

Echoes of Eden in C.S. Lewis's The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

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C. S. Lewis is very much in the news these days. Bookstores are selling great quantities of Lewis's Narnia stories and many other Narnia-related works because of the recent release of the film version of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. All this interest in Lewis led me to think about the significance of his work, not only as literature, but also as an instrument for spreading the Gospel. Let me begin by explaining why I chose the title "Echoes of Eden in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*."

To understand this, we must go all the way back to Lewis's childhood. From a very early age, Lewis loved fairy stories, legends, and myths. He delighted particularly in the myths of the Norsemen—the sagas of Scandinavia—which evoked for him the strange and distant world of "northern-ness." The music of Richard Wagner also delighted him and stirred his heart and imagination. Stories, music, and artwork about the far north stirred in him an experience of deep joy and a longing for things strange and remote—a longing for something he could not quite name.

This longing was later fed by other great works of imagination: the fairy story books of Andrew Lang; the fantastic novels of William Morris; the tales of George MacDonald; the sharp wit and gift for paradox found in G. K. Chesterton; the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood*; the medieval *Piers Plowman*; John Milton's *Paradise Lost*; and the poetry of Edmund Spenser, Samuel Johnson, John Donne, Sir Thomas Browne, and especially George Herbert. Eventually, Lewis also discovered the

exultant Psalms, which filled him with a great sense of joy and gladness. By the mid-1920s, Lewis began to realize that, even though he was not a believer at this point in his life, all the works he loved most had been written by Christians.

Much to his own surprise, however—and with deep reluctance—Lewis found his thinking beginning to shift, first to a kind of Platonic belief in a universal power of goodness, then to a somewhat pantheistic acknowledgment of spirit, then to admitting that there is a God who made all things and who upholds the world. With all sorts of reservations and with strong hesitations, Lewis began to think seriously about the Christian faith held by the writers he loved. He could not yet bring himself to bow fully before God as the Creator to whom he owed allegiance, honor, worship, and submission, and he had no personal trust in Jesus Christ as the Redeemer who is at the heart of the Christian message, but he had gradually moved to the point of giving intellectual assent to Christian teaching as the truth about the world. His heart, however, was still far away.

This all began to change one night in September 1931, when Lewis had a long discussion with two of his close friends, J. R. R. Tolkien and Henry Victor “Hugo” Dyson. Lewis told them that he could not see what meaning Christ’s life, death, and resurrection could possibly have for him 1900 years after the events. Tolkien replied that the Gospel works in a similar way to how myths work in Lewis’s worldview. Lewis had no problem in being moved by myths and legends—they gave him a sense of joy and touched a chord of longing in his heart. But, he replied, “they are lies breathed through silver.” Tolkien explained that they are not completely lies; rather, myths contain kernels of truth within the distortions and unworthy outer husks they often wear.

Myths, said Tolkien, are echoes or memories of the truth that God had originally made known to Adam and Eve, the ancestors of the whole human race. There are in myths memories of the unfallen world, memories of paradise when the world was not stained by human rebellion and characterized only by goodness and joy in all of life. Although they also contain a sense of the shame and tragedy of the brokenness of our present life, there are also hints of the promise and hope of redemption, of the setting right of all things. The Gospel is the *true* myth, Tolkien said, the great fairy story. In the Gospel of Christ, all the elements of truth in the pagan myths find their fulfillment. This conversation was a significant turning point in Lewis’s conversion; just a few days afterward, he came to faith in Christ, acknowledging that the truth underneath the husk of the myths was made sober history in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He had found the joy that he had been seeking all his life—or rather, joy had found him.

All of this only strengthened Lewis’s interest in fairy stories and myths and in their possibilities as vehicles for conveying the truth. Years later, he would write his own version of the story of the Garden of Eden in *Perelandra*, the second volume of his adult science fiction trilogy. But our primary interest here is the way Lewis undertook this same task in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, and particularly the way he did this in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first book written in the series.

In his Narnia books, Lewis very intentionally set out to tell the Christian story but not in such a way that those who were ignorant of or resistant to it would find it thrust in their faces. He wanted to capture the imaginations of children and touch their hearts just as he had been captured by the fantastic tales he had read when he was young. As an avid student of the Gospels, Lewis also knew that Jesus himself told wonderful stories which He used to communicate truth indirectly to people who, for all sorts of reasons, would no longer listen to straightforward presentations of it. Lewis wanted his stories, like the myths and fairy stories he loved, to reflect the underlying truths of reality but to do so even more deliberately. In fact, his goal was to ensure that his stories were full of “echoes of Eden.”

Let us now consider some of the echoes of Eden heard in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

First, we find that there are *echoes of creation*—elements of the adventures in Narnia that reveal the beauty of life as it once was before deceit, betrayal, rebellion, pride, and every kind of evil entered the world. There is the promise of new life because, as we are told, Aslan the Great Lion “is on the move.” There is the loveliness of spring when Aslan comes and “shakes his mane.” Lewis’s description of the sudden coming of spring reminds us of the wonder and freshness of the original creation. There is the peaceable nature of many of the creatures of Narnia, and this recalls for us a happier and more innocent time. We find a celebration of the dignity and glory of ordinary persons—such as Mr. Tumnus, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, and Rumblebuffin the Giant. This is a dignity at which we can laugh without a hint of malice and instead with glad pleasure.

There is the beauty of the snowy landscape, the frost, and the ice. Even though this perpetual winter has been brought about by the wickedness of Jadis the White Witch, it still reveals the “dearest freshness deep down things,” in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. This expresses the reality that this world is made by a benevolent Creator so that it may flourish and be enjoyed by the creatures in it. Above all, there is great delight in the ordinary things of life: food and drink, dancing (the fauns, dryads, and naiads), feasting (the Christmas party in the woods),

marriage (the beavers), friendship, work well done, trust, loyalty, and bravery.

Second, we find many *echoes of the fall*—the tragedy of life as it now is. We see the reign of the White Witch—the instruments of her rule are lies, deceit, power, fear, betrayal, cruelty, sorrow, destruction, and murderous death (terms which recall Satan's character and rule as described in the Bible). In the White Witch's kingdom, it is always winter but never Christmas, for the witch hates happiness and ordinary joys. For her, pleasant things are only a means to an end, and the end is always more power for her and less independence and joy for others. Her fury at the Christmas feast in the woods is typical of real evil; this is the way Satan is—he hates the good gifts of God. The witch has no concern for anyone else—all creatures are objects to her, things to be used in her lust for power rather than persons to be respected and honored for their uniqueness and significance.

The account of Edmund being brought under the witch's sway is masterfully depicted. This is indeed how evil works in our hearts and minds, appealing to our worst instincts, shrewdly summing up our character flaws, and then exploiting them. The White Witch presents her treats—the Turkish Delight and the hot drink—as if they were generous gifts rather than instruments of deceit and control. But the gifts of evil always have a cost—they do not satisfy. Rather, they enslave the one who receives them. Edmund begins to lie more and more and to deceive himself about the true nature of the witch, about himself, and about everyone else.

As he comes more under the witch's control, Edmund grows ever angrier with his brother and sisters. He becomes meaner, more spiteful, and more self-centered. Evil is like this, for it destroys our humanity, making us less than who we are meant to be. Edmund's foolish choices alienate him from others and from himself. Ultimately, they even alienate him from Aslan and his creation as we see when Edmund becomes uncomfortable at the mere mention of Aslan's name. In just this way, evil alienates us from God; it distorts our natural and right desire for dominion over the world as God's stewards. Edmund thus imagines himself as king of Narnia, indulging his every whim and keeping others in subservient

positions. Evil even undermines his enjoyment of the beauty of creation. Indulging in evil always reaps a harvest of destruction in our own lives and in the lives of others.

Yet, even as he does these things, Edmund is aware of what is happening in his own heart and is not given up fully to evil. Instead, we see the struggle that takes place in him, the memories of goodness in his heart, and, above all, his pity for the creatures enjoying their Christmas party—the squirrels, foxes, and satyrs whom the witch turns to stone even though Edmund intercedes on their behalf. It is his pity that gives us a glimmer of hope for Edmund's deliverance and restoration.

That leads us to our third theme—*echoes of redemption*. This story is full of the promises of what will be when Christ returns to establish His Kingdom and when He destroys evil entirely. Then peace, righteousness, and joy will endure forever.

Aslan is the son of the Emperor across the Sea. He is the Son of God, the Great Lion—Christ, the Lion of Judah. He is the image of Christ to us in his moral perfection and glorious power, his kingly nature and intimate friendliness, his holiness and gentleness, his fearsomeness and kindness. He cannot be controlled; rather, his ways are sovereign. Yet, just as Christ was fully human—and thus, one to whom we can relate as a brother—so Aslan is one with the creatures of Narnia.

This is most significant and at the very heart of the book. We see the sacrifice of Aslan—his offering of himself as one who is innocent for one who is guilty as he gives himself up for the traitor Edmund. We learn of the deep mystery of the penalty of death for a traitor inscribed as law by the Emperor across the Sea. The White Witch knows this mystery but has no true appreciation of the importance of justice. For her, the death penalty is her means of gaining revenge and some measure of fulfillment of her lust for power. But, in what Lewis calls “the even deeper magic from before the dawn of time,” Aslan suffers a substitutionary death in place of Edmund. In his self-sacrifice, we see “justice and mercy kiss,” as Lewis later wrote of the death of Christ on the cross.

However, we see not only Aslan's miserable death, but also his glorious resurrection from the state of death. I will never forget the first time I read the story to my two elder sons, who were then three and four years old. As we read about

the White Witch cutting off Aslan's mane, binding him tightly with ropes, and sharpening her stone knife, my son Paul looked at me in great distress and said, "Daddy, are they going to kill him?" I said, "Yes, I'm afraid they are." The three of us began to cry, and then Paul burst out through his tears, "But he'll rise again, won't he?" As readers, we join the characters in the book in their horror at this sight, but we also join them in their "disbelieving joy" as they are comforted by Aslan's love and by the power of his indestructible life.

We revel in Aslan's delight in encouraging the gifts and glory of others, his giving rewards, joy, and greater responsibility to those who serve him. In the events that follow his return to life, we see his healing breath bring life to the dead and strength and courage to the weary. His defeat of the White Witch, the healings, the restorations to life, and the coming of spring look forward to the final renewal of all things. They are the first fruits of the ultimate consummation of Aslan's kingdom just as Christ's defeat of the devil on the cross, His miracles of healing, His raising of the dead, and His power over the created world point

forward to His return and final victory over all the forces of evil and death.

In all these ways and many more, Lewis has filled this story with echoes of Eden. Every time you read this marvelous little book (or any of the other Chronicles of Narnia) you will see and hear more such echoes.

Someone once said to Lewis, "Children growing up in Christian homes who are taught the Gospel by their parents will recognize Christ in these stories, but what about those children who do not know the story of Christ?" Lewis responded that he hoped and prayed that children who were ignorant of the Gospel would fall in love with Aslan through the echoes of Eden in the Narnia books, and that, when they later heard about Christ, they would respond to Him as one whom they already knew and loved. I have met people for whom this is true, and I am sure there are many such all over the world. It is my hope and prayer that the recent film will be faithful enough to Lewis's story that God will use it to touch the hearts and kindle the imaginations of many, many more who will eventually come to know and love Christ.

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