The World of Narnia: Fantasy or Reality?

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Can fantasy have any appropriate bearing upon our reality? Can it inspire us to "real world" living by better informing our thinking, inspiring us to right action, and enabling us to more fully glorify and enjoy God? The better question, for our context, is to ask whether or not C.S. Lewis thought it could be so. Before exploring that theme, perhaps it would be best to better acquaint ourselves with the man.

Lewis readers are not going to become Kings or Queens or talk to lordly Lions, but they can behave in the real world with the same manner of wisdom, courage and fortitude that was demanded of Lewis's literary characters.

C.S. Lewis was an Irishman who is recognized as one of the greatest literary minds and Christian apologists of the twentieth century. Lewis was a tutor in English literature at Oxford University, where he served for 29 years. While at Oxford, Lewis was a core member of a literary group that called themselves the "Inklings." J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, was a member of this group and was influential in Lewis's conversion to Christianity. Living with his brother, Warren, and the mother of a fellow soldier who had died in World War I, Lewis and company took in child evacuees during the years of World War II. He said that he knew nothing of children before the war, but came to love them dearly through this experience. Lewis favored one particular child named Jill Flewett. After the war, Jill worked for the Lewises and Mrs. Moore by keeping house and tending to their chickens. He then paid for her enrollment at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts which gave birth to her career as a renowned actress in the West End theatres of London. Still alive today, it is this person who was the inspiration for the character of Lucy Pevensie. She does not recall whether or not she was the particular child that once asked Lewis if there was anything behind his wardrobe, but Lewis's stepson, Douglas Gresham, confirms that his step-father claimed that one of the children asked him this question. And it was certainly seminal in the development of his first story, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.*

It would be a misinterpretation of the facts to assert that Lewis originally set out to write his children's fantasies from a motivation to teach lessons to his readers. Rather, he claimed,

> One thing I am sure of. All my seven Narnian books, and my three science fiction books began with seeing pictures in my head. At first they were not a story, just pictures. The Lion (Witch and Wardrobe) all began with a picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood. This picture had been in my mind since I was about sixteen. Then one day, when I was about forty, I said to myself: "Let's try to make a story about it."
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> At first I had very little idea how the story would go. But then suddenly Aslan came bounding into it. I think I had been having a good many dreams of lions about that time. Apart from that, I don't know where the Lion came from or why He came. But once He was there, He pulled the whole story together, and soon He pulled the six other Narnian stories in after Him.
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> So you see that, in a sense, I know very little about how this story was born. That is, I don't know where the pictures came from. And I don't believe anyone knows exactly how he "makes things up." Make up is a very mysterious thing. When YOU "have an idea" could you tell anyone exactly how you thought of it?[1]

Such a revelation from C.S. Lewis should not be taken to imply that he simply sat down with pen and paper and started writing purely imaginative thoughts that would take any possible turn. Later in his life, he would come to state:

> I wrote fairy tales because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say . . . I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own

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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. As obligation to feel can freeze feelings . . . But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.[2]

So, here we gain our first keen insight into how C.S. Lewis believed that fantasy could have a substantive and beneficial effect upon reality. His worldview and communicative gifts compelled him to write apologetically, whether in his children's stories, science fiction, essays or epistles.

So he had a gift for writing, the uniqueness of housing child evacuees during wartime, and what Lewis called a "baptized imagination." In his autobiography, Lewis described how reading George MacDonald "baptised his imagination" by showing him "the beauty of holiness."[3] In the Chronicles and other writings, Lewis is said to have performed a similar service for his readers. He certainly may have done that for some of us. All of these factors had their confluence in the writing of the Chronicles of Narnia so that they could be used to express key truths of Christianity in a fresh, allegorical fashion. To children, yes, but he was actually writing to anyone who would care to listen. He said,

> I was therefore writing "for children" only in the sense that I excluded what I thought they would not like or understand; not in the sense of writing what I intended to be below adult attention. I never wrote down to anyone; and whether the opinion condemns or acquits my own work, it certainly is my opinion that a book worth reading only in childhood is not worth reading even then. The inhibitions which I hoped my stories would overcome in a child's mind may exist in a grown-up's mind too, and may perhaps be overcome by the same means.
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> The Fantastic or Mythical is a Mode available at all ages for some readers; for others, at none. At all ages, if it is well used by the author and meets the right reader, it has the power: to give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of "commenting on life," can add to it.[4]

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To those who argued that fantasy is a form of escapism, Lewis had an insightful argument. He said, "Children may be regaled by Peter Rabbit without wishing to become rabbits, but the 'reality-based' story of the awkward novice who becomes the star athlete panders to a young reader's actual fantasies and ambitions." It is important to grasp this point. Like most every other thing in the known universe, overgeneralization cannot be made. All fantasy is not good fantasy, especially fantasy that leads the reader to pursue unrealistic dreams or leads them to dwell upon an improper worldview. A small fraction of a percentage of a fraction of a percentage of readers get to grow up to be star athletes, space travelers or celebrities. Lewis knew this. He wrote about fanciful characters, yes, but his emphasis was upon their character qualities. Of course, Lewis readers are not going to become Kings or Queens or talk to lordly Lions, but they can behave in the real world with the same manner of wisdom, courage and fortitude that was demanded of Lewis's literary characters.

Anais Nin was a French author who was a contemporary of Lewis and Tolkien. She once said, "It is the function of art to renew our perception. What we are familiar with, we cease to see. The writer shakes up the familiar scene, and as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it."[5] So the fantasy writer helps us to gain new perspective on life by breaking out of our familiarity. And this is not something that should be thought of as childish or merely for the youthful audience. Listen carefully to what Lewis said to his god-daughter Lucy Barfield, a daughter of a fellow member of the Inklings, in his dedication of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.*

> My dear Lucy, I wrote this story for you, but when I began I had not realized that girls grow quicker than books. As a result you are already too old

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> for fairy tales, and by the time it is printed and bound you will be older still. But some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again. You can then take it down from some upper shelf, dust it, and tell me what you think of it. I shall probably be too deaf to hear, and too old to understand a word you say, but I shall still be your affectionate Godfather, C. S. Lewis.

In his Narnia novels Lewis was playing the role of what Tolkien labeled "a subcreator." And as we have said, he was creating stories that he hoped would prepare the hearts of his readers to embrace truths about Christian living and the Lord Jesus Christ. He clearly stated that his goal in writing the *LLW* became a quest to answer the question, "What might Christ be like if there really were a world like Narnia and he chose to be incarnated and die and rise again in that world as he has actually done in ours?" All Narnia books develop answers to that question. Narnia is simply a creation of another world and a commentary on what the Lord Jesus Christ did, does, and—maybe—will do in this one.

In a Radio Bible Class (RBC) article entitled "Narnia: The Story Behind the Stories," there is a good overview of some of the themes of the various Chronicles of Narnia. RBC states that,

> Lewis created for us mental images and ideas that parallel the story of Christ as the caring Creator (*Magician's Nephew*), compassionate King and risen Savior (*The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*) and faithful Friend (*Voyage of the Dawn Treader*).[6]

Let me cite some examples that are identified by Dennis Fisher in "Narnia: The Story Behind the Stories."

In *The Magician's Nephew*–which is the first of the Narnia stories in chronological order–Aslan's creation by singing Narnia into existence is reminiscent of Job's exclamation about creation, "when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7).

His first written book, which became the second book in his chronology, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, is a story of substitutionary atonement and redemption. Atonement and redemption are necessary because of a world full of Turkish delights, which are a powerful picture of the seductive power of evil to capture and control the human heart.

In *The Horse and His Boy* we see the problems of personal pride and prejudice. Like that of Shasta, Bree and Aravis, our pride must give way to a teachable spirit if it is ever to be conquered. Our pride is wrong because it ignores the truth that all natural abilities and spiritual gifts are given by God. Our prejudice is wrong because God is the creator of all races and stations in life, and He values each of His creations highly.

The Voyage of the Dawn Treader illustrates different attitudes toward truths of natural law and the revealed law of the Bible. How we respond to these truths determines our destiny. In one compelling scene, Lewis illustrates the spiritual principle that true transformation can come only from the work of Christ in our lives and not through our own self-effort. Eustace tries three times unsuccessfully to scratch off his dragon skin until the Lion tells him, "You will have to let me undress you." And that undressing is painful in process, but refreshing and fulfilling in completion. On Deathwater Island, the pool of gold illustrates how unrestrained greed can lead to death, just as the Scriptures say: "What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" (Mt. 16:26). The life of faith is a journey in which we learn that eternal values far outweigh temporal gain. Reepicheep continues to struggle with a degree of pride—much less after losing his tail in the great battle of Prince Caspian—but he also wonderfully illustrates the "otherworldly" orientation of the life of faith. Reepicheep's whole life was now filled with meaning, adventure, and joy in seeking his eternal home.

In *The Silver Chair*, Jill Pole's lack of attention to Aslan's command to rehearse and remember the four signs almost cost them the successful completion of their quest. They fulfilled their ultimate purpose in the sovereignty of God, but the hardship they endured in the process could have been largely avoided by attending to the commands. And just as Prince Rillian and the children overcame the wicked queen by affirming the truth and reality of Aslan, so affirming the truth that God has revealed in Scripture is the best defense against the enemy of our souls.

In *The Last Battle*, the evil Ape, Shift, claims to be the voice of Aslan. This parallels the work of Satan, who is described in the Scriptures as the enemy of God who is in the business of imitating God. His goal is, and always has been, to be like the Most High.

It is at the end of the last of the Chronicles of Narnia that

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we are encouraged to persevere in the knowledge that one day Christ will set things to rights. As the children pass through the shed to the afterlife, we hear the great Lion say, "The [school] term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."[7] The text continues,

> And as He spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and title page: 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.[8]

Can you not just hear C.S. Lewis saying to you, "When we see Christ face to face things will be so great and wonderful that—like John of Revelation—we cannot even describe them. It will be the dawning of TRUE reality, and we will truly live happily ever after–with no more tears and no more pain. That will be the beginning of such a story for each of us that our life in this world and our present sufferings will be nothing more than a mere title page to the Great Story of our eternal life with Christ . . . an eternal life that only gets better and better so that 'when we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun.' " This is what fantasy–appropriate fantasy—can do for us, to us, to our children.

Does the fantasy of the Chronicles of Narnia have value? It has as much value for us in the real world as it had for Lucy and Edmund at the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and their last trip to Narnia. You'll remember that before going back, Lucy was concerned that they would never see Aslan again. His reply: "But you shall meet me dear one," said Aslan. "Are—are you there too, Sir?" said Edmund. "I am," said Aslan. "But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there."[9]

NOTES

1. C.S. Lewis, *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), xix and 53. *It all Began with a Picture* is reprinted there from the Radio Times, 15 July 1960.

2. C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1994), 37.

3. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: Inspirational Writings* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1994), 100.

4. C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. C.S. Lewis (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, June 1966 [1947]).

5. Anais Nin and Valerie Harms, *Celebrations with Anais Nin* (Riverside,CT: Magic Circle Press, 1973).

6. Dennis Fisher, *Narnia: The Fantasy World of C.S. Lewis*, in *Narnia: Story Behind the Stories*, (Grand Rapids, MI: RBC Ministries, 2007).

7. C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle (*London: Bodley Head, 1956), ch. 16.

8. Ibid.

9. C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), ch. 16.