attempting to imagine heaven, Lewis suspected that joy is 'the secret signature of each soul'. He confessed, 'There are times when I think we do not desire heaven; but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have ever desired anything else ... While we are, this is. If we lose this, we lose all.'¹⁰

From his conversion in 1931 Lewis's intellectual and imaginative orientation was to Christ. In the Chronicles the mysterious longing that pointed to joy is most often associated with the presence, or even a hint of the presence, of Aslan, the Creator-Lion: 'At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something jump in his inside ... Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realise that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer.'¹¹

The sensation is perhaps most emphatic in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, which is embodied in Reepicheep's quest for Aslan's Country, and is a desire that more and more grips the other voyagers. It becomes most intense as they sail over the last sea, beyond Ramandu's country, where the water is sweet. When they drink the water, they feel 'almost too well and strong to bear it'. They need no food – the light itself sustains them. Then a sudden, short-lived breeze from the east, from Aslan's Country, carries a smell and music on it: 'Edmund and Eustace would never talk about it afterwards. Lucy could only say, "It would break your heart." "Why," said I, "was it so sad?" "Sad!! No," said Lucy. No one in

NOTES

1. See his, *De Descriptione Temporum* in CS Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 1–14.
2. An extensive body of works on the Chronicles explores this richness of meaning, such as: Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Paul Ford, *Companion to Narnia* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1994); Walter Hooper, *Past Watchful Dragons* (London: Collins Fount, 1980); Martha A. Sammons, *A Guide Through Narnia* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979); Peter J Schakel, *Reading with the Heart: The Way into Narnia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979); Colin Duriez, *A Field Guide to Narnia* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2005); David C Downing, *Into the Wardrobe: C. S. Lewis and the Narnia Chronicles* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).
3. 2 Samuel 12.1–4.
4. 'On Fairy Stories,' in JRR Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), p. 122.
5. See Colin Duriez, 'Myth, Fact, and Incarnation,' in Eduardo Segura and Thomas Honegger (eds), *Myth and Magic: Art according to the Inklings* (Zollikofen, Switzerland: Walking Tree Publishers, 2007), pp. 71–98.
6. CS Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, in CS Lewis, *Selected Books* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 1347–8.
7. WT Kirkpatrick partly inspired Professor Kirk of the Narnia stories.
8. CS Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Little Books on Religion 189; London: SPCK, 1942), ch. 1.
9. CS Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, in Lewis, *Selected Books*, p. 617.
10. CS Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: The Centenary Press, 1940), pp. 133–4.
11. CS Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Ch. 7. As there are numerous editions, I shall only cite chapters for Narnia books.
12. CS Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Ch. 16.
13. CS Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*, Ch. VIII.
14. CS Lewis, *The Last Battle*, Ch. 15.
15. On this important contrast, see my, 'Myth, Fact, and Incarnation'; and also, 'The Theology of Fantasy in Lewis and Tolkien', *Themelios* 23 (1998), pp. 35–51.

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► the boat doubted that they were seeing beyond the End of the World into Aslan's Country.¹²

In portraying this theme of joy Lewis wished, to use the words of one commentator, 'to awaken a desire for love and goodness'. In *The Magician's Nephew*, during the creation of Narnia by Aslan's song, Frank the cabby exclaims: 'Glory be! ... I'd ha' been a better man all my life if I'd known there were things like this.'¹³

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* the girls had longed ever since they met Aslan to bury their hands in his mane. In *The Horse and His Boy*, Shasta, the lost prince, longs to travel to Narnia. The boy experiences a desire for northern lands. In *Prince Caspian*, the longing often manifests itself as a desire for the Old Narnia, suppressed by the modernising tyrant Miraz. In *The Last Battle*, Emeth, a virtuous Calormene whose name means 'truth' in Hebrew, has since childhood desired to serve and know Tash, the false deity, and look on his face – a desire that is fulfilled when he meets Aslan. At the end of Narnia, Jewel the unicorn declares of Aslan's Country: 'This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now.'¹⁴

HEAVEN

Jewel's comment highlights Lewis's identification of unfulfilled desire with Aslan's Country as its true object. In *The Last Battle* his Country is realised as the new Narnia, and indeed the new England of the world from which the children have come into Narnia. Lewis had employed some of his most abiding images of heaven in describing the approach of the voyagers to the World's End in the earlier *Dawn Treader*. There Eustace, Edmund and Lucy are invited to breakfast by a Lamb. On the green grass near Aslan's Country a fire has been lit and fish is roasting on it. The setting evokes a breakfast long ago by the shore of Lake Galilee, to which the newly risen Christ invited the disciples, one of the most numinous passages in the New Testament, yet in real history. In the other sense of the end of the world, Lewis describes the apocalyptic creation of the new Narnia in *The Last Battle* in terms of a heavenly country.

Heaven is probably unimaginable, Lewis believed, even though of course we have the biblical images to take us as far as they can. Parable, allegory and fiction and other forms of metaphor are the closest that we can come to speaking of heaven. This is why he explored heaven so much through fantasy, as in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and *The Last Battle*, as well as other fiction, such as *The Great Divorce* and *Perelandra*. In *The Last Battle*, the children see the land of Narnia die

forever and freeze over in blackness. They are filled with regret. Later, as they walk in a fresh morning light, they wonder why everything seems strangely familiar. At last they realise that this was again Narnia, but now different – larger and more vivid, more like the real thing. It is different in the way that a real thing differs from its shadow, or waking life from a dream.

PLATONISM?

The imagery of heaven that Lewis uses in *The Last Battle* is explicitly derived from Plato (he even has Professor Kirk muttering, 'It's all in Plato', so that there is no doubt). There is a contrast between copy and original, or shadow and light, which also pertains to the new or real England in contrast to the Pevensies' England of wartime and just after. Lewis also uses Plato's famous image of the Cave (albeit brilliantly adapted) in one of his most memorable sequences in *The Silver Chair*, where the Green Witch tries to persuade the children and Puddleglum in the underworld that Narnia does not exist, and that their very idea of the sun is derived from the hanging lamps (a stunningly deconstructive portrayal by Lewis of the argument that belief in God is simply a projection of our wishes and fears).

Is Lewis a Platonist, rather than biblical in his Christian portrayal? The issues here are complex, and involve Lewis's well-thought-out contrast between the nature of thought and of imagination, one concerned with truth and the other with meaning.¹⁵ What is more directly appropriate is seeing Lewis's use of platonic imagery in the context of the deliberate paganism deployed in the *Chronicles*, in which, for instance, Aslan owes much to the old myths of dying gods and a wildness in paganism – after all, he is not a tame lion, though he is safe. Behind the *Chronicles*, as is also true of Lewis's earlier science-fiction stories, is a medieval picture of reality, particularly of the sixteenth century, his specific area of scholarly expertise and dominated by Plato's thought. The use of this pre-modern imaginative model is intended to introduce an alternative consciousness or perception to the reader, opening up all kinds of liberating possibilities and introducing new experiences and sensations – in Lewis's phrase, 'getting past the watchful dragons' that are barriers to the reception of truth, and of Christ in particular. The more interesting issue therefore is not, Was Lewis a Platonist? Rather, it is why his use of an incipient paganism and pre-modernism has been so enormously successful in what might be called his imaginative apologetics. ■