

A MODERN-DAY PARABLE: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF *THE LION, THE
WITCH, AND THE WARDROBE* IN COMPARISON TO THE PARABLES OF THE
NEW TESTAMENT

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to explore the connection between the parables of the New Testament and modern religious fiction such as C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Since biblical writers recorded Jesus of Nazareth speaking in parables, essentially extended metaphors with a narrative quality, the connection between these ancient tales and modern religious stories is compelling. By examining similar literary features, structural components, and content we will see the similarities in function and purpose behind these two genres. Both access the creative faculties of their audience to allow ideas to germinate from a uniquely inventive part of the imagination. By using Lewis's novel as comparison we will see a direct correlation of technique between parabolic speaking and modern storytelling. In addition, this particular novel illustrates the technique of reading the gospel narrative as a parable itself by retelling and repainting the story of Jesus of First Century Palestine in Aslan of Narnia. By examining Lewis's story in comparison to the story of the gospels, one can understand a modern view of the Christ story in new ways.

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I. Introduction

It has been roughly 2000 years since the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth and nearly as long since the gospel writers chronicled his life. Yet what began as a simple movement in ancient Judea has grown to become one of the farthest reaching religions of the modern day. The biblical accounts of Jesus' life and his teachings are just as powerful and affecting now as they were during the first few centuries CE. Jesus' mission and sacrificial life have been recreated and dramatized in countless ways from one society to the next. His preaching has been quoted by countless leaders since. It may seem elusive how this particular story has remained relevant for thousands of years over other religious movements. What makes the life of Jesus a timeless tale, one that is retold continually for new generations?

To understand the persistent relevance of Jesus we must comprehend the universal themes, values, and methods he espoused that make him a teacher of the modern and ancient worlds. He was particularly adept at portraying poignant truths to his audience through accessible imagery and language, notably through his adept use of parables. This form of speaking allowed Jesus to talk about abstract concepts while grounded in the reality of daily life. The parables contained life lessons as well as important theological ideas, meaning that they could simultaneously preach and teach. Unfortunately readers often ignore the exterior wrappings of the parables' messages and simply look for the deeper meaning without appreciating the beauty of the form. I agree with John Donahue that "the parables are not carriers of ideas where the image is to be discarded in the quest for the kernel of meaning. The nuances and implications of the images must be unfolded."¹

The parables first drew my attention in relation to a theory of imagination put forth I read by J. R. R. Tolkien in his essay "On Fairy Stories." In this treatise, Tolkien (a fervent Catholic)

¹ John R. Donahue S. J., *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 13.

argues that fiction and fantasy are essential human characteristics in the Christian schema of the world, allowing man in the likeness of the Creator to co-create the world around him. Through illustrating fiction, man becomes a partner architect with God, demonstrating the ability for creation through the imagination. Tolkien urges that "fiction is a human right: we make in our measure... because we are made: and not only made, but made in the likeness of a Maker."² Thus, according to Tolkien, our ability to fantasize, contextualize, and create *mythos* is direct evidence of our similarity to the divine. This theory holds incredible implications when speaking of Jesus' parables because they are elements of Christian mythology.

I became consumed with this idea that creating stories and myths was an exercise of man's creative faculties and realized that Jesus was not the only author to manipulate this genre in the Christian contexts. Christian writers exist in every era, utilizing the powers of imagination to repaint familiar stories and make the unknowable tangible. Was this not what Jesus sought to do by speaking in parables? The parables represent an attempt to discuss ethereal concepts of the Kingdom of God in worldly terms. They make the divine accessible for earthly people. So too do modern Christian fiction writers through their imaginary worlds attempt to conceptualize the proclaimed Son of Man. I felt myself drawn in particular towards the Chronicles of Narnia series by C. S. Lewis that are perhaps the most widely read example of Christian fiction.

C. S. Lewis was an Oxford don turned author who wrote during the mid-twentieth century. Moving past an early atheistic period of his life, Lewis became a Christian apologist writing rational defenses of the faith. But no amount of reason or logic seemed to satisfy his writer's urge and repeatedly he kept returning to the idea of writing fantasy. Drawn in by the theories of his close friend Tolkien, Lewis explored the genre of children's fiction and found that Christianity seemed to percolate into his writing of its own accord. Before long, he had a full-

² J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," *The Rivendell Community*, 9.

length novel called *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* that imagined a Christological savior in a magical land with six more volumes soon to follow.

The success of the Chronicles, and the reason they have never been out of print, is their ability to access the creative center of the mind while exploring a familiar tale. They retell the gospel story of Jesus, but with the unique feature of doing so by Jesus' own method of communication. Lewis was familiar with Jesus' narrative style and his extensive use of parables and used that to his own advantage. His object became "to recreate the Christian supernatural truth within an invented world" much as Jesus had recreated God's supernatural reality and the Kingdom of God within the parables.³ Lewis exhibited the main form of flattery by mimicking his subject's very patterns of speech.

In this paper, I will examine the similarities in content and form between Lewis's novel and Jesus' parables to illustrate their close relationship. I would argue that *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is the modern-day version of a parables because it functions similarly to create meaning through the powers of the imagination. It parablizes the story of Jesus itself, imagining the Son of Man as a powerful lion come to unite a divided land. Donahue supports this thesis, saying that "to study the parables of the Gospels is to study the gospel in parable."⁴ In this paper we shall explore the intricacies of the parable genre and its purpose within First Century Palestine compared to Lewis's fairy tale in the twentieth century. Through analysis, we will begin to see how Lewis immortalized Jesus' life and mission as parable in his novel.

³ Colin Manlove, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Patterning of a Fantastic World* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), 7.

⁴ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, ix.

II. The Parable as an Oral Story: A History of the Genre

Before we examine parallels between Lewis's fiction and the biblical parables, we must set a baseline understanding of the parabolic genre. J. Dominic Crossan describes a parable as "an extended metaphor or simile frequently becoming a brief narrative, generally used in biblical times for didactic purposes."⁵ This definition is an intriguing starting point because it fuses the idea of a simile and a narrative, implying that parables transform a simple comparison to the complexity of a story. In order to grasp the significance of this statement, modern readers must remember that first-century Palestine was primarily an oral culture which utilized long, recited stories as the main method of information transference. In a time when only the very elite were literate, stories were the lifeblood of this community much like most other ancient civilizations. Studying oral storytelling today is a valuable tool to understanding much of early global history. Through both content and form, this rudimentary style of communication reveals something fundamental about the very basis of human nature. Storytelling is a natural human response to synthesize the unknown and to understand the world. To begin, we'll look at the origins of the biblical parable tradition to better understand the genre which Jesus so deftly employed to deliver religious truths to his followers.

The Origins of the Parable up to First-Century Palestine

The genre of the parable first began in the Greco-Roman tradition. In their theory of rhetoric, ancient Greek philosophers delineated two types of acceptable proof for argumentation: history and fiction. They further divided fiction into fable (Greek being *logos*) and comparison

⁵ J. Dominic Crossan, "Parable," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary: Volume 5*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1992), 146.

(*parabolē*).⁶ For the Greco-Roman world, fables and parables were etymologically different. Distinguished based their varying layers of realism and fantasy, fables were impossible fictions whereas parables were grounded in their plausibility. These strong delineations eventually became muddled and by the time rhetorical patterns spread to the Levant, parables were basically descriptive analogies that were "almost synonymous with metaphor."⁷ The Greco-Roman tradition which emphasized the narrative plausibility of the parable broadened in Hebrew culture to become rather more story-like and imaginative. Parables of this practice tend to contain an overt message and one or more covert interpretations, making great use of the imaginative capability of their audience. They function as lures to interpretation, inviting the hearer to interact with the text on a personal level.

By the time parables were written into the Hebrew Scriptures, they "include everything from proverb to allegory."⁸ This diversification of purpose set the scene for a variegation of the term itself so that by the first century CE it grew to include a far wider scope of written materials. The term "parable" that we are familiar with today is a translation of the Hebrew word *mashal* found in the Old Testament and refers to a large selection of genres including parables, fables, riddles, and proverbs.⁹ A *mashal* was simply an artful comparison used to describe or illustrate another concept. Interestingly, *mashalim* in the Hebrew Bible are only spoken by prophets and God.¹⁰ Since they function as vehicles of religious transmission, either by the spokesmen of the deity or God himself, the *mashalim* became associated with a sacred literary form. The mythologizing of religious thought through parables helped ancient Judaism not only

⁶ In this case, *logos* refers not to the common definition of "reason" or "word" but rather to this type of ancient fable.

⁷ Crossan, "Parable," 146.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁹ Dina Stein, "Parable," 2013, in *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions* (London: Routledge), <http://ezproxy.library.arizona.edu/login?url=http%3A%2F%2Fliterati.credoreference.com.ezproxy1.library.arizona.edu%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fsharpejft%2Fparable%2F0>.

¹⁰ Examples of Old Testament *mashalim* include II Samuel 7:1-4, Isaiah 5: 1-6, and Isaiah 28: 24-28.

become solidified through the written word but become more appealing and relatable to the general community.

The next major period of writing is what Dina Stein terms the Rabbinic Era, a period from about 539 BCE when the Jews returned to Judea from the Babylonian Exile until 70 CE when the second Temple was destroyed. At this time *mashal* narrowed in definition, referring simply to parables and fables. The stories became standardized often relying of a group of stock characters, namely the protagonist King (e.g. God) who undergoes different trials or decisions. These parables are at once "both a fictional story [with a plot line] and exegesis," not only revisiting old stories but constantly reconstructing meanings.¹¹ It is this time and tradition that welcomed the parable's most famous client, Jesus of Nazareth.

John Kloppenborg agrees that Jesus' parables are "literary successors to the *meshalim* of the Hebrew Bible."¹² Just like his predecessors, he utilized parables in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes. Traditionally, his sayings are divided into three categories: aphoristic, extended, and narrative parables. Aphoristic parables usually tell a predictable yet enlightening story and force the reader to examine a typical situation with a critical eye.¹³ Despite the misgivings of their name, extended parables still tend to be shorter narratives with the unique trait of unexpected moral endings.¹⁴ Crossan says of the extended parable that "despite its brevity or maybe even because of it, one could certainly not guess from the opening sentence how the story would unfold."¹⁵ It is this element of surprise that hold the key to interpreting critical parabolic function in First Century Palestine. The true power of the parable is that it can both

¹¹ Stein, "Parable."

¹² John S. Kloppenborg, "Parables," 2011, in *Biblical Studies*.

<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com.ezproxy1.library.arizona.edu/view/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0045.xml>.

¹³ One example is the Parable of the Sower found in the Synoptic Gospels. The story tells a predictable tale of seeds prospering in healthy soil and perishing in rocky soil but holds a deeper meaning about prosperity and faith.

¹⁴ To see an example of an extended parable, look to the Parable of the Two Sons in Matthew 21:28-32.

¹⁵ Crossan, "Parable," 149.

astound the listener and fit into an applicable and relatable schema. Finally, the narrative parable is the most similar in format to traditional storytelling and is, perhaps, the most important category to examine for our purpose here. The narrative parables had all of the qualities most valued in the oral culture of the day along with delivering messages. They functioned both as metaphors to explain Christ's Kingdom of God and as moral examples by which followers ought to pattern their lives.

After Jesus' time, parables continued to be used in both Jewish and Christian contexts, though none have grown to fame like those contained within the Gospels. As time continues, the parables take on new meanings and applications. Though we may never read them with the same eyes that Christ's first followers did, they continue to hold poignant messages 2000 years later. John Donahue says that parables have remained so important in the Christian church today because "theologically, metaphor and parable became the language par excellence for theology, since they point beyond what is expressed to what is beyond expression."¹⁶ Let us now look at certain elements of early parables that are critical to their literary interpretation today.

Who Spoke in Parables?

I. M. Crombie calls Jesus' own life story a kind of parable in itself, mirroring in real time the epitome of a pious life.¹⁷ Jesus' life and mission documented in the Gospels is the Christian myth of God-becoming-man to save humanity from its sins. We might say that using parables to deliver religious ideology was an outward expression of his internal nature and will look closer at his life as a real example of the parables later on. We must realize that Jesus was a powerful social actor who understood the audience to whom he was speaking. The oral culture thrived on

¹⁶ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 13.

¹⁷ Peter Slater, "Parables, Analogues and Symbols," *Religious Studies* 4, no. 1 (Oct. 1968), 25.

stories and, as we have seen, had a rich history of parables. His message gained legitimacy in part by hearkening back to the genre favored by the prophets of the Hebrew Bible.

If we consider the purpose of Jesus' mission, usually agreed by scholars to be the profession of the intangible Kingdom of God to a receptive audience, then we understand how Jesus revealed enigmatic information with the best tools he had: the wonderful art of storytelling. By symbolizing a seemingly unknowable concept in concrete pictures, "we not only *see that* certain things are as they are but also *see them as* significant of the interconnections between events, processes, thoughts, and actions."¹⁸ Jesus brought his followers an accessibility to God and his Kingdom through the parables. His religious symbolism provided the creative room for each individual to pass their own judgment and see beyond the world in comprehensible terms. Furthermore, the atypical features of Jesus' parables (e.g. their fusion of the possible with the impossible, which was a drastic break from Greco-Roman usage) were, Norman Huffman believes, Jesus' "way of revealing the unworldly character of the coming kingdom of God."¹⁹ Their simultaneous incomprehensibility and sensibility married the worldly with the divine.

Jesus' parables are particularly poignant because they (like many of his teachings) were paradoxical. Drawing on the genre of the prophets, Jesus assumed religious authority when he spoke; however, his parables marked a decidedly worldly change to sacred tradition. His parables are filled with everyday people rather than the traditional King protagonist and paint pictures of daily labor. Jesus also spoke to informal gatherings of people outside of the holy day, clearly distancing his message from the rabbinical teachings. In a sense, Jesus' message bounded into the everyday and broke down barriers between the holy and the mundane, inextricably connecting daily activities with religiosity. Norman Perrin writes that "the parables of Jesus are

¹⁸ Slater, "Parables, Analogues, and Symbols," 29.

¹⁹ Norman A. Huffman, "Atypical Features in the Parables of Jesus," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97, no. 2 (Jun. 1978), 219.

significant artistic creations and as such they necessarily involve something of the vision, the person, the self-understanding of Jesus himself."²⁰ Understanding the purpose of the teacher helps us to grasp his true teachings. In the parables, we see Jesus as bringing his personal vision of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom grounded in reality, to all people whoever and wherever they may be. His message is universal; his stories speak to the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the insiders and the outsiders. With this in mind, let us move further into the other side of the equation: the audience of the parables.

To Whom Were Parables Told?

We cannot look at Jesus' parables without considering to whom they were spoken and then written and what the intended consequences upon the audience were. The parables provide a unique view into the social and economic mindset of First Century Palestine. On the one hand, they paint vivid pictures of daily life from working the fields to family relations. Concurrently, they pinpoint what is distinctly uncommon and out-of-place in the community. Every parable has a turning point when the story goes from expected to unexpected, from normal to radical, from despair to joy. We learn much about the community and its traditions in this moment based on what Jesus says that is surprising to his audience. One definition emphasizes that parables have a purpose "not so much of imparting propositional truths or general moral lessons as challenging the perspective of the hearer."²¹ We can read these stories as Jesus responding to the mentality of his followers to broaden their minds and expand their dogmatic schemas.

²⁰ Norman Perrin, *Parable and Gospel*, edited by K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 41.

²¹ "Parable," 2005, in *The Crystal Reference Encyclopedia* (West Chilmington: Crystal Semantics), <http://ezproxy.library.arizona.edu/login?url=http%3A%2F%2Fliterati.credoreference.com.ezproxy1.library.arizona.edu%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fcre%2Fparable%2F0>.

Part of the incredible beauty and transcendence of the parables is what Peter Slater terms the "ambiguity of religious symbolism." Slater goes on to say that the open-endedness of metaphoric writing "leaves room for each individual to exercise his own judgment in determining how he is to see himself in the world."²² The power of these parables over the last 2,000 years lies in their continued relevance and significance for each subsequent generation as readers continually reinterpret their meaning. Jesus seems to have understood, as Crossan has, that "it is sometimes best to leave the unpacking to the recipient's imagination."²³ This gives the power to the hearer; it places the agency of acceptance in their hands rather than forcing an unwanted interpretation upon them. The parables hold no single meaning and because they deliver their message indirectly and personally, their significance can be whatever we interpret it to be.

Viewed in this light, the parables of Jesus are arguably his greatest tools in achieving a universal yet personalized understanding of the Kingdom of God amongst his followers. Crossan put it best, saying:

The application of Jesus' stories seems to derive more from their general structure than from specific detail... It's a parable's destiny to be interpreted and those interpretations will necessarily be diverse. When the diversity ceases, the parable is dead and the parabler is silent.²⁴

The reason that Jesus was such a successful orator was this ability to reach out to his community on several levels through one of the simplest, and most straightforward of manners. He allowed people to learn the lessons they *needed* to learn, not that they thought they *wanted* to learn. The parables spoke to the heart of each listener in a deep and profound way. Jesus' charismatic and didactic strength lay in his understanding of his oral community and their reactions to his

²² Slater, "Parables, Analogues and Symbols," 31.

²³ Crossan, "Parable," 149.

²⁴ Ibid., 150-2.

message. Luckily, the parable form remains just as poignant today as in First Century Palestine and readers continue to garner meaningful messages from his teaching. Though his parables might take a slightly different form if Jesus came to speak to today's audience, the message of the Kingdom of God remains universal.

The Function of the Parables

Through the past couple millenia, Jesus' parables have remained literary juggernauts in the Christian tradition for simple reasons: they are both relatable and intriguing to the intellect. Donahue pinpoints two qualities, immediacy and transcendence, that make the parables so well-suited to describing the religious experience.²⁵ What he means by this is that the parables take images of everyday reality and transform them into a new world order.²⁶ The familiar is elevated and altered to gain new significance and hold greater potential. This is what Marcus Locker means when he refers to the parables as "transformative speech events," what Amos Wilder calls "the power of metaphor," and what Ernst Fuchs terms a "language event."²⁷ Parables feed the human longing for significance in life by making the mundane fantastic. Jesus' mission of bringing the Kingdom of God to people on earth was fully supported by the parabolic tradition; it was the perfect medium to deliver his message.

Peter Slater's article on "Parables, Analogues and Symbols" explores reasons for religious practice making use of rhetorical tools. For Slater, the key to understanding imagery in the Bible is that "our urge for empirical grounding has to be balanced by the needs of conceptualization."²⁸

²⁵ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 9.

²⁶ Though the images Jesus uses in his parables are of First Century Palestine's concept of an everyday situations, the concepts and emotions are understandable to all audiences because they contain basic human truths.

²⁷ Marcus Locker, *The New World of Jesus' Parables* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 17. See also Perrin, *Parable and Gospel*, 41.

²⁸ Slater, "Parables, Analogues and Symbols," 29.

One cannot learn by rote fact alone; the mind needs the license of creative situations to process, digest, and fully grasp the significance of a message. Parables provided this precise medium for Jesus. They allow the subconscious to garner whatever truth the conscious cannot recognize and for that truth to take hold in the imagination. In addition, parables provide a space to depart from the norm and consider the impact of the extraordinary. They allow us to see worth where we may otherwise never look, either in a fictional tale or an illustration of society.

Ricoeur says that the parables construct a pattern of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation for their audience.²⁹ They draw upon the familiar to make their concepts understandable while simultaneously presenting an unfamiliar outcome. Though the metaphoric stories always resolve to a coherent solution, the key is that they challenge the status quo.

Donahue emphasizes that the fundamental message behind Jesus' parables was that "you must be open to having your tidy vision of reality shattered."³⁰ We are forced to consider the significance of a shift in reality and its meaning on our lives.

But Jesus brought more than a simple shift in thinking, he brought the divine in contact with the mundane by living on the earth as God-become-man. Donahue continues that the entire Christological narrative is radically parabolic and functions in a similar way on a holistic level as the individual parables of Jesus' mission. He writes:

In effect, the message of the kingdom is that the world points beyond itself. The use of parable with the native power of metaphor to point beyond itself means that in effect the medium is the message. Jesus himself *is* parable; so also the Gospel presentations of him. Thus, theological language is radically parabolic.³¹

By embodying the medium that is the message, or rather by becoming parable itself, Jesus lives out the depth of his message. In Christian tradition, his composition as fully human and fully

²⁹ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

divine is representative of the Kingdom of God. It both lies within natural comprehension (his humanity) and outside of it (his divinity). The Jesus of the gospels is a walking, talking paradoxical parable. He functioned in First Century Palestine just as the parables have functioned for the past 2000 years. It is no wonder that this artistic form has become one of the most recognizable features of Christian literature.

As we continue in the next section into the case study involving C. S. Lewis's novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, we will further examine this idea that Jesus is himself a parable by comparing his life to the story of Lewis's salvific Aslan. The combined immediacy and transcendence of the savior is precisely what makes it so appealing and compelling. By looking at Lewis's illustration of the Christ narrative we shall see how a story becomes a parable for Christian historical truth and immortalizes the life of Jesus through fiction.

Secular Parables

As we have already shown, storytelling is an art as old as history. It is a tool to create and reconstruct meaning for people within the world they know. And much as Jesus utilized the oral culture of First Century Palestine to illustrate his message through parables, so too have artists throughout all history capitalized on the tools of their day. The parables allowed Jesus to present reality with a twist, to challenge the normal and create meaning from the unordinary. As mentioned before, the power in Jesus' preaching was its ability to make the routine exceptional and paint the world in fantastic new ways. He opened the eyes of his followers to alternative possibilities by verbally creating a new world order. His "fantasy" of the Kingdom of God became a tangible reality through his parables and took on a life of its own through the power of his and his audience's imagination.

One of the oldest genres, and one that I believe is a close relative of the narrative parable which Jesus manipulated, is the fairy tale. Leland Ryken says that "fairy tales are a primitive genre, meaning that they have been around from the beginnings of recorded history."³² They are crucial to our interpretation of the world for they illustrate the unknowable and through vivid illustrations can express emotion that simple narration could not deliver. Much like the parables, they function to radicalize and fantasize our world, allowing us to transcend the mundane qualities of our everyday problems and find new meaning in life. Fairy tales are, as J. R. R. Tolkien said, "a natural human activity" where we can build new worlds and understand the unknowable.³³ Through fantasy the impossible becomes attainable.

In his essay "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien gives an authoritative definition of the genre and its function in modern society. He describes its unique purpose as such:

I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairystory. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite—I will call it Eucatastrophe. The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function.³⁴

He goes on to call the Eucatastrophe "the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn'... it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur... it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat."³⁵ This joy at the end is the sign of a true fairy tale, it is the glimpse of the underlying reality and beauty of the story. All trials and tribulations lead to this unparalleled moment of redemption. The fairy story thrills us beyond belief by presenting us with an impossible, incredible, fantastic result. Is this not the message of Jesus? Is this not the story of his life, death, and resurrection?

³² Leland Ryken and Marjorie Lamp Mead, *A Reader's Guide Through the Wardrobe: Exploring C. S. Lewis's Classic Story* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 101.

³³ Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

The fairy tale is powerful because it engages our deepest desires and creates in each person a personal longing for the eucatastrophe, for utter goodness and joy. Lewis himself stated that a fairy tale has the ability "to generalise while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience."³⁶ The same has already been said of the parables, that they engage their audience in deeply personal ways and speak to a radically new type of joy. This comparison is not to say that all fairy tales or fantasy hold religious overtones; rather, this genre exists within a tradition that holds the capacity for religious significance. As Donahue says, "no particular genre or type of language is religious of itself; it becomes religious when a particular use of it is pushed beyond its immediate significations to the point of the wholly other."³⁷ Jesus proved that the parable was well-suited to delivering a religious message and his use as such defined the genre indefinitely as a religious tool.

The parables of Jesus, whether we categorize them as examples of early fairy tales or not, remain timeless and valuable to the present day. Readers almost two thousand years later are continuing to react to and with the text in fresh, meaningful ways. Tolkien believed that in writing fantasy "Man becomes a sub-creator... making immediately effective by the will the visions of 'fantasy.'"³⁸ Jesus created visions of the Kingdom of God through the parables. He made an elusive concept concrete and essentially knowable. By speaking them into existence as the Word of God he made the sublime a reality, one that lives on indefinitely through the written word. The parables are the lifeblood of the Kingdom of God; they make the concept a reality.

³⁶ C. S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said," *A Pilgrim in Narnia*, originally published in *The New York Times*, 18 November 1956.

³⁷ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 16.

³⁸ Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," 4.

III. Literary Comparison of New Testament Parables and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

C. S. Lewis was adamant from the time he published the first book in his Chronicles of Narnia series that he did not originally intend for the books to be overtly Christian and moreover that they were not Christian allegories. Though there is no mistaking certain theological themes throughout the series, Lewis claimed that the Christian element in his narratives "pushed itself in of its own accord."³⁹ Inspiration for the novels came to Lewis through a series of images, first a faun with an umbrella making its way through a snowy wood then a powerful lion bounding into the storyline. Though Lewis acknowledged that from the start he knew this character to be "the lion of Judah," the Christian themes were the result of, not the reason for, his writing.⁴⁰

Lewis's own conversion to Christianity from the stout atheism of his younger years was greatly mediated by his close friend and colleague J. R. R. Tolkien. Known best for his groundbreaking trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was a devout Catholic and a professor of literature and philology. His professional studies lead him to develop a unique perspective of faith which proved highly influential in Lewis's life. Colin Duriez details that "Tolkien's argument that the biblical gospels have all the best qualities of pagan myth, with the unique feature that the events actually happened in documented history" was a critical realization in Lewis's conversion.⁴¹ Lewis's love of myth and search for meaning culminated in the Christian narrative because he could both believe the historicity of the story and personally connect to it. He loved the universality and individuality of the gospels.

³⁹ Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories."

⁴⁰ C. S. Lewis, "22 January 1952," *C. S. Lewis: Letters to Children*, edited by Lyle W. Dorsett and Marjorie Lamp Mead (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1985), 29.

⁴¹ Colin Duriez, *A Field Guide to Narnia* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 36.

The gospels no doubt remained a major literary influence upon Lewis for the rest of his life and it is no surprise that Lewis heavily drew upon the material when he began to write himself. But other genres influenced the form and content of his novels as well, namely myths and fairy tales. As an Oxford don of medieval literature, Lewis almost exclusively read these genres all in the name of literary scholarship. In reality, he simply found them the best intrigues and most fascinating reads. Hugely influenced by authors like Edmund Spenser, E. Nesbit, and George MacDonald, Lewis wrote his Chronicles like a modern myth, drawing elements of classical mythology and pagan stories. The novels contain a hodge-podge of mythological characters with everything from centaurs to Father Christmas, from minotaurs to the jovial Bacchus.

Despite this great variety of literary influences, Lewis believed that the core of all Western mythologies and stories went back to the gospels.⁴² More intimately, they all heralded back to Jesus' parables. The Chronicles are more than just a work of Christian fantasy like the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins or *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant. They are a new exploration into the extended parable. They represent the best of Christian imagination for the literate modern day. Lewis wrote his novels for a society that was learning and loving to devour elaborate fiction. The success of Tolkien's series proved that much to him; the modern world was once again hungry for the myths of old. There was no better way to fill it than with a retelling of what Lewis perceived to be the best and most compelling original myth: the Christian story.

From the first read, similarities between the Chronicles and Jesus' parables are clear to see. They both contain moral stories that hold important lessons for their audience and both

⁴² Lewis's focus here is namely on Anglo-Saxon and Germanic mythologies.

consist of smaller stories that mediate a larger meta-narrative throughout.⁴³ And, perhaps most obviously, they tell the story of Christ and his all-redeeming love for mankind. In this section, we will examine the parables and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to compare their literary similarities and find evidence that Lewis was inspired by the Gospels, in both form and content, to write his novels.

The Authority and Role of the Narrator

To understand a work of literature, we must first understand the voice behind it. With our works that task is multilayered. Not only must we consider the historical person behind the parables and the novels, but also the narrative voice and characters they construct. Though these layers may be closely related, they help us to determine the purpose and function of the author's stories in unique ways. To begin, let's examine Jesus and Lewis as real men in their time.

Both Lewis and Jesus were experts within their field but estranged from the center of their communities. As a religious prophet and the acclaimed Son of God, Jesus both respected and alienated the religious leaders in the Temple by contesting the rigidity of their religious interpretation. Though he did not seek to overthrow the Jewish law, he presented a radically different interpretation and practice of it. In addition, unlike other prophets of the past, Jesus performed miracles that demonstrated God-given powers and challenged the Jewish ideas of distinct monotheism. Growing awareness of his divine-like acts brought accusations of heresy and resulted in his being condemned by the religious leaders. Jesus' followers also assigned him the monikers of teacher, rabbi, and Messiah which tested the authority of the Temple leaders and the sanctity of their titles. Though in the Synoptic Gospels part of Jesus' legitimization and

⁴³ In the parables, this meta-narrative is typically agreed to be the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Similarly the Chronicles tell the story of the salvific Aslan leading his the Narnians into his kingdom where all are unified.

validation is bestowed by God himself during his baptism, this event was not recognized by the Jewish leaders as divine inspiration.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Jesus' openness to both Gentiles and Jews challenged historical Judaism; rather than being a movement for insiders of God's chosen nation, the Jesus Movement welcomed the outsiders into a willing multitude.

Lewis faced similar antagonism from his peers at Oxford, the literary megaliths of twentieth-century England. As an outspoken Christian, Lewis faced derision and humiliation at the hands of these "rational" intellectuals. His apologetic works and popular Christian radio talks during World War II made him the laughing stock of the academic world. In his entire career, Lewis was never awarded a professorship because he was seen as an unstable radical. But precisely what distanced him from this crowd brought him esteem and credibility among popular Christian reading circles. His early apologetic works like *Mere Christianity* and *The Problem of Pain* remain some of the most widely read Christian commentaries of the modern day. His deep involvement with atheism and his vividly rational justification of Christianity resonate with many today in a world populated by science and reason. In a sense, Lewis gained authority from his followers simply by so staunchly rejecting the mold into which he was born. Contrastingly, Jesus' validity rested in his deep knowledge about the Jewish law that allowed him to openly wrestle with the Temple leaders' interpretation.

Moving on to the texts, John Donahue describes one of the unique characteristics of the parables as the "parabolic third-person and paranetic second-person discourse" in which they are written.⁴⁵ The third-person perspective allows the parables to intrude into each character's thoughts while the paranetic (or persuasive) second-person language directly affects and influences the audience's perception. In other words, Jesus has a very present narrating voice in

⁴⁴ See Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, and Luke 3:21-22.

⁴⁵ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 149.

the parables. He inserts his opinions into the parables and challenges the audience to question its meaning and relate to the story he is delivering. The Jesus of the parables asks the hearer to understand the message of his stories as something both personal and strikingly universal. He invites each person to form their own opinions and come to conclusions on their own all the while constructing a narrator that is omniscient and utterly moral, much like one might imagine God to be. Coupled with the fact that the content of the parables often deals with the relationship between the divine and the mortal, it might be argued that the narrator persona in Jesus' parables is evidence that he saw himself as the Son of God. Perhaps the best evidence for this possibility that Jesus referenced and illustrated his own divine nature in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matthew 21:33).

Lewis similarly constructs a unique narrator for *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* that is not far off from his own personality. He remains rather autobiographical in his narration, constructing a persona that is, as described by Colin Duriez, "attractive, rather like a kindly uncle who doesn't look down on his nephews and nieces but constantly takes them into his confidence and expresses forthright opinions."⁴⁶ His perspective is limited, but with the insight and opinions of one who already knows the moral outcome; much like Jesus, he leads his readers to what he is teaching. Lewis's narrator cares deeply about the impact of the story upon the audience and takes great measures as to not upset them or worry them.⁴⁷ He acts as a guide throughout the story, but allows his readers to form their own opinions of the characters and events. It is as if Lewis

⁴⁶ Duriez, *A Field Guide*, 107.

⁴⁷ A few notable examples: "Now we come to one of the nastiest things in this story," when Edmund lies to Peter and Susan about exploring Narnia with Lucy (p. 129). "...And other creatures I won't describe because if I did the grown-ups would probably not let you read this book;" in reference to the creatures gathered at the Stone Table on the night of Aslan's death (p. 180). "I hope that no one who reads this book has been quite as miserable as Susan and Lucy were that night;" on the night of Aslan's death (p. 183). Contrastingly, Jesus often blatantly intends to shake or disturb his audience from the comfort of lives into a new awareness. Whereas Lewis leads his readers through unfortunate situations, Jesus challenges his audience to directly change what is wrong in the world around them.

himself is reading aloud a fairy tale to some companion and eagerly turning page after page even though he already knows the ending.

One of the unique points about Lewis's narrator is that he appears to truly know the audience to whom he is speaking. As David Downing points out, the narrator "frequently refers to the reader as *you*" and connects intimately with them, intellect to intellect.⁴⁸ Downing argues that after Aslan, the narrator is the most significant character in the story because he provides the cohesion from scene to scene, from twentieth-century England to fantastic Narnia, and he emotionally connects his audience to the plot. He has an appealing, inviting voice that "makes the marvelous seem reasonable, almost (but not detrimentally) mundane."⁴⁹ It is this narrative voice that makes the divinity of Aslan perceivable and the unknowable qualities of Narnia tangible. The narrative voice is the reason we feel called to Narnia ourselves, the reason we wish it was real, and the reason we read the books over and over again to regain that magic. Jesus similarly makes the Kingdom of God accessible, desirable, and collaborative through his illustrations in the parables. It becomes a sanctuary on earth, the golden community open to all.⁵⁰

One final unique feature about the presence of the author in both Jesus' parables and Lewis's novel is that both men often insert themselves into the storyline as a visible representation of one aspect of their own persona. Jesus, as a divine member of the Godhead tells many parables about the relationship between God and his followers.⁵¹ By reading these parables, we gain a vivid depiction of God himself from a very good authority. God is often embodied as the welcoming Father, the persistent Shepherd, or the benevolent Host, monikers

⁴⁸ David C. Downing, *Into the Wardrobe: C. S. Lewis and the Narnia Chronicles* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 152.

⁴⁹ Naomi Wood, "God in the Details: Narrative Voice and Belief in The Chronicles of Narnia," *Revisiting Narnia: Fantasy, Myth and Religion in C. S. Lewis' Chronicles* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005), 46.

⁵⁰ See examples of this doctrine of inclusion in the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the Parable of the Lost Sheep, and the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

⁵¹ See the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, the Parable of the Great Supper, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, etc.

which are all commonly used for God still today. Lewis similarly includes characters that resemble himself quite a bit, most notably Professor Kirke who houses the Pevensie children during their stay in the English countryside. Much like the Professor, Lewis himself hosted children during World War II in his country home as part of England's efforts to remove the youth from the bomb-prone cities. Both this self-referential nod and Jesus' own inclusion show their unique determination as authors to be part of the story. Their personas are forever bonded to the tales they tell and this grounds them in reality; the authors live on through the stories.

The Nature and Role of the Audience

In addition to examining the author behind the stories, it is equally important to understand the intended audience of a particular work. When looking at our two pieces, this refers to two very different groups. Jesus spoke his parables aloud, which were later recorded in the gospels, to the Jewish community of First Century Palestine. His audience was highly illiterate (even Jesus himself likely never learned the intricacies of the written word) and accustomed to hearing stories orally. His followers called him "teacher" and "rabbi" because he told them religious stories, roles which were reserved for the powerful and literate within the societal structure. By speaking in parables, the form of the prophets, he automatically attained a level of prestige not provided to many. Perhaps most importantly, he had the innate capacity to speak in simple, relatable terms so that his audience of all ages and abilities could understand him.

Jesus also primarily spoke in parables only to his followers or disciples. Rather than utilizing parables as an evangelical preaching tool, he chose to speak in parabolic terms only to those ready and willing to hear them. This suggests that Jesus thought hearing religious stories

was a way for people to further connect to their faith rather than convert to a new ideology.

Parables serve to deepen faith and open our eyes to new conceptions rather than alter our entire framework. The few exceptions to this rule are a few key parables where a group of Pharisees, Sadducees, or scribes are listening to Jesus on the periphery of the crowd.⁵² In these instances, the parables tend to focus on humbling the entitled or including the excluded. Though Jesus is still clearly speaking to the group of his followers, the content of his parables challenge the beliefs of those overhearing. Jesus appears to be clearly aware of who was listening and, though he harbored no hopes that the religious leaders would change their faith so drastically, he adapted to his audience to include a message for everyone.

Lewis similarly had the unique ability to appeal to a wide variety of readers. Though he clearly wrote children's fiction and was widely read among this demographic, the majority of his readership was Christians of all ages. Colin Manlove pinpoints the overwhelming appeal of Lewis in that "he had the capacity to be simple without being facile."⁵³ Even though the genre he embraced appealed primarily to children, Lewis superseded these bounds to appeal to a much larger readership. Lewis believed that limiting a novel or story to children alone was foolish; he himself read far more fairy tales and myths as an adult than in his childhood. Following in the footsteps of his close friend Tolkien, Lewis argued that there is no inherent connection between fairy tales and children.⁵⁴ He wrote in an essay concerning writing for a young audience, "there is no question of 'children' conceived as a strange species whose habits you have 'made up' like

⁵² See the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke), the Parable of the Great Supper (Matthew, Luke), the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke), the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke), the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke), the Parable of the Pounds (Matthew, Luke), the Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew), the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matthew, Mark, Luke)

⁵³ Manlove, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, 6.

⁵⁴ Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories."

an anthropologist or a commercial traveler."⁵⁵ Rather, myths and fairy tales, into which categories the Chronicles definitely fit, are for all ages to enjoy should they choose to do so.

Michael Coren points out that Lewis believed the best children's books appeal not only to the children but to their parents as well.⁵⁶ No story that is high quality would be unappealing to an entire generation; rather, the quality of the story is evident by how universal yet personal its message is. In the dedication to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lewis addressed his goddaughter Lucy Barfield, the daughter of his close friend Owen Barfield, saying, "You are already too old for fairy tales... But some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again."⁵⁷ Though the reading of myths may go in and out of style, Lewis believed that their message will remain pertinent for all people and for all time. Part of what drew him to the fairy tale genre was its timelessness, its ability to carry weight and importance long past its age. He assuredly recognized that similarly the parables of Jesus have lived 2000 years past their inception and have no end in sight for their relevance.

The most important message to gain from Lewis's beliefs on the universal relevance of fairy tales is that we can continually gain new understandings and new truths from reading them. In writing to a young fan of his, Lewis wrote, "I don't think age matters so much as people think."⁵⁸ Instead, what mattered to Lewis, was how each person related to the text. He set out to write a book that anyone could enjoy and that anyone could learn from. In every one of us there is a kind Lucy, a jealous Edmund, a dubious Susan, and a valiant Peter. Similarly, we are all the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son, and the Unmerciful Servant at some point in our lives. The best

⁵⁵ C. S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," *A Pilgrim in Narnia*, originally published in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*.

⁵⁶ Michael Coren, *The Man Who Created Narnia: The Story of C. S. Lewis* (Ontario: Lester Publishing, 1994), 70.

⁵⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, published in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 110. Hereafter shortened to *LWW*.

⁵⁸ Lewis, "14 September 1953," *Letters to Children*, 34. In another letter, Lewis further says that "no book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty" (p. 35).

messages are for all people, and Lewis recognized the capacity for fantasy to be the bridge that impacts all ages, educations, races, and genders. The audiences of both the parables and the Chronicles must constantly interact with and react to what the authors wrote; they are invited to be co-creators in the newly created worlds.

The Structure of the Story

The parables and the Chronicles, in addition to sharing didactic elements, also bear a striking resemblance in their overall structure. In today's world, we are accustomed to hearing the phrase "Once upon a time..." and immediately recognize this cue as a sign that a fairy tale is soon to follow. The opening line sets the scene and raises expectations. We expect a story of adventure and heroism, love and bravery, to soon follow. We expect to journey to another world and to be entertained by the break from reality. We expect an escape from the everyday. In both the parables and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, however, the stories begin just as a story from everyday life.

Lewis's novel opens with the simple statement, "Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy."⁵⁹ There is nothing in this statement to suggest anything unordinary or unusual; certainly nothing suggests travelling to a world of nymphs and evil witches where an epic battle between good and evil will soon take place. The story seems disarming and simple, a snapshot of daily life. The parables similarly open with basic expositions: "A sower went out to sow his seed."⁶⁰ "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers."⁶¹ "There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine

⁵⁹ Lewis, *LWW*, 111.

⁶⁰ Luke 8:5, "The Parable of the Sower."

⁶¹ Luke 10:30, "The Parable of the Good Samaritan."

linen and who feasted sumptuously every day."⁶² In each example, Jesus and Lewis drop us right into the action of their story, which is set in the everyday, without any warning for the unusual plot ahead. If you will remember, one of the striking characteristics Dominic Crossan raised in regards to the extended parable was that "one could certainly not guess from the opening sentence how the story would unfold."⁶³ On the surface, the tales seem grounded in reality, concrete in their setting, and for this they are appealing. They are stories of the mundane with surprising fantastical twists.

There is no doubt that the setting of Jesus' parables is very firmly within First Century Palestine. His stories often include themes of harvest, cultural celebrations such as feasts and weddings, and interrelations amongst neighboring peoples.⁶⁴ Lewis similarly grounds his tale in 1940s England during the air raids of London, a fear all too familiar to his readership a mere decade later. Soon the four protagonists are whisked away to the magical land of Narnia where animals can talk and the inhabitants reside in perpetual winter. Yet despite this rapid change of scenery, Narnia remains grounded in modern England with a Faun who strictly observes traditional tea-time and a gas lamp-post which guides the children's way. Colin Duriez points out that Lewis's "symbolic world of Narnia, even though fictional, points to the solidly real."⁶⁵ This marrying of the modern English world with the archaic Narnia makes the story both accessible and epistemologically distant. This paradoxical proximity allows the magical within Narnia to become believable. Narnian magic could never plausibly exist in our world, but in the fantastic setting of Narnia we accept it and learn from it. Lewis utilizes the familiar of our world to understand and expose the unfamiliar or supernatural within Narnia.

⁶² Luke 16:19, "The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus."

⁶³ Crossan, "Parable," 149.

⁶⁴ The most famous example of contemporary inter-group relations being the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

⁶⁵ Duriez, *A Field Guide*, 65.

The same could be said about Jesus' parables. Opening with everyday situations, Jesus sets a familiar scene wherein he can expose the unfamiliar: the Kingdom of God. From the beginning of his mission Jesus faced a serious dilemma. How could he deliver the message of the Kingdom of God, an entirely divine and supernatural concept, to his human followers? Only through sparking the imagination and igniting the creative conception through storytelling could he achieve understanding. Thus Jesus was able to preach about heavenly precepts without ever directly describing the sublime.

The feature which allows a seemingly mundane story to take on divine significance is what Tolkien deemed the "eucatastrophe."⁶⁶ As you will recall from the previous section, Tolkien defines this term as the sudden turn towards grace, the "good catastrophe" at the end of the story that not only resolves all but saves all. Both Lewis's novel and the parables resolve with such grace. The mundane becomes fantastic, the tragic becomes truly miraculous. All action builds to this final resolution which both surprises and astounds. An ending far beyond imagination resolves the story that began with such simple exposition.

These elements of setting, beginnings, and endings in the storyline itself show that *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* shares many similar plot devices with narrative parables. Beyond the obvious Christological narrative of Aslan, Lewis did not have far to look for the structure of his novel. He took the qualities of the parable and the story of Christ, creating a cohesive narrative that drew upon one powerful source. His ability to weave together such rich elements in new ways highlights his ability to adapt old stories for a modern audience. In a sense, the story of Narnia was already laid out for him even before he began to write.

Christian Content and Ideologies

⁶⁶ Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," 13.

In looking at the parables and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* side by side, the overlap of religious ideas and themes become apparent. As Lewis was writing his novel, he soon became aware that the content he wrote had very Christian themes. Though he never intended the series to be overtly Christian in content, he also believed that good works of imagination "instruct by pleasure," and if Christianity was going to push its way into his novel then he would allow it to have its way.⁶⁷ David Downing describes Lewis's decision thus:

As the story-making process matured, however, Lewis began to see the Christian possibilities in the narratives that were beginning to take shape... By enlisting the unfettered powers of the imagination, Lewis hoped to recapture the original beauty and poignancy of the Gospel message.⁶⁸

Though Lewis did not originally set out to rewrite the Christ story he adapted his novel to assume the reality that slowly made itself clear to him, the reality that his novel was ultimately about Jesus. Fiction provided what Lewis's apologetic works could not. It made the Christ story and the Kingdom of God, as Lewis understood it, come alive.

It is no surprise that goodness and peace within Narnia are tied to nature, for almost half of Jesus' parables deal with images of nature and growth.⁶⁹ Jesus' followers lived in an agriculture-based society and their survival was intimately tied to the prosperity of the land. Even in modern literature, there is something magical and idyllic about nature in the pastoral sense; it is a realm that explores the goodness and beauty of uncorrupted nature where all exists in harmony with God. In Narnia, nature is sacred and any threat to its preservation necessitates salvation. The Narnian savior Aslan arrives in the story when Narnia is forced to endure

⁶⁷ Duriez, *A Field Guide*, 94. Lewis writes of his own instruction by works of fiction in his autobiographical book *Surprised by Joy*. He was deeply influenced by reading works such as Viking mythology and *Phantastes* by George MacDonald and often said that books were his greatest teachers.

⁶⁸ Downing, *Into the Wardrobe*, 64.

⁶⁹ Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara, *Narnia and the Fields of Arbol: The Environmental Vision of C.S. Lewis* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 86.

everlasting winter under the reign of the evil White Witch.⁷⁰ All of the inhabitants of the land who need saving are Talking Animals who desire nothing but to live in harmony with one another.⁷¹ The thaw of winter heals not only the frozen land but the relationship between the Animals, once more creating a whole and vibrant community.

Of course at the center of the story is the Christological narrative of Aslan. The "son of the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea," Aslan is the Great Lion of Narnia who unsurprisingly resembles the Lion of Judah.⁷² He is an astounding figure, one that all Narnian lovers will remember can be both terrible and good, after all he is not a tame lion. Aslan is almost indescribable; though he takes the shape of a lion, it is clear to the children in the novel that he is so much more than another Talking Animal. Duriez explains this indefinable trait by acknowledging that Aslan has qualities of the numinous. His very scent and name stir the children to excitement and anticipation. When Beaver first mentions the great lion, Lewis writes:

None of the children knew who Aslan was any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone felt quite different... It [the feeling, as if from a dream] feels as if it has some enormous meaning--either a terrifying one which turns the whole dream into a nightmare or else a lovely meaning too lovely to put into words, which makes the dream so beautiful that you remember it all your life... At the name of Aslan each of the children felt something jump in its inside.⁷³

⁷⁰ Interestingly, the arrival of Aslan is heralded by a chapter entitled "The Spell Begins to Break." It is as if Aslan's arrival is the thawing force needed to restore nature to its vibrant, healthy state. Christians might compare this to Jesus' mission of healing the sick, preaching love, and delivering humanity from sin.

⁷¹ All Talking Animals in Narnia are called by their species and all have capitalized names (i.e. Faun, Beaver, Badger). This deliberate choice by Lewis gives the characters significance in their identity as nature's creatures and emphasizes their citizenship in Narnia.

⁷² Lewis, *LWW*, 146. The Lion of Judah is the symbol of the Jewish tribe of Judah. It is also mentioned in Revelation 5:5 in association with Jesus and it is by this application of the term that Lewis uses the phrase in conjunction with Christ.

⁷³ Lewis, *LWW*, 141.

Even Aslan's roar and breath have power; later in the book we see Aslan reawaken all of the Animals the White Witch has turned to stone by a simple breath.⁷⁴ Every part of his being exudes power, majesty, and divinity.

Lewis accepted, from the moment he first visualized the great lion leaping into his story, that Aslan would represent the Narnian Christ. In responding to a letter from a young fan he wrote, "I found the name in the notes to Lane's *Arabian Night*: it is the Turkish for Lion. I pronounce it Ass-lan myself. And of course I meant the Lion of Judah."⁷⁵ Heralded as the savior by a Narnian prophecy, Aslan comes to rescue a world under the thumb of the White Witch just as Jesus came to a Judea suppressed by Roman occupiers.⁷⁶ Aslan so fully encompasses the salvific role of Jesus that a young boy named Laurence wrote to Lewis asking why he loved Aslan more than Jesus and if doing so was wrong. To Lewis, this simply proved the point he believed all along, that "a fictional lion [can] convey so well the admixture of human, utterly human, and profoundly divine nature of Jesus long after the biblical account has come to seem like something you read at the Easter Vigil and maybe it gives you the shivers and maybe it doesn't."⁷⁷ Aslan reinvigorated the Christ story, just as the parables reinvigorated the Kingdom of God. He gave new life to a two thousand year old story, making it relevant to modern generations.

One of the most impactful changes Lewis made to the original Christ story in his retelling was to make Aslan's sacrifice intensely personal yet still universal. Before the White Witch kills him on the Stone Table, Aslan agrees to trade his life for that of Edmund. Up until this point in

⁷⁴ This image is, of course, reminiscent of the Genesis narrative with the Word of God speaking the world into being and the *pneuma* as the breath of life.

⁷⁵ Lewis, "22 January 1952," *Letters to Children*, 29.

⁷⁶ This Narnian prophecy reads: "Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight/ At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,/ When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,/ And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again." Lewis, *LWW*, 146.

⁷⁷ Mark Eddy Smith, *Aslan's Call: Finding Our Way to Narnia* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 25.

the book, Edmund has proven himself to be the most deceitful, untrustworthy, and selfish of all the Pevensie children. He even sold his brother and sisters out to the White Witch in exchange for sweets. But Aslan consents to die for this eleven year old child, this traitor and coward. *This* is why we love Aslan. He loves unconditionally and without bounds. He forgives all and takes even the most unwanted into his care. When the Great Lion of Narnia dies, he dies for a single soul's salvation. Mark Eddy Smith says that the power of this retelling of Christ's sacrificial death comes from the fact that "it's so much easier to come at it through the lens of fiction... Edmund, I can relate to Edmund."⁷⁸ We've all been the outsider, the betrayer, the leper whom no one wanted, yet Christ communed with the lowliest.⁷⁹ To see Aslan save poor Edmund is empowering and overwhelming, a perfect example of Jesus' boundless love.

But Aslan's death is immeasurably more important, for in dying he saves far more than a small snot-nosed English boy.⁸⁰ To end the story there would not be "eucatastrophic" enough. The great miracle of Aslan's sacrifice is the breaking of the Deep Magic that binds the souls of the impure to evil. In death, Aslan breaks that debt and frees all Narnians from the clasp of the White Witch and all other evil forces. His resurrection further proves his victory; in breaking the Deep Magic, Aslan overcomes death and lives to save Narnia once more. He is the ultimate gift, for with Aslan on their side there is no battle the Narnian cannot win. As the Chronicles progress, Aslan continues to show up when the Narnians need his help most. It is only by his aid that they can prevail.

Lewis's novels depict the Christ story and many other Christian vignettes in detail, painting them in new colors and giving them new relevance for the modern age. His imagination

⁷⁸ Smith, *Aslan's Call*, 23-24.

⁷⁹ The example of the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a direct representation of this promise, that even those who stray are welcomed back into the fold of God with open arms.

⁸⁰ N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg puts forth a similar idea of universal and personal salvation in their book *The Meaning of Jesus* (1999). See especially Borg's discussion on p. 140-142.

brings the age-old narratives to life and make them into personal anecdotes for the modern reader. Jesus spoke in parables to achieve a similar effect. He told stories about morality, love, and charity to teach his followers how to behave by example. He told stories about the Kingdom of God to illustrate the unknowable. He told parables about God's relation to his people to show the depth of love and compassion he had for them. Jesus' stories have brought the Christian religion to life for two millennia and no doubt will continue to inspire other to write their own.

IV. The Purpose of Religious Storytelling: Truth in Imagination

Up to this point our analysis focused upon literary parallels between the parables of Jesus in the New Testament and C. S. Lewis's novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. We have seen similarities in style, content, and structure showing that the two bodies of literature indeed share many traits. Perhaps most importantly we discovered that they stem from a similar historical genre and function similarly within their individual societies. Jesus spoke in parables to construct the Christian schema of the Kingdom of God, revealing religious dogmatic truths through realistic imagery. Lewis sought to create a modern myth that drew upon the Christian tradition effectively mythologizing the Gospel narrative for the modern reader. Both successfully manipulated their stories to appeal to their audience and leave lasting images in their imaginations.

Having explored all of this, we must now address the heart of our inquiry: why use storytelling to deliver religious truths? Both Jesus and Lewis made conscious decisions as authors to speak and create meaning through the imagination rather than explicitly speaking in religious language. What spurred this choice to rely on the creative intellect over reason and logic? How did parables succeed at establishing a vision of the Kingdom of God that has lasted for two thousand years? Why is the lion Aslan an attractive and compelling savior that we immediately recognize as a re-figuration of Christ?

In this section we will explore the purpose of the authors and the effect that their deliberate literary choices had upon their readership. We will examine both the author's purpose in writing the works as well as the real impact they have had upon their community of readers. Through this analysis, we will determine how well-suited fantasy is for religious teaching and how storytelling as a whole enhances religion.

The Use of a Genre: Parables and Children's Fairy Tales

Both Lewis and Jesus spoke to their followers through comparison and fantasy utilizing the imagination to create vivid pictures of the divine. This method of indirect communication, creating secondary worlds in which one can discover truth on their own, is a valuable technique for conveying knowledge. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote extensively on this theory even going so far as to say that "all communication of knowledge is in the medium of imagination."⁸¹ He believed that in order to accurately and potently convey ideas to another person you must allow that person consciously discover that knowledge of their own accord. By speaking of the matter indirectly you allow the other person to both create and perceive the conclusion simultaneously. This independent discovery of truth makes their understanding all the more genuine and honest. Conscious leading towards the truth is exactly what Jesus did by speaking in parables.

Kierkegaard himself was a Christian, although rather unorthodox for his time and qualified his ideas of indirect communication in terms of religious language. Looking to the Gospels, he classified ethical and religious communication as successful examples of indirect communication.⁸² He saw Jesus' many sermons and individual teachings as strong examples of a teacher leading his students to truth by their own conclusions. The parables are the ultimate example of this for the externally simple narrative contains multi-faceted lessons that must be interpreted from the text. Kierkegaard believed that Jesus asked his followers to imagine the divine Kingdom of God through his illustrations because it was impossible to describe in humanly understandable terms. Kierkegaard persists, "Christ continued with the indirect method until the last, for the fact that he was incognito, in the guise of a servant, makes all his direct

⁸¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers, Vol. 1*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967), section 649.28, p. 275.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 657, p. 308.

communication nevertheless indirect."⁸³ As God-become-man, Jesus himself was an indirect line to the divine; his very life was a physical representation of the parables in which he spoke.

In other words, Kierkegaard believed that Jesus' very nature supports his speaking in parables because his divinity lay beyond the realm of human comprehension. He created fantastical narratives that force us to reconsider who he is and the significance of our daily lives. Leland Ryken and Marjorie Lamp Mead relate, "every piece of fiction, whether realistic or fantastic raises the question of how a fictional world relates to the real world in which we are actually living."⁸⁴ The parables force us to consider the effects of our own decisions upon the infinite divine realm of God. Jesus sought to bring awareness of the eternal Kingdom of God to the finite people of First Century Palestine by stimulating their imagination. His parables served to open their minds and test their faith in the unknown.

But why use stories that have numerous interpretations for a community already wary of Jesus' teachings? Tom O'Loughlin addresses this issue:

Human beings have a bad habit of thinking that important information will be very simple in form... There are many who imagine that God either does or should communicate in this way, but they might be less enthusiastic if we asked them to describe themselves completely in just one simple sentence. Life is complex and mystery is manifold: the religious texts in which we seek to communicate about the divine to one another are always many layered.⁸⁵

The very nature of God, Jesus, and the Kingdom of God necessitates an open description. If Jesus sought to bring news of the Kingdom of God to his followers, he could in reality only bring hints and pieces of such an idea because the concept as a whole is entirely beyond our realm of comprehension. But by speaking in parables, Jesus allows us to conceptualize the unperceivable

⁸³ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 677, p. 316.

⁸⁴ Ryken and Mead, *A Reader's Guide*, 48.

⁸⁵ Tom O'Loughlin, "The Gospels: What Are We Listening To?" *Pastoral Review* 7, no.4 (July/August 2001), 43.

and imagine the unknowable through metaphor. Interpretations are meant to be abundant, for only through imagination can we transcend beyond our world.

Lewis similarly sought to tap into the unbounded nature of human imagination by creating a fantastical world that supposed what could happen if a Christ-like savior came to save a sinful world. He chose to write a children's story in part in 1939 when a small group of children came to live in his country home, called the Kilns, in a country-wide effort to evacuate children from the threat of London bombings. One of the young evacuees expressed a particular fascination with a wardrobe in the Kilns and asked Lewis one day if there was any way through the other side.⁸⁶ This curious encounter with the unbounded imagination of a child provided Lewis with the impetus to create a fantastical world within a wardrobe where the Christ-story could take on new potency for the latest generation.

Lewis had first become drawn to the idea of fairy tales along with his friend and colleague J. R. R. Tolkien. The two shared the belief that fairy tales were not strictly a child's entertainment but had in recent years been confined to the nursery when they had fallen out of favor among adults. They both firmly believed that fantasy could and ought to be enjoyed by all generations as can be seen in the title of Lewis's essay "Sometimes Fairy Tales May Say Best What's to be Said." They became "co-conspirators in a project to rehabilitate fairy stories for grown-ups" and encouraged each other in their literary endeavors.⁸⁷ As a result, two of the twentieth century's most poignant and memorable series were written: *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

These fairy tales, however, must not be interpreted farther than they were meant to be taken. Lewis fought strongly against the idea that he was writing allegory saying that allegory is

⁸⁶ Coren, *The Man Who Created Narnia*, 68.

⁸⁷ Duriez, *A Field Guide*, 98.

wholly dependent upon the author's innate knowledge.⁸⁸ If he acknowledged that he wrote allegory, Lewis believed that he limited his stories to a Christian interpretation rather than allowing each new reader independently evaluate his novel. Lewis insisted that the beautiful nature of the mythic fairy tale is that such a story "may well communicate truths that are beyond the author's own apprehension" and therefore was a window into human truth.⁸⁹ Urged by Tolkien, who was particularly against the idea of allegorizing, Lewis made a concerted effort to disguise his Christian narrative and invite his readers into the co-creation of Narnia. He deemed his stories "supposals" in which he could imagine thematic scenarios and how they might play out rather than directly alluding to the Gospel story. He chose to write a the fairy tale because, as he wrote, he fell in love with the form; "its brevity, its severe restraints on description, [and] its flexible traditionalism" all allowed for simple yet impactful writing.⁹⁰

In addition, the fairy tale allowed Lewis to demonstrate the application of moral lessons in the story to everyday life and emphasize his belief that "nothing is 'mere.'"⁹¹ The main characters of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* are a family of ordinary British children. They do not come from royalty, they are not outstandingly virtuous, and they certainly are not equipped to save Narnia from the evil of the White Witch. But Lewis uses their seemingly ordinary traits to emphasize the concept that anyone can be heroic and righteous just as even a children's novel can discuss important religious precepts. As Colin Duriez points out, Lewis felt that "picture language and stories came closer to grasping the concreteness of reality, including

⁸⁸ In this case, Lewis defines allegory as strictly retelling a familiar story in a new setting. He was opposed to allegorizing the Christological narrative in part because of Tolkien's extreme aversion to the idea. Tolkien influenced Lewis with his thoughts that fiction ought to create new meaning with each reading rather than remain stuck within one interpretation. By writing the Christ story into a fairy tale, Lewis allowed for his story to be continually interpreted both as a Christian novel and simply a really good story. He wanted to be both a Christian writer and a quality fiction author and for his work to be respected for its greater implications and its literary qualities.

⁸⁹ Ryken and Mead, *A Reader's Guide*, 64.

⁹⁰ Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories."

⁹¹ Manlove, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, 38.

God's overwhelming reality."⁹² By demonstrating how the divine Aslan worked in Narnia through the Pevensie children Lewis could demonstrate how Jesus worked in our world.

Lewis believed that painting a picture of God was far more valuable to understanding Christianity than intimately dissecting theology. In his novel, Lewis strove to make God tangible and give him a face, allowing the reader to emotionally connect with the Christian story of salvation. Colin Manlove writes:

[Lewis] writes mythopoeia within a resonant literary and biblical tradition... Lewis expected through myth—of which he found George MacDonald's work the finest example—not only to see the pattern of holiness but to *feel* it. One of the central threads in his 'Romantic theology' is the belief that certain images may act as temporary vessels of God, filling human beings with a longing, a *Sehnsucht*, for heaven.⁹³

The Chronicles are meant to awaken this feeling, this desire for the divine by illustrating what comes from such a relationship with God. Lewis knew the power of fantasy to awaken the heart and mind and expanded this genre to a readership of all generations. It achieved and created a longing among his readers for the beauty and community of Narnia. As Lewis himself simply put, "The Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say."⁹⁴

A Call to Action or a Moral Imperative?

Having looked at the parable and fairy tale genres, we see that each evokes an emotional response from the audience that enhances the perception of the story. The stories naturally include ethical and moral dilemmas that must be resolved in order to come to conclusion. Jesus' parables teach lessons on community relationships, the value of perseverance, and discernment. They call for a spiritual enlightenment or shift of perspective that challenges dogmatic beliefs.

⁹² Duriez, *A Field Guide*, 66.

⁹³ Manlove, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, 6.

⁹⁴ Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Tales."

Leading their audience into a new world order, the parables seek to create a new community of believers that live according to the ideals of the Kingdom of God.

But what are these ideals? The Kingdom of God is an essentially elusive concept. Explained only through metaphors and comparisons, the idea itself is indefinable and open to interpretation. Rather than completely spelling out its moral implications, parables about the Kingdom of God rather act as channels towards an ethical and moral truth. David Downing similarly described the Chronicles of Narnia saying they "serve as faithful guides, illustrating moral failure and moral recovery."⁹⁵ They provide examples of this behavior and lead us towards perfecting our own morality. The distinction that the stories were valuable tools for the reader was of utmost importance to Lewis; rather than an escapist genre such as juvenile fiction, the fairy tale is a way to engage with reality. The moral laws within the story are just as real in a fictional realm as in the real world. Manlove points out, in a comment that could be applied to both the parables and the Chronicles, that "the story as a whole can be seen as a spiritual journey through a landscape of the soul."⁹⁶

Jesus's parables overtly and purposefully lead their audience on a faith journey. Constituting the majority of his speeches to his followers, the parables contain moral lessons and challenges that seek to redefine the relationships in the community of faith. But even though the fact that Jesus preaches parables with a message is clear, the message itself is often hidden. In many instances in the Gospels, Jesus' disciples approach him after he speaks and inquire about the meaning of his parables. Even for those closest to Jesus his message is often lost. Rather than being a hindrance to his mission though, this ambiguity is an enhancement. Jesus forces his followers, as well as us today, to continually reexamine his meaning and look for new

⁹⁵ Downing, *Into the Wardrobe*, 90.

⁹⁶ Manlove, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, 35.

interpretations. Our constant analysis allows us to be co-creators in meaning with Jesus in seeking to discover truth.

On the other hand, Lewis deliberately urges his readership not to look for a point but rather to let it arrive on its own. In a letter to a young fan Lewis wrote, "I think that *looking for a 'point'* in that sense may prevent one sometimes from getting the real effect of the story in itself."⁹⁷ Primarily his stories were meant to be enjoyed, rather than dissected and analyzed. Whereas Jesus sought to illustrate pictures that would encourage examination and close scrutiny, Lewis hoped to "instruct by pleasure" and create meaning out of enjoyment.⁹⁸ Only by losing oneself within Narnia can one truly find their way to the Christian God behind Lewis's writing. It is with this reason in mind that Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper wrote:

And so the stories can be read and enjoyed on at least two levels: by the child who perhaps knows nothing of the Bible, of classical or Arthurian myth and legend, of any of the authors whose work Lewis knew; and by the reader who knows many at least of these and senses many more.⁹⁹

Everything readers of the Chronicles get out of their reading depends on who they are and with what lens they read the story. Just as Lewis intended, each perception of Narnia is unique, important, and insightful to that person.

And so we return to the dilemma: do the parables and the Chronicles contain moral imperatives or a call to action? Certainly the parables demand a response from their audience that contains a moral framework. Through them Jesus challenges the mindsets of his day and forces his followers to consider alternative views. But Lewis' Chronicles are rather more ambiguous. Though grounded in modern English morality, the novels do not challenge ethical standards. If anything, they reinforce old standards by drawing upon the Christian biblical

⁹⁷ Lewis, "18 December 1953," *Letters to Children*, 35-36.

⁹⁸ Duriez, *A Field Guide*, 94.

⁹⁹ Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (London: Collins, 1974), 253.

tradition. This distinction is important for it emphasizes the fact that Jesus preached change and growth while Lewis emphasized the sustenance and maintenance of this growth. Lewis upholds the call to action preached by Jesus in the gospels by illustrating the values of the Kingdom of God in Narnia. The morality of Narnia can only be understood in terms of Jesus' own teachings.

The Authors' Purposes and Their Outcomes

In recent decades, the search for the historical Jesus has been an important focus for Christian scholarship as academics attempt to define exactly who Jesus was and claimed to be in First Century Palestine. As in any study, written accounts that can be cross-referenced to other independent sources are regarded as the most reliable when seeking to determine the accuracy of information. Many of Jesus' teachings, especially the parables, are found in multiple gospel accounts and though they might vary slightly in form they carry similar messages. At this point in time, it is safe to say that those teachings are fairly representative of the message Jesus spread during his life. But what was that message? Why did Jesus preach in parables and to what end?

The Jesus of the parables was a social activist who challenged the status quo and urged his followers to reevaluate their lives. He sought to heal bonds between estranged groups, build a stronger community, and serve the lowly. He fought against bigotry and injustice all the while preaching of a Kingdom of God where all people stood on equal ground and faced acceptance. His message was understandable by all; through parable teaching even the children could understand what he said.

Lewis was one of the people who heard the message of Jesus and took away impactful meaning. His path to Christianity was not straight and narrow but rather tested and tried. After coming into belief, Lewis sought to make the gospel message more accessible to the modern

world. He saw the influence of Christianity ebbing and came to the defense of the faith he saw as the "true myth." Colin Manlove fully supports the belief that "his fantasy can be seen as a response to what he perceived was an anti-theistic tendency in modern life."¹⁰⁰ He sought to recreate the potency of the first gospel message before centuries of accretions and rehabilitate religious language for all readers in the twentieth century. Lewis found his voice in fantasy and found the medium that could recreate the beautiful promise of Jesus. The Chronicles became so successful because "Narnia strips away the incrustation and shows us [Christianity's] essence," which Lewis interpreted as integrity, kindness, and above all faith.¹⁰¹

Lewis first defended his faith in a series of apologetic works including stand-outs such as *Mere Christianity*, *The Great Divorce*, and *The Problem of Pain*. While these expository, rationalistic narratives gained him international regard, Lewis felt that they did not successfully justify Christianity to the contemporary populace. His new strategy for reaching people "was born in those persistent arguments of Tolkien, in which imagination and reason are reconciled, and in which storytelling is at the center."¹⁰² Lewis believed in the theory of fiction writing that emphasized two reasons for writing: the "Author's" reason (passion or urge) and "Man's" reason (logic and practicality).¹⁰³ His interest in logical argumentation provided the impetus to continue to write while his love of the fairy tale genre spurred the Chronicles into being. In fact, Lewis even likened the urge to write his stories to being in love. His efforts truly were a labor of the heart.

But his intention originally was not to pursue a Christian agenda in writing the Chronicles. Lewis himself called this idea "pure moonshine" and insisted that "at first there

¹⁰⁰ Manlove, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, 5.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Williams, *The Heart of the Chronicles of Narnia* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2005), xxii.

¹⁰² Duriez, *A Field Guide*, 38.

¹⁰³ Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories."

wasn't even anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord."¹⁰⁴

The stories came as a series of images, eventually coalescing into the salvific story of Aslan and Narnia we now know. Thomas Williams argues that Lewis deliberately protected the integrity of the Christian element in his story by disguising it in a fantastical world: "Any truth to be found would be that which germinated in the heart of the author and percolated naturally into the story. Any other approach would show itself to be false as a story and unable to camouflage its true colors—a sermon in disguise."¹⁰⁵ Lewis believed that as humans we could not understand or comprehend the Kingdom of God but we can seek to understand God by comparing the way he works to situations in our lives. It is for this reason that Lewis wrote the Chronicles which revolve around the lives of four English schoolchildren. Even though they go on fantastical adventures, the children must face everyday challenges like standing up against evil and refusing temptation.

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Peter goes to the kindly old Professor when his sister Lucy tells him of an impossible world within an old wardrobe which he has been unable to find. When the Professor suggests Lucy might be telling the truth, Peter counters, "Well sir, if things are real, they're there all the time." The Professor responds, with a twinkle in his eye, "Are they?"¹⁰⁶ In this moment, the Professor resembles Lewis more than ever before. The entire premise of his story is that things are not always as they seem and we must constantly look for what is hidden. Lewis knew that the teachings of Jesus were elusive but also believed that what is unseen is perhaps the most real of all. Through the character of the Professor, Lewis urges his audience to always look for truth even when it lies far below the surface.

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories."

¹⁰⁵ Williams, *The Heart of the Chronicles*, xvii.

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, *LWW*, 131.

Despite Lewis's insistence that he wrote without a Christian agenda, many critics have been quick to argue the opposite.¹⁰⁷ In a brief essay, Natasha Giardina details her own revulsion to what she term's Lewis's "conscious purpose" to promote a Christian message. Reading the books as a child, she felt betrayed by his storyline and argues that "by writing the Christian message into a fairy tale, Lewis knew exactly what he was doing was deceptive."¹⁰⁸ I would argue that though divine sacrifice became a theme of his story later on, Lewis only found the Christ story in his novel when he discovered the character Aslan within his imagination and allowed him to embody the qualities of a savior. In a letter to a fan, Lewis wrote "children nearly always do, grown-ups hardly ever" find a hidden story in the Chronicles and that such a plethora of interpretations is entirely acceptable.¹⁰⁹ He believed that children had the ability to see hidden truths better than adults and by writing a series with Christian overtones he allowed for the possibility that they might discover the qualities and traits he found so valuable to Christianity. Lewis did not desire to preach through his books, but rather sought to elevate child-like perception. His ultimate message was simply not to look too hard; the hidden truth will reveal itself to you.

The Value of Storytelling in Religion

The question this comparison must necessarily boil down to is simply what makes stories like Jesus' parables and Lewis's Chronicles so adept at conveying religious ideology. To answer this we must return to Kierkegaard's theory on indirect communication. As mentioned before, Kierkegaard believed that truth can only come from within the individual and one must be led to

¹⁰⁷ Lewis certainly wrote with Christian implications, but never with any agenda to convert or market his faith. He sought to open the minds of his readers but never to change their minds.

¹⁰⁸ Natasha Giardina, "Elusive Prey: Searching for Traces of Narnia in the Jungle of the Psyche," *Revisiting Narnia: Fantasy, Myth and Religion in C. S. Lewis' Chronicles* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005), 34.

¹⁰⁹ Lewis, "26 October 1963," *Letters to Children*, 111.

it by their own intellect. This makes teaching a difficult task because the problem becomes not how to convey a message but how to engender the desired conclusion within a listener's thought process. Kierkegaard believed that the ethical existed within the individual and would, if awakened, lead them aright.¹¹⁰ He wrote, "Science can be pounded into a person, but the ethical has to be pounded out of him."¹¹¹ This internal realization of religious truth is at the heart of belief; by nothing but our own self-discovery can we find faith.

Leland Ryken and Marjorie Lamp Mead developed a theory about faith and the role of storytelling in religion in their guide to the Chronicles:

The theological imagination achieves its theological purposes by means of what we can call *delayed action insight*. We begin by enjoying the narrative and entering its imagined world... Gradually it dawns on us that more has been embodied and communicated than simply a narrative.¹¹²

It is precisely by this method that Jesus and Lewis communicate religious ideals to their audiences. Jesus' parables instruct by shaking and startling the schemas of his followers. They not only tell a story but challenge beliefs and force the perceptive audience to reevaluate themselves. Lewis similarly invites his readers "to feel it, to experience religion as an emotion rather than an idea."¹¹³ He created a modern narrative to draw us in, to personally connect with the Christ story in an attractive setting. Narnia is our invitation to Christian faith.

But here lies the catch: the Chronicles are no more than this, a simple invitation to engage with the text on a Christian level. Unlike Jesus who spoke in parables with direct social messages and encouraging active engagement from his audience, Lewis allows the reader to engage with Christian themes at their own will. Though during his apologetic years he wrote to a friend

¹¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 649.5, p. 269.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 649.6, p. 269-70.

¹¹² Ryken and Mead, *A Reader's Guide*, 12-13.

¹¹³ David Colbert, *The Magical Worlds of Narnia: A Treasury of Myths, Legends, and Fascinating Facts* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 2005), 1.

saying, "Any amount of theology can be smuggled into people's minds under cover of romance without their knowing it," by the time he ventured into Narnia Lewis realized the importance of discovery and choice in genuine faith.¹¹⁴ He firmly believed that the Christian themes would percolate into one's consciousness only if one was open to their message. Thomas Williams recommends: "Forget the 'lessons' and abandon any search for deeper meanings. The meanings in the stories will enter your soul through the stories themselves. You will *experience* the truths they contain instead of studying them and consciously applying them."¹¹⁵

Though brought up in an Ulster Protestant home, Lewis came to Christianity by his own reason and discovery. His conversations with Tolkien about the reality of the Christian myth and its historical accuracy were the final piece to his conversion. It is with this personal experience that he wrote the Chronicles to allow others to come to their own understanding of the Christian gospel apart from the impersonal, stuffy sermons he often heard from the pulpit. Lewis lamented in his essay "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said,"

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. An 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 thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.¹¹⁶

Ironically, Lewis brought that potency of the Gospel message back into view through dragons of his own. Narnia awakened the adventure, the passion, and the emotion of Christianity for readers in the twentieth century and allowed them to experience the personal nature of religion once more. Lewis's storytelling reinvigorated the ancient narrative, rehabilitating it for a modern audience.

¹¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, "9 July 1939," *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Books, Broadcasts, and the War 1931-1949*, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 260.

¹¹⁵ Williams, *The Heart of the Chronicles*, 181.

¹¹⁶ Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories."

V. Conclusion

The story of the Gospels is unique, powerful, and meaningful. It is the story of bravery and sacrifice, of faithfulness and honor, of love and respect. No matter one's religious affiliations, the story of Jesus itself is a powerful narrative of the weak standing up to the strong in the name of acceptance and goodness. Jesus taught his followers about the righteousness of forgiveness and the beauty of community and his teaching through parables provide beautiful examples of this community. John Donahue writes on this particular narrative tool:

The parables present stories about ordinary individuals and ordinary events, but told in such a way that people from every age and culture have seen their own life with its hopes and challenges replayed in these short vignettes... The realism of the parable means that Jesus places the point of contact between God and human beings in the everyday world of human experience.¹¹⁷

Just as the power of the parables comes in their simple universal message, the life of Jesus contains universal themes that are accessible and grounded in realism. The gospels tell the ultimately reproducible and attractive narrative of love, betrayal, and sacrifice and many great stories today draw their themes directly from the Gospel.

C. S. Lewis was initially attracted to Christianity by not only these themes but by the fact that the story was based upon an accessible reality. He wrote that "the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*."¹¹⁸ Not only was it one of the greatest, thematically all-encompassing stories of all time, but it held historical weight. He became a believer when he realized that this story married his affinity for mythology and his need to rationalize and contextualize beliefs. Lewis found comfort in the fact that Christianity appeased both his creative and logical faculties. Similar to the parables, the Christian version of what Lewis called the

¹¹⁷ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 14.

¹¹⁸ Lewis, "18 October 1931," *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Vol. I: Family Letters 1905-1931*, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 977.

"dying God" myth stood firm in a real-world setting with accurate dilemmas and problems. Christianity was the ultimate fulfillment of his affinity for mythology and need for justification.

The Christological narrative that Lewis tells in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* highlights the real-world struggles and hardships of growing into responsibility, caring for one's family, and learning right from wrong; in a sense, it tells everyday challenges of humankind. Lewis drew heavily on the quality of the Gospels where "Legend and History have met and fused" by both creating a new legend in the story of Narnia and populating it with a new version of the historical Christ story.¹¹⁹ As a result, Aslan is not a direct representation of Christ but rather illustrates Christ-like behavior. As David Colbert states, "Aslan always does what Jesus would do; but he doesn't always do what Jesus did."¹²⁰ Aslan comes to represent Lewis's best version of a Christ-centered life, a pattern to be studied and emulated. He is Lewis's realization of Jesus' message and his plea with the rest of the world to wrestle with the gospels in a similar fashion.

Ultimately, it is important to remember Lewis's shared theory with Tolkien on the purpose and nature of the gospels. Tolkien wrote:

The Gospels contain a fairystory, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: 'mythical' in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the 'inner consistency of reality.'¹²¹

Lewis sought to recreate the eucatastrophe of the Resurrection through Aslan, to make the 2000-year-old story fresh for the modern mind. He brought Christianity once more into the visible,

¹¹⁹ Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," 15.

¹²⁰ Colbert, *The Magical Worlds of Narnia*, 11.

¹²¹ Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," 15.

popular realm in a world that showed increasing hostility towards faith. The Chronicles of Narnia are a fulfillment of Christianity's ultimate premise, that man is created in God's image as co-creators in the world. Lewis fulfilled that promise by recreating the meaning of Christ's sacrifice in Narnia and bringing the promise of redemption and salvation to his audience.

So is *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* a modern parable of the life of Jesus of Nazareth? In the modern day, the salvation narrative has become familiar to us. From Harry Potter, to *The Matrix's* Neo, to Tom Sawyer, the salvific lone savior is a common trope in modern culture. It has become commonplace and familiar. What remains fresh and new is the setting or circumstance of the story that forces us to consider the impact of that salvation in new ways. The character Aslan and the events in Narnia are not particularly revolutionary, but the magical Narnian landscape is. Lewis takes on the mantle of the fairy tale in order to clothe the Christological narrative in a beautiful, compelling, ground-breaking new way. Narnia has become a medicine for the modern mind, a quiet relief from the hardships of our world. Through its painted glades and magnificent mountains we as readers can recapture the beauty of the eucatastrophic Christ story and once more revel in the power of the gospels.

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