



Media Spotlight

A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR MEDIA

SPECIAL REPORT

C.S. LEWIS THE MAN AND HIS MYTHS

by Albert James Dager

One of the most profound, logically irrefutable writings on Christian apologetics is C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, a book upon which the standards of many Christians' beliefs are based.

Lewis's brilliant mind left no question open to debate as, in *Mere Christianity* and others of his works, he carefully answered every argument of the "higher critics." He went out of his way—even at times belaboring the point—to ensure that if anyone were to refuse to accept Christ after having encountered his arguments, they would have to admit their dishonesty.

In *C.S. Lewis: Mere Christian*, Kathryn Lindskoog calls him "the greatest lay champion of basic Christianity in the twentieth century."¹ Many will agree. Certainly Lewis can be regarded as one of the most precise and brilliant apologists of his time.

Yet in spite of his brilliant exegeses on Christian apologetics, Lewis had an irresistible attraction to the shadow world of occult fantasy, evident in writings apart from his apologetics.

To understand C.S. Lewis and the rationale behind his writings we must realize that we are all, to some extent, products of our environments. Attitudes, prejudices, and loyalties to which we adhere as adults were shaped for the most part during our childhoods. If nourished, those influences become strengthened as we grow. The more intensely they are nourished, the more difficult it is to change them, for better or for worse. Consequently, we all have areas in our lives we find difficult to surrender to God. There are many things we don't recognize as offensive to Him because they are so much a part of us we "can't see the forest for the trees."

This was no less true of C.S. Lewis. So in order to treat his ideas fairly we must consider his life—what shaped it in its early, formative years.

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Clive Staples Lewis was born at Belfast, Ireland, in 1898, three years the junior to his only brother Warren.

As a child, Lewis's fertile imagination was greatly influenced by fantasy and fairy tales told to him by his mother. His brilliant mind was quick to seize upon these experiences, and his favorite pastime became drawing what he later called the "anthropomorphized beasts of nursery literature." He and his brother referred to them as "dressed animals."²

Lewis's early favorite literature included E. Nesbit's trilogy, *Five Children and It*, *The Phoenix and the Wishing Carpet*, and *The Amulet*—all occult fantasies. Even after having been a Christian for twenty-five years he maintained, "I can still read it with delight."³

Lewis's life was so steeped in fantasy that he wrote, "The central story of my life is about nothing else."⁴ From Nesbit and *Gulliver* he advanced to Longfellow's *Saga of King Olaf* and fell in love with the magic and pagan myths of Norse legend.

But Lewis's early reading habits were part of the influences that formed his attitudes. His young life was pressed upon by tragedy, beginning with the death of his mother. His father, in his distress, alienated his sons by unjust and erratic behavior. This drove Clive and Warren more closely together to the exclusion of all others. Lewis wrote, "We drew daily closer together ... two frightened urchins huddled for warmth in a bleak world."⁵

Young Clive was so adversely impressed with the insecurity of the real world that he began to withdraw into himself, developing a distaste of all that was public, or had an air of formality.

By the age of twelve there had grown in Lewis's mind an intense relationship with the world of fantasy and elves.

I fell deeply under the spell of Dwarfs—the old bright-hooded, snowy-bearded dwarfs we had in those days before Arthur Rackham sublimed or Walt Disney vulgarized, the earthmen. I visualized them so intensely, that I came to the very frontiers of hallucination; once, walking in the garden, I was for a second not quite sure that a little man had not run past me into the shrubbery. I was faintly alarmed.⁶

Although childhood fantasies are expected to subside after a time, in Lewis's case they became more a delight as he grew older. One statement gives insight into his reluctance to become an adult:

My father, whom I implicitly believed, represented adult life as one of incessant drudgery under the continued threat of financial ruin.⁷

DIFFICULT EXPERIENCES AT SCHOOL

Sent to boarding school in Hertfordshire, England, his first impression was one of revulsion toward the unpleasant urban environment compared to his Irish countryside. He hated England, and described Hertfordshire as "flat," "flinty," "bitter frost," "stinging fog," "sweltering heat," and "great thunderstorms."

His schoolmaster was cruel—merciless in his flogging of boys of lesser social standing. Wrote Lewis, "The putting on of school clothes was, I well knew, the assumption of a prison uniform."⁸

In this oppressive environment, Lewis learned to fear and hate emotion. Still, he considered the most important experience at school to be attendance at church twice each Sunday. The church was High Anglo-Catholic, though he considered himself an Ulster Protestant. He began seriously to pray, read his Bible, and attempt to obey his conscience. Of this time he wrote:

I also developed a great taste for all the fiction I could get about the ancient world: *Quo Vadis*, *Darkness and Dawn*, *The Gladiators*, *Ben Hur*.... The attraction as I now see, was erotic, and erotic in rather a morbid way.... What I took to at the same time, is the work of Rider Haggard; and also the 'scientification' of H.G. Wells.... The interest, when the fit was upon me, was ravenous, like a lust.⁹

Advancing to preparatory school at Wyvern, Lewis "ceased to be a Christian." Straying from his church roots he began to dabble in the occult. In the process he became enamored of Wagnerian operas, their Norse sagas derived from Celtic mythology.

ENTER J.R.R. TOLKIEN

At the age of twenty-seven, having been elected Fellow and Tutor in English Language and Literature at Magdalen College, Lewis met John Ronald Reuel Tolkien at a meeting of the English faculty at Menton College. J.R.R. Tolkien was wary of Lewis at first, but he enrolled him in the "Coalbiters," a club he had founded for the study and propagation of Norse mythology.

The two began to meet regularly in Lewis's rooms at Magdalen, sometimes talking far into the night of the gods and giants of Asgard. Tolkien, a Roman Catholic, considered himself a Christian and argued for the truth of Jesus Christ being the Son of God.

With the aid of a mutual friend, Hugo Dyson (Lecturer in English Literature at Reading University), Tolkien worked on Lewis's "theism" to convince him of the meaning of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, and the role of Christ in Christianity.

Tolkien and Dyson argued that there is an inherent truth of mythology: all pagan religions point in the direction of God. Through this faulty argument, Lewis reasoned the story of Christ to be a "true myth"—a myth much the same as others, but a myth that really happened. Thus Lewis declared that he had "passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ—in Christianity." But to the consternation of the Catholic Tolkien, he embraced the Anglican Church.¹⁰

It was during their long association that both Lewis and Tolkien developed their most prestigious "sword and sorcery" material. Tolkien became well known for his mythological tale, *The Hobbit*, and his later work, *The Lord of the Rings*. Lewis turned to writing fantasy and expounding intermittently on Christian apologetics.

ALLEGORY OR PURE MYTH?

Perhaps the best-known fantasy from Lewis's pen is the seven-volume *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In it some see a parallel to the warfare between God and Satan. Many of Lewis's fans see the great lion, Aslan, as Christ. This because Aslan lays down his life to free the children from the curse of the evil witch (believed to represent Satan). Aslan possesses knowledge of a greater "magic" than that of the witch—a magic that brings him back to life and destroys the witch's power.

Contrary to popular belief, it was not Lewis's intention to blend fantasy with allegory of Christian truth. Rather, he was

genuinely enamored of mythology and believed the "Story" to take precedence over any preconceived moral:

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 at all. Everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn't even anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord.¹¹

In response to critics' claims of Christian allegory in his fantasies, Lewis stated,

No story can be devised by the wit of man which cannot be interpreted allegorically by the wit of some other man.... The mere fact that you can allegorize the work before you is of itself no proof that it is an allegory. Of course you can allegorize it. You can allegorize anything.... We ought not to proceed to allegorize any work until we have plainly set out the reasons for regarding it as an allegory at all.¹²

Yet even if Christian allegory was his intention, the fact is that God's truth, when couched in terms less than accurate, is open to question. No understanding can arise without prior knowledge of the truth—in which case the allegory is useless.

It is also wrong to depict evil as good, and magic as synonymous with the power of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 5:20; Acts 8:9-23). Many of Lewis's characters in his fantasies, depicted as "good," are really products of witchcraft, pagan mythology, and the Norse mysteries. They are demon gods of nature.

One of the more pronounced confusions of good and evil is *Till We Have Faces*, Lewis's retelling of the Greek myth of Cupid and Psyche, written just a few years before his death. In it several pagan concepts are espoused as valid truths. One such concept is a strong hint at universalist doctrine:

We're all limbs and parts of one Whole. Hence, of each other. Men, and gods, flow in and out and mingle.¹³

When such ideas are presented by one of the chief protagonists, heralded as a purveyor of wisdom by the author, one cannot but think the author also believed that way. So, too, one might for this same reason

think Lewis looked upon suicide as an acceptable act:

Have I not told you often that to depart from life of a man's own will when there's good reason is one of the things that are according to nature?¹⁴

Lewis may not have been aware of his error. His imagination, welded upon fantasy in preference to what he considered a faulty reality, set the themes for his writings and resulted in confusion by readers who perceived them as Christian allegory.

RESOLVING A DILEMMA

Many forget that Lewis was a fallible human whose writings must be subject to testing by God's Word. Thus we see in Christian bookstores his treatises on Christian thought alongside his occult fantasies.

It has escaped the notice of most Christians that Lewis is highly respected among occultists. There has developed a cult of sorts which venerates his fantasies along with those of non-Christians. Evidence of this is the fact that *The Chronicles of Narnia* is listed with other occult writings as recommended inspirational reading by the makers of the demonically-oriented game, *Dungeons and Dragons*.

One may accept C.S. Lewis's brilliant apologetics, but let's not deceive ourselves into thinking that everything he wrote bears the mark of the Holy Spirit. v

NOTES

1. Kathryn Ann Lindskoog, *C.S. Lewis, Mere Christian* (Glendale, CA: G/L Publications, 1973), p. 1.
2. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), p. 6.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
10. Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (New York: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1977), p. 164.
11. C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 36.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 58.
13. C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), pp. 300, 301.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 17.



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