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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VIII

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

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Introduction

Readers and scholars of C.S. Lewis universally acknowledge his "syncretistic imagination"--which fuses classical pagan ideas with Christian allegory--and call him a "Neoplatonist Christian" (cf. *C.S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness and Beauty*; Adam Barkman, *C.S. Lewis & Philosophy As A Way of Life*). This paper will specifically identify the concept of the Angelic Hierarchy (or "spiritual cosmology") as being both ancient and universally accepted. The Canadian critic Adam Barkman warns that "Lewis's fiction is not always an accurate depiction of his metaphysical [spiritual] beliefs," (p. 237). Yet there are clues in the Ransom trilogy that C.S. Lewis collapses the distinction between "ancient" and "modern" and "fiction" and "fact" precisely because he takes "ancient philosophy" seriously and wants us moderns to do likewise.

At the end of *Out of the Silent Planet* Lewis the author establishes that the fictional narrator is named "Lewis" (p. 155); that he is close friends with the novel's protagonist Ransom; that he has been working on certain facts concerning planetary knowledge and medieval Platonism; that these facts are relevant to modern times because "the medieval Platonists were living in the same celestial year as ourselves" (p. 153); and finally, that they--Ransom and Lewis--must disguise these facts as fiction because humanity is in danger and that

"the dangers to be feared are not planetary but cosmic . . . not temporal but eternal" (p. 153).

Daring us to take up this challenge of being "one of the few" who are "prepared to go further into the matter," Lewis presents to us readers the ancient and universal belief in spiritual cosmology, or as this paper identifies it, the Angelic Hierarchy. By examining this belief Scripturally and philosophically, we can then highlight its centrality in Lewis's thinking and writing and speculate that he believed it to be part of a spiritually-based worldview true for moderns as well as for the ancients.

The Angelic Hierarchy in the Scriptures

Let us emphasize at the outset that "the Bible provides the basis for all Christian reflection on angels. Angels are present throughout Scripture, and must be confronted by all of its readers" (Keck, p. 8). Far from being a "mythological hangover from pre-modern times" (Dunbar, p. 5), Scripture tells us right in the beginning of Genesis about God's creation of the cosmos and every creature in and on the celestial and terrestrial orbs. From the patristic era through the medieval period, the roles of the spirits in the Genesis creation story were frequently explored (Keck, p. 16). Yet ultimately by the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., the orthodox Fathers declared that God created the angels despite the

apparent silence of Genesis in this specific area. Lewis takes this historically orthodox position that the Angelic Hierarchy exists as part of God's creation, yet sees the cosmos as filled with angelic beings, arranged hierarchically.

In the Bible the angels are represented throughout as spiritual beings intermediate between God and Man in their function as "messengers of God." The Latin and Greek words for "angel" or "aggelos" means "one sent." They, like humans, are created beings (Ps. 148:2-5; Col. 1:16-17). They are spirits; the writer of Hebrews says "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent to minister to them who shall receive the inheritance of salvation?" (Heb. 1:14). In Revelation 8:2-5 they render perpetual assistance to God and are depicted as standing "before God's throne." In Jacob's vision they are shown ascending and descending the ladder which stretches from earth to heaven--a visual image of this concept of hierarchy. Angels interact with Hagar in the wilderness. The angel Gabriel announced the birth of John the Baptist and the Incarnation of the Lord Christ. Further, they are represented as the constituted guardians of the nations at some particular crisis, such as in Daniel 10:12-21, where the Archangel Michael was coming to assist Daniel but was detained in the heavens by the Prince of Persia. Throughout the Bible we find it repeatedly implied that each soul has its tutelary angel. St. Paul refers to principalities, powers, virtues, and dominions in Ephesians 1:21, and, writing to the Colossians (1:16), he says: "In Him were all things created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations, or principalities or powers." According to John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Vol. I, Chapter XIV, Section 6, p. 145), the angels "regard our safety, undertake our defense, direct our ways, and exercise a constant solicitude that no evil befall us."

This mention of "evil" by John Calvin reminds us that those who choose to follow God's Son are constantly engaged in cosmic spiritual warfare. Ephesians 6 warns that "we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (RSV). Paul here clearly states that the fallen angels hold sway over the world!

It is assumed in the ancient Biblical worldview that this "angelic fall" occurred prior to the Fall of Man and that legions of fallen angels who had allied themselves with Lucifer also fell. Revelation 12:9 describes this War in Heaven, with Satan, which "deceiveth the whole world," being cast out into the earth "and his Angels were cast out with him." Luke 8:31 tells us that a portion of the fallen angels are currently restrained in a spiritual prison called "the Abyss." Later we will connect this ancient idea of the angelic fall to Lewis's knowledge of, and love for, Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, and his linking of the fallen angel Lucifer to the story of Earth's fallen "Oyarsa" in his cosmic inter-planetary novels.

The Angelic Hierarchy and Platonic Philosophy

Realizing how extensive the Biblical teaching is on the spiritual reality of the angels, their place in God's creation, and their relationship to humanity, let's examine the belief in spiritual cosmology or hierarchy seen in philosophers such as Plato and Plotinus. According to Justin Pollard and Howard Reid: "In the *Enneads* we can look into the mind of the last great pagan philosopher of antiquity. Plotinus's universe is, broadly speaking, of a similar structure to Plato's, graded in the Great Chain of Being from the divine to the mundane, from the eternal to the mortal,

from God the One to nature, matter, and the observed world." (Pollard and Reid, p. 248)

These authors pinpoint that the legacy of these ideas continued not just in the last days of the pagan ancient world but throughout later history:

In the later classical world the theological traditions of Christianity (most particularly in the work of Saint Augustine), Islam, and Judaism all looked to Platonic philosophy, as described by Plotinus, as a method for formulating and articulating their own theologies. After the obscurity of the medieval period, the *Enneads* reemerged in 1492 as *one of the driving forces behind the writings of the Italian Renaissance philosophers and in the works of humanists like Erasmus and Thomas More*. [emphasis added] (Pollard and Reid, p. 250)

We emphasize this connection because Lewis's area of academic expertise was precisely in this time period of history. In the "Introduction" to his magnum opus, the *Oxford History of English Literature in the Sixteenth Century excluding Drama* (popularly called the "OHEL" volume), Lewis discusses such Renaissance thinkers as Ficino, Pico, Paracelsus, Agrippa and the English Dr. Dee. Substituting Ficino's term "Platonic theology" for "Neoplatonism," Lewis defines this whole system of daemonology arranged in a hierarchy as "a deliberate syncretism based on the conviction that all the sages of antiquity shared a common wisdom and that this wisdom can be reconciled with Christianity" [emphasis added] (OHEL, p. 21) This ancient "Platonic theology," according to Pollard and Reid, was salvaged from antiquity specifically by the Florentine Renaissance philosophers discussed by Lewis in his OHEL volume. Pollard and Reid continue, saying that Plotinus came to be recognized as "one of the formative influences on Western Christianity" (Pollard and Reid, p. 250).

The Angelic Hierarchy in Lewis's *A Preface to Paradise Lost*

Twelve years prior to the publication of the OHEL volume, in 1942, Lewis published his famous study on John Milton, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. In it he discusses the concept of hierarchy itself, something he believed to be "of great importance" (Hooper, p. 561). Further, as a seventeenth century English poet, Milton's tale of the rebellion and fall of the angels provides further grist for Lewis's ancient Neoplatonic spiritual cosmology. In Chapter XV, "The Mistake about Milton's Angels," Lewis defends the materiality of Milton's angels by saying that "the whole passage . . . becomes intelligible . . . when we realize that Milton put it there chiefly because he thought it true. In this he did not stand alone" (PPL, p. 109). Lewis then reiterates the unity between the ancient writers, the Platonic philosophers and Christianity, saying that "bound up with this is a belief that the pictures of non-human yet rational life presented in the Pagan writers contain a great deal of truth. The universe is full of such life . . . *genii, daemones, aerii homines*. And these are *animals*, animated bodies or incarnate minds" (PPL, pp. 109-110). Further, Lewis confesses that "a new period in my appreciation of *Paradise Lost* began when I first found reason to believe that Milton's picture of the angels . . . is meant in principal as a literally true picture of what they probably were . . ." (PPL, p. 108). This "voice" of Lewis the academic literary critic of Milton here sounds like the same voice of Lewis the self-named narrator at the end of *Out of the Silent Planet*, both saying the same thing: he "has reason to believe" that the ancient wisdom of the Angelic/Planetary Hierarchy is fundamentally and spiritually "true."

To complete our earlier tracing of this strand of Neoplatonic thought through the centuries of human history, let's go back to Pollard and Reid, who

continue by stating that the "German idealists of the following century [late 18th and 19th century] considered Plotinus's work the basis for their opposition to the growing schools of scientific philosophy, and his influence can even be traced in the twentieth-century Christian imaginative literature in England, spearheaded by C.S. Lewis" [emphasis added] (Pollard and Reid, p. 250).

The Angelic Hierarchy in Lewis's *The Discarded Image*

The crucial "road map to ancient ideas" and especially the idea of the universe encompassing spiritual beings arranged in hierarchies, is found in the posthumously published nonfiction work, *The Discarded Image*. Lewis describes the lingering, pervasive and often unacknowledged influence of this "spiritual cosmology," and states that "not all Christians at all times have detected them or admitted their existence . . ." (*Discarded Image*, p. 48) Below Earth's moon is the "aether" or "air" which is populated by "the Longaevi", to whom Lewis devotes an entire chapter. Cosmically, above the earth, is "the Angelic Hierarchy" explicated in detail in the sixth century by the famed Pseudo-Dionysius, who elaborated this hierarchy into three triads of three species each: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominations, Powers, Virtues, Principalities, Archangels and Angels (Keck, p. 57). As Lewis tells us, this is a "finely graded descent of power and goodness . . . the universal principle. The Divine splendor (*illustratio*) comes to us filtered, as it were, through the Hierarchies" (*Discarded Image*, p. 73). Additionally, if we want to understand the "old poets", we must be aware that "there is a vast re-adjustment involved" (*Discarded Image*, pp. 74-5). A few pages later, Lewis reiterates that this difference in perspective is so radical that it perhaps 'leaves no area and *no level of*

consciousness unaffected' [emphasis added] (*Discarded Image*, p. 85). At this point Inklings scholars will remember that in 1936, Lewis first read Charles Williams' spiritual thriller, *The Place of the Lion*, which not only links the ancient Platonic Ideas/Intelligences with the Church's "Celestial Hierarchy" but also warns of the spiritual importance of a properly perceptive "consciousness" of "the celestials." Damaris Tighe refuses to see the actuality of the universe (in her case, the Eagle of Wisdom) properly and instead sees a frightening reptilian pterodactyl. Lewis was so excited by this novel's theme of Platonic Forms materializing in real-life London and by Williams' thought, that Lewis met "C.W." in person and later incorporated him into his circle of friends in Oxford (Carpenter, pp. 99-101). All of this links Lewis's own "change of consciousness" in his understanding of Milton to his friendship with Charles Williams, who knew all about this ancient "Platonic Theology" through his esoteric studies. Williams adored Milton and later lectured at Oxford on Milton's *Comus*. The force of all these points together reinforces my supposition that Lewis joined forces with Williams in recovering an ancient and Neoplatonic truth "carried forward" in the writings of John Milton to the careful reader in our more modern time period.

The Angelic Hierarchy in *Out of the Silent Planet*

In the late 1930's and early 1940's Lewis published his three interplanetary novels, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. In the first novel, the protagonist, a philologist named Ransom is kidnapped and brought to Malacandra/Mars by two evil scientists, Weston and Devine, who have already made contact with higher forms of life on this planet. Right here at the beginning, Lewis makes the point that the reality of all such higher beings has been

dismissed from human consciousness. The type of beings that rule over the three Malacandrian races are called *eldils* and the senior one of them, who is the planetary ruler, is called Oyarsa. The critic Gareth Knight states that this "cosmic picture" which Lewis uses as a backdrop is drawing from "a great tradition *that was once common knowledge but is now half-forgotten*" [italics added] (Knight, p. 26). At the end of their "space adventure," as already mentioned, Ransom and Lewis agree to tell their story of expanded consciousness in fiction rather than as fact, and in the hope of being believed, they agree that "What we need for the moment is *not so much a body of belief as a body of people familiar with certain ideas. If we could even effect in one percent of our readers a change-over from the conception of Space to the conception of Heaven* [constituted we now know of angelic and planetary Intelligences/Angels] *we should have made a beginning* [italics added] (*Out of the Silent Planet*, p. 154).

The Angelic Hierarchy in *Perelandra*

In the second novel Ransom travels to Perelandra/Venus, which by ancient cosmology is the planet of the "third heaven" which holds the true pattern for Earth's civilization. In Lewis's commentary on his friend Charles Williams' Arthurian poetry, Lewis says that Williams calls what resides in the third heaven "the feeling intellect", a term used by Wordsworth. But then Lewis states that Williams, like Lewis himself, sees the planetary "intelligences" as objective celestial fact and that "Williams is . . . reproducing the doctrine of the Renaissance Platonists that Venus--celestial love and beauty--was the pattern or model after which God created the material universe" (*Arthurian Torso*, p. 286). In this novel, after Ransom thwarts Weston's attempt to corrupt the

innocence of Perelandra, an unfallen world, he reaches the high place, so sacred and secret, and can hear the conversation of angels. Indeed, he finds himself in communion with the Planetary Spirits/Angels of both Mars and Venus.

The Angelic Hierarchy in *That Hideous Strength*

Returning to the final volume of the Ransom trilogy, we notice that Lewis returns full force to his ancient cosmic model of the universe filled with light and angelic beings but with planet earth, "Thulcandra," being "silent" separated from the light and joy of the great cosmic dance of the Angelic Hierarchy. The reason for earth's "silence" and "separation" is that earth is under the domination of the evil, fallen Oyarsa. As mentioned previously, the Bible does teach us about the angelic creation and the fact that "there was war in heaven" and that "Lucifer, a created angelic being was thrown out of Heaven and legions of the Angelic Hierarchy with him."

Since we are unpacking "what Lewis knew" about ancient spiritual cosmology, let us probe further into what has been called "the Myth of Angelic Descent," which is elaborated in the lost pseudepigraphical work called *The Book of Enoch*. This book was more ancient than the canonical New Testament Scriptures and, although forgotten by the Church for 1500 years, was used by the early Church. *The Book of Enoch* describes the corruption of superhuman forces/angels or "Watchers", who are corrupt themselves and who oppress and diminish God's creation. According to Margaret Barker, an Oxford scholar studying Second Temple Judaism and the origins of Christianity, the *Book of Enoch* "...was a text from their Jewish background kept and used by the earliest churches. These ideas about the nature of evil, the danger of corrupted skills and scientific knowledge, and the bonds of

natural harmony in creation, must have been a part of the earliest Christians' worldview, a part of what they assumed..." (Barker, p. 3)

Besides using the ancient idea of humanity being under the influence of the fallen, evil "Oyarsa" of earth in *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis also probes the Enochian themes of corrupted science and the breaking of God-ordained order in the heavens. The backdrop provided by all three of these "Enochian themes" in *That Hideous Strength* strengthens the argument that Lewis not only "knew about" the implications for humanity but was working as an author to help humanity achieve the necessary "change of consciousness" required to return to this ancient and spiritually true worldview. (Cf. Michael Ward's *Planet Narnia* for the unpacking of this "ancient code" in Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia!*)

C.S. Lewis's "Preface" to *The Hierarchy of Heaven and Earth*

In March of 1952 (7 years after the publication of *That Hideous Strength*), Lewis wrote to Douglas Harding to tell him that reading the manuscript of Harding's book, *The Hierarchy of Heaven and Earth: A New Diagram of Man in the Universe*, had really excited him deeply. In a postscript he tells Harding "*I thought the doctrine always was that of my eldila . . .*" [italics added] (*Collected Letters, Vol. III*, p. 101). The details of why Lewis agrees with Harding and thinks that his thought represents not just "rearguard actions" against modern scientific/mechanistic worldviews but rather "a kind of thought which attempts to reopen the whole question" is delineated in Lewis's "Preface" to Harding's book. Later reprinted as the essay *The Empty Universe* in the volume *Present Concerns* (edited by Walter Hooper and published by Fount in 1986), this essay boldly claims that Harding's book is "the first attempt to

reverse a movement of thought which has been going on since the beginning of philosophy." Lewis describes how over the centuries the progression towards "modern knowledge" not only strips the cosmos of its transcendent meaning but leads to nothing less than "the abolition of man" which actually is the title of Lewis's nonfiction companion volume to *That Hideous Strength*.

Conclusion

Although time prevents our further development of this ancient spiritual cosmology, this exploration leads us to certain conclusions about C.S. Lewis. By highlighting Lewis's use of this spiritual cosmology in his fiction, his literary criticism, his essays and letters, we can better understand Lewis's message for us moderns. If we view ourselves as readers who are "among the few, the very few" who understand and work towards this "change of consciousness" required to understand our spiritual danger, we can use our heightened awareness of the ancient spiritual cosmology as an antidote to the "hideous strength" of the demonic influence of our materialist "death culture." Could it be that our beloved Jack Lewis is urging us to take up his challenge to question our modern culture's dismissal of such ancient spiritual worldviews as mere "myth"? Could it be that he is calling us even now to effect a changeover in our own thinking such that we know them to be spiritually true? If we take such matters seriously, then we, along with Lewis, become spiritually attuned to the "cosmic dimension" of our faith and thereby become radically counter-culture and even subversive in our departure from mainstream (modern) thinking.

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