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A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
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In *The Last Battle*, Lewis tells the story of the end of Narnia. This beautiful world comes to a close as the children and animals watch from inside the stable door. The stable, like so many things in Narnia, is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. The children are finally discovering Aslan's own true country. But they are not the only ones to discover this country. Also within the stable is Emeth, a Calormene, who has spent his life worshipping the demon-like god of the Calormene's—Tash. Emeth is as surprised as the children at his inclusion in this new world. In response to their questioning he describes his encounter with Aslan,

The Glorious One bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, Son, thou art welcome. But I said, Alas, Lord, I am no son of Thine, but the servant of Tash. He answered, Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me. Then . . . I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, Lord is it then true, as the Ape said, that thou and Tash are one? The Lion growed so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him, for I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore, if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him But I also said (for the truth constrained me), Yes I have been seeking Tash all my days. Beloved, said the Glorious One, unless thy desire had been for me, thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek.¹

Here we have in fictional form what Lewis had long contemplated and spoken of in other places—the

possibility of true knowledge of ultimate reality through natural or human sources. The character of Emeth may offer some insight into Lewis's understanding of what he calls "myth" and what many theologians call "natural theology."

To properly understand the story of Emeth (as well as the *Chronicles of Narnia* as a whole) we must first understand Lewis's distinction between allegory and symbol. Lewis proffers definitions in a 1939 essay, "In Allegory the images stand for concepts (giant Despair, Mr. Legality); in Symbolism for something the poet has experienced but which he has not reduced, perhaps cannot reduce, to a concept." Indeed, the difference is in the specificity. Lewis goes on to say, "Allegory can always be translated back into the concepts: the "meaning" of a symbolical work cannot be stated in conceptual language because it is too concrete."² While allegories have a one-to-one correspondence that can be expressed through a single concept, symbols are much richer and point towards the "more real invisible world."³ The *Narnia Chronicles* have often been read as allegory, but Lewis repeatedly stated that they did not fit into this category. The more proper category for the *Chronicles* as a whole is symbol. As symbol, these stories leave our world not for a world of fiction *per se*, but for a world Lewis considered more real than our own. Symbol does not stand for a concept, but rather tells an entire story. To use Lewis's own language, Narnia is a re-symbolizing of the world revealed in Christianity. If symbol is the proper category for the *Chronicles* as a whole, we can assume that this is also the proper category for Emeth and his story. As such, we must ask what story or meaning Lewis is symbolizing in Emeth.

Lewis believed that symbol was most fully embodied in what he called Myth. Myth, for Lewis, is the archetypal stories that strike deep into the roots of our imagination and give meaning to our lives. Myth taps into that deep longing that all people have but cannot always understand. He writes, "Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are

all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise.”⁴

Myth, for Lewis, has multiple characteristics. First, it allows the hearer to experience truth on a deeper level than just the intellect. Myth reaches the imagination, which is the organ of meaning, rather than the intellect, which is the organ of fact. Myth embodies a universal reality and therefore acts as a bridge between absolute reality and our own realm of abstract truth. Myth is more than factual and symbolizes something that cannot be reduced to a mere concept. Because of this, myth always has an element of the fantastic, which is always in reference to the supernatural which the myth embodies. Therefore, Lewis believes that myths fulfill God’s purpose by reflecting brokenly the true light. Lewis called myth “a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination.”⁵

It is here that we begin to see his connection to natural theology. Natural theology claims that humans can have some knowledge of God through the natural, created world, including innate human capacity. Lewis’s understanding of epistemology grew out of his understanding of humans as both rational and imaginative, and he believed that these two faculties could lead humans to an understanding of God. This is done through myth, which touches the imagination, as understood through reason. Lewis believed that non-Christian myths and the Christian myth are all pointing to the same true God, though the pagan myths are “dim dreams or premonitions of that same event [redemption].”⁶ We can see this in the conversation Edmund and Lucy have with Aslan at the end of their journey on the *Dawn Treader*. They are told that they will never return to Narnia, and when Lucy cries out in despair that it is not Narnia they will miss, but Aslan himself, Aslan replies that it is time they knew him in their own world. “‘Are—are you there too, Sir?’ said Edmund. ‘I am,’ said Aslan. ‘But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.’”⁷ Here Lewis puts in Aslan’s mouth his own beliefs about the purpose of Myth. A myth of any kind is meant to be our first stepping-stone in knowing the great I AM. A myth will help us to recognize the true name when we encounter it in our own world. Myth is the first small step in knowing the true Lord and paves the way for all other steps that must necessarily come after it.

Lewis contends that the “mythology” of the Jewish people as recorded in the Old Testament is simply one myth among many. In *The Pilgrim’s Regress* Lewis developed the idea of “the Shepherd People” to whom God has revealed himself through the Law. Lewis contrasts this with the revelation given to pagans, stating, “The Landlord has circulated other things besides the Rules . . . What use are the Rules to people who cannot read?”⁸ Lewis equates the myths of pagan

societies to the Law given to the people of Israel, claiming that both serve the same function—to lead God’s people to Christ. As Richard Cunningham explains, “Mythological structures are inherent in the nature of reality, structures tied not to certain words but to certain patterns of events that impress themselves on human imagination . . . Myth is one of the means by which God reveals himself to mankind. Lewis believes that God is revealing himself in many ways and in many places.”⁹ This revelation is exemplified by Lewis when he states that the pagan myth of that the Corn-King is a portrait of Christ. In *Miracles* Lewis writes, “The similarity [between Christ and the Corn-King] is not at all unreal or accidental. For the Corn-King is derived (through human imagination) from the facts of Nature, and the facts of Nature from her Creator: the Death and Re-birth pattern is in her because it was first in Him.”¹⁰ Lewis does admit that because Israel was the chosen people theirs was the chosen mythology, but no other distinctions are made between the Law and the myths of pagan cultures. Both seem to have the same goal and the same ability to reach that goal.

Following this theme, Lewis describes Christianity as “the myth that came true.” For Lewis myth and truth are usually two separate realities. Truth is the realm of fact while myth is the realm of meaning. The myths of pagan cultures and of ancient Israel are truthful in the sense that they convey true existential significance, not in the sense that they are historically based. However, many things that are grounded in history and fact are devoid of this significance, in and of themselves. According to Lewis, it is in Christ that myth and truth come together. The meaning of the ancient myths is grounded and made alive in a real person who lived in real time and real history. In Christ there is a new kind of re-mythologizing of all the old myths, with the drastic newness of truth attached to the myth. Yet, as Richard Cunningham asserts, there is, for Lewis, no absolute newness in Christ:

There can be progress in the insights within the framework of Natural Law, *which is the sole source of all value judgments*, but only quacks and cranks introduce new moralities. Even Christ did not teach a radical new morality. The Golden Rule is only a summing up of what people had always known to be right . . . Moral rules . . . are expressions in terms of temporal existence of what God by his own righteous nature necessarily is. For that reason Lewis could never think of God or the Christian life as “beyond morality.” God may be more than more; he is not less nor other than moral.¹¹

Cunningham is right to see morality at the foundation of Lewis’s understanding of myth. *Mere Christianity* opens with an extended discussion of the moral

argument for God's existence, showing Lewis's belief that the basic tenet of the universe which points to God is, in fact, morality. Therefore, even Christ himself must acknowledge and simply teach this universal truth.

Here is where we begin to see the problems in Lewis's understanding of Myth as revelation. To invoke theologian Karl Barth, one must draw a sharp line between "religion" and revelation. Barth defines revelation as God coming to man and religion as man's search for meaning. Superficially this sounds very similar to Lewis. However, Barth goes to further define religion as "the realm of man's attempts to justify and sanctify himself before a capricious and arbitrary picture of God."¹² This "capricious and arbitrary picture of God" is what Lewis calls "the unfocused gleam of divine light." Like Lewis, Barth recognizes that when comparing God's revelation with human things "revelation seems necessarily to be only a particular instance of the universal which is called religion."¹³ Barth acknowledges that human culture and human thinking seem always to be related to some belief or knowledge of the supernatural, of something other than ourselves. But while granting this, Barth responds with the following statement, "But the question arises how the statement has to be interpreted and applied. Does it mean that what we think we know of the nature and incidence of religion must serve as a norm and principle by which to explain the revelation of God; or *vice versa*, does it mean that we have to interpret the Christian religion and all other religions by what we are told by God's revelation?"¹⁴ Barth believed that the great representatives of modern Protestantism were declaring the former ("the revelation of religion") rather than the latter ("the religion of revelation").¹⁵ Here we see Lewis standing with modern Protestantism in his belief that Myth precedes Christ and helps us understand and know Christ.

But Barth says something much more is required. It is only in Christ that we encounter the true God and so it is only in Christ that we receive real revelation—a true encounter with the true God. Commenting on Barth's understanding of revelation, David Mueller writes, "We are forbidden, therefore, if we wish to speak of the triune God of the Bible, to begin with some general doctrine of God or of ultimate being abstracted from God the Father who makes himself known in his Son and through his Spirit."¹⁶ It is this abstraction of meaning from the person of Jesus Christ which Lewis is guilty of. In putting the myth before Christ, Lewis is claiming that there is a universal truth that can be understood in a variety of ways and that can be "mythologized" within many human cultures. This is possible because the meaning of the myth is universal, in the sense that it is embedded within the universe and is therefore available to humans who exist within that universe. However, this leads to a separation between God and the meaning of God, as if God's self-meaning is something he simply possesses or expounds upon

rather than is. Lewis's understanding of myth does not lead us to talk about God, but rather about ourselves. If, like Lewis, we can only speak of revelation *after* we have spoken of religion, "What we are really and properly speaking about is not revelation, but what precedes it, man and his religion, about which we think that we know so much already which we are not ready to give up. There lies our love, there our interest, there our zeal, there our obedience, there our consolation: and where we have our consolation, there we have our God."¹⁷

Barth recognizes that these modern Protestant theologians did not set out to talk about themselves and their idols, but he questions whether any other outcome is possible. The same can be said for Lewis. We can state with certainty that Lewis wants to talk about the true God rather than about himself. However, given his understanding of myth it is perhaps impossible for him to do what he has set out to do. Mark Freshwater, in his analysis of Lewis, demonstrates that Lewis has abstracted truth from Christ in such a way that there is no longer a living or vital connection between the two. In other words, Jesus is no longer THE truth, but simply the best expression of the truth because he joins truth with meaning in a way that other myths do not. Freshwater follows this abstraction to its logical end: "Lewis stressed the mythic nature of Christianity as a validation of the historical reality. However, in his *Narnia Chronicles* Lewis showed that the Christian story has a mythic power that is independent of the historical reality. Thus, both Lewis and Bultmann recognized the *kerygma* and radical obedience to it as the essence of Christianity."¹⁸ Again, Freshwater writes, "Lewis showed in the *Narnia Chronicles* that the realities of the Gospel can be transposed onto a fictional world like Narnia without distorting or distracting from the Christian message. The *Narnia Chronicles* succeed as religious fantasy because the truth of the 'myth' they present *is prior to and independent of* any historical judgments or findings."¹⁹ To be fair to Lewis, he would most certainly disagree with this interpretation of his work. But to be fair to Freshwater, we must acknowledge that his statements are a genuine result of Lewis's thinking. Lewis does see myth arising prior to and independent of historical judgments or findings. Lewis insists that myths are related to God (they are imbedded in the created world by its Creator), but that is not enough. To separate truth and meaning from the very person of Christ is to fall into the trap of natural theology—the idea that man can know and understand God apart from God himself. Christ no longer is the truth, he is simply one way of accessing the truth. This makes Christ simply one Buddha among many. Lewis himself, when pushed, could not but follow his ideas to this same conclusion. In *God in the Dock* Lewis wrote, "Even assuming (which I most constantly deny) that the doctrines of historic Christianity are merely mythical, it is the myth which is the vital and nourishing element in

the whole concern.”²⁰ With this statement Lewis makes, even against his own protests, Christ superfluous to knowing God. Lewis essentially wants to have his cake and eat it too. He wants to find in humans the potential and ability for knowledge of God and yet still ultimately attribute this knowledge to God. Barth states clearly that this we cannot do.

We could not fix the reality of revelation in God, and yet find in man a possibility for it. We could not ascribe the event to God, and yet attribute to man the instrument and point of contact for it. We could not regard divine grace as the particular feature and man’s suitability and capacity as the universal. We could not interpret God as the substance and man as the form. We could not, therefore, regard the event of revelation as interplay between God and man, between nature and grace.²¹

This belief in the interplay between God and man, nature and grace, always leads to unbelief because it abandons the Church’s faith in the gospel and God’s grace. “The reason for this is not that the believer has the knowledge of God, whereas the unbeliever does not. No one *has* the knowledge of God. Rather, the impossibility of natural theology reflects human beings’ radical dependence on God’s grace—a condition in which both believers and unbelievers find themselves.”²² If we abandon the truth of this radical dependence we do not, as Lewis hoped, lead the unbeliever further along the path to God. In fact, the opposite is true because we state our independence from the God and Lord of the universe who has been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Even Lewis, in distinction from so much of his own writing, states, “It must be admitted at once that Christianity makes no concession to this point of view [natural theology]. It does not tell of a human search for God at all, but of something done by God for, to, and about Man.”²³ This statement, taken with Lewis’s strong support of natural theology, reveals the very real danger Barth is concerned with. When human knowledge of God centered in the self is made equal with God’s self-revelation centered in Christ, humans feel free to judge between the two, to pick and choose what seems best. Inevitably we will choose poorly.

Which leads us back to Emeth. Because Narnia and its inhabitants are not allegories, we cannot put Emeth in a one-to-one correspondence with the righteous pagan or natural theology. Emeth must be seen as living within a mythic structure and therefore as symbolizing something more than a single concept. I believe that in Emeth Lewis is symbolizing the mystery of salvation. However, the category into which Lewis places that mystery makes all the difference. If he is placing the mystery of Emeth’s salvation in the realm of piety and

good works, then, as we have already seen, it is a form of natural theology. It is making something other than God himself the norm, the principle that is true within and throughout the universe and which even God himself must obey and respect, both in himself and in others. If piety is the norm, then God is not. If God is not the norm, he is no longer God.

However, if Lewis is placing the mystery of Emeth’s salvation in the realm of God’s grace, we are confronted with an entirely different symbol. If Emeth is there in spite of his worship of Tash, in spite his admission that “the name of Aslan was hateful to me,”²⁴ then Emeth’s story is a mythologizing of the truth attested to in revelation—our knowledge of God and therefore our salvation are entirely and at all times dependent on God and God alone. We are saved by God’s grace and that salvation is every moment upheld by God’s grace. If Emeth’s salvation is *in spite* of his good works, then his story actually speaks against natural theology.

Given the text, I am forced to conclude that Emeth is a symbol of Lewis’s capitulation to natural theology. Aslan specifically says that it is for Emeth’s works of piety and “purity of desire” that Aslan receives them and him as his own.

Where does this leave us, and where does it leave Lewis and the *Chronicles of Narnia*? Lewis’s primary mistake is one of priorities. The myth comes before Christ. But if we allow Christ to come before the myth, we can have a new and robust appreciation of Narnia. In Narnia, Lewis re-mythologizes Christianity. This is very different than Christ re-mythologizing the pagan myths. When Christ comes first, we can have a new understanding of nature and man. Therefore David can write, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”²⁵ David knew God first and therefore had a right understanding of nature. Lewis knew Christ and then wrote about Narnia. For those who already know Aslan “in this world,” Narnia can help us know him better. And conversely, for those of us who know him here, we can recognize him in Narnia as well.

Notes

¹ C.S. Lewis. *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), 164-165.

² Richard B. Cunningham. *C.S. Lewis: Defender of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 73.

³ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴ C.S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 135.

⁵ C.S. Lewis. *Miracles* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 218.

⁶ C.S. Lewis. *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 129.

- ⁷ C.S. Lewis. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 247.
- ⁸ C.S. Lewis. *The Pilgrim's Regress* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 146.
- ⁹ Cunningham, 95-96.
- ¹⁰ 186.
- ¹¹ Cunningham, 118-119. Emphasis mine.
- ¹² Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Vol. I.2. Translated by G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight, edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 280.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, 281.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, 284.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 284.
- ¹⁶ David Mueller. *Karl Barth* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1972), 64.
- ¹⁷ Barth, 296.
- ¹⁸ Mark Edwards Freshwater. *C.S. Lewis and the Truth of Myth* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1988), 123-124.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, 127. Emphasis mine.
- ²⁰ C.S. Lewis. *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1994), 64.
- ²¹ Barth, 280.
- ²² Joseph L. Mangina. *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 61-62.
- ²³ *Miracles*, 187.
- ²⁴ *The Last Battle*, 162.
- ²⁵ Psalm 19:1