

5-2016

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## Recommended Citation

Guenther, Kylie, "Allegory? Myth? Lewis' Narnian Series Exposed" Whitworth University (2016). *History of Christianity II: TH 314*. Paper 11.  
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May 2, 2016  
Final Research Paper

## Allegory? Myth? Lewis' Narnian Series Exposed

A powerful lion, an icy witch, regal war boats, fire breathing dragons, children from our world transported into the fantasy land of Narnia. C. S Lewis has the ability to capture the minds and hearts of readers with his tales of adventure and fills the soul with a deep longing for something Other. Woven into the fairyland images are strong parallels to the Christian message of sin, redemption and new life. Among other parallels, Aslan seems to be a lot like Christ, at least, his death looks a lot like Christ's death and resurrection. Many would assume that C. S. Lewis intended to write the Narnian series as thinly disguised theology. Lewis himself gives us differing answers on the presence of Christian theology in his beloved series. The first question, then, to be answered is: How does Lewis incorporate theology in his fiction?

When he was a young boy, Lewis had access to hundreds of books, which lined the walls of his childhood home. He was fascinated most by mythology, fantasy and fairylands. Drawn to the adventure of it all, he crafted his own fantasyland called "Boxen" complete with mythical talking creatures. As his literary tastes developed, he found himself drawn to works with Christian undertones--in complete antithesis with his atheistic worldview of the time. After years of struggling with his intellectual inability to accept Christianity, he was converted in conjunction with his involvement with The Inklings- a small group of fantasy writers who were mostly Christian. After his conversion, Lewis began writing Christian apologetics and other theological works. However, Lewis never left his fantasy roots. Lewis' early life provided the basis for the fantasy and theology he would later draw upon while writing Narnia.

At the time he began writing *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, four schoolgirls were staying in his home while World War II raged on. Lewis lived by himself in a large house, unable to join the military ranks because of a previous injury incurred during the First World War. Lewis' life while writing the series sounds strangely like the opening scenes of his first novel. Perhaps the life he was living provided images to set the early scenes, but how did the rest of Narnia arise? Lewis first saw images of a faun carrying an umbrella when he was sixteen, but it was not until he was forty that he decided to write anything about it.<sup>i</sup> When writing *Of Other Worlds*, Lewis describes how his series began:

“Some people seem to think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument, then collected information about child psychology and decided what age group I'd write for; then drew up a list of basic Christian truths and hammered out 'allegories' to embody them. This is all pure moonshine. I couldn't write in that way. It all began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn't anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord.”<sup>ii</sup>

Fantasy did not arise out of theology, but rather theology out of fantasy.

How then would Lewis explain the clear presence of Christian theology in the Narnian series? He makes a strong distinction between allegory and myth, rejecting the idea that the series is an allegory. An allegory in fantasy would require the reader to “repeatedly look for parallels in [the] Primary [world], taking one's self out of Secondary world.”<sup>iii</sup> Lewis' intention is to write a story where the reader is present in the tale without having to disengage from the plot to search for parallels in their own world. An allegory

also necessitates such close parallels that deviations disqualify it from the list of possibilities. If Narnia were written as an allegory for the gospel and Christ, then the parallels between the two would be closer. However, major events like Aslan's death are vastly different from Christ's. If Lewis had been allegorizing Christ's death on behalf of all men, crucifixion on a cross and resurrection after three days, Aslan's death would parallel these events. As it is, Aslan is killed on behalf of one person, Edward, slaughtered on top of a stone table by sword, and dead for less than twenty-four hours before resurrection. If Narnia were an allegory for Christ's death and resurrection, then these major differences are huge deviations.

If, however, Narnia was written as a suppositional myth, Lewis created a brilliant series that teaches Truth out of its fantasy roots. To break down what a suppositional myth is, one must first define what Lewis thinks of myth. A myth expresses reality without forcing one's mind to adapt what is already known to a new situation. The difference, therefore, between allegory and myth is this: "A good myth (i.e. a story out of which varying meanings will grow for different readers and in different ages) is a higher thing than an allegory (into which one meaning has been put). Into an allegory a man can put only what he already knows: in a myth he puts what he does not yet know and could not come to know any other way."<sup>iv</sup> Myth allows for a reader's mind to creatively process ideas without the constructs and barriers of what he already knows. When Lewis writes of battles between the armies of Aslan and the White Witch's, or Repicheep's entrance into Aslan's country, "Lewis indeed renews in us a longing for the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."<sup>v</sup> Reading Lewis' series stirs up a longing for something Other. What is that Other?

Here is where the word “suppositional” becomes important. To suppose something is to imagine what would happen in a hypothetical situation. To write “theologically-inclined” suppositional mythology is to question how a theological idea would play out in a mythical world. As Lewis states, “You are mistaken if you think anything in [Narnia] ‘represents’ something in this world... I did not say to myself let us represent Jesus as he really is in this world by a lion in Narnia. I said, ‘Let us *suppose* there is a land like Narnia, and that the Son of God, as he became a Man in our world, became Lion there, and then imagine what would happen.”<sup>vi</sup> Lewis let the images he had in his mind take on theological significance by imagining what would happen if Christ came in a land called Narnia. He did not copy the gospel story and allegorize it, nor did he create a false picture of how Christ works in the world; he simply wrote brilliant stories that speak to Truth.

After writing the series, Lewis admits that by taking the route of mythology and fantasy “any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people’s minds under cover of romance without their knowing it.”<sup>vii</sup> By bypassing typical modes of communicating Christian theology, Lewis can and does steal past the barriers that turn people off from Christian literature and teach readers about Truth through theologically inclined suppositional mythology. In Lewis’ words, the fairy tale form allowed him to “steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to.” Figuring Christ as a lion allowed Lewis to “steal past those watchful dragons” guarding against the “ought to” of Sunday school dogma.<sup>viii</sup> The images Lewis creates are accessible, but also reveal a deep truth. To Lewis, Narnia and its truths are about ““Seeing with the heart,” of apprehending

images and tracing metaphors that instill faith and inspire journeys into the never-never land of the spirit.”<sup>ix</sup> The brilliance of Narnia is its ability to stir up a longing for the spiritual that is fantastically described in the epochs of Narnia.

The second question that must be addressed is: to what extent is the Christian message apparent in the Narnian series? Throughout the series, Lewis sprinkles in parallels to Christ’s death and resurrection and our ultimate goal of salvation. However, it is crucial to remember, “The Chronicles are about Aslan’s lordship over Narnia, not Christ’s over planet Earth.”<sup>x</sup> *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* has the strongest similarities to the crucifixion and resurrection narrative. Analyzing Edmund’s situation in the Narnia series provides the framework for Aslan’s subsequent atoning sacrifice. After being told of the danger of the White Witch and unaware of her identity, Edmund meets her in the woods. She ensnares him with hot drink and Turkish delights, promising to give him the deepest desire of his heart, kingship, if he brings his siblings to meet her. Of course, the Witch has an ulterior motive, but when Edmund discovers her identity, he still decides to align himself with her in secret in order to be crowned king. When she becomes angry at his failure to bring his siblings, she invokes her right to Deep Magic to kill the traitorous Edmund, but Aslan willingly sacrifices himself in Edmund’s place. The White Witch binds Aslan on the Stone Table and stabs him, killing him. In the morning, Susan and Lucy heard the crack of the table and saw the risen Aslan. As a result of the power of Deeper Magic from before the Dawn of Time, Aslan reverses death itself.

Since Deeper Magic has existed before Narnia was created, the Witch, who came into Narnia afterwards was unaware of the caveat to her power that allowed Aslan to resurrect. According to the law, “when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in

a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards."<sup>xi</sup>

Deeper Magic transcends and overrides Deep Magic because Deeper Magic is "magic inherent not in created things but in their creator, the greater magic of God's grace, love, and forgiveness."<sup>xii</sup> Deeper Magic reflects the divine power because He created all things and has dominion and influence over them. Just as God conquers evil in Christian Theology, Deeper Magic is able to conquer evil powers because of its preeminence and divine element.

A further parallel between *Narnia* and the gospel is Deeper Magic's ability to conquer Deep Magic by an innocent dying in the place of a traitor. Just as Christ died for our sins, Aslan dies for Edmund's evil transactions. "The story itself, by its structural movement from Deep Magic to Deeper Magic, conveys the magic of divine grace."<sup>xiii</sup> By his love and grace, Aslan voluntarily died in Edmund's place to save his life. But this is where the parallel stops. While Christ died for all who have sinned, Aslan only died in Edmund's place. The story that unfolds in *Narnia* calls for atonement for an individual, not the entirety of the human race. When Lewis imagined *Narnia* and Aslan's role in it, he did not seek to copy the death of Christ, but to suppose what Aslan's role in *Narnia* would look like.

Lewis also did not seek to copy the gospel's account of the resurrection. According to prophecy, Christ would rise after three days in the tomb; Aslan was alive the next morning. There was no long-standing prophecy in *Narnia* that established how long it took Deeper Magic to resurrect the Innocent One. We are only told Aslan is alive the next morning. While this is a discrepancy, it is a minor and probably insignificant one. Christian truths come through in Lewis' *Wardrobe* but they are not copied exactly as "the Passion and Resurrection of Aslan are the Passion and Resurrection Christ might be supposed to

have had in *that* world-like those in our world but not exactly alike.”<sup>xiv</sup> Lewis follows through on his commitment to writing a suppositional myth, using the biblical crucifixion and resurrection narrative as a basis and supposing how it would play out in another world.

Similarly to the curtain ripping in the gospel narrative, upon Aslan’s death, the Stone Table cracks. While the exact significance of both is different, both represent the defeat of evil. Christ’s death and the subsequent ripping of the curtain symbolize Christ’s complete conquering power over evil and his atonement for our sins. Likewise, when the Table cracks, it signifies the fulfillment of Narnian law. Written on the table are the words, “If a willing Victim that has committed no treachery is killed in a traitor’s stead, the Stone Table will crack; and even death itself would turn backwards.” Aslan fulfilled the criterion and atoned for the sin of Edmund, like Jesus fulfills the embodiment of the perfect man to atone for the sin of all men. Both the curtain ripping and the Stone Table splitting speak of a higher power transcending OT and Deep Magic Law in order to atone for the sins of others.

Comparably to Jesus’ decreased presence in the world after his resurrection, Aslan’s presence in the other *Narnia* books decreases after *Lion*. However, one poignant scene in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* captures Aslan’s identity in our world. The final scenes of *Treader* are set on the shores of Aslan’s country, a place many liken to heaven. After Repicheep enters Aslan’s country, Lucy and Edmund are left wondering if they will ever see Aslan again as they are now too old to return to Narnia. Aslan reassures them saying, “In your world, I have another name; you must learn to know me by it. You were brought to Narnia so that you may learn to know me better there.” While, at first, this quote seems allegorical, referring to Aslan’s identity as Jesus in this world, we must always remember

that Narnia and our world are separate places, which act under different rules and whose respective Redeemer behaves differently. Lewis still writes true to his commitment to suppositional myth, but points to the reality of God in our world. Just as Aslan works as Redeemer and Lover in Narnia, Christ functions this way in our world. The love inherent in Aslan is inherent in Christ, but Aslan points to the Truth of Christ. The great love story told in Narnia is only a shadow of the Love Story between God and man here. This love story is beautifully wrapped up in *The Last Battle*, where “For [Edmund and Lucy] it was only the beginning of the real story. . . Now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”<sup>xv</sup> Their journey ends at the beginning of an even greater one: at the start of relationship with Christ.

Lewis wrote the Narnia series knowing full well the Christian implications of his work. Lewis brilliantly intertwines adventure, spirituality and religion into a masterpiece still widely loved today. Lewis is able to pull in those opposed to Christian writing with his stories of adventure and slip in Truth. As a Christian author, Lewis is brilliant at writing to non-Christian and Christian audiences alike. As Thomas Aquinas states, “We can play, as we can eat to the glory of God...When Christian work is done on a serious subject, there is no gravity and no sublimity it cannot attain.”<sup>xvi</sup> Lewis writes to and for the glory of God, but never lets his ability become glory itself. As Lewis says, “We should get as a basis for all critical theory the maxim that an author should never conceive himself as bringing into existence beauty or wisdom which did not exist before, but simply and solely as trying to embody in terms of his own art some reflection of eternal Beauty and Wisdom.”<sup>xvii</sup> Lewis’ works capture the ‘eternal Beauty and Wisdom’ in a profound way, presenting the Christian

gospel through a medium which engages a wider audience than traditional Christian writing.

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<sup>i</sup> Allen Jacobs, "The Chronicles of Narnia," in *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis 2010*, ed. by Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward, 265-280, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 266.

<sup>ii</sup> Ted & James Baehr, *Narnia Beckons: C. S. Lewis's The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe and Beyond* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Homan Publishers, 2005), 127.

<sup>iii</sup> Peter J. Schakel, *The way into Narnia: a reader's guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 36.

<sup>iv</sup> Schakel, *The Way Into Narnia: a reader's guide*, 36.

<sup>v</sup> Bruce L. Edwards, "Patches of Godlight: C. S. Lewis as imaginative writer," in *C.S Lewis Life Works and Legacy: Fantasist, Mythmaker, and Poet* (vol. 2) 2007, ed. Bruce L. Edwards (Westport Conn.: Praeger, 2007), 10-11.

<sup>vi</sup> Schakel, *The Way Into Narnia: a reader's guide*, 37.

<sup>vii</sup> Schakel, *The Way Into Narnia: a reader's guide*, 45.

<sup>viii</sup> Naomi Wood, "God in the Details: Narrative Voice and Belief in the Chronicles of Narnia." In *Revisiting Narnia: Fantasy, Myth and religion in C. S. Lewis' Chronicles 2005* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2005), 51.

<sup>ix</sup> Bruce L. Edwards, "Patches of Godlight: C. S. Lewis as imaginative writer," 4.

<sup>x</sup> Peter J. Schakel, "Hidden Images of Christ in the Fiction of C. S. Lewis," *Studies In The Literary Imagination* 46, no. 2: 9, accessed February 24, 2016.

<sup>xi</sup> Schakel, *The Way Into Narnia: a reader's guide*, 48.

<sup>xii</sup> Peter J. Schakel, "Hidden Images of Christ in the Fiction of C. S. Lewis," 9.

<sup>xiii</sup> Peter J. Schakel, "Hidden Images of Christ in the Fiction of C. S. Lewis," 9.

<sup>xiv</sup> Schakel, *The Way Into Narnia: a reader's guide*, 44.

<sup>xv</sup> Naomi Wood, "God in the Details: Narrative Voice and Belief in the Chronicles of Narnia," 46.

<sup>xvi</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Christianity and Literature," 10.

<sup>xvii</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Christianity and Literature," in *Christian Reflections 1995*, 1-11 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 7.