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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VII

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Seventh
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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Hidden Images of Christ in the Fiction of C.S. Lewis

Peter J. Schakel

Hidden Images of Christ in the Fiction of C. S. Lewis

Peter J. Schakel, Hope College

Have you ever had someone sit down next to you on a plane and say, “Let me show you some pictures of my grandchildren”? It gives you a sinking feeling, doesn’t it – this could be a long trip. I’m going risk starting in a similar way: “Let me tell you something about my students.” Did you get that same sinking feeling? This could be a long lecture. After all, you have your own adorable children or grandchildren or nephews or nieces, and many of you have your own students. You can show your own pictures, or tell your own stories about students – the stories, for example, about students who write sentences like “the Magna Carta provided that no free man should be hanged twice for the same offense,” or “Nero was a cruel tyranny who would torture his poor subjects by playing the fiddle to them,” or “The climate of the Sarah Desert is such that the inhabitants have to live elsewhere, so certain areas of the dessert are cultivated by irritation.”

You’ll be relieved to hear that I intend to say nothing more about my students’ inability to proofread, or their use of words in ways that show total ignorance of the lexicographers’ trade. The reason I bring up my students is the way they read C. S. Lewis, which is what got me thinking about my topic for today. Many of my students love Lewis’s stories, especially his *Chronicles of Narnia*, and they read them again and again. They love them partly, they say, because Lewis makes Christianity so vividly apparent in his stories. The Christian allegory is so clear, so evident: four Pevensie children, four gospel writers – what could be clearer than that! There is a wardrobe door and Jesus said “I am the door” – obviously Lewis meant the portal into Narnia as a symbol for entering his kingdom. Other literature, they feel, is tricky; teachers say

are there are metaphors and symbols present, but they are difficult to find and hard to “interpret” (and literature needs to be “interpreted,” doesn’t it, like any foreign language?). In Lewis, however, there’s lots of “depth” that they can find, and they can interpret it easily. They come to a class on Lewis expecting me to be pleased and impressed by the biblical parallels and symbols they’ve identified – that’s what literature teachers like and want, isn’t it? And they’re looking forward to seeing what further allegories I can point out to them.

The difficulty is that I believe they would be better readers if they looked for less instead of more. They find Christian applications everywhere because they approach the work expecting to find them everywhere. Lewis is a Christian, and they find, or have been told, that he sometimes uses symbols – so they begin to look for symbols everywhere, and of course as a result they are going to find them everywhere. I try (futilely) to convince them that everything is not symbolic – a robin is sometimes just a robin, and a sulky, nasty boy is sometimes just a sulky, nasty boy. I try (equally futilely) to convince them that Lewis was not trying in his stories to lay Christianity out in perfectly clear ways which no one could miss – that, on the contrary, he often tried to *hide* Christian allusions rather than *reveal* them. Today I’m going to lay out my case for hidden images in Lewis’s fiction and see if you will find it at all convincing, even if they don’t. And if it’s not convincing, I hope you’ll disabuse me of the notion in the discussion following the paper.

Kallistos Ware, Bishop of Diokleia and the Spalding Lecturer in Orthodox Studies at Oxford University, wrote of C. S. Lewis that he was “acutely conscious of the hiddenness of God, of the inexhaustible mystery of the Divine,” an awareness he shared with the Orthodox tradition.¹ Ware explains that, although Lewis’s apologetic works, with their almost overconfident reliance on reason and moral law, are cataphatic in tenor (they convey knowledge of God through positive

statements), an apophatic side evident in his imaginative writings (the conveying of knowledge of God by way of negation). I'm not convinced that Lewis had leanings toward the Orthodox tradition as Bishop Ware implies. But I think there is evidence that he had a deep sense of the incomprehensibility of God – that in trying to know God, we are trying to imagine the unimaginable, to know the unknowable. In *Letters to Malcolm* (where Lewis gets beyond the reasoned approach Ware finds characteristic of his nonfiction), Lewis refers to “the bright blur in the mind which stands for God.”² It is in that sense that God is hidden, for Lewis. We can know God through God's word, and through Jesus; but to know God directly and evidently is like when Moses asked God, “Now show me your glory,” and the Lord replies, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you. . . . But you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live. . . . You will see my back; but my face must not be seen” (Exodus 33: 18-23 NIV). Lewis, with his sense of the numinous, had deep feelings of awe and respect for God. And that, I believe, is reflected in his works. That is why he hides images of Christ. This paper will push Bishop Ware's comments a step further and argue that Lewis's literary techniques reflect his theology: that the subtle mixture of hiddenness and revelation characteristic of Lewis's imaging of Christ in his major fiction – the Ransom trilogy, the Chronicles of Narnia, and *Till We Have Faces* – conveys some of Lewis's deeply held beliefs about God's hiddenness and God's self-revelation.³

That mixture is apparent in Lewis's earliest work of fiction, *Out of the Silent Planet*. Hiding the Christian references was easier when it was published in 1938 than it was later in Lewis's career. Today Lewis is well-known as one of the twentieth century's leading defenders of the Christian faith, and readers expect to find, and thus look for, Christian themes in his works of fiction. But that was not the case in 1938. At that point his name would be recognized only by literary scholars. They knew it because of the recent publication of a brilliant study of the courtly

love tradition, *The Allegory of Love* (1936). That book, and a half-dozen scholarly articles, marked Lewis as a leading figure in the post-war generation of literary scholars. The only other things he had published at that point were three books with very low sales figures: a collection of war poems, *Spirits in Bondage* (1919), and a long narrative poem, *Dymer* (1926), both published under the pseudonym Clive Hamilton, and a rather strange work entitled *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), an allegorical account of his sojourns as an atheist (or agnostic) in his teens and twenties and his journey back to the Christian faith. It is now evident from *The Pilgrim's Regress* that Lewis had begun using his writing skills in support of the faith he had returned to, but readers then would not be aware of that.

Most of you know what happens in *Out of the Silent Planet*, so I'll recap it very briefly. A middle-aged professor, Elwin Ransom, who reminds one of both Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, is kidnapped by a mad scientist (Edward Rolles Weston) and a wealthy playboy adventurer (Richard Devine) and taken with them on a space vehicle (which surely could never have lifted off the ground) to Mars (though they use only its "Old Solar" name, Malacandra). The flight is a journey into experience and self-knowledge for Ransom, as he learns, for example, that space is not cold, empty, and barren, but is pulsating with light and spiritual life. After arriving on Malacandra, he escapes from his captors and spends several months living with the hrossa, the poets and musicians of the planet, rational, gentle, charitable creatures. They live in perfect peace and cooperativeness with two other rational species, the sorns (the scientists and philosophers of the planet) and the pfifltriggi (its craftsmen and artists).

From the hrossa and sorns, Ransom learns about the spiritual beings who look after Malacandra. The planet has a guardian angel, called its Oyarsa, who is served by innumerable spiritual beings called eldils. But the Oyarsa is not the supreme spiritual being. When Ransom

asks if the Oyarsa had made Malacandra, the hrossan answer is the first example of Lewis providing an image of Christ that simultaneously reveals and hides: “Did people in Thulcandra [Earth] not know that Maleldil the Young had made and still ruled the world?”⁴ For readers familiar with the Bible, this passage reveals that Maleldil the Young is the Malacadian name for Christ, the second person of the Trinity, who is creator and ruler of both planets: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3; also Hebrews 1:2). For readers less conversant with the Bible, the image is hidden, partly by the unique use of the prefix *mal*, which in this case does not have its usual meaning of “bad.” Lewis explains in a letter: “MAL- is really equivalent to the definite article in some of the definite article’s uses. ELDIL means a lord or ruler, Maleldil ‘*The Lord*’: i.e. it is, strictly speaking, the Old Solar not for DEUS but for DOMINUS.”⁵ Even the information that Maleldil the Young lives with “the Old One” who “is not that sort . . . that he has to live anywhere” might be read without recognizing it as a Christian allusion: the eldils and Maleldil could just be supernatural beings, not specifically Christian ones. The allusion in one sense is clearly Christian, but in another sense it is veiled.

Ransom subsequently is taken to meet the Oyarsa, from whom he learns much about the spiritual structure of the universe: about spiritual hierarchies, about the pervasiveness of spirit life throughout the heavens (which, he discovers, is the proper name for what we call “outer space”),⁶ and about a great war in heaven in which the Oyarsa of our planet (the “Bent One”) rebelled against the Old One, was defeated, and was hurled back to Earth, which from then on Earth was called the “silent planet.” As a result of that quarantine, the Malacandrian Oyarsa does not know about subsequent events on Thulcandra, although, he says, “there are stories among us that [Maleldil] has taken strange counsel and dared terrible things, wrestling with the Bent One

in Thulcandra” (196). Again Lewis simultaneously reveals and hides: for alert readers, the passage is an allusion to what God the Son, in his human embodiment as Jesus, encountered on the Silent Planet. He took *strange* counsel (counsel that was “surprising, difficult to take in or account for, exceptional to a degree that excites wonder or astonishment” – *Oxford English Dictionary*) and dared *terrible* things (things that excite a feeling akin to dread or awe; violent, severe, painful” – *OED*). He wrestled with our Oyarsa, the Bent One, Satan, and by defeating him he defeated death. Many contemporary readers did not see what Lewis had hidden, perhaps because they did not expect Christian themes in science fiction. H. G. Wells and the other writers of early science fiction were not Christians, or at least did not incorporate Christianity into their fiction.⁷ Thus initial readers of *Out of the Silent Planet* would not have expected a theological strain in it, and the details about Maleldil were taken by most readers as just part of the backstory that makes Ransom’s adventures on Malacandra seem rich and mysterious.

Lewis makes clear in letters that his hiding of Christian images and themes was deliberate. In a 1943 letter to the novelist E. R. Eddison, Lewis complains about the way his publisher handled the dust jacket of *Perelandra*: “Note that they blab out my whole theme in the blurb, wh. was meant to come over the reader by stealth. Idiots!” (29 April 1943; *CLet2*, 571). Such stealth is even more characteristic of *Out of the Silent Planet*. About a year after it was published, he wrote to a friend, Sister Penelope, “You will be both grieved and amused to learn that out of about 60 reviews, only 2 showed any knowledge that my idea of a fall of the Bent One was anything but a private invention of my own[.] But if only there were someone with a richer talent and more leisure, I believe this great ignorance might be a help to the evangelisation of England: any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people’s minds under cover of romance without their knowing it” (9 July [actually August] 1939; *CLet2*, 262). His explanation

in a letter to Ruth Pitter clarifies his aims further: “From [David] Lyndsay [sic – in his *A Voyage to Arcturus*, 1920] I first learned what other planets in fiction are really good for: for spiritual adventures. Only they can satisfy the craving which sends our imaginations off the earth.”⁸ What he smuggles into *Out of the Silent Planet* is Christian spirituality: images of Christ as the creator, king, and ruler, and initially these images remained hidden.

The second volume of the Ransom trilogy, *Perelandra* (1943), is space fantasy – not science fiction. This story too is familiar to most of this audience, but let me summarize briefly. Ransom is sent to Perelandra (Venus) not in a space ship but in a coffin-like container which whisks him off by supernatural power. He arrives on a paradisaal world, a global Garden of Eden. On this perfect world Ransom encounters its Eve, an unfallen woman, human in form but green in color. Shortly thereafter he discovers that Weston has traveled to Perelandra to cause the Eve of that world to disobey, as the Eve of our world did. Weston tempts her three times (the number is another example of revealing while hiding); each is an effort to persuade her rationally (1) that God actually desires her to disobey, (2) that her disobedience will gain greater spiritual awareness for her offspring, and (3) that the endeavor to accumulate possessions will enhance her personhood.

Ransom helps the Green Lady defend herself, by offering counter-arguments. But after the third temptation he realizes he must physically destroy Weston’s body. There is a fight, a flight across the sea, and a pursuit through deep underground caverns. Ultimately Ransom wins out and tragedy is averted. This planet, unlike ours, will remain unfallen, obedient, and Edenic.

The Christian nature of this story is more obvious than that in *Out of the Silent Planet*. Most readers recognize it as a retelling of the story of Satan’s temptation of Eve as found in Genesis 3 and in *Paradise Lost* 9. Yet Lewis makes enough changes to give the story a very

different atmosphere and feeling, and a sense of mystery and uncertainty. This is accomplished largely through the setting on another planet, which is described in abundant detail partly for the sake of bringing the new planet to life imaginatively. The presence of Ransom as the Green Lady's advocate and the nature of the command she must not disobey are notable changes. So too of course is the outcome of the story.

The weaving of Christianity into *Perelandra* is more complex than it is in the earlier book. Christ (as Maleldil) takes part in the action of this story, at least to the extent of carrying on a conversation with Ransom. And Christ is imaged in Ransom himself: in rescuing the Green Lady, Ransom becomes a surrogate for Christ. What Lewis is smuggling into this story is more explicitly theological than the biblical allusions in *Out of the Silent Planet* were: Lewis examines the nature of the atonement, a divine mystery on which the church fathers disagreed and Christian theologians still differ. Lewis acknowledges in *Mere Christianity* that "No explanation will ever be quite adequate to the reality" of the atonement.⁹ *Out of the Silent Planet* deals with this by having Ransom tell the Oyarsa about it in a conversation not reported in the book. Lewis's friend Sister Penelope responded to that hidden conversation by asking "Could you not, for believers only, perhaps as a *Theology* article, write the scene where Ransom tells Oyarsa about the Incarnation?" Lewis replied that one should not attempt to spell out such mysteries: "I don't think, even 'for believers only' I could 'describe' Ransom's revelation to Oyarsa: the fact that you want me to really proves how well advised I was merely to suggest it" (letter to Sister Penelope, 9 July [actually August] 1939; *CLet*2, 262).

In *Perelandra* Lewis seems to aim at a compromise between the explicit approach Sister Penelope asked for and the hidden approach used in *Out of the Silent Planet*. He smuggles into *Perelandra* a fuller account of salvation than in the previous book, but conveys it through images,

not explanation, thus preserving the sense of divine mystery. In the story's terms, Christ gave himself as a sacrifice to rescue humankind: "He whom the other worlds call Maleldil, was the world's ransom, his own ransom."¹⁰ To "ransom" is to effect the release of a person or property in return for payment of a stipulated price. The price paid was Maleldil himself, his physical death; by paying it, he rescued humankind from eternal death. Lewis images this in the name Ransom: "It is not for nothing you are named Ransom," the voice of Jesus tells the character Ransom (168). His name is part of a mysterious but divine plan: "Before his mother had born him, before his ancestors had been called Ransoms, before *ransom* had been the name for a payment that delivers, before the world was made, all these things had so stood together in eternity that the very significance of the pattern at this point lay in their coming together in just this fashion" (168). The role assigned Ransom by his name is to give himself for the Green Lady as Maleldil gave Himself for Ransom (and for a ransom). Though it involves death, such giving, such sacrifice, leads to life. And such redemptive, Christ-like action and sacrifice, the story affirms, should characterize the lives of all humankind: "In that sense, he stood for Maleldil: but no more than Eve would have stood for Him by simply not eating the apple, or than any man stands for Him in doing any good action" (171). Ransom is an image of Christ, but so should everyone be, in Lewis's view.¹¹

About a decade after *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis began working in a different genre of fiction. In August 1948 he told a friend, American scholar Chad Walsh, that he was working on a children's book.¹² He read two chapters of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to Roger Lancelyn Green on 10 March 1949 and finished the book by the end of the month.¹³ In it Lewis

introduces what Will Vaus calls “the greatest character of his fiction – Aslan . . . the great lion who gives us Lewis’s perspective on the very character of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ That wording suggests that Lewis depicted Aslan as an intentional, accessible, evident image of Christ. Many people believe just that – that Lewis conceived of and began the *Chronicles of Narnia* as a way to teach Christianity. Lewis denied this. In a 1956 essay he wrote, “Some people seem to think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument; . . . then drew up a list of basic Christian truths and hammered out ‘allegories’ to embody them. This is all pure moonshine. I couldn’t write in that way at all. Everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn’t anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord.”¹⁵ I quoted this passage at length because of the way it suggests that there is something mysterious about the way the story originated, and something hidden about the presence of Christianity, and the images of Christ, in the stories. In another essay he wrote: “At first I had very little idea about how the [initial] story would go. But then suddenly Aslan came bounding into it. . . . I don’t know where the Lion came from or why He came. But once He was there He pulled the whole story together.”¹⁶ I would suggest that it is important to examine the images of Christ in the *Chronicles of Narnia* in terms of what is hidden as well as what is apparent.

To notice the hiddenness of the images requires reading the *Chronicles* in the order of publication, not as they are renumbered in the 1994 edition. To read one of the other books before *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* sacrifices two key strategies that Lewis built into the initial story: one is introducing the Narnian world with great care with strategies that lead readers into it step by step and help them share imaginatively in the experiences of Lucy, and later the other children, as they discover what that world is like. The other is building into the story strategies that

initially hide who the great lion is, before revealing who he is. Reading *The Magician's Nephew* first changes the reading experience of the series, and to change the reading experience changes the meaning of the books to some extent. Perhaps one reason my students think Christianity is so obvious in the Chronicles is that they start with the wrong book.¹⁷

I contend that the right book to start with is *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, with four children going through an ordinary-looking wardrobe (that isn't ordinary at all) into another world, the land of Narnia, a land with fauns and talking animals, and a wicked witch who has enslaved the land and made it always winter, but never Christmas. They are told that the great lion Aslan, the King of Beasts, is on his way to Narnia, to bring an end to winter and to the reign of the wicked witch. Until late in the book, Aslan is not presented as an image of Christ. Rather, he is depicted in heroic terms fitting an adventure story – as the King of the Wood, the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. In Chapter 11, where his arrival causes winter to turn to spring, one could assume that he is some sort of nature god appropriate to a Faërie-world, and that the witch's power is being superseded by a greater magical power. Even in Chapter 12, when the children meet him as a powerful but benevolent king, one who is “good and terrible at the same time,”¹⁸ his true identity as a Christ figure is hidden. Lewis continues to hide and to reveal.

The basis for Christian significance in the story is laid in Chapter 13. Because Edmund falls under the witch's spell and tells her where she can find his brother and sisters, thus becoming guilty of treason, the Witch claims Edmund as hers. As *de facto* ruler in Narnia, holding power as its Queen, the witch can declare that she has the right, even the obligation, to execute him: “Every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and . . . for every treachery I have a right to a kill” (130). She bases her claim on “Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time,” what in our world is known as the moral law, or the Law of Nature.

Even at this point, however, the story has not turned specifically Christian. Deep Magic lays out a standard of expected moral and civil behavior, and the Witch's comments on it clarify the consequences of failure to live up to that standard. But the moral law itself is not religious, nor the property of any one religion. Only when Edmund is sentenced to die and Aslan volunteers to take his place does religious significance unmistakably emerge. The wicked witch binds Aslan, places him on the stone table, and kills him. The next morning, however, at sunrise, Aslan comes back to life. Transcending Deep Magic is "Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time" (144), a magic inherent not in created things but in their creator, the greater magic of God's grace, love, and forgiveness.

The willing sacrifice, the biblical tone and imagery (with its similarity to Isaiah 53: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth"), and Aslan's subsequent return to life clearly associate him with Christ. Yet, even so, Aslan's death is not a mirror image of Christ's death in the Bible. Aslan's death saves all of Narnia from destruction, but he does not die to save all Narnians from their failures to keep the law: he dies only for Edmund, in that sense. He dies by stabbing, not crucifixion; he is dead only overnight, not for two nights; he comes back to life the next morning, not on the third day. The general meaning of Aslan's death is very similar to the meaning of the death of Christ in our world, but one does not need to know or refer to the biblical account of Christ to gain that meaning. It is comprehensible in terms of the imaginary world Lewis created. The story itself, by its structural movement from Deep Magic to Deeper Magic, conveys the magic of divine Grace. The Chronicles are about Aslan's lordship over Narnia, not Christ's over planet Earth.

The nature of the connection between Aslan and Christ in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is amplified in the third Chronicle, *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* as two of the

children return to Narnia, along with their obnoxious cousin Eustace Clarence Scrubb, very much against his will. They accompany King Caspian on a voyage in which he searches for seven lords who had been sent into exile by the previous king of Narnia.

In contrast to his active roles in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*, Aslan does very little in the “*Dawn Treader*,” except to change Eustace from being a dragon back into a boy. Characters are aware of his presence on seven occasions. They see him on the horizon, for example, or through the page of a book; he answers Lucy’s prayer by providing help to escape from the terrors of the Dark Island; and he talks to Caspian, Lucy, and Edmund. He empowers, encourages, restrains, and guards the children, filling a spiritual more than a physical role. Although they are aware of his presence on those specific occasions, he actually seems to be present all the time, in a protective way, even though they are not conscious of his proximity. Here and later in the Narnian chronology Aslan’s physical presence is more and more withdrawn from the world. Just as Christ in the Gospels increasingly turned over responsibility to his disciples, so does Aslan following his resurrection. This concept grew as the series developed, however, since Aslan is still active as a physical presence in the world at the end of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and in *Prince Caspian*, long after his resurrection.

The striking thing about the images of Christ in *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”* is that the most important ones are couched in riddles and allusions. The voyage for Edmund, Lucy, and Eustace concludes as they reach the end of the world in the *Dawn Treader*’s lifeboat and wade to the shore. There they find a lamb, so white they can hardly look at it, cooking fish over a fire on the grass. After they eat a meal (the most delicious food they have ever tasted), Lucy asks if this is the way to Aslan’s country, and the lamb replies that for them the door into Aslan’s country is from their own world. The lamb then turns into a lion, and the children realize he is

Aslan.¹⁹ For those who recognize the biblical allusion, the lamb is an image of Christ. In John 21:4-19, Peter and four other disciples, after a night of fishing, come to the shore where Jesus has prepared a meal of roasted fish. After they eat it, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you truly love me?” and when Peter replies that he does, Jesus says, “Feed my lambs.” But the passage uses allusion as a type of riddle: those who do not know the answer to the implied question must read further to pick up the full meaning.

Aslan then tells the children that he will open the door in the sky through which they must return to their own country (222), and adds that Edmund and Lucy will not return to Narnia. Lucy begins to sob, not from longing for Narnia itself, but for Aslan: “How can we live, never meeting you?” she cries. Aslan replies that she *will* meet him in our 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” (222).

These lines also function like a riddle, and that was Lewis’s intention. When a child wrote him asking what Aslan’s other name is, Lewis replied, “As to Aslan’s other name, well I want you to guess” (letter to Hila Newman, 3 June 1953; *CLet3*, 334). Of course he wants readers to guess that Aslan’s “other name” is Jesus, and the answer clarifies the way Lewis images Christ in the *Chronicles*: Aslan does not *stand for* Christ, he *is* Christ, in his Narnian incarnation. The imagery should suffice to make this clear, but Lewis spells it out in a letter, to clarify the difference between allegory as a form and what he is doing: “You are mistaken when you think that everything in the book ‘represents’ something in this world,” he wrote to a fifth-grade class in Maryland. “Things do that in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* but I’m not writing in that way. I did not say to myself ‘Let us represent Jesus as He really is in our world by a Lion in Narnia’: I said ‘Let

us suppose that there were a land like Narnia and that the Son of God, as He became a Man in our world, became a Lion there, and then imagine what would happen.’ If you think about it, you will see that it is quite a different thing” (24 May 1954; *CLet3*, 479-80).²⁰

In addition to the obvious riddle in the passage, Lewis slips in a less obvious one, in Aslan’s reply to Edmund that “I am” in your world as well as Narnia. Again it is a riddle that hides and reveals. “I am” is the name revealed by Yahweh to Moses in Exodus 3:13-15:

Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ . . . This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.”

God’s answer is a sort of riddle, an answer that simultaneously reveals and hides. It is a stock element of ancient stories that one’s true name must never be revealed, for knowledge of a person’s true name mysteriously gives one power over the person. One’s true name must be kept hidden. In the Exodus passage, instead of being given a name, Moses is given a description – a phrase describing an active, relational God: “I am who I am,” “I am what I do,” “I am what I do in history,” “I will be what I will be.” Lewis surely knew that relatively few readers would pick up the “I am” allusion – he must have included it as a sort of insider’s joke. Again a hidden detail reveals a significant truth about his imaging of Christ: in the Chronicles as in the Ransom trilogy, he asserts the truth of monotheism. God may be known by different names in different countries, planets, or universes, but there is only one God, the same in person and nature in all places.

After reassuring the children that he is present in all worlds, Aslan adds: “This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there” (222). What Aslan says to the children, Lewis offers readers as an indication of his ultimate goal in writing the Chronicles. In an essay Lewis raises a problem that he says paralyzed his own religious development in his childhood: “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. And reverence itself did harm.” So he wonders if indirection might be more successful than a direct approach: “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.”²¹

In the remaining Chronicles, Aslan is usually portrayed in ways that recall familiar roles of Christ. In *The Magician’s Nephew* he is primarily the creator, as his singing fills Narnia with light and life. In *The Last Battle* he is a judge, separating those who love him and want to be with him in the New Narnia (heaven) from those who do not.²² But woven through these clearly Christian depictions of Aslan is a thread of mysteriousness. In *Prince Caspian* he is visible only to those who believe he is there, and characters wonder “Why can’t I see him?”²³ In *The Silver Chair* he tells Jill “I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” not as if he were boasting, or sorry, or angry, but just stating a fact—puzzling though its meaning may be.²⁴ In *The Horse and His Boy*, when Shasta asks an unseen creature walking beside him in the dark “Who *are* you?” a voice answers three times “Myself,” first low and deep, then loud and clear, and then in a soft whisper, thus mysteriously imaging the trinity, a

single God in three persons, one of the profoundest of Christian mysteries.²⁵ Bishop Ware is right when he calls Aslan “a profoundly apophatic lion” – he is not safe or tame; he is never under the control of our human will or of our human logic; “he remains always ‘the Unimaginably and Insupportably Other,’ who is yet uniquely close to us” (59).

Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold (1956) was Lewis’s last work of fiction, the one he considered his best,²⁶ and the one that illustrates most fully his use of hidden images of Christ. The book is a retelling of the Cupid and Psyche myth, from the *Metamorphoses*, or *The Golden Ass*, of Lucius Apuleius, a story that had fascinated Lewis since he first read it in 1916 and made him want to write his own version of it, correcting what he regarded as an error on Apuleius’s part: Psyche’s sisters, he concluded the first time he read Apuleius’s tale, could not have seen the palace of Cupid to which she was carried by the West Wind; they could not have seen it because they did not believe in divine mysteries.²⁷

All of Lewis’s other stories are written in third person, with the narrator providing a clear, reliable point of view to orient the reader. *Till We Have Faces*, however, uses a first-person, unreliable narrator, Psyche’s older sister Orual, who writes the book as a defense of her own actions, accusing the gods of treating her unfairly. Orual writes what she believes to be an accurate, truthful account of her life. It is up to the reader to recognize her hidden faults and self-deceptions, without a reliable narrator’s help.

Most of you already know Lewis’s version of the story, with its realistic, pseudo-historical setting in the country of Glome, on the outskirts of the Hellenistic world, a century or two before the

birth of Christ. Orual loves the beautiful Psyche devotedly, even acting as mother to her, and worries as people begin to worship her, instead of worshipping the local nature goddess, Ungit. After Psyche is sacrificed to relieve a drought and famine, Orual goes to bury her bones, but instead finds Psyche, vibrantly alive and claiming to have a husband who gave her rich clothes, in whose palace she lives, and who sleeps with her at night. Orual forces Psyche to light a lamp at night and look at her husband, out of jealousy at having her place in Psyche's life taken by another and at being excluded from an area of Psyche's existence.

Psyche looks at her husband, who awakens and rebukes her angrily. She is sent into exile, and Orual returns home. Soon after her return, the King dies and Orual succeeds him. She devotes herself totally to official activities and becomes more and more the Queen (a masculine-like monarch), less and less Orual (a woman and a person).

Many years later she hears a priest in a neighboring country tell a sacred story about Psyche, and she recognizes it as her own story – but she says the teller got the story wrong, because he says both sisters visited Psyche, and they could see the palace and they became jealous of it. So Orual decides to write her own version of the story, to get the facts right and to show how unjust the gods have been to her. But in the process of writing, she discovers how self-deceived she has been and how she has used people, especially those who were closest to her, including Psyche. In a series of visions she learns unselfish love, becomes beautiful like Psyche, and gains salvation.

Lewis uses hidden imagery in more subtle and sophisticated ways in *Till We Have Faces* than in his earlier fiction. The gods in this story seem more confusing and mysterious. The Glomian god, Ungit, is a black stone with “no face; but that meant she had a thousand faces. For she was very uneven, lumpy and furrowed, so that . . . you could always see some face or other” and the worship of Ungit is accompanied with “many great mysteries.”²⁸ Psyche's divine husband, “the god,”

comes to her “only in the holy darkness.” Psyche tells Orual “I mustn’t – not yet – see his face or know his name” (132). (Here is another example of hiding one’s real name.) Orual complains that the gods do not show themselves, do not give signs, and speak only in riddles (142-43, 159, 258-59). In searching for Psyche, Orual and Bardia come upon “the *secret* valley of the god” (109; my italics). The words of the Priest of Ungit sum all of this up well: “The gods . . . dazzle our eyes and flow in and out of one another like eddies on a river. . . . Holy places are dark places. . . . Holy wisdom is not clear and thin like water, but thick and dark like blood” (58). Bishop Ware is right when he calls hiddenness “the *leitmotif*” of *Till We Have Faces*.²⁹

By setting the story before the time of Christ, Lewis eliminates the possibility of imaging Christ directly. But he does include oblique references that anticipate Christ, through lines such as “It’s only sense that one should die for many” (69), and “I wonder do the gods know what it feels like to be a man” (74), and “in that far distant day when the gods become wholly beautiful, or we at last are shown how beautiful they always were” (315). Psyche refers to her divine husband as “the Bridegroom” (124), with strong New Testament overtones of Christ (Matthew 25:1-13; Mark 2:18-20). All these references indicate that, when Orual in her final vision is brought before Psyche’s husband to have her life and actions judged by him, she is meeting Christ, hidden but revealed: “It was not, not now, [Psyche] that really counted. Or if she counted (and oh, gloriously she did) it was for another’s sake. The earth and stars and sun, all that was or will be, existed for his sake. And he was coming. The most dreadful, the most beautiful, the only dread and beauty there is, was coming. The pillars on the far side of the pool flushed with his approach” (318-19). In retrospect, alert readers may discern that the many references to “the god,” Ungit’s son, are hidden allusions to Christ, who later would come to Earth and be one who died for many, as Psyche did within the story.

The motif of sacrifice in the story also contains hidden images of Christ, both in the pagan worship of Ungit and the personal sacrifices of the characters. Orual thinks of sacrifices as empty rituals: “The duty of queenship that irked me most was going often to the house of Ungit and sacrificing” (243). She follows the Fox in denying the efficacy of the religious sacrifices: “All folly, child . . . things come about by natural causes” (18). However, near the end of her life, Orual accepts that the old priest of Ungit, not the Fox, was right: “The Priest knew at least that there must be sacrifices. [The gods] will have sacrifice; will have man. Yes, and the very heart, centre, ground, roots of a man; dark and strong and costly as blood” (306). The worship of Ungit was a nature religion of the type Lewis discussed in the fourteenth chapter of *Miracles* (1947). The nature gods pre-figure Christ, as they enact the pattern of sacrifice found throughout nature, the rhythm of death and re-birth: Christ “is like the Corn-King because the Corn-King is a portrait of Him.”³⁰ The events in Glome, set before the birth of Christ, similarly anticipate Christ’s coming: “The very thing which the Nature-religions are all about seems to have really happened once” (*Miracles*, 138).³¹ The reader shares Orual’s experience: as she searches for the hidden God, so the reader searches for the role of Christ in this supposedly pre-Christian story, and for both the answer is revealed in sacrifice.

In her denial of the efficacy of religious sacrifices, Orual also fails to recognize the other kinds of sacrifice that are evident all around her – and these too become hidden images of Christ. Hidden images are evident in the self-sacrificial attitudes of Psyche, as she risks her own health to bring healing during the plague, and of the Fox and Bardia, as they sacrifice their lives to Glome and to Orual as its queen. The sacrifices of Orual herself become such a hidden image, although she is totally unaware that she is making sacrifices as she devotes herself to her people and her country and then at the end performs Psyche’s tasks for Psyche. In a letter to Clyde S. Kilby, Lewis calls Psyche “an instance of the *anima naturaliter Christiana*” [a soul by nature Christian]: “She is in

some ways like Christ not because she is a symbol of Him but because every good man or woman is like Christ. What else could they be like?”³² Orual also in some ways is like Christ. But she needs to grow more Christ-like by learning the importance of what Lewis in *Miracles* calls the universal “principle of *Vicariousness*”: “Everything is indebted to everything else, sacrificed to everything else, dependent on everything else” (*Miracles*, 143). It is this principle, “very deeply rooted in Christianity” (*Miracles*, 143), that brings Christian theology into *Till We Have Faces* in ways that are more deeply hidden, but more profoundly revealing, than in Lewis’s earlier stories.

Orual started her journey wanting answers, but in the end she finds not answers but the reason why her doubts and questions were not answered: “I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice?” (319). Readers in many cases come to Lewis’s works the way my students do, looking for answers and explanations, and his apologetic works often seek to provide them in clear, direct terms. But I contend that is not his aim in his fiction. Images of Christ are present, but in his fiction Lewis works by indirection, by suggesting the truth, but leaving readers to discover and experience it for themselves, as is the nature of imaginative literature. When Orual stood in the palace without being able to see it, Psyche said, “Perhaps . . . you too will learn how to see” (130). And Orual does learn how to see – the story ends with a series of dreams or visions or “seeings” (319). Likewise I hope my students, like all readers of Lewis, will learn how to see and respect what is hidden, and not always expect to find obvious allusions, answers, and explanations.

Notes

¹ Kallistos Ware, “God of the Fathers: C. S. Lewis and Eastern Christianity,” *The Pilgrim’s Guide: C. S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*, ed. David Mills (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 58. Michael Ward argues that Ware’s insight is applicable to Lewis’s general theological vision: his continual emphasis is God’s unperceived omnipresence and proximity: “The major feature of his spirituality is the exercising of Enjoyment consciousness in order to experience that hidden divinity” (*Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2008], 227).

² Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1964), 104.

³ In saying that Lewis had a sense of God’s hiddenness, I do not mean what *Time* magazine focused on in its 8 April 1966 cover story entitled “Toward a Hidden God,” which was an examination of how putative believers and atheists deal with the death of God. Lewis very much believed that God was alive, but he didn’t consider knowledge of God to be as simple and easy as some Christians treat it.

⁴ *Out of the Silent Planet* (London: John Lane—The Bodley Head, 1938), 106.

⁵ Letter to Victor M. Hamm, 11 August 1945; *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, vol. 2: *Books, Broadcasts and War 1931-1949*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 666-67; hereafter abbreviated “*CLet2*.”

⁶ “I am glad you mentioned the substitution of heaven for space as that is my favourite idea in the book. Unhappily I have since learned that it is also the idea which most betrays my

scientific ignorance: I have since learned that the rays in interplanetary space, so far from being beneficial, would be mortal to us. However, that, no doubt, is true of Heaven in other senses as well!” (Letter to Evelyn Underhill, 29 October 1938; *CLet2*, 235).

⁷ H. G. Wells was one of Lewis’s earliest models for science fiction writing: “I had grown up on . . . the ‘scientifiction’ of H. G. Wells. The idea of other planets exercised upon me [in my early boyhood] a peculiar, heady attraction.” (letter to Charles A. Brady, 29 October 1944 [*CLet2*, 235] and *Surprised by Joy*, chap. 2). For Christmas 1908, his father gave him a copy of Wells’s *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). In a letter of 21 February 1909 Lewis thanks him and adds, “I have already finished it and enjoyed it very much” (*The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, vol. 1: *Family Letters 1905-1931*, ed. Walter Hooper [London: HarperCollins, 2000], 11 – hereafter abbreviated “*CLet1*”). Years later Lewis wrote to his friend and former student Roger Lancelyn Green, “I think Wells’ *1st Men in the Moon* the best of the sort I have read” (28 December 1938; *CLet2*, 237).

⁸ 4 January 1947; *CLet2*, 753. See also his letter to Charles A. Brady, 29 October 1944; *CLet2*, 235. In a letter to Helmut Kuhn, Lewis comments, “I was trying to redeem for genuinely imaginative purposes the form popularly known in this country as ‘science-fiction’ . . . just as . . . *Hamlet* redeemed the popular revenge play” (16 August 1960; *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, vol. 3: *Narnia, Cambridge and Joy 1950-1963*, ed. Walter Hooper [London: HarperCollins, 2007], 1178; hereafter abbreviated “*CLet3*”).

⁹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), book 2, chapter 4.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Perelandra* (London: The Bodley Head, 1943), 169.

¹¹ Lewis completed the trilogy in *That Hideous Strength* (1945), but it doesn’t develop the Christ imagery beyond the use of the name Maleldil.

¹² Chad Walsh, *C. S. Lewis: Apostle to the Skeptics* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 10.

¹³ Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 307.

¹⁴ Vaus, *Mere Theology: A Guide to the Thought of C. S. Lewis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 79.

¹⁵ Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Told," in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), 36.

¹⁶ Lewis, "It All Began with a Picture . . .," *Of Other Worlds*, 42.

¹⁷ For a thorough discussion of the texts of the Chronicles and the numbering of the volumes, see Peter J. Schakel, *The Way into Narnia: A Reader's Guide* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 15-21.

¹⁸ Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), 117-18.

¹⁹ Lewis, *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), 221.

²¹ Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said," *Of Other Worlds*, 37. This seems a fine example of what J. R. R. Tolkien refers to as Recovery, one of the key values and functions of the fairy stories ("On Fairy-Stories, Essays Presented to Charles Williams, ed. C. S. Lewis [1947; rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966], 74-75).

²² With allusions to Matthew 25: 31-46 and Revelation 20: 11-15.

²³ Lewis, *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1951), 129.

²⁴ Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953), 27.

²⁵ Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1954), 147.

²⁶ In a letter to Anne and Martin Kilmer, 7 August 1957, Lewis said of *TWHF*, "I think it much my best book" (*CLet3*, 873). Similarly, *CLet3*, 1040, 1148, 1181, 1214. Lewis told Charles

Wrong, “It’s my favorite of all my books” (“A Chance Meeting,” *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James T. Como [New York: Macmillan, 1979], 109).

²⁷ Early references to Apuleius’s tale appear in letters from Lewis to Arthur Greeves, 28 January and 13 May 1917; *CLet1*, 268, 268n, and 304-5. Lewis tried several times to write his own version of Apuleius’s story. A diary entry for 6 May 1922 records “Tried to work on ‘Psyche’ . . . with no success.” On 23 November 1922 he was “thinking how to make a masque or play of Psyche.” A year later, 9 September 1923, his “head was very full of my old idea of a poem on my own version of the Cupid and Psyche story.” He had already started such a poem twice, “once in couplet and once in ballad form” (Lewis, *All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C. S. Lewis 1922-27*, ed. Walter Hooper [London: HarperCollins, 1991], 30, 142, 266).

²⁸ Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956), 12, 281, 57.

²⁹ Ware, 58.

³⁰ Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Geoffrey Bles – The Centenary Press, 1947), 139.

³¹ A turning point in Lewis’s return to Christianity occurred when a hard-boiled atheist, T. D. Weldon, said to him one evening, “Rum thing, . . . all that stuff of Frazer’s about the Dying God. Rum thing. It almost looks as if it had really happened once” (*Surprised by Joy*, 211).

³² 10 February 1957; *CLet3*, 830. The Latin phrase is from Tertullian’s *Apology* 17.6.