

**Introduction:**

John Dickson:

Fans of the works of C.S. Lewis will no doubt recognise the meeting between Lucy Pevensie and Mr Tumnus the faun, under the lamp-post in the magical woods of Narnia

Lucy's discovery of Narnia has become one of the best-known scenes in children's literature.

This version is courtesy of the BBC series that first aired in 1988. The tone is very prim and proper, but still 'delightful'.

Lucy and Mr Tumnus remain two of Lewis' most iconic fictional characters, and they weren't just there at the beginning of this adventure, but at the beginning of its literary creation as well.

Fans of The Chronicles of Narnia have often wondered where Lewis's ideas for the collection came from.

Well, like most creative works, the Chronicles have mixed parentage.

Lewis says the first picture to pop into his head was the image of a faun carrying an umbrella and parcels through a snowy wood. But his idea of mystical creatures and talking animals goes back much further.

When he was a young child, Lewis, (who called himself 'Jack') and his brother Warnie wrote stories about imaginary lands to pass the time. Lewis's first creation was Animal Land, where winged and furry creatures walked and talked like humans. Later, he and Warnie created the land of Boxen where animals ran governments and managed railways.

Narnia's physical descriptions are also rooted in Lewis's childhood. His enchanting forests and rolling green hillsides owe much to his Irish homeland. He once wrote, "I felt that twinge of yearning at seeing the distant blue Mountains of Mourne from my childhood home",

And elements of Narnia arose from real childhood experiences. In *The Magician's Nephew*, the fatal illness that leaves Diggory's mother bedridden is a poignant mirror of the condition that took Lewis's own mother.

Even the name 'Narnia' is from an ancient Italian town that Lewis circled in his schoolboy atlas.

But the drive to write The Chronicles of Narnia came from a simple conversation near the outbreak of the second world war. Over breakfast, Lewis announced to his friends, Mrs Moore and her daughter, "I'm going to write a children's book!"

There was laughter - Lewis didn't have any children of his own and he had virtually no contact with kids apart from rare encounters with his godchildren. But though the laughs died down, and the idea grew.

Lewis set about writing not an allegory (where every element represents something in our world), but a 'supposal'. He wrote that Aslan, the lion-king "... is an invention giving an imaginary answer to the question, 'What might Christ become like if there really were a world like Narnia and He chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as he actually has done in ours'"?

That much we know from Lewis' own words. But scholars have since discovered some other amazing historical, literary, and theological keys that Lewis never talked about openly. Still, it seems - and you can be the judge - that he really intended them as a kind of inside joke, or, perhaps more accurately, a medieval pun!

That's what we're examining together as we walk through the wardrobe and join Lucy and Mr Tumnus in the fascinating world of Narnia.

### **Part 1**

Michael Ward:

Thank you for having me on. I've just sent you an email, by the way, including a quotation from C.S. Lewis in which he says "after all, undeceptions are a common enough event in real life".

**JD:** *Oh, thank you. I mean, I pinched obviously the title of my podcast and my whole ministry from the out-of-print collection of essays, the 'Undeceptions' collection of essays. That's where I got this title but hadn't seen the actual word in his essays.*

**MW:** Well, I'm not sure. I'm not sure that this quotation comes from an essay in *Undeceptions*. I can't remember what's in *Undeceptions*, but the essay I've sent you is

his essay on Jane Austin, which is all about undeception as a feature of Jane Austin's novels.

John Dickson:

I'm speaking with Dr Michael Ward, a man who could reasonably lay claim to being the world's foremost expert on Narnia.

Michael is an English literary critic and theologian, as well as an associate faculty member of Oxford University's Faculty of Theology and Religion. His academic focus is theological imagination, especially in the writings of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and G.K. Chesterton.

And, alongside a shelf full of books and essays, he's well known as the author of the book *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*.

And, wonderfully, straight after our conversation, he sent me Lewis' article arguing that Jane Austen's books are best thought of as classic 'undeceptions'! Very cool!

Anyway, back to Michael.

**JD:** *Michael, what's fascinated you so much, uh, to dedicate, you know, years of studying Lewis, What has fascinated you about him?*

**MW:** Well, I think it's his combination of reason and imagination. He's interested in truth, but he is also interested in meaning, and that's how he defines imagination and reason as the organ of meaning, imagination, and the natural organ of truth and reason. And he puts the two together. He combines them. He's not interested in just dry facts. He can do that of course. He's trained in logic. He taught philosophy at Oxford as his first position. But he's also a poet and he loves language and symbol and metaphor and the simple texture of reality, what it means, even before you begin to consider whether it's true or false or not. And that combination of the poetic and the philosophical is quite unusual, I think. That's one of the things I, I most, most admire and value.

John Dickson:

Now, many people have spoken and written about the works of C.S. Lewis - I'm a bit of a fan-boy myself!

But Michael shares a very intimate connection with Lewis' life that few can boast about.

**JD:** *You lived for three years in C.S. Lewis's home 'The Kilns' - is that real?*

**MW:** It is. I lived there from 1996 to 1999. I was a kind of warden, and head resident. I was in charge of the house on behalf of its owner, the C.S. Lewis Foundation. And I was charged with paying the bills and showing people around. And it was a good period to live there because 1998 was the anniversary of Lewis' birth. And there was a lot of special interest in Lewis that year from people all around the world. The *BBC* came several times for different programs and the *LA Times*, and the *Guardian* newspaper and all sorts of people were interested in Lewis that year. I had the great privilege of living within the house, I occupied Lewis's bedroom and study upstairs.

**JD:** *Did your imagination run wild? I'd find myself imagining or lighting a pipe!*

**MW:** ironically, you are not allowed to smoke in the house anymore.

John Dickson:

C.S. Lewis was a heavy smoker - like his friend, J.R.R. Tolkien. He was famous for puffing a pipe through student tutorials and using his study carpet as an ashtray.

And he certainly didn't refrain at home.

Michael Ward:

Even more ironically, when the C.S. Lewis Foundation took over the house in the mid-1980s, they tried to recreate the look that it had had in the 1950s when Lewis lived there. And they actually brought in a professional pub painter, who painted the ceilings yellow to suggest the nicotine stains that would've accumulated from all the years of smoking.

John Dickson:

Some are surprised to learn that Lewis smoked and drank and used a pub as his second office. Tolkien says he was known to put away as much as three pints of beer in a very short session.

He wasn't your typical modern public Christian.

**JD:** *Lewis is loved by some kinds of evangelicals, but he's disliked by other kinds of Christians. He's had a massive influence in some quarters and almost completely unknown in others. Why is there such a difference of opinion about him, do you think?*

**MW:** Interesting question. Mark Noll, the American historian has recently given some lectures on this very subject about Lewis's reception, particularly in America.

Mark Noll recently gave a series of lectures at the Wave Center at Wheaton College on Lewis's American reception. And he pointed out that the more reformed a Christian is, the less interested they tended to be in C.S. Lewis. So Catholics, Anglicans and fairly Catholic-minded Lutherans and Presbyterians and other kinds of evangelicals, they're all quite open to C.S. Lewis. And he does have a very broad readership amongst those, those groups of Christians and indeed amongst Eastern Orthodox Christians. But the more Calvinistic you get the fewer people who seem to be interested in Lewis.

**JD:** *Is this simply because he did make one or two unkind or, you know, unappreciative remarks about Calvinists in his writings?*

**MW:** Yes. That might be it, though. You know, those are so few and far between that I doubt that can really have an effect. I think it's just his, his whole approach, his, his great interest in and high evaluation of natural theology and natural law. That just cuts against the grain for many Calvinists.

John Dickson:

Natural theology is just rationalising the Creator on the basis of the creation.

Natural law theory is that the structure of creation tells you something about the nature of ethics - what things are 'for' is an indication of how we are to live.

And, as Michael says, Calvinists (my buddies) can sometimes be sceptical that the fallen human mind is capable of working out much at all about God and ethics without the explicit revelation of God in the Bible.

That said, some very famous Calvinists - like New York's Tim Keller - is a huge admirer of C.S. Lewis and quotes all the time in his writings and speeches. (I'm with Tim!).

Whether you're a fan or not, there's no getting around the footprint of Lewis.

*The Cambridge Companion to C.S. Lewis* - which Michael Ward co-edited - names the Oxford don as the most influential religious author of the 20th century - and Lewis is probably maintaining that status in the first quarter of this century, too.

Michael Ward:

Well, it's, it's simply the fact that he's so vastly popular, both in the Christian world and in the secular world. The 90 books have really gone mainstream and are classic titles in the canon of English children's fiction. He's, as I've just been saying, popular amongst a wide array of Christians. Not all Christians, but many Christians, perhaps even most Christians, have some patience for him. He's been translated into numerous different

languages and the fact that he has continued to be popular since his death is itself telling.

He himself thought that his popularity would wane after his death. He predicted that nobody would be reading him five or 10 years after he died, but quite the contrary, he's just become more and more and more popular. And the fact that he's also associated with Tolkien, I think helps his legacy and helps him to endure in the public imagination, because people who might not know much about Lewis, but do know about Tolkien, will eventually discover that Lewis and Tolkien were firm friends and that if it hadn't been for Lewis' encouragement, Tolkien would never have finished writing *The Lord of the Rings*, which is often cited as the greatest work of fiction of the 20th century.

And so for all those reasons and others, including the fact that he works across such a wide waterfront of different genres and fields - so children's fiction, apologetics, poetry, journalism, academic works, those different genres - but also philosophy, English, literary criticism, theology, popular apologetics ... he just is touching lots of different bases where people live and find their way into him.

**JD:** *Yes. He always played down his ability to contribute to theology. I mean, he was always self-deferential in, 'I could only speak as a layman', that kind of language. But do you rate him theologically?*

**MW:** Yes, I do. And indeed, this is another point that my co-editor of the *Cambridge Companion*, Rob McSwain makes that it's bizarre that C.S. Lewis should not appear in lists of significant 20th-century theologians, given the impact that he has had in theology and in the church more generally. It just goes to show what a narrow and over-professionalized conception of theology we have had if someone like C.S. Lewis isn't regarded as a significant theological voice.

Now admittedly, he wasn't a trained theologian, and admittedly, he never taught theology officially at either Oxford or Cambridge, his two universities, and you're quite right that he always disavowed any, you know, professional credentials. He wasn't a priest, he wasn't a proper theologian. He said he was only a layman, a very ordinary layman of the Church of England, he says, And those, those are all true.

But he was also exceptionally well-read in theology. He was a very devout Christian. So he was interested in applying theology to his spiritual life. It wasn't just a cerebral game for him, it was a matter of the most important existential reality. But then I think the real contribution he makes to theology is, and this connects to what I was saying in answer to your earlier question, he's imaginative, he's a poet. And his theological imagination, I think, is the thing that marks him out, and highlights his particular value in theology. He's

so interested in metaphor and language and symbol and rhetoric. That's his chief contribution I always think.

John Dickson:

Lewis isn't remembered by most as "... one of the most 'original' exponents of the Christian faith." - as one critic put it. Arguably, he's better remembered as the author of a shelf full of imaginative fiction.

Biographers like A.N. Wilson have argued that Lewis sort of 'retreated' into fiction writing after being out-debated at the Socratic Club by Oxford philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe.

You can hear more about that in Episode 80, *Lewis's Oxford*, which is sort of the companion episode to this one (sort of).

But, basically, the story goes that, bruised and battered, Lewis could no longer rationally defend Christianity, so he turned to the story as a means of commending the faith. And that's how he ended up penning his most famous fictional work, *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

It's a cool story the sceptic sometimes likes to tell. I raised it with Michael.

Micahel Ward:

That way of talking about the conception or the inception of the *Chronicles* is so much bunkum if you ask me. There's nothing to it at all. Neither generally nor particularly. Generally, Lewis had been writing fiction for years before he started the *Narnia Chronicles*. He'd written three stories of *Interplanetary Adventure*, *The Ransom Trilogy*. He'd written *The Screwtape Letters*, he'd written *The Great Divorce* long before he turned to *Narnia*. And at the same time as he was writing all those fictional works, he was writing more philosophical, apologetic nonfiction works like *The Problem of Pain* and *Mere Christianity*, and *The Abolition of Man*. He'd always been riding two horses abreast as it were. So we can hardly say that he turned as a novelty to fiction writing. He'd already been writing loads of fiction for years. So, that's just a general point.

The more particular point is that, well, first of all, this debate that he had with Elizabeth Anscombe has been much overblown. He admitted she won the debate. She managed her wrong foot him in this Socratic Club, set two, and that was so unusual for Lewis to be, to be checked, even in the slightest in public debate, that this was why it suddenly became such an urban myth. 'Oh, did you go to the Socratic Club last night? Elizabeth

Anscombe wiped the floor with C.S. Lewis! It was a sober discussion about some very highly technical points of linguistics, really. And, Lewis admitted that she had forced him to rethink some of his arguments, and he did rethink them. And he later republished the book *Miracles*, which was where she was directing her fire, and he rewrote the offending chapter, taking into account her critique. So he respected Elizabeth Anscombe, and he realized that he needed to tighten up his argument a bit, which he did. So the idea that he was absolutely devastated and couldn't hack it anymore as a philosopher is not true at all. Why would he republish the book, tightening it up if he, if he was so desolate? It's preposterous.

But then the idea that he just retreated into fantasy and turned to a mere story when he was writing the Narnia Chronicles is also just particularly mistaken, because if you ask me, and indeed you are asking me, the whole origin of *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* grows out of *Miracles*, which is the book that Elizabeth Anscombe was, was critiquing. I've got a whole chapter on this in my book *Planet Narnia*, about how I think that after Elizabeth Anscombe critiqued his defensive *Miracles*, Lewis began to say to himself, 'Well, how can I retell this argument more poetically, more symbolically'? And I won't go into all the boring details of that argument, but I think that rather than retreating into fantasy, Lewis was, as it were, advancing into a fairytale, which he regarded as a higher form of communication. Myth is a language more adequate than doctrine, theological formulations, and mere intellectual abstractions. And so by turning from an apologetic work like *Miracles* to a fabulous work like *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, Lewis would not have regarded that as a retreat, but as an advance.

John Dickson:

The Chronicles of Narnia certainly weren't any kind of retreat for Lewis's publisher.

He wrote seven books between 1950 and 1956, and they were astonishingly successful (as we discussed in episode 80).

In case you're new to Lewis' Narnia collection, I asked the author of *Planet Narnia* to give us a potted history.

Michael Ward:

Well, if you've not read Narnia, and know nothing about it, basically Narnia is à magical kingdom. It's another world to which children from this world gain access through various portals, such as wardrobes and paintings and hidden doorways. And they arrive in Narnia at various crucial points in Narnia's history. And these children from England managed to participate in Narnia's history. And they're present at its creation. They're



present at its final judgment. And in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, they're present at that moment when Narnia has its own Christ event when Aslan, the king of Narnia, who's this lion figure, dies and rises. And that's Lewis' own attempt to tell his own myth of a dying and rising God, except in this case, the God is a lion called Aslan, who dies and rises in a very Christlike way in order to redeem a young schoolboy called Edmond, who has betrayed his brother and his sisters. So that's it in a nutshell.

John Dickson:

Narnia's significance extends much further than children's entertainment, though.

On the surface, it's a story of kings and queens, knights and ladies, horseback rides and mighty sailing ships.

But one of his recent biographers Alister McGrath says Lewis is doing much more than asking us to inhabit a recreation of the Middle Ages. Rather, "Lewis is giving us a way of thinking by which we can judge our own ideas ... and come to realise that they are not necessarily "right" on account of being more recent".

So Lewis created a world of the past to judge our present. And in Narnia, we find challenges to modern ways of thinking.

Lewis has been accused of promoting a kind of middle-class sexism in his books by giving subordinate roles to all of his female characters. But he actually stood out from his time by neatly balancing his gender roles. And if there's a lead character across *The Chronicles of Narnia*, it has to be Lucy. Lewis sometimes armed her with absolute zingers.

### **Excerpt - *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe***

*"That's the worst of girls," said Edmund to Peter and the Dwarf. "They never carry a map in their heads." "That's because our heads have something inside them," said Lucy.*

Nice!

And then there are the animals in Narnia.

We might not think much of them - talking creatures are common in fairytales, right?

But Lewis was writing in the middle of a very public debate on animal vivisection. By giving them voices, Lewis emphasised the biological proximity of humans and animals and challenged humanity's right to do whatever they pleased with them.

Outside of his books, he even teamed up with children's author Louis Carroll (of Alice in Wonderland fame) to protest cruelty to animals.

Narnia demonstrates, again and again, the power of storytelling to help readers feel the weakness of present ideas. But Lewis's chronicles are more than just parables for teaching ethics. There is a profound worldview here.

Now, we go into detail about Lewis' conversion to Christianity in that previous episode. But it's worth remembering that pivotal to his conversion were conversations with JRR Tolkien and his other good friend and English professor Hugo Dyson. They convinced Lewis to see an intimate connection between myth and reality.

Michael Ward:

Lewis admitted to Dyson that he had always found those myths profound and suggestive of meanings beyond his grasp. He couldn't say in cold prose what they meant, but then he didn't *want* to say in cold prose what they meant. He was prepared just to enjoy the story, to feel the myth shining by its own light, as it were. But with Christianity, his sort of meddling intellect had come in and interfered with his enjoyment of the story of Christ and Tolkien and Dyson and said, "you are putting the cart before the horse. You're letting the tail wag the dog".

Because doctrines are merely translations into our ideas and concepts of that which God has already expressed in a language more adequate and that language more adequate (I'm quoting Lewis here in this phrase, this language more adequate) is the lived language of a human being, being born, teaching, suffering, dying, rising, ascending. That's the language most adequate as a way of making the meaning of Christianity come home to us. So when Tolkien and Dyson said, "enjoy Christianity in the same way that you enjoy pagan myths", that was a huge breakthrough for Lewis. And he suddenly realized, 'Oh, yeah, I've been getting things back to front and that pagan myths', he said, 'are men's myths - that is to say they are the product of human imaginations. And God is working through those human imaginations revealing something, however, refracted, however, diffused through those stories of dying and rising gods, as they tell stories about the natural processes of the world'.

But in Christianity, we find not a human myth, but a divine myth. This is God's myth in which God reveals himself directly through Jesus Christ. And that's why there's a

similarity between Christianity and Paganism in this respect - that both Christianity and Paganism tell stories about dying and rising divinities, except in Christianity it's actually historical. It really happened. Whereas in the Pagan myths, it was merely imaginary. From the similarity between Christianity and Paganism, we should not conclude so much the worst for Christianity. We should conclude so much of the better for Paganism, that Paganism got some things right. It was sort of gesturing in the right direction, at its best. And Lewis is talking here about the great pagan myth, the highest, the noblest. There are a lot of pagan myths which are obscene and blasphemous and almost lunatic, he says. But the great myths: Adonus, Bachus, and others are, you know, they rise out of the swamp of paganism, like elms, like tall, beautiful elms rising from a swampy undergrowth.

John Dickson:

Narnia was Lewis' attempt to create a myth for children that would point them to this one true myth ... an instructive myth.

From about 1937 Lewis seems to have realised that he could engage with anxieties about the Christian faith in ways additional to rational argument.

He could use imagination as a key to the human soul.

And so he began writing fictional stories which would eventually culminate in his *Chronicles of Narnia*. He wanted to gain a purchase on the human heart to help people see the beauty of some of Christianity's most important doctrines.

Take the atonement, for example - Jesus dying in our place.

In *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lucy's brother Edmund has betrayed his family to the White Witch and so the law says his life must be forfeited.

But Aslan allows *himself* to be executed on the stone table - like Christ on the cross - in Edmund's place.

All seems lost. Lucy and Susan find his dead body and spend a miserable night crying. Until, as the sun rises, they hear the Stone Table crack...

**Excerpt - 'The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe**

*"Who's done it?" cried Susan. "What does it mean? Is it more magic?" "Yes!" said a great voice behind their backs. "It is more magic." They looked around. There,*

*shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself. "Oh, Aslan!" cried both the children, staring up at him, almost as much frightened as they were glad. "Aren't you dead then, dear Aslan?" said Lucy. "Not now," said Aslan. "You're not—not a—?" asked Susan in a shaky voice. She couldn't bring herself to say the word ghost. Aslan stooped his golden head and licked her forehead. The warmth of his breath and a rich sort of smell that seemed to hang about his hair came all over her. "Do I look it?" he said. "Oh, you're real, you're real! Oh, Aslan!" cried Lucy, and both girls flung themselves upon him and covered him with kisses. "But what does it all mean?" asked Susan when they were somewhat calmer. "It means," said Aslan, "that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that 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 backward."*

John Dickson:

"Death itself would start working backward." I get a chill down my spine when I read this.

Even if I don't quite get it, I find myself seeing its beauty.

In some ways, all of this is straightforward - especially if you've read a bit by (or about) Lewis.

But we've got some insights that are not straightforward, that are not obvious. It really seems like Lewis built into the world of Narnia a hidden structure, a kind of coded message.

That might sound like a Dan Brown-style conspiracy, but it isn't!

## **Part 2**

### **Excerpt - 'The Magicians Nephew'**

*"But please, please—won't you—can't you give me something that will cure Mother?" Up till then he had been looking at the Lion's great feet and the huge claws on them; now, in his despair, he looked up at its face. What he saw*

*surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion's eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory's own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself. "My son, my son," said Aslan. "I know. Grief is great."*

John Dickson:

That's Aslan again in *The Magician's Nephew* ... the first or the last book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, depending on your approach.

It tells the story of the creation of Narnia ... so it's a beginning ... but it was also the last book that Lewis wrote ... so it's an ending.

And that brings us to the overarching structure of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

There are actually three different ways you can read the seven books - the order in which Lewis wrote them, the order in which they were published, and the order suggested by their internal chronology.

We'll put a chart in the show notes so you can get reading.

But each order suggests a different way of thinking about the Chronicles of Narnia, and those considerations have set literary scholars searching for a unifying theory that would bind the books together.

Some have suggested that Narnia's seven books parallel the seven volumes of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, a vast medieval work Lewis knew well.

Others think the seven books match the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church - or possibly the seven deadly sins.

There are problems with all of those suggestions - not the least of which is that Lewis was an Anglican, not a Catholic.

But in 2008, Michael Ward set the critical world on fire with an idea that might have won the day!

**JD:** *You've made the astonishing claim that you've found a hidden meaning in Lewis' Narnia series that ties the whole thing together. Can you put that simply before I ask you a few more questions drilling down on it?*

Michael Ward:

Yeah. Well, there are seven Narnia Chronicles and a question has often arisen as to why there are seven, and why they are so varied and different from each other. Where's the consistency? Where's the uniformity?

Across these seven different books, various explanations have been offered by people. Maybe Lewis was writing about the seven deadly sins. Maybe he was writing about the seven Catholic sacraments. Maybe he was writing about any seven that people can think of different theories have been suggested.

My belief is that he wrote seven Narnia books because of his interest in the seven heavens, the seven planets of medieval cosmology, which he as a medieval scholar knew all about, wrote about extensively and described as spiritual symbols of permanent value, which are especially worthwhile in our own generation. And when you come at the Narnia Chronicles from the Seven Heavens, these seven spiritual symbols, the apparent oddities, the ostensible inconsistencies disappear. And the Chronicles suddenly reveal themselves to be even more brilliant and more imaginatively sophisticated than we previously realized.

**JD:** *And you came across this, or, you know, it, it sort of creatively struck you when you were reading the Planets poem by Lewis?*

**MW:** Yes. He wrote a long, complicated poem about the seven heavens, it's called simply *The Planets*...

***Excerpt - 'The Planets'***

*Soft breathes the air  
Mild, and meadowy, as we mount further where rippled radiance rolls about us  
Moved with music – measureless the waves'  
Joy and jubilee.  
It is Jove's orbit,  
Filled and festal, faster turning  
With arc ampler.  
From the Isles of Tin  
Tyrian traders, in trouble steering  
Came with his cargoes; the Cornish treasure  
That his ray ripens. Of wrath ended  
And woes mended, of winter passed  
And guilt forgiven, and good fortune*

*Jove is master;  
 and of jocund revel,  
 Laughter of ladies.  
 The lion-hearted,  
 The myriad-minded, men like the gods,  
 Helps and heroes, helms of nations  
 Just and gentle, are Jove's children,  
 Work his wonders.  
 On his white forehead  
 Calm and kingly, no care darkens  
 Nor wrath wrinkles: but righteous power  
 And leisure and largess their loose splendours  
 Have wrapped around him – a rich mantle  
 Of ease and empire.*

Michael Ward:

And I was reading this one night in bed. I was halfway through my PhD research. I was looking at Lewis's theological imagination at the time, and I got to the lines about Jupiter. And one of the influences that Jupiter was thought to bring about, according to medieval thinking, was this, as Lewis puts it in the poem, 'Winter passed and guilt forgiven'.

And those five words left off the page at me, *winter passed, and guilt forgiven*. And they put me in mind of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, which is all about the passing of winter and the forgiving of guilt. That's a five-word summary, if you like, of *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. And that was the link that, as it was flashed, connected the poem to the Chronicles.

And as I began to think about the other six chronicles on the other six planets, it was pretty clear to me that they all matched up. There was no force, there was no crowbarring. It just clicked into place all over the picture. And I suddenly thought, "Oh, this is what he was up to". And it was the most marvellous sort of revelation as it were of his secret imaginative design of the Chronicles. It's the only original idea I've ever had in my life. And it's dominated my life since I had it back in 2003.

**JD:** *But how does it connect to Jupiter? So 'The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe' is a Jupiter world, where winter is passed and the forgiving of guilt occurs, but how does that relate to the medieval idea of Jupiter? What's going on there? I don't see the connection.*

**MW:** Yeah, there's a lot going on in the Jupiter symbol, the jovial archetype. The principal quality of Jupiter, according to medieval poetry and art is kingship. That's the principal quality of Jupiter. He's the king. But as Lewis says, in one of his academic works, "we must think of a king at peace enthroned, taking his leisure, serene, tranquil, festive, prosperous, magnanimous. When Jupiter dominates, we may expect peace and healthy in days", he says. And it's that kind of kingship, that sort of magnanimous, regal sovereignty that Lewis found particularly reflective of Christ's kingship.

**JD:** Yes. And you're saying that the mood of the medieval understanding of Jupiter gives us the atmosphere of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. It's the atmosphere of -

**MW:** I think what he's doing with this symbolism in each chronicle is quite complex, actually. It's not just mood, an atmosphere. I mean, he was interested in mood and atmosphere, but the intriguing thing that he does is that with the Jupiter symbol, he portrays Aslan as the king. He's the king of the wood. He's the king of the beast. He's royal, he's solemn. He's got all these royal accoutrements. So Aslan, as it were, sums up in his own person, that aspect of Jupiter's personality. And it is through Aslan, this jovial king that winter is passed and guilt is forgiven. But it's not just Aslan who sums up these Jupiter qualities because the children themselves, as they get into Narnia, as they come to know Aslan, they become increasingly jovial themselves. So when they first go into the wardrobe and they put on the fur coats, we're told in a very meaningful little sentence that the fur coats looked more like royal robes when they put them on.

And that's a little tip of the wink, as it were, to where the story is gonna end up when the children are actually enthroned and crowned and hailed as kings and queens in the Castle of Cair Paravel at the end of the story. And we're told repeatedly by Aslan and one of the other characters, that once you're a king in Narnia, you're always a king in Narnia, or once you're a queen, you're always a queen in Narnia.

So the children, as they come into Aslan's world and get to know Aslan, take on Aslan's own nature. And that's from a theologically imaginative point of view, a really, really significant thing for Lewis to depict because he's showing subtly and indirectly how we grow up into the fullness of the stature of Christ as we love him, as we obey him, as we know him, we become like him.

So the children become kings and queens after the jovial King himself in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. And in *Prince Caspian*, which is the Mars book, they become martial. And in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, which is the Sun Book, the Sun was a planet according to medieval thought, the children learn to drink light, and they can stare into the sun as they become acquainted with Aslan, who in that book is depicted



under the heading of Christ, the Light of the World, to use biblical terminology, and so on, seven times over.

It sometimes confuses people to discover that the Sun and indeed the Moon were regarded as planets in medieval cosmology, but they were. And the other five were Mars, Mercury, Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn. And it's these seven planets that give us the names of the days of the week. That's probably the best way to think about them. If you're trying to remember what the seven Planets are, this is before Astronomists discovered Neptune or Uranus or Pluto.

John Dickson:

So, following Michael's theory, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is the Jupiter book, and *Prince Caspian* is the Mars book. And the others?

Well, *The Voyage of the Dawntrader* is the sun, and *The Silver Chair* is the moon.

*The Horse and His Boy* is Mercury, *The Magician's Nephew* is Venus, and *The Last Battle* is Saturn.

Michael says this ancient cosmology didn't dictate the *plots* of the books.

Instead, each drew on the characters, the vibe, of one of those planets - planets which Lewis once described as "spiritual symbols of permanent value," and "especially worthwhile in our own generation".

**JD:** *You had read the Narnia series many times. You were a growing scholar of this. Why do you think you began to see it at that point? I mean, I know the reason was that line but was there something else? I mean, had you been striving for a unity of thought?*

Michael Ward:

Yes. I had been looking at the non-Chronicles from a sort of the literary critical point of view, asking myself, "Why is it that they are so apparently disconnected from each other? Why do they have such different tones and flavors"?

I wasn't the only scholar who was thinking along these lines. As I said, other people have been suggesting different explanations to account for the oddities. I myself had once made a halfhearted attempt to link the Chronicles to different plays of Shakespeare. There are lots of Shakespeare and illusions in the Chronicles. But although I could make that work for, you know, three or four of them quite well, it didn't really account for all seven. And I abandoned that idea. But I was working away almost

sort of unconsciously at this question, nibbling away at it, I suppose, and in my PhD research, I was looking at Lewis's understanding of wordless communication, implicit communication, saying things without saying them, if you like.

This is an important theme in his book on prayer *Letters to Malcolm*, where he says, "Prayer without words is best if you can achieve it, not to verbalize the mental acts", he says, And I was intrigued as to why so articulate amount of C.S. Lewis would want to pray wordlessly. So I was investigating his whole approach to saying things without saying them when I stumbled upon this secret design to Narnia. And of course, if I'm right about it, this is a prime example of saying something without saying it, because *The Lion The Witch and The Wardrobe* say 'this is a Jupiter world', and 'this is a jovial king, and here are the jovial kings and queens under him'. But it never says it explicitly. It's woven into the warp and woof of the whole text so that everything bespeaks this jovial reality, but it's never explicitly identified.

**JD:** *And why would he do this? Was it some kind of in-joke that he went to his grave smiling over? I mean, he didn't tell, so far as we know, the Inklings, Tolkien... people who would've loved the idea that there was some inner logic to the whole thing.*

**MW:** Well, I think in, in a certain way, it was a joke, a game, an intellectual game that he was playing. He was, as it were, imitating some of the practices of medieval and Renaissance writers who loved to, you know, worked to complicated schemes and, and, and hidden designs. So there was that going on. And, indeed when I told someone in Cambridge, an old man who had known C.S. Lewis in the 1950s, what I discovered this old guy said, "Oh, that's exactly like Jack".

John Dickson:

There are other medieval elements at play in Narnia.

For a start, the plot is a lot like the great mystery plays of the Middle Ages, like those performed at York in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Just like the events in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, an arrogant Satan (represented by the White Witch) is tricked into furthering God's plan, just when it looks like darkness has conquered the forces of light.

And the same sorts of passion plays regularly contained something called the 'Harrowing of Hell' - a dramatic performance of the risen Christ battering down the gates of Satan's kingdom - just like Lewis' lion conquering the Witch's castle.

But whatever book we're in, whatever aspect of medieval imagery they might present, there's always one character at the centre of them all - Aslan.

Let's press 'pause'. I've got a five-minute Jesus for you.

### **FIVE MINUTE JESUS**

*"I am [in your world]," 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."* - The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe

There is a straightforward reason the Christ figure in Narnia is a Lion. It's not just because Lions are traditionally the 'king of the animal kingdom'.

It's a Bible thing from the first book to the last book.

In listing the tribes of Israel, the book of Genesis (49) describes the tribe of Judah like this:

*"You are a lion's cub, Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him?"*

That's pretty emphatic. One of the tribes of Israel is lionlike, compared to a cub, a lioness, and a lion - all in one verse.

King David was from that tribe, the tribe of Judah, and so this 'lion thing' came to have the resonance of a mighty warrior and lord. And so in Jewish tradition, the 'Lion' motif is associated with the future Messiah, the descendant of King David who will conquer the world. For the nerds, head to 4 Ezra where a lion rushes out of the woods to roar commands and save the day.

Jesus was an Israelite from the ancestral tribe of Judah. And, indeed, he was a direct descendant of king David.

Jesus never refers to himself as a lion.

But in the last book of the Bible, the New Testament book of Revelation in chapter 5, there is an apocalyptic vision about Jesus that explicitly calls him the "Lion of Judah" ... but does so in a way that completely upends the normal expectations of the roaring,

commanding 'King' of the animal kingdom. Listen to this - it's a wonderful piece of theological subversion, and it's the key to understanding C.S. Lewis' Aslan.

*"I wept and wept (says the author John) because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. [This scroll, by the way, is the scroll outlining the course and meaning of human history] ... Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."*

(Okay, big build-up... the Lion of Judah is here to save the day, to unlock history, to triumph over all ... and now here is the very next sentence about the appearance of the Lion ...)

Revelation. 5:6: *"Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne."*

The lion, the king, turns out to be a slain lamb, a Lord who gave himself for us, instead of lording it over us.

The Messiah's true victory is dying for us - bearing our judgment - so that all the world could be forgiven and brought back into a relationship with the Creator.

This is what Lewis is doing. Yes, Aslan is a Lion but he is a king that dies for his beloved kingdom.

You can press 'play' now.

**JD:** *If I were to ask Lewis, what's the most compelling thing or things about the Christian faith, what do you think he might say?*

Michael Ward:

I think Lewis' whole approach is to try to show the cosmic nature, the all-encompassing nature of the Christian life, that it accounts for everything. If you have religion, he says somewhere it must be cosmic. It must include everything, from the nebula down to worms and everything in between.

I'm not just dodging your question, I'm seriously trying to communicate what I think Lewis and indeed Tolkien, and to a certain extent, Barfield we're all trying to do, which is to push back against a mindset that has come upon us in since the scientific revolution

of the 17th and 18th centuries of thinking about the universe as somehow alien from us, as somehow a machine that, you know, we can make to work for our purposes.

And Lewis's whole thrust is to say, 'no, don't think of it as a machine. Think of it as a body. Think of it yourself as connected to this body that is the universe, and you are part of it. You are one organ within it'. This is not pantheism, Lewis has a, has a very clear belief that there is an ontological distinction between creator and creation.

But he is wanting to say that since the scientific revolution, we have become alienated from the universe and increasingly alienated from ourselves. We now view ourselves as so much raw material to be cut up and moved about, to suit our own conveniences, rather than just inhabiting ourselves and our universe as children, as natural creatures within it. It shouldn't be alien to us. It should be our home. Not our permanent home. There, there is death and resurrection to be experienced before we come to our home with the capital 'H'. But nonetheless, we should feel that nature is, is natural to us.

**Excerpt - 'The Last Battle'**

*It is as hard to explain how this [new] sunlit land was different from the old Narnia as it would be to tell you how the fruits of that country taste. Perhaps you will get some idea of it if you think like this. You may have been in a room in which there was a window that looked out on a lovely bay of the sea or a green valley that wound away among mountains. And in the wall of that room opposite the window, there may have been a looking glass. And as you turned away from the window you suddenly caught sight of that sea or that valley, all over again, in the looking glass. And the sea in the mirror, or the valley in the mirror, were in one sense just the same as the real ones: yet at the same time, they were somehow different—deeper, more wonderful, more like places in a story: in a story, you have never heard but very much want to know. The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that: if you ever get there you will know what I mean.*

**JD:** *I want you to think about the Lewis sceptic listening to us. They might be sceptical about the whole Christian faith, but perhaps about Lewis. And I wanna ask you, what are, I don't know, two or three things you would recommend the sceptic read of Lewis?*

Michael Ward:

Before I suggest something by C.S. Lewis, I would suggest reading something about C.S. Lewis, and that's a little book by Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, a very significant theological mind himself. He gave a series of lectures

about Narnia at Canterbury Cathedral when he was Archbishop. And in this book, *The Lions World*.

One of Williams's purposes in that book is to try to address the sceptic who thinks that Lewis is, you know, just a crabby old, conventional conservative Christian, dealing out bromides and, you know, feeding his reader's pie in the sky when they die. And Roan Williams says, 'no, no, actually Lewis is much more disturbing than that. He much more unsettling, he's much more inquiring both of himself and his readers than that'. So Rowan Williams' book is a good book for a sceptic about C.S. Lewis and a sceptic about Christianity to read.

As regards books by Lewis well ... as we're on the Interceptions podcast, maybe I should mention his essay on Jane Austen. This is a bit of a left-field answer because this is not explicitly about Christianity, but he's writing about a Christian novelist Jane Austen, and he's pointing out how in many of Jane Austen's novels, the heroin goes through a process of undeception.

So Elizabeth Bennett or Maryanne Dashwood or the others, they suddenly realize they've been misunderstanding their world. They need a paradigm shift. They need to view themselves and their world in a different relation. It's that process of undeception - of conversion if you like - that Lewis of Admir in Jane Austen, which he analyzes brilliantly in that essay.

John Dickson:

Michael Ward says Lewis wasn't magically converted. His belief in God, and finally his faith in Jesus, were struggles that took decades to resolve. I'm sure some listeners will resonate with that.

Michael Ward:

So he didn't find faith easy. And this is what perplexes me about some people who say that Lewis dolls out easy answers to difficult questions.

It makes me wonder whether they've ever read C.S. Lewis. The whole thrust of his writings is to say 'no Christianity isn't easy. Rather it's easy for those who do it'. You know, it's like riding a bike. It's easy once you can do it. It's easy for the saints, as it were. But because we are fallen, we find it difficult to get there. We find it unbelievable, for a good period of our lives, many of us. He's an expert at clearing away the obstacles to adult mature faith. So his own autobiography, *Surprised by Joy* would be a good thing for people to read about that. As would ... I always think his *Screwtape Letters* is an absolute classic work. That's particularly astute on the psychological barriers to faith

and the way that we are tempted to dismiss Christianity is for reasons, often incompatible reasons. It's a, it's a work of supreme wit.

**JD:** *My wife and I read that over our cup of tea in the morning every five or six years!*

**MW:** It's so challenging to our own evasions and obscurantism because, you know, even mature Christians, they still are apt to fall into these errors that he's diagnosing in the *screwtape Letters*. He does it so brilliantly that you can't take offence. This is why it's such a work of classic wit. If he said the same point directly, we'd feel got at, we'd feel lectured and moralized about. But because he says it all back to front, as it were, from the devil's point of view, and we laugh at ourselves, then, you know, he sugars the pill, the medicine goes down very easily.

John Dickson:

In one sense, Lewis is writing the same story over and over again - about God and His relationship with His creation.

J.R.R. Tolkien wasn't as theologically explicit as Lewis, but his *Lord of the Rings* is a critique of worldly power and a call to renounce it for the sake of the good. The epic struggle to possess the master ring that controls all other rings of power ends with destroying the ring to save the world from itself. The Christian resonance is impossible to miss.

Both these great authors are embodying profound theological ideas in an imaginative form.

Michael Ward:

What Lewis is trying to communicate is that before we ever begin to look analytically or speculatively at the world and try to divine or discern traces of God's existence or traces of God's presence in the world, long before we do that with our analytical intelligence, God is already working through us in the air that we breathe and in the blood pumping in our veins.

And God, of course, is behind us and beneath us, long before he ever becomes present before us, as it were.

And it's that holistic presentation of God's activity in our lives, which Lewis is trying to depict imaginatively in Narnia by drenching the Narnia world with this jovial spirit in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* so that you never look at it - you look along it, you are inside it, you are inhabiting it.

That's precisely what Lewis believed about our relationship with God, that we are, we're not just looking at God, we're looking along God. Because in him, we live and move and have our being, as Paul says in the acts of the Apostles. We've developed too much of what his friend Owen Barfield called 'dashboard knowledge' about God. You know, you're driving your car and you're looking at the dashboard, you're seeing the lights flickering on your dashboard, but you've got no engine knowledge, Barfield would say. You've got no knowledge of what these lights actually mean or how they connect to the engine. And that relates to so many of us in our spiritual lives, that we've got a dashboard knowledge of God, but we've got no engine knowledge. And Lewis is trying to give us both.

### **Excerpt - The Last Battle**

*Then Aslan turned to them and said: "You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be." Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often." "No fear of that," said Aslan. "Have you not guessed?" Their hearts leaped, and a wild hope rose within them...*

*"The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."*

*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 the 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.*