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*The Chronicles of Narnia: Pagan Myth or Christian Truth?*

C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* is a favorite of children all around the world, and many keep this fascination with the world of Narnia into adulthood. For some, these books remain a favorite because of their religious content. They are frequently praised as a Christian allegory, the Christian elements being depicted through symbolic representations. However, there are conflicting beliefs that these stories are not, in fact, Christian at all, but instead paint ancient myths and paganistic beliefs and practices in a positive light, portraying Christian figures in a negative one. There is no question that *The Chronicles of Narnia* is heavily influenced by ancient myth and cultures, but there is an equally prevalent influence of Christianity throughout the series. Though C. S. Lewis does draw from different myths and pagan cultures in his depiction of the world of Narnia, he draws just as much from the Christian religion, but he does this for the purpose of making Christianity more acceptable and available to people of all ages rather than to present a Christian allegory.

C. S. Lewis draws a lot from different mythologies and pagan cultures throughout his Narnia series. Throughout his life, he studied these ancient cultures almost fanatically, and many of his characters were inspired by his readings of "classical mythology, Norse epics, medieval bestiaries, fairy tales, more or less all Western literature from Homer through Spenser's *Faerie Queen*" (Bell 14). Knowing that these elements exist in *The Chronicles of Narnia* makes it easy to see these influences in the construction of this story. Many of the races and creatures the

human characters encounter throughout the series come straight from mythology. Dwarves are Germanic in origin, and centaurs, minotaurs, griffins, unicorns, merpeople, satyrs, and fawns are from Greek mythology. Also from Greek myth are the nymphs in all their different forms: dryads, naiads, maenads, river and wood gods, etc. And Greece also gave birth to the flying horse, though in Greek mythology the father of flying horses is Pegasus, while in Narnia, it is Fledge (Lewis 84-85). Dragons, of the type used by Lewis, are found in European myths, and giants can be found in a wide range of mythologies, including Greek, Roman, Norse, Balt, Basque, and Bulgarian (Chattaway). The world of Narnia, then, is very heavily infused with these ancient myths, and these myths characterize the world.

There are also very specific myths that C. S. Lewis relied upon when creating this world and the characters that inhabit it. For instance, he drew on religious myths when deciding on the form that Aslan would take, for the lion is “a royal and divine symbol throughout world religion; there are numerous lion-like divine figures in ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Hindu and Buddhist religious symbolism” (Kjos, “Christian Allegory”). It is fitting, then, that Aslan’s adversary, the White Witch, was also derived from mythology, her personality matching up with the figures of both Circe and Lilith. Circe is famous for seducing Odysseus and his men with her beauty and charmed food, and then turning them into swine with an enchanted wand (Graham 32). The White Witch, whose true name given in *The Magician’s Nephew* is Jadis, is similarly seductive in her actions toward Digory (Lewis 39, 93-94) and Edmund (Lewis 124-127), and she also wields a wand, though hers turns creatures into stone: “she...waved her wand and instantly where the merry party had been there were only statues of creatures” (Lewis 163). Jadis most closely resembles Lilith, however. Lilith is a figure that “entered Jewish mythology through Babylonian and Sumerian mythology, probably as an attempt to resolve apparent contradictions

between the creation stories of the first and second chapters of Genesis” (Graham 33). She is believed to have been Adam’s first wife, “created like Adam, only from filth rather than dust or earth” (Graham 35), and there are mixed myths concerning her, that she was cast out of the Garden of Eden for refusing the lie with Adam, that she was actually the serpent who tempted Eve, that her children are demons and giants, and that she goes around seducing men and causing women to have miscarriages (Graham 35). Basically, she ruined her own life, and so all of her energy is spent destroying the lives of others. This matches up with Jadis perfectly, for she “opposes the ‘new, clean world’ of Narnia, and its creator, Aslan...Like Lilith, Jadis ‘opposes life and growth,’ having turned her own world into a tomb, and hating the living, creative world of Narnia” (Graham 37). Thus is the rivalry between Aslan and Jadis pre-ordained purely through their mythological origins, Aslan representative of divine religious mythology and Jadis the embodiment of evil witches from ancient beliefs.

Just like mythology, C. S. Lewis also incorporated many different pagan practices and beliefs throughout the series. Some of the more common practices include magic and astrology. There is magic all throughout Narnia, but the two main sources are Aslan and the White Witch, including her followers and successors. Magic, sorcery, and witchcraft are all reminiscent of pagan cultures where they practiced these arts through the use of incantations, potions, rituals, divination, etc. There are also references to astrology, though they are very subtle. There are times when the centaurs seek for signs in the stars, such as in *Prince Caspian* when the centaur Glenstorm says, ““The time is ripe...I watch the skies, Badger, for it is mine to watch, as it is yours to remember. Tarva and Alambil have met in the halls of high heaven, and on earth a son of Adam has once more arisen”” (Lewis 352). And then in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, when Eustace meets a man who used to be a star, Eustace comments, ““In our world, a star is a

huge ball of flaming gas” (Lewis 522). To this the star replies, ““Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is but only what it is made of”” (Lewis 522). Both of these instances make stars out to have greater importance and significance than what they really have, which again reflects paganistic beliefs. Michael Ward, in his book *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis*, writes about an even stronger influence of astrology and cosmology on C. S. Lewis’ work:

Lewis used one of the seven heavens as the basis for each of the seven books in the Narniad. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is based on Jupiter. *Prince Caspian* on Mars. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* on Sol, *The Silver Chair* on Luna, *The Horse and His Boy* on Mercury, *The Magician's Nephew* on Venus, and *The Last Battle* on Saturn. For each book, Ward shows how the presiding planetary spirit has determined the plot and the details. (Davis 844)

There is currently debate going on about whether Ward’s ideas are legitimate, but the fact that these ancient practices can be found in Lewis’ writing proves that his works cannot be strictly Christian in origin and that they do share their origin with these pagan beliefs.

A big part of many pagan cultures, like Native Americans, for example, was the worship of animals, or animal-like idols. Aslan, who appears in the form of a great lion, can be seen as a pagan idol, given his animal form. There is evidence of other idol worship in the novels, such as Tash from *The Last Battle*, god of the Calormenes, who appears in the form of a skeleton with ““four arms and the head of a vulture”” (Lewis 685) and demands blood sacrifices, having ““fed on the blood of his people”” (Lewis 686). There is nothing quite so pagan as blood sacrifices. This also comes into play in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when the White Witch sacrifices Aslan on the Stone Table, an action that is reminiscent of ““the ancient Winter Solstice rituals and

blood sacrifices to cultural gods (whether Hindu, Mayan, Inca or Babylonian)” (Kjos, “Blending Truth and Myth”). At an earlier point in his life, C. S. Lewis had visited Stonehenge, where he learned that “The stone that is lowest at Stonehenge is called the stone of sacrifice because people suspect that humans were bound and stabbed there in evil ceremonies thousands of years ago” (Kjos, “Blending Truth and Myth”), which is likely where he got the idea for the Stone Table. The culmination of this idol worship comes at the very end of *The Last Battle* when Emeth, a Calormene soldier who worshipped Tash his entire life, is given credit for worshipping Aslan instead: “‘Alas, Lord, I am no son of thine but the servant of Tash.’ [Aslan] answered, ‘Child, all the service thou has done to Tash, I account as service done to me’” (Lewis 757). Somehow, even though Emeth did everything in the name of and for Tash, Aslan accepts those actions for himself instead. These pagan themes and beliefs resonate throughout C. S. Lewis’ entire Narnia series, and given the evidence, it is impossible to say that these do not play a large part in the make-up of these stories.

Though there are a great deal of these pagan beliefs and mythology in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there is an equal share of Christian imagery and doctrines that have just as much influence on the shaping of the story and the world it is set in. The creation of Narnia, as described in *The Magician’s Nephew*, comes almost straight from the book of Genesis in the Bible. For example, the formation of the stars is described in the Bible in the following manner: “And God made...the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth...to divide the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:16-18). C. S. Lewis records the creation of Narnia’s stars as, while the voice of Aslan sings, “the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars...One moment there had been nothing but darkness; next moment a thousand thousand points of light leapt out — single stars, constellations, and planets, brighter

and bigger than any in our world” (61). This is just one example of how similar these accounts are to one another, and Lewis makes it very clear that the great lion Aslan is the Creator of Narnia just as Jesus Christ is the Creator of our world. This also points to a doctrine that is taught in the Bible, about how “the worlds were framed by the word of God” (Hebrews 11:3), as the singing voice of Aslan does. And in Christian belief, the creation was done through God’s “Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds” (Hebrews 1:2), just as Aslan gives birth to not only Narnia but “a myriad of other ‘worlds’ as well” (Kjos, “A Four-legged Creator”). Though the creation of Narnia does not follow the same chronological order as is recorded in the Bible, many of the same things are mentioned, including the creation of the sun, the earth, water, plant-life, and animals. The only thing that is left out is the creation of man, who instead accidentally enters the world through the use of magical rings made by Digory’s Uncle Andrew. Aslan turns to the already created Cabby and his wife, Nellie, and tells them, not unlike what God tells Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden upon their creation, “My children...you are to be the first King and Queen of Narnia...You shall rule and name all these creatures, and do justice among them, and protect them from their enemies when enemies arise” (Lewis 81). Through this, it is evident that the very foundation of Narnia, though mixed with elements of mythology and paganism, is Christian, with Aslan standing as a representative of Christ.

The most obvious example of Christianity is when Aslan is sacrificed on the Stone Table, an action very similar to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Aslan allows himself to be sacrificed because, as the White Witch announces to him, “I will kill you instead of [Edmund, the traitor] as our pact was” (Lewis 181) while Christ gave himself up “to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:26). Aslan’s sacrifice is on a much smaller level than that of Christ’s, but

the intention of sacrificing oneself in the place of another in order to protect them from the consequences of their own actions is still there in Aslan's objective. The manner in which Aslan is sacrificed is also much like how Christ was, where both were humiliated and abused before the actual act was performed. Aslan was muzzled and shaved (Lewis 180-181) while Christ was mocked, had a crown of thorns placed on his head, and was given "vinegar to drink mingled with gall" (Matthew 27:29-31, 34). Then both are resurrected after their act of sacrifice, though Aslan's resurrection comes shortly after his death whereas Christ returns after three days have passed. There is further evidence throughout the Narnia series that strengthens the connection between Aslan and Christ. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, "Eustace is 'un-dragoned' only when, his own efforts at transformation having failed, the Lion himself tears away the dragonish skin" (Meilaender, "Entering Narnia" 36), much like how mankind cannot become free of sins on their own, but need Christ to remove them. And in *The Silver Chair*, when Jill first arrives in Narnia, she finds Aslan standing between her and a stream of water that she desperately wants to drink from, but "He refuses to promise that he will leave her alone if she comes to drink--yet there is no other stream that can refresh her" (Meilaender, "Entering Narnia" 37). This is similar to how Christ guards the way to truth, which quenches a thirst in mankind that nothing else can. Robert Bell, a published author and Kenan Professor of English at Williams College, describes Narnia as being "a story of fall and redemption. Martyred and resurrected, Aslan is unmistakably a Christ-figure whose sacrifice resonates throughout the seven volumes of Narnia" (Bell 13). There can be little doubt, then, that Aslan, despite his animalistic appearance, is a Christ-like figure whose character is based heavily on the life and nature of Jesus Christ.

Just as there is a Christ figure in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a Satanic representative can also be found in the character of Jadis. Though there are minor instances that illustrate her

connection to Satan, such as when she tempts Edmund with sweets and power if he betrays his siblings (Lewis 124-127), the clearest link can be found when she plays the part of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. In *The Magician's Nephew*, Digory is instructed by Aslan to travel through the newly-formed land of Narnia to where “there is a garden. In the centre of that garden is a tree. Pluck an apple from that tree” (Lewis 84), an apple that gives “eternal life- or, possibly, eternal death” (Graham 37), but Digory is told that he should not take an apple for himself or his dying mother. This is a clear replay of the events in the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve were instructed by God “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it” (Genesis 2:17). Like what happened in the Garden of Eden, a tempter appears, Jadis, who tries to persuade Digory to disobey Aslan’s commandment, saying, “Eat it, Boy, eat it; and you and I will both live for ever and be king and queen of this whole world” (Lewis 93). These words place Jadis solidly in the role of Satan, with Digory playing the part of Eve. Unlike Eve, however, Digory eventually sees through Jadis’s lies and resists the temptation, bringing the apple straight to Aslan (Lewis 94-95). Throughout her time in Narnia, Jadis continues to play the role of the devil as she “opposes the Christ-figure Aslan, usurps a throne from its rightful owner, tempts and threatens humans...Her castle is hell, from which Aslan frees and restores to life all the captives turned to stone” (Graham 39). And even the mythological Lilith that Jadis so closely resembles has herself been seen as “a female equivalent to Satan, the enemy of humankind... She tempts and destroys, like Satan, and is associated with death and hell” (Graham 34). Jadis easily fits the part of Satan, a counterpart to Aslan just as Satan is a counterpart to Christ.

Because both these paganistic and Christian beliefs can be found throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there has been much controversy about the wisdom of exposing these stories to their intended audience, which is children about the ages of 8-12 (“The Chronicles of



Narnia Boxed Set”). Peter Chattaway, a journalist and film critic, records how Christians and Christian organizations have criticized C. S. Lewis for promoting “‘soft-sell paganism and occultism,’ because of the recurring pagan themes and the supposedly heretical depictions of Christ as an anthropomorphic lion.” There is the fear that children who are exposed to these stories will begin to “lovest evil more than good” (Psalms 52:3) because “the magic is marketed through supposedly ‘Christian’ books,” and magic, divination, and astrology, even in a fictional setting, “clash with God's Word” (Kjos, “Awakening Narnia”). Berit Kjos, a respected Christian researcher and the author of many books and magazine articles, believes, “Lewis has a remarkable ability to bring Christian readers into new worlds and make them feel at home in the midst of pagan rituals, occult mysteries and magical forces,” which is the danger of reading his works (“Christian Allegory”). Keeping these concerns in mind, it is understandable why the major controversies are centered on the Christ-like Aslan. Mainly, there is unease about the close association between Aslan and Christ because it violates the first two of the ten commandments given to Moses by God: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” and “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them” (Exodus 20:3-5). This lends to the belief that the overall context of these stories is pagan rather than Christian and that these stories skew Christianity enough to make their content blasphemous (Kjos, “A Four-legged Creator”).

There is no real answer to ease these controversies because the reader interprets the story in their own way, and there will be those who are influenced by the mythology and paganistic themes as well as the Christian ones. But some have tried to ease the waters, pointing out that “Lewis ‘baptized’ these pagan elements, by situating them in a context where Aslan, the Christ-

like creator of Narnia, is firmly in control” (Chattaway), which seems to pave a middle ground for both sides. And there are those who feel that these influences should not even matter, such as Robert Bell:

I contend that despite its richly spiritual pattern and iconographic [images or symbols associated with a person, cult, or movement] components, *The Chronicles of Narnia* are neither consistently allegorical nor primarily didactic [intending to teach or give moral instruction]. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* in particular can very well be read without persistently allegorical interpretation. (Bell 12)

But Chattaway puts the situation best when he says that *The Chronicles of Narnia* “introduce the non-Christian reader to stories with a Christian sensibility. But they also constitute an intriguing defense of pagan mythology -- a defense that may not be welcome in some modern churches.” Because of this, the controversy will continue to rage on with no definitive answer of who is right and who is wrong.

Though there may not be an answer to these two conflicting aspects of this classic and much-loved story, some understanding can be found in the past, character, and words of C. S. Lewis himself. Lewis originally felt that myths were untrue, that they were “lies and therefore worthless,” but his close friend J. R. R. Tolkien convinced him that “myths, far from being lies, were the best way of conveying truths which would otherwise be incomprehensible” (Grace 37). This echoes the belief that Gilbert Meilaender has that “Myth provides, if only for a moment, what we desire: to break through to some great truth in which the heart can rest and which can give coherence to the isolated particulars of life” (“Theology in Stories” 224). This fact, combined with these words from Tolkien, changed Lewis’ life: ““The story of Christ is simply a

true myth, a myth that works in the same way as the others, but a myth that really happened” (Grace 37). From this conversation, C. S. Lewis came to believe that ““Christianity is a myth which is also a fact,”” which led him to the conclusion that ““We must not be nervous about ‘parallels’ and ‘Pagan Christs’: they *ought* to be there—it would be a stumbling block, if they weren’t”” (Trotter). It was from his desire to share this belief with the world that *The Chronicles of Narnia* came into being.

Knowing this, it can be seen that C. S. Lewis constructed *The Chronicles of Narnia* around both mythology and Christianity for a purpose in order to prepare readers to understand and accept Christianity at a later time. It is one of the beliefs of C. S. Lewis that ““a Pagan, as history shows, is a man eminently convertible to Christianity. He is essentially the pre-Christian, or sub-Christian, religious man”” (Chattaway), and so by basing his stories around pagan beliefs and mythologies, Lewis lays the foundation for that opportunity of conversion to Christianity once belief is established in the paganistic elements. Blair Hodges from the University of Utah describes how “the better elements in mythology can be a real *praeparatio evangelica* [preparation for the gospel] for people who do not yet know whither they are being led” (30). This explains why Bell describes these books as being “adroit instruction, like precalculus, preparing children for the real thing” (12). It can safely be assumed, then, that these books were intended to have elements of both paganism and Christianity, but these elements are to work together in harmony to make readers more susceptible to Christianity because, as Lewis said, “perhaps it was necessary ‘first to make people good pagans, and after that to make them Christians’” (Chattaway). These books do that by masking their Christian themes in paganistic rites and beliefs so that only those who are ready to recognize their Christian messages will be able to truly understand the messages Lewis desired to convey.

Since there is evidence that C. S. Lewis intended for his series to have elements of mythology, can it really be said that *The Chronicles of Narnia* are a Christian allegory? Although Lewis in 1961 wrote a letter to one of his fans saying, ““The whole Narnian story is about Christ”” (Kjos, “Christian Allegory”), it is clear that these stories cannot be considered an explicit allegory. An allegory “manifestly and continuously represents a separate philosophy or sequence of events, for the primary (though not exclusive) purpose of highlighting or inculcating a doctrine or system of belief” (Bell 14), but though Lewis’ stories do attempt to teach some elements of Christianity, they do not follow the history or doctrines of Christianity with a single-minded persistence. Many of the paganistic and mythological elements have little to nothing to do with the Christian story, and there are also characters and events that have not point other than for story-telling purposes, such as many of the adventures that Shasta and Bree experience in *The Horse and His Boy*. Therefore, it is impossible for the Narnia series to be categorized as primarily a Christian allegory, but it instead utilizes archetypes:

[T]hey do allegorize Christian stories, most notably the death and resurrection of Jesus as Aslan, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950). My point is that their foremost objective is not the allegorical implied scriptural significance but rather something more participatory and transformative for the reader...the reader is led by the text as a sort of psychopomp into the spiritual and psychological rebirth through archetypal symbolism. (Rowland 4)

These archetypes, such as many of the mythological elements Lewis introduces like giants, dragons, and gods, act as symbols that can touch readers more deeply than realistic elements because “they spring from a more fundamental source” (Rowland 5). This ties back into the

reason why C. S. Lewis wrote these books the way he did: in order to reach out to a wide audience and introduce them to Christianity through the use of paganism and myths.

Though not intended to be strict allegory, Lewis, in a letter written in March 1961, says that *The Chronicles of Narnia* ended up working out in this way: *The Magician's Nephew* is “the Creation and how evil entered Narnia”; *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is “the Crucifixion and Resurrection”; *The Horse and His Boy* is “the calling and conversion of a heathen”; *Prince Caspian* is the “restoration of the true religion after corruption”; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* is “the spiritual life (especially in Reepicheep)”; *The Silver Chair* is “the continuing war with the powers of darkness”; and *The Last Battle* is “the coming of the Antichrist (the Ape), the end of the world and the Last Judgement” (Meilaender, “Theology in Stories” 224). Thus is the Christian story told through a mixture of paganism, mythology, and Christian archetypes, combining together to make a timeless series which influences readers all around the world, either toward a spiritual understanding or intense revulsion. Since the publication of this series, there has been and always will be those who misunderstand Lewis’ intentions or miss the underlying messages entirely, but in the end, it makes no difference. Regardless of what readers believe, the myriad of influences on these stories are clearly evident throughout the text, from the first novel to the last. And even if critics continue to condemn *The Chronicles of Narnia* for its paganistic elements, labeling it as unchristian and blasphemous, C. S. Lewis knew what he was doing when he created the many different levels of interpretation within his novels, and so his books will continue to be a favorite among readers of all ages.

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