

C.S. LEWIS: HIS VIEWS ON SCRIPTURE, MYTHOLOGY, AND THEIR APPLICATION  
TO THE BOOK OF ESTHER

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to analyze C.S. Lewis's beliefs about the inspiration of certain parts of Scripture, particularly Esther and the Old Testament. Lewis thought it likely that the book of Esther was work of fiction. In this paper, Lewis's comments on his beliefs about the nature of verbal inspiration are summarized along with some of his beliefs about the nature and function of mythology. Then, features of the book of Esther are analyzed as a test case for why Lewis may have doubted the historicity of this book. This is done to show that Lewis was consistent in his belief that certain parts of the Old Testament did not need to be considered historical to be canonical or inspired.

## INTRODUCTION

C.S. Lewis has become a favorite author for many twenty-first-century Christians. He wrote across multiple genres, penning children's stories like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a work of science-fiction with his three-part Space Trilogy, apologetic works like *Mere Christianity* and *Miracles*, along with more philosophically minded writings such as *The Abolition of Man*. In addition to his more popular works, Lewis also wrote numerous essays on medieval mythology, and kept up correspondence with his many fans, with several volumes of letters preserved for us today.

What is it that people see in Lewis? Tolkien himself accused Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* of being "too allegorical."<sup>1</sup> And while his work *Mere Christianity* is a favorite among Christians of many churches and denominations, Lewis was frequently the subject of criticism by his contemporaries, criticism that continues to this day. For being a man who emphasized the importance of those things that are central to Christianity, Lewis himself has been accused of straying from what many consider to be orthodox Christian doctrine.<sup>2</sup>

But, for whatever faults and criticisms have been leveled against him, Lewis endures. Several years ago, his *Chronicles of Narnia* was turned into a major motion picture, following on the heels of the popular *Harry Potter* franchise. *Mere Christianity*, and *The Screwtape Letters* are common subjects of study in Bible classes. It seems that Lewis has been entered as a *de facto* member of the larger canon of Christian writers and that he is here to stay.

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1. Fr. Dwight Longenecker, "Tolkien's 'No' to Narnia," *Crisis Magazine*, May 15, 2008. <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2008/tolkiens-no-to-narnia>.

2. Marcel Sarot, "A Barricade across the High Road: C.S. Lewis on the theology of his time," *HTS Theological studies* 75 (4), 4–5. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5542> 5–6.

## Purpose

Lewis is popular among laypeople. Mention his name or some of his more common work to a Christian (and many non-Christians) and they will probably have at least a passing familiarity with the man and some of what he has written. But as popular as Lewis is, it seems that within the Wisconsin Synod not much has been written about him.

As mentioned in the introduction, Lewis is a complicated figure. For a man who could write in such a clear and relatable way about the Christian faith, he was not immune to criticism. I hope to bring the reader to a better understanding of Lewis's own beliefs about Christianity and the Bible, particularly in the domain of biblical inspiration and how Lewis viewed the historicity of certain books of the Bible.

A criticism of Lewis is that he did not have an orthodox understanding of biblical inspiration.<sup>3</sup> Part of this stems from some of Lewis's writings where he plays with the idea that certain biblical stories and accounts aren't representative of actual history. At times he seems to doubt whether the six-day creation account is historically accurate.<sup>4</sup> He toys with the idea that humans may have evolved into their present state from lower life-forms, rather than being created by God in six days.<sup>5</sup> In a letter to an acquaintance, he seems quite convinced that the events of Jonah and Esther are mere fabrications.<sup>6</sup> The particular focus of this paper will be on the book of Esther, but its conclusions will help the reader understand why Lewis may have questioned the historicity of other Old Testament books.

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3. Erin Cline Hanbury, "Elephant in the room: Evangelicals continue to value C.S. Lewis despite theological differences," *Towers* 12(4), 2013. <https://equip.sbts.edu/publications/towers/elephant-in-the-room-evangelicals-continue-to-value-c-s-lewis-despite-theological-differences/>.

4. Kevin S. Livermore, *The Theology of C.S. Lewis* (2018), 52–53.

5. C.S. Lewis, "Funeral of a Great Myth," in *The Timeless Writings of C.S. Lewis: Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Family Christian Press, 1981), 236.

6. C.S. Lewis, *Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy*, vol. 3 of *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2007), 319.

Before analyzing Esther itself and seeing whether Lewis's criticisms were valid, this paper will cover several topics. First, it will take a look at Lewis's life. This will help the reader understand the context that Lewis wrote in. His understanding of Christianity grew and changed as he grew and changed. He was never in a position where he was actively employed by the church writing doctrinal statements. All of his writings were done as a layperson, standing outside of the clergy looking in.

After looking at Lewis's life, this paper will analyze Lewis's thoughts on two topics that are pertinent to Esther: both Lewis's opinion of the inspiration of Scripture as a whole, and what Lewis meant when he talked about *myth*.

The final part will analyze Esther and show that Lewis's understanding of Scripture and the function of myth is consistent with his opinion that Esther was not a historical account.

## PART I: THE LIFE OF LEWIS

### **Jack**

Before looking at Lewis's writings, a summary of Lewis's life is in order. Lewis's journey from Christian to atheist back to Christian again was certainly not unique for a twentieth-century Christian, but the way it transpired was interesting. His view of myth as it related to the Bible had a significant effect on his conversion from theism to Christianity. It is useful to trace out this part of his life and see it in its larger context to gain a broader understanding of the effect that myths had on Lewis's life.

Looking at Lewis's life is useful for another reason. The charge has been leveled against Lewis that he was not always consistent and that his views of God and theology morphed to a certain degree throughout his life.<sup>7</sup> While this is certainly not unusual for the average Christian, a chronology of Lewis's life will help the reader gain an awareness of some of the writings that this paper analyzes and recognize where Lewis was in his life when he wrote what he did.

### Young Lewis

C. S. Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland on November 29, 1898. From a very early age, he developed a fondness for ancient myths and storytelling. George Sayer, in his biography *Jack*,<sup>8</sup> says that Lewis "had begun to make up stories before he could write, with his father acting as amanuensis."<sup>9</sup>

When Lewis was old enough, his father enrolled him in a series of boarding schools. It was here that he first became a Christian. Although his family was nominally Protestant, he was given almost no religious instruction from his mother and father. It was during his time studying at the boarding school named Wynard that Lewis first began to seriously consider himself a Christian.<sup>10</sup> However, Lewis did not remain a Christian for long.

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7. Philip Ryken, "Inerrancy and the Patron Saint of Evangelicalism: C.S. Lewis on Holy Scripture," in *The Romantic Rationalist: God, Life, and Imagination in the Work of C.S. Lewis*, ed. John Piper and David Mathis (IL: Crossway, 2014), 39–64.

8. "Jack" was Lewis's nickname among his close friends.

9. George Sayer, *Jack* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1988), 49.

10. Sayer, *Jack*, 61.

As he continued to bounce around schools (Wynard had closed due to lack of pupils), he renounced his faith due to struggles stemming from the guilt that resulted from his personal sins.<sup>11</sup> It was during these early years that Lewis also developed a strong affinity for ancient Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology.<sup>12</sup> Boarding schooling was not particularly congenial to Lewis, and so eventually his father pulled him out of school and sent him to study under William T. Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick was a strong proponent of reason and logic, and his time spent with Kirkpatrick helped turn Lewis into a confirmed atheist.<sup>13</sup>

It was also during this period of his life that Lewis was introduced to the writings of George MacDonald (particularly his book *Phantastes*), which helped carve out the way for his return to Christianity years later.<sup>14</sup> While MacDonald's *Phantastes* didn't convert Lewis on the spot, the work put into his head many of the ideas and themes that would cause him to return to theism and then Christianity later in his life.

In 1917, during the second half of the First World War, Lewis enlisted in the O.T.C. (Officer Training Core) at his new home in Oxford.<sup>15</sup> In November of 1917, Lewis was shipped out to France to serve on the front line.<sup>16</sup> Although he was wounded, he returned home safely and was reunited with his father and brother<sup>17</sup> for the Christmas season of 1918.<sup>18</sup>

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11. Sayer, *Jack*, 68.

12. Sayer, *Jack*, 64, 78.

13. Sayer, *Jack*, 90.

14. Sayer, *Jack*, 107-108.

15. Sayer, *Jack*, 121, 127.

16. Sayer, *Jack*, 130.

17. Lewis's mother had died of cancer in 1908.

18. Sayer, *Jack*, 140.

Very quickly upon his return to Oxford, Lewis published his first work, entitled *Spirits in Bondage*, which was a collection of poems. Already in this collection, there is evidence that Lewis was beginning to have doubts about his stance as an atheist. Sayer identifies one of the poems "Satan Speaks" as emblematic of the struggle Lewis was going through.

"Satan Speaks" introduces the primary difficulty Jack was having at this time in his life in the conflict between the rationalism that he had perhaps acquired from Kirkpatrick and his romantic imagination. His problem was how to integrate the two in order to become a whole person. In the meantime Satan can present himself as "the fact and the crushing reason to thwart your fantasy's newborn treason."<sup>19</sup>

This poem and others in the collection present clear evidence that Lewis was having trouble rectifying his materialist worldview with the inner romanticism he had felt throughout his life and the deep connection he had with story and mythology. "Our Daily Bread" from the same publication is even more obvious in its religious symbolism. Though its themes are more generally spiritual than they are overtly Christian, it is "certainly not atheistic," as Sayer puts it.<sup>20</sup>

After completing his study at Oxford, Lewis spent several years in poverty trying unsuccessfully to apply for fellowships at different universities. Finally, in May of 1925, Lewis was accepted to teach English at Magdalen College, part of the Oxford system. While his years living hand to mouth were difficult for him, Sayer notes that this period of his life gave Lewis "complete freedom from the snobbery based on possessions, and sympathy with and understanding of the poor people. The many thousands of pounds he was to give away in the years ahead were nearly always bestowed on those short of money." Perhaps it was also this experience that influenced Lewis's negative views toward a purely materialistic society, a theme that he later explores in both *The Abolition of Man* and *That Hideous Strength*.

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19. Sayer, *Jack*, 145.

20. Sayer, *Jack*, 148.



### A Conversion Experience

Lewis's fellowship at Magdalen also marked the official beginning of his return to Christianity. This was a slow process, influenced by multiple factors that spanned several years, beginning in 1926 (by his account) up until his actual conversion in 1931.

As Lewis played with the various philosophies that permeated the institutions he attended and taught at, he found himself often pushing back against whatever current thought was popular. He had acquired a degree of introspection after seeing the horrors of the western front, and this introspection caused him to criticize and think deeply about both rational philosophy and his skeptical tendencies. The two thoughts which plagued him were "the danger of 'falling back into the most child-like superstitions,' and the temptation of fleeing into 'dogmatic materialism.'"<sup>21</sup> His dissatisfaction with materialism finally led him into the beginnings of theism in 1926.

A chance conversation with a cynical professor led to an investigation of the Gospels. In his book *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis notes one of his colleague's comments: "'Rum thing,' he [Professor T. D. Wheldon] said, 'All that stuff of Frazer's about the Dying God. Rum thing. It almost looks as if it had really happened.'"<sup>22</sup> This comment from a hardened atheist led Lewis to investigate whether the Gospels might be historical, which led to church attendance, which led him to reluctantly accept the fact that he was at that point a theist.<sup>23</sup>

In the final chapter of *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes this period of his conversion as a chess game where God slowly whittled away Lewis's pieces. Especially starting during his

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21. Sayer, *Jack*, 221.

22. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 223–224.

23. Sayer, *Jack*, 223.

teaching career at Magdalen, Lewis saw that it was God's hand that took down all of the rationalistic and philosophical defenses that he had raised against believing in a Christian God. By 1929, Lewis finally had to admit that "God was God." Interestingly, he describes his conversion to theism not as a prodigal son despondently returning home after years of debauchery, but as a man brought "kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape."<sup>24</sup> However, his conversion to theism doesn't seem to have brought peace from the angst that his rationalist background and study of myth had engendered.

At this point, Lewis also became a regular church attender. Though he still hadn't embraced the tenets of Christianity at this point, he saw value in signaling some sort of overt religious belief. Even while attending church and chapel, he described himself as distinctly anti-ecclesial, finding the leaders of church tiring and stuffy, saying that he would prefer men to either practice their belief in solitude or gather occasionally in small groups. He was not a fan of hymn-singing or church music, a trait which he held even after conversion.

Other factors began to push Lewis into a more solid Christianity. He became friends with J. R. R. Tolkien, a firm Roman Catholic. His father died in 1929, which had a profound effect on him. His brother Warren, driven to alcoholism by the war, had also begun to dabble in church attendance and Christianity in the years following their father's death, and the two of them had begun to discuss religion.<sup>25</sup>

In these intervening years between theism and Christianity, Lewis describes his intellectual searches not so much as an attempt to pin down which one of the thousands of religions was the right one, but rather as a process where he saw that each religion had a certain

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24. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 229.

25. Sayer, *Jack*, 225.

degree of truth within it. He began to see that the myths of pagan cultures were merely a kind of child-like foretelling of the historical truth of Christianity.<sup>26</sup>

What Lewis cites as the pivotal point in his conversion is a conversation he had with J. R. R. Tolkien and a mutual friend named Hugo Dyson on the evening of September 19, 1931. He, Tolkien, and Dyson stayed awake until 3 a.m. discussing myth and religion. Lewis recounts that several days later, on September 22, 1931, he had a distinct conversion experience. Sayer describes it like this:

The conversion took place on September 22, 1931, while Jack was sitting in a sidecar of Warren's motorcycle en route to Whipsnade, the safari zoo. "When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God," Jack wrote, "and when we reached the zoo I did." It was not an emotional conversion, nor was he aware of his reasoning. "It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake."<sup>27</sup>

Lewis says that once he realized this, he understood that Christianity was not merely just a religion or a philosophy that someone could attach themselves to, but was rather "a summing up and actuality of them all."<sup>28</sup> A year later, Lewis wrote *The Pilgrim's Regress*, his first work as a Christian. In this work, Lewis writes an allegorical account of his path from atheist to Christian through the character of a man named John, who encounters many people and situations that serve as poetic representations of the different philosophies and thoughts that Lewis himself passed by on his journey to Christianity.

Throughout the 1930s, Lewis continued to teach at Oxford. While he made a point to never openly proselytize any of his students after his conversion, he did note that his Christian faith came in handy as he taught his students. His faith and his experience with the shortcomings

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26. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 236.

27. Sayer, *Jack*, 226.

28. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 236.

of secular philosophy helped him to guide his students in their thinking. He got along very well with his students during this period, and each class produced at least someone who became one of Lewis's lifelong friends. During this period Lewis also did a significant amount of research on medieval thought and literature that he used to produce both *The Allegory of Love* and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*.<sup>29</sup>

It was also during this period that Lewis helped form the reading and writing club known as The Inklings. Although its initial members were only Tolkien and Lewis, the group slowly grew as the two Oxford professors invited more and more friends to their informal Thursday evening meetings. They held discussions on writing and literature and bounced story ideas off of one another. These meetings continued until October of 1949.<sup>30</sup>

Lewis's first foray into popular literature came in 1937. He'd always had a taste for science-fiction, but felt that there was room for a science fiction series with an underlying Christian philosophy. To remedy this, he made a bet with Tolkien. Tolkien would write a novel involving a time-journey, while Lewis would write a novel involving a space-journey. Lewis wrote his novel *Out of the Silent Planet* to fulfill his part of the bet. The book received a significant number of positive reviews, but few of them seemed to be aware of the book's underlying Christian theology.<sup>31</sup>

Lewis didn't let this lack of awareness on the part of reviewers bother him. Instead, he used his experience writing *Out of the Silent Planet* to inform how he would write his future novels, particularly *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In a 1939 letter to a friend Lewis commented that

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29. Sayer, *Jack*, 241.

30. Sayer *Jack*, 252–253.

31. Sayer, *Jack*, 255.

"any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people's minds under cover of romance without their knowing it."<sup>32</sup> This realization by Lewis would influence how he wrote the rest of his fantasy and science-fiction novels.

### **The War Years**

Lewis's tenure at Magdalen came to a pause during the years of World War II. While he regretted being forced to take a break in his teaching, the war had some positive benefits for Lewis.

Lewis had been living with his brother and a long-time friend known as Mrs. Moore in a house and estate purchased in the early 1930s known as the Kilns. Throughout the war, the Kilns was used as a place to shelter evacuees, particularly children, from large English cities that were susceptible to air raids.

Lewis had previously been shy and rather aloof around children. Being forced to lodge with them during the war years cured Lewis of this disposition, and his familiarity with them helped him to write his seven-part series on the land of Narnia a decade later.<sup>33</sup>

The war years also proved fruitful to Lewis's writing and brought his name to national prominence. He was commissioned to write *The Problem of Pain* after the editor of a publishing house read through and enjoyed Lewis's *The Pilgrim's Regress*. During the period between July 1940 and February 1941, he completed what would become *The Screwtape Letters*. The letters were published weekly in a Church of England periodical known as *The Guardian* from May through November 1941. They were later collected and published as one work in 1942,

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32. C.S. Lewis, *Books, Broadcasts, and the War*, vol. 2 of *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 167.

33. Sayer, *Jack*, 268–69.

becoming instant bestsellers. This event boosted Lewis into the popular consciousness of the English people.<sup>34</sup>

Although Lewis personally disliked radio, he allowed himself to be talked into doing several broadcasts for the BBC during England's wartime years. His first series of talks dealt with the nature of morality in modern society. In correspondence with BBC religious broadcasting director Dr. James Welch, Lewis noted that the New Testament was written to people who had a grasp of natural law. In Lewis's opinion, modern society had deprived people of a solid sense of right or wrong, and along with it, any concept of guilt.

To address this issue, Lewis gave four 15-minute lectures during 1941, all of which were a huge success. Due to the success of these initial broadcasts, the BBC approached Lewis for a second set. Rather than continue his exposition on natural law, Lewis instead decided to give a brief overview of fundamental Christian beliefs. Lewis strove to be ecumenical in his presentation, covering doctrines that he felt members of most mainline Christian denominations would agree to.

In total, Lewis recorded seven series of talks for the BBC during World War II. His broadcasts proved so popular that before he even finished all seven series, his talks began to be collected and published for reading. His first set of broadcasts was written down and released in a work called *Broadcast Talks*. Later, additional talks about Christian behavior and living were written down and released in *Beyond Personality*. Eventually, all of his talks for the BBC were released in a single volume as *Mere Christianity*.<sup>35</sup>

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34. Sayer, *Jack*, 265–274.

35. Sayer, *Jack*, 277–281.

Along with these talks, Lewis published many of his most famous works during the wartime years. He completed his space trilogy with the release of *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*, penned *The Great Divorce* and *The Abolition of Man*, and also wrote *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, along with several articles for various theological and popular periodicals.<sup>36</sup>

The popularity of Lewis's work during the wartime years, his subsequent fame, and his continued employment at Oxford led to tension between him and many of his colleagues. In 1942 he headed up a group known as the Oxford Socratic Club, a Monday evening debate group for agnostics, atheists, and fence-sitters. Both believers and unbelievers were allowed a turn at speaking and defending their position, followed by a discussion led and refereed by Lewis. His views and opinions spilled out from these Monday night sessions into his relationships with his fellow Oxford professors, putting many comfortable unbelievers and agnostics within the faculty on the defensive. His colleagues felt that he ought to have "stayed in his lane," and kept his opinions within the bounds of English literature.<sup>37</sup>

### **Post-War Years**

For all of the success that Lewis had as an author and speaker during the wartime years, the period immediately following the Allies' victory served to humble him. Two things contributed to this.

The first was a debate that Lewis had with a woman named Elizabeth Anscombe. During a meeting of the Oxford Socratic Club in 1948, Anscombe offered up a convincing criticism of one of Lewis's arguments for the existence of God. Although the audience was divided on

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36. Sayer, *Jack*, 289.

37. Sayer, *Jack*, 286, 302–303.

whether Lewis or Anscombe provided the better argument, Lewis felt so thoroughly shaken by Anscombe's arguments (and recent developments in philosophical thought at Oxford) that he swore off writing any more overtly philosophical or theological works. Instead, he committed himself to write devotional material and works of fiction, like *Reflections on the Psalms* and his *Narnia* series.<sup>38</sup>

The second thing that caused Lewis consternation was his landlady, Mrs. Moore. Lewis had a longtime relationship with Mrs. Moore, stretching back to his days as a schoolboy. Several decades Lewis's senior, Mrs. Moore began to suffer health problems in the years following the war. As Mrs. Moore's health declined, Lewis began to take a more active role in administering the affairs of their estate, the Kilns. Despite the trouble this caused Lewis, this experience (along with his perceived humiliation by Ms. Anscombe) helped to trigger Lewis's work on *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

### **The Chronicles of Narnia**

Though the germ for writing a children's novel was first planted in Lewis's head in 1939, it wasn't until 1948 that he finished the first manuscript of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Although the initial draft was met with harsh criticism from his good friend J. R. R. Tolkien, the praise of other friends convinced Lewis to find an illustrator and submit the work to a publisher.<sup>39</sup>

Released in time for Christmas of 1950, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was met with severe criticism from reviewers. It was panned for what they saw as heavy-handed

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38. Sayer, *Jack*, 308.

39. Sayer, *Jack*, 311–315.



moralizing and barely concealed Christian content. Despite negative reviews, the book produced huge sales and was an instant classic. Lewis continued to release another Narnia book each year until he finally completed the series in 1956.<sup>40</sup>

Although the release of *The Chronicles of Narnia* was a huge success for Lewis, in his private life he continued to struggle. His landlady Mrs. Moore's health continued to decline, and Lewis had to take over the management of the estate at the Kilns. In January of 1951, just after the release of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Mrs. Moore succumbed to influenza.<sup>41</sup>

Lewis's brother Warren, who struggled with drinking ever since his time in France during World War I, continued his slow decline into alcoholism. Lewis's health took a downward turn as well. Despite these problems, Lewis managed to write a volume for *The Oxford History of English Literature* which focused on the sixteenth century, along with an autobiographical work about his early life and conversion entitled *Surprised by Joy*.<sup>42</sup>

### Changes

During this time, Lewis began to have problems at the Magdalen campus of Oxford. The end of the war and changing tastes had brought about a shift in the curriculum towards newer and more modern literature, a change Lewis disagreed with. Lewis's relationship with the faculty also became more strained. As a solution, some of Lewis's friends at neighboring Cambridge came up with the idea of creating a new professorship of renaissance and medieval studies, a position they

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40. Sayer, *Jack*, 315–316.

41. Sayer, *Jack*, 335.

42. Sayer, *Jack*, 321–322, 326.

felt would be perfect for Lewis. Lewis accepted the professorship and gave his first lecture at Cambridge in November of 1954.<sup>43</sup>

Around the same time as he was making the move to Cambridge, Lewis started to become romantically involved with an American woman named Joy Davidman. Similar to Lewis, she grew up as a staunch atheist, and only converted to Christianity later in life. Joy helped Lewis write one of his final novels, *Till We Have Faces*, and her death served as the inspiration for his book *A Grief Observed*.<sup>44</sup>

They were married in April of 1956, though the circumstances were atypical. Before her marriage to Lewis, she had been living in England, estranged from her husband. Lewis had a high view of marriage and was reluctant to marry Joy. He thought he would be committing adultery, even if she divorced her husband. Eventually, Lewis married Joy in a civil ceremony. At the time he viewed the marriage as mostly a formality so that she could stay in England and avoid returning to her ex-husband. But once Joy and her sons moved in with Lewis it became obvious to his friends that he had a real affection for her.<sup>45</sup>

### **The End**

Joy and Lewis were not married long. Joy began suffering numerous health problems around the same time she married Lewis, including bone and breast cancer. Lewis began developing osteoporosis around the same time. Despite all this, they found happiness and spent several fulfilling years together, which Lewis later described as the best years of his life. Joy

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43. Sayer, *Jack*, 358.

44. Sayer, *Jack*, 361.

45. Sayer, *Jack*, 365.

finally passed away due to cancer in July of 1960.<sup>46</sup> Lewis was deeply affected by Joy's death. As a way to process the loss, he wrote *A Grief Observed* and published it anonymously.<sup>47</sup>

In the year following Joy's death, Lewis began to suffer the effects of renal failure. During this time, he continued teaching at Cambridge and wrote one of his final scholarly works, entitled *An Experiment in Criticism*, where he bemoaned the modern literature student's tendency to read the classics through the eyes of contemporary scholars. The summer before his death, Lewis resigned from his professorship at Cambridge. He spent his last several months reading, keeping up with letter writing, and going on walks outside when he felt well enough. He finally succumbed to kidney failure on November 22, 1963, the same day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Texas. Due to this, news of his death was not widely circulated. His funeral was mostly attended by close personal friends.<sup>48</sup>

### **Lewis's Life in retrospect**

C.S. Lewis had an interesting life. He served as a soldier in one world war and helped support England's efforts in another through his uplifting radio broadcasts. He spent a large part of his life conversing with twentieth-century literary greats such as J. R. R. Tolkien and other members of The Inklings. He served as a professor of literature at both Cambridge and Oxford. He went through a profound conversion experience that changed him from a confirmed atheist into a lifelong believer. Later in life, he was married to a woman who had undergone a very similar process.

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46. Sayer, *Jack*, 380.

47. Sayer, *Jack*, 392–393.

48. Sayer, *Jack*, 410.

Lewis's life was colorful, but why spend all of this time summarizing his life? How is this relevant to the question of why Lewis doubted the historicity of the book of Esther? The reason for this summary is to give an overview of why and in what circumstances Lewis was writing, and to help shed light on why Lewis may have felt comfortable making offhand comments about the historicity of certain books of the Bible.

Although he did write and deliver several sermons, Lewis never wrote in any sort of official clerical capacity. The items that he did write for Church of England publications like *The Guardian* were written as a layperson. When he presented essays, he was invited as a guest to give his personal opinions and suggestions, not as an official theologian of the church.<sup>49</sup>

A number of his essays on religion and theology come from meetings with other Oxford faculty, often given as a defense of his Christian beliefs in response to the hostility and criticism of his fellow faculty members. At other times his essays were presented as responses to members of the Oxford Socratic Club which he headed at Magdalen.

The circumstances surrounding the composition of his works also varied. *The Pilgrim's Regress* was written soon after his conversion as a way to process and communicate what the experience had been like for him. *The Chronicles of Narnia* came about in part from his years spent housing evacuated children in his estate at the Kilns. *Till We Have Faces* and *A Grief Observed* were written in the period surrounding his marriage to Joy Davidman.

On top of all this, Lewis spent considerable time responding to letters he received from his readers, especially following the publication of *The Screwtape Letters* and his radio broadcasts. While his brother Warren helped him respond to much of his mail, Lewis wrote handwritten responses to as many fan letters as he was able. Sayer makes the comment that

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49. Lewis, *Undeceptions: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (London: Bles, 1971).

Lewis often took on the task of acting as a spiritual mentor to those who wrote to him by giving them advice and personal counsel.

Lewis's sense of spiritual understanding was also constantly evolving. While his conversion in 1931 was a seminal moment for him, his understanding of Christianity and the Gospel was constantly growing, both through his encounters with his secular coworkers at Oxford and Cambridge and through the time he spent among his intimate Christian circle of friends. His marriage to Joy, caring for her through her illness, and her subsequent death also added depth to his understanding of Christianity.<sup>50</sup>

In short, Lewis's writings shouldn't be viewed as a tight, systematic package. Lewis enjoyed talking, conversing, and sharing his opinions about whatever was on his mind with whoever would listen, and wrote with a similar attitude. If an idea for a story grabbed him, he followed where it led him. Lewis's comments on any part of Scripture ought to be read with the caveat that he was not a man who was always worried about theological precision.

## PART II: LEWIS ON SCRIPTURE

### **Fern-Seeds and Elephants**

While Lewis made several statements about Scripture throughout his works, one of the best and most concise writings he composed on the subject was an essay originally entitled "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," though it is frequently referred to by the more popular name "Fern-Seeds and Elephants."

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50. Sayer, *Jack*, 369.

The event which prompted the essay was a conversation Lewis had with one of his fellow professors concerning a contemporary book of theology.<sup>51</sup> Both Lewis and his colleague had reservations concerning the content of the book in question. Lewis penned the essay as both a criticism and a warning to theologians whom he feared were more concerned about impressing other theologians than with the spiritual care of those who were under them. In Lewis's words, he wrote as "a sheep, telling shepherds what only a sheep can tell them."<sup>52</sup> Putting on the mantle of a metaphorical sheep, Lewis offered up four worries (which he calls 'bleats') he had about the group that was shepherding the sheep of the Church of England.

Lewis's first bleat was that many of the scholars of his day were not treating the Bible, and particularly the Gospels, as they were meant to be treated. He was worried that the New Testament scholars were too engaged in the work of New Testament *criticism*. Lewis's grievance was that "whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics."<sup>53</sup> The distinction is small but important. What Lewis saw in the church were men who were more worried about analyzing the Gospels through the lenses of various literary genres, rather than treating them as the history they presented themselves to be. Lewis cites instances where scholars try and read the Gospels as legend, romance, and even as poetry, missing the point that the Gospels present Jesus as a historical figure.

The cause of this first bleat was Lewis's own experience with literature, poetry, and history. Lewis had been listening to myths since before he was even able to read. He composed

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51. Lewis doesn't give the exact title of this book in his essay but notes that the author was a man named Alec Vidler.

52. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," in *The Timeless Writings of C.S. Lewis: Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Family Christian Press, 1981), 279.

53. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," 280.

multiple books of poetry and even wrote a long-form poem during his busy beginning as a fellow at Magdalen College.<sup>54</sup> He knew what a poem and a myth looked like. Whatever critics may have thought of the miracles in the Gospels (Lewis addresses miracles in his third bleat), the men who authored the Gospels presented Jesus as a historical figure. Lewis's point was that historical critics were not treating the Gospels as history. He criticized Bultmann in particular as a scholar who failed to see the personal and historical Jesus in the Gospel accounts.<sup>55</sup>

Lewis's second bleat was against another axiom of liberal theology. In Lewis's day, it had become popular to assume that a proper understanding of the meaning and purpose of Jesus's teaching had quickly been lost by subsequent generations of Jesus's followers. Contemporary thought said that it was only modern scholars and their enlightened literary techniques who had managed to rediscover the true meaning of what the Gospel authors were trying to communicate.

Lewis poked fun at the fact that pretty much every ancient author had been given a similar treatment by modern scholarship. He mentions that even when he was a student, scholars had found a way to turn Plato into "an English Hegelian" and that each week a new report was published about the hidden meaning of one of Shakespeare's plays.<sup>56</sup> Lewis's critique was that most of these interpretations would have made no sense even as recently as the early twentieth century and that they were mostly products of the inner workings of contemporary scholarship. It seemed incredibly preposterous to Lewis that people who spoke the same language and came from the same culture would have misunderstood the words and actions of Jesus so profoundly that only scholars 2,000 years removed could understand what Jesus meant.

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54. Sayer, *Jack*, 207–215.

55. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," 281.

56. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," 282.

Lewis's third bleat focused on the fact that modern liberal theology came to the Bible with an *a priori* assumption that miracles and supernatural events are categorically impossible. Lewis didn't want to get into a discussion of whether miracles were possible or not (he goes into much greater detail about this topic in his book *Miracles*) but only pointed out that this was an assumption they brought to the text from outside it. He warned his reader that the liberal scholar may be “insufficiently critical of...the spirit of the age they grew up in.”<sup>57</sup>

Lewis's fourth bleat, and in his opinion his loudest and strongest, came from a place of personal experience. Lewis noted that scholarship in recent years had a tendency to attempt to reconstruct the beginnings of how a text came to be, how it was influenced, and how this affected the final product. He complained that in almost every provable instance, modern scholarship failed.

By 1959, when Lewis wrote this essay, he was already a well-established author. Much of what he became famous for had already been published. He had been subjected to much review and criticism and had also seen his writings put through the same process that liberal scholars were applying to the Bible. Lewis's impression of the literary reconstruction process was less than favorable. He says in his essay that he doesn't recall a single instance where an author got the origins of one of his books right or even came close. Lewis pointed to how similar methods were applied to his friend J. R. R. Tolkien. Many critics thought that the One Ring of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy served as an allegory for the atomic bomb. This was a convincing theory to Lewis, except for one problem: Tolkien composed the idea for his story long before the atomic bomb even existed.<sup>58</sup>

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57. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," 282.

58. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," 283.



Aside from his personal experience with modern literary reconstruction, Lewis demonstrated that whatever theory a critic might come up with for the origin of a text, their theory was ultimately unverifiable. Aside from asking the author himself, there was no way to check whether the critic's theory was correct. The liberal critics' lack of success with authors who spoke their language and came from a similar background seemed evidence to Lewis that their attempts with texts far removed from themselves would have even less success.

However, Lewis did have some positive things to say about these liberal scholars. He noted that he had a large amount of respect for their work as Bible critics. Throughout his life he got great enjoyment talking to biblical scholars, and found himself learning new facts about the Bible. His worry was the liberal theologians hadn't taken enough of their own medicine to counteract the effects of their theories. Lewis notes that "everywhere, except in theology, there has been vigorous growth of scepticism about scepticism itself."<sup>59</sup> Lewis's critique again came from his own experience. As a young man, he had a great deal of respect for the ideas his tutor Kirkpatrick introduced him to, only to find that respect dulled once he converted to Christianity. Lewis realized he ought to have been more skeptical of his contemporaries.<sup>60</sup>

Lewis saw modern liberal theologians falling into a kind of hubris common to their age. He felt that they had gotten a bit full of themselves. Instead of acknowledging that human understanding was ultimately inadequate in its ability to understand God and his mode of thought, they sought to dictate to God how he ought to act. The liberal theologian had flipped around the proper order of things.<sup>61</sup>

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59. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," 285.

60. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," 285.

61. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," 286.

Lewis used a playful analogy to illustrate this concept. In this analogy, humans take the place of dogs and humans fill in for God. Certain parts of human life would make sense to a dog, even though there would be significant degrees of difference (things like eating, drinking, and sleeping). But other behaviors could only be understood by analogy. Some things humans do would be utterly impossible for a dog to understand unless it went through the absurd process of temporarily experiencing life as a human. Just as a dog is incapable of fully understanding how a human conducts their affairs, humans are ultimately incapable of understanding the mind of God.<sup>62</sup>

In closing, Lewis proposed that he and liberal theologians must "take our ignorance seriously." He leaves the listener with a feeling of unease, warning that if laypeople have to serve as missionaries to their church, the Church of England is not likely to last much longer.<sup>63</sup>

### **Lewis on the Psalms**

Another helpful case study to gain a better understanding of Lewis's view of Scripture is to consult his book *Reflections on the Psalms*, another place where he deals more explicitly with the words of Scripture.

Already in the introduction to this book, Lewis gives us a helpful insight into how he understands the various books, letters, and parts of the Bible. He says...

Those who talk of reading the Bible "as literature" sometimes mean, I think, reading it without attending to the main thing it is about, like reading Burke with no interest in politics, or reading the *Aeneid* with no interest in Rome. That seems to me to be nonsense. But there is a saner sense in which the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different

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62. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," 286.

63. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," 286.

sorts of literature they are. Most emphatically the Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licences and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyrics poetry. They must be read as poems if they are to be understood; no less than French must be read as French or English as English. Otherwise we shall miss what is in them and think we see what is not.<sup>64</sup>

Hopefully, nothing in this quote strikes the reader as particularly surprising. Much of it is a reflection of what Lewis wrote in the essay previously analyzed. It is merely a reaffirmation of his proposition that the only way to read Scripture correctly is to approach it as the author intended. In what follows, Lewis notes the parallelism of Hebrew poetry, along with what he identifies as the psalms' "practical and didactic purpose." The psalms were not meant to be consumed only by scholars in ivory towers, but by the common Christian.<sup>65</sup>

Interestingly, Lewis begins his work on the psalms with what he considered to be the hardest subject the psalms cover, that of judgment. He notes the differences between the Jewish concept of justice and the Christian one, revisiting the themes of right, wrong, and guilt that also informed his earlier book, *Mere Christianity*.<sup>66</sup>

Rather than going through the entire book of Psalms poem by poem, Lewis takes a more topical approach. After discussing psalms about judgment, he moves on to the imprecatory psalms and the subject of vengeance (a tough topic by Lewis's admission). He goes from there to the subject of death, beauty, sin and punishment, nature, and psalms of praise. Throughout these chapters, Lewis gleans a great deal of insight about God, his Word, and how God interacted with the ancient Israelites. Lewis reaffirms that he has a high amount of respect for the psalms as

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64. C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986), 3.

65. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 5.

66. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* 9–19.

God's Word. However, Lewis does say several things that may give the confessional Lutheran pause.

For example, early in his chapter dealing with death in the psalms, Lewis raises the thought that the ancient Israelite likely had no concept of the afterlife. Lewis sees much of the pagan idea of Hades in the Hebrew word *Sheol*. Hell for the author of many of the psalms was less a place of punishment and torment and more so the natural destination for man's soul after death, much like the heroes of the Iliad turned into senseless ghosts following their defeat on the plains outside Troy.<sup>67</sup> Lewis also doubts that cries for salvation in the psalms should be viewed as calls for eternal salvation, as someone in the New Testament era might understand them. He points to the Sadducees of Jesus's day as an example that this idea of the afterlife was not foreign to Judaism. However, Lewis is quick to mention a few pages later that this all might be his own opinion. He even says that this lack of information about the afterlife may have been an intentional act of God, a way to drive the Israelites away from the world around them into a relationship with him.<sup>68</sup>

Lewis touches on the incongruities between Jewish and Christian theology several more times but explores the topic more fully in the tenth chapter. Initially, Lewis acknowledges that reading Christian theology into the Old Testament can seem like a dangerous endeavor for the modern mind. He cites situations where readers read their incorrect analogies and allegories into his work and expresses caution that he might do the same to the psalms. In this respect Lewis is consistent with the principle he laid out in his essay on modern theology and biblical criticism.

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67. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 37.

68. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 39–42.

He is worried about reading the psalms in an allegorical manner, where every foray into a Psalm turns into an attempt to find the incarnation of Christ, his resurrection, or his ascension.<sup>69</sup>

It is in this chapter that Lewis reveals his understanding of how God works and communicates. For Lewis, the Bible is not the only place God speaks. He uses several examples from ancient pagan societies where a certain truth, or categorical type of truth, was revealed that God later fulfilled. For example, Lewis sees in the forced death of Socrates a form of the righteousness that Christ later fulfilled in his death on the cross. Likewise, Lewis sees the many myths where a god dies and rises again as additional evidence for this idea. These repetitions of death and rebirth myths are a sign that Christianity was the true religion.<sup>70</sup> Lewis leaves open the possibility that many of the Christological connections between the pagan myths and the Christian story may be mere coincidences, but he finds it impossible to ignore this "second meaning" when it seems so clear to one reading a text far in the future.<sup>71</sup>

In the next chapter, chapter eleven, Lewis says that he sees a difference between how the Christian should understand the inspiration of the New Testament and the Old Testament. Like the Apostle Paul, he sees Scripture as something inspired and revealed by God. However, he denies that he is a fundamentalist, and he hesitates to say that every part of the Old Testament is historical.<sup>72</sup>

For example, he leaves open the possibility that Moses's account of creation was derived from an earlier poet's creation account. He cites St. Jerome as a church father with a similar

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69. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 99.

70. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 104.

71. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 108.

72. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 109.

view. The Book of Job seems to him unhistorical. Job and the characters in the book have no connection to any other characters or events in the rest of Scripture. There is no genealogical connection to Israel, and Job's homeland is barely mentioned anywhere else in Scripture.<sup>73</sup>

Although Lewis seems to agree with many contemporaries that the creation account of Genesis was derived from earlier pagan stories, he still believes that God played an important role in the preservation of the story. God took what was merely a human story and elevated it to the level of Scripture.

This is how Lewis views most of the Old Testament. God used a variety of authors, redactors, editors, and compilers to collect the various works that compose the Old Testament. God took these sources and used them to transmit truth which found its fulfillment in Jesus. He uses the term "divine pressure" to explain how God's hand guided these various entities.<sup>74</sup>

This solves several problems from Lewis's perspective. Perceived contradictions and minor errors can be written off as the human qualities of the underlying material showing themselves in the text. In an earlier chapter, Lewis is uncomfortable with the idea that the author of the imprecatory psalms could wish vengeance on their enemies. This apparent contradiction is removed for Lewis once he realizes that this is merely an earlier editor allowing the human substance of the text to stand by itself.

To Lewis, calling the Bible "the Word of God" doesn't mean that every single word is scientifically accurate and historically correct. The Bible carries the Word of God when "we (under grace, with attention to tradition and to interpreters wiser than ourselves, and with the use of such intelligence and learning as we may have) receive that word from it not by using it as an

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73. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 110.

74. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 111.

encyclopedia or an encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message."<sup>75</sup>

Lewis admits that there are problems with this understanding of Scripture. He almost envies the fundamentalist who sees the entire Bible as God's word-for-word Word, and the Roman Catholic who can place his full confidence in the Church. In his own words, his modern, stitched-together view of God's word is leaky and a little bit cryptic. But Lewis rationalizes this with the fact that Jesus himself was often cryptic. Jesus didn't always speak openly and directly. Jesus frequently used parables and paradoxes to communicate his message. Likewise, Paul (in Lewis's mind) wrote in a way that was difficult to understand, especially for a man God used as the apostle to the Gentiles.<sup>76</sup> The apostle Peter himself reflects this fact in 2 Pet 3:16. However, for all the messiness Lewis sees in the method God used to pass down the Old Testament, he accepts this as the way God chose to deal with humans. "Since this is what God has done, this, we must conclude, was best."<sup>77</sup>

Lewis offers his conjectures for why God might have included certain books in the Bible, such as the imprecatory, cursing psalms, and the nihilistic (in Lewis's opinion) book of Ecclesiastes, but admits that in the end, his conjectures are as good as his proverbial dog trying to figure out what his owner does when he sits down to read a book. Even when it comes to the creation story of Genesis, Lewis says that it's ultimately a mystery what happened. He leaves open the possibility that God created man from dust on the sixth day of creation but finds it more likely that God used a lengthier, drawn-out process to create humans. Whatever someone might

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75. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 112.

76. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 113.

77. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 113.

believe about Genesis, the important thing for Lewis is that God chose humans for a special purpose and status. Just like the miracle of the incarnation, Scripture became God's Word by a miraculous assumption of human literature.<sup>78</sup>

Lewis sees Jesus's own words throughout the Gospel as evidence that this interpretation is correct. He points particularly to the words Jesus spoke to the men on the road to Emmaus, where Jesus made clear that he was the fulfillment of what was written in the Old Testament. Along with this are Jesus's many references to the Psalms and how he fulfilled their words. Lewis also identifies Phillip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch reading Isaiah fifty-three as an instance where Jesus was the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy.

He even sees the apostles' many references to the Old Testament as a support for the second bleat he made in his *Fern-Seeds and Elephants* essay. The common thought among liberal theologians was that the apostles and early church quickly lost Jesus's early message. The fact that both Jesus and the apostles make frequent Old Testament references was evidence to Lewis that the apostles and early church knew better than twentieth-century authors what Jesus was teaching.<sup>79</sup>

In light of all this, Lewis is quite comfortable reading Christ into his analysis of the Psalms. Jesus identifies himself as a king and a sufferer. It seemed obvious to Lewis to make the connection that David and Melchizedek, as kings, also prefigured Christ.<sup>80</sup>

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78. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 116.

79. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 119.

80. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 122-123.



### Summary

Hopefully, this short analysis of Lewis's work *Reflections on the Psalms* has served to give the reader a fuller understanding of Lewis's views on Scripture, God's Word, and inspiration. From *Fern-Seeds and Elephants*, the reader can see that Lewis had a high view of Scripture. He viewed Jesus as a historical person. He had no problem believing that Jesus performed miracles and even rose from the dead. He was opposed to anyone who wanted to remove the supernatural from the Bible or who wanted to interpret Scripture as metaphorical rather than historical.

And yet, Lewis's views of Scripture were not perfectly in line with the typical confessional Lutheran. He was a man of his times and was influenced by the various strains of biblical criticism that were popular in his day. He was open to the possibility that certain parts of the Bible, particularly several books of the Old Testament, were not historical. He even toyed with the idea that humans developed out of an evolutionary process. Despite this, he rarely came down hard on one side of these kinds of questions. He offered up his own opinions, while also allowing for the possibility that he might be wrong.

## PART II: LEWIS AND MYTH

### Introduction

Before analyzing the book of Esther, this paper will take a brief look at Lewis's thoughts on the purpose and deeper meaning of myth.

As mentioned in the biographical section above, Lewis was a lifelong lover of myth. A major highlight of his life was when he and his new wife Joy took the opportunity to vacation in the northern Mediterranean, where he was able to see and experience the landscape that he had

only ever read about in Homer and Virgil.<sup>81</sup> As a professor of medieval literature at Oxford and at Cambridge, he had the opportunity to dive into the influence ancient myths had on the subject matter he taught. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze everything Lewis wrote about myth and its importance, but this paper will identify a couple of relevant highlights.

### **Myths as Answer**

The first relevant point is that for Lewis, calling something a myth was not the same thing as saying that it was "not true." Rather, a myth was any story that helped give the reader a broader understanding of the meaning and purpose of their life. As Edith M. Humphrey suggests in her book *Further Up and Further In*, myth is something that primarily serves to answer four fundamental questions for the reader/listener: 1. Where am I? 2. Who am I? 3. What's wrong? 4. What's the remedy?<sup>82</sup>

Lewis saw several metaphors repeat themselves, both in nature and in pagan mythologies. As Humphrey demonstrates, the most important myths for Lewis contained the metaphor of *descending and reascending* (especially as it pertained to death and rebirth), the metaphor of *selectivity*, and the metaphor of *vicariousness*. Lewis saw all these mythic metaphors at work in the Christian story. Jesus descended to earth to be born of a woman and put to death, only to rise to life and reascend back to heaven. God chose to work specifically through Abraham and the nation of Israel as he brought about his promise for salvation. Jesus died vicariously, for all humankind.<sup>83</sup>

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81. Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 271-276.

82. Edith M. Humphrey, *Further Up and Further In* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017), 73.

83. Humphrey, *Further Up and Further In*, 91.

Many of Jesus's acts and miracles also repeat these motifs and metaphors. Rather than spending time with the higher-ups of society, he chose to work with people on the lower rungs, like prostitutes, tax collectors, and shepherds. Jesus, like God the Father, selected a certain group of people (the disciples) to work with him and carry out his ministry, just as God selected the Israelites as his chosen people. Jesus's miracles were frequently repetitions of God's large-scale creative actions. Jesus acted vicariously, on a small scale, as God the Father did when he created the world at the beginning of Genesis. He turned water into wine, bypassing the natural order that would ordinarily be required to make wine. He bypassed the natural order of growing, milling, and then baking bread into grain when he provided bread and fish for the crowd at the Sea of Galilee.<sup>84</sup>

Ms. Humphrey suggests that ultimately, Lewis sees Christianity as a reframing of the four fundamental questions that all myths answer. "Just as Peter redirected the crowd on Pentecost, Lewis reframes the worldview questions: Where am I? Who am I? What's wrong? And what's the remedy? The governing questions now become, "Who is God? Who are we meant to be? Where is God in this fallen and dying world? and Who is our fulfillment?" The answer to all these questions is a singular: 'One is holy! One is Lord, Jesus Christ!'"<sup>85</sup>

### **Not All Myths Are Created Equal**

A second, shorter point that needs to be made about Lewis's opinion on the use of myth is that he recognized a danger in relying too strongly on myth. Several times throughout his writing Lewis makes clear that the primary appeal of myth is to a person's imagination. In a critical essay

84. Humphrey, *Further Up and Further In*, 92.

85. Humphrey, *Further Up and Further In*, 96.

on Percy Shelley, John Dryden, and T. S. Eliot, Lewis has this to say about the appeal of a particular myth to an individual, "Like all great myths its primary appeal is to the imagination: its indirect and further appeal to the will and the understanding can therefore be diversely interpreted according as the reader is a Christian, a politician, a psychoanalyst, or what not. Myth is thus like manna: it is to each man a different dish, and to each the dish he needs."<sup>86</sup> The appeal of a particular myth, in Lewis's opinion, has more to do with the individual listening to it. The listener is free to take whatever truth they want out of a particular story. A Christian can see the familiar death and rebirth cycle in Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, but a person with a different belief system would be free to take a variety of other truths out of Shelley's retelling of this classic Greek myth. The person interpreting a myth must understand how it affects them and why it has that effect.

In another essay, Lewis reveals that the fundamental importance of Christianity isn't just its mythic characteristics, but that it is a real, historical fact. In his essay on the subject, *Myth Became Fact*, he writes:

Now as myth transcends thought, Incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be a myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens*—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle.<sup>87</sup>

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86. C.S. Lewis, "Shelley, Dryden, and Mr. Eliot," *Rehabilitation and Other Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 14.

87. C.S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact" *The Timeless Writings of C.S. Lewis: God in The Dock* (Grand Rapids: Family Christian Press, 1981), 343.

The most important thing about Christianity wasn't its mythic characteristic, but rather its historical characteristics. The fact that Jesus is a myth come to life is the real miracle of Christianity.

Earlier in this same essay, Lewis criticizes one of his friends, named Corineus, for making this mistake. Lewis saw in his friend a kind of cognitive dissonance. Corineus wanted to hang on to all of the outward trappings of Anglican Christianity, like the names, rituals, and metaphors, while leaving behind all the historic doctrines. By cutting out the history and leaving only the myth, Corineus would be cutting out the only reason to be a Christian.<sup>88</sup>

### Writing Using Myth

One final point ought to be made about Lewis and myth, one which was a source of contention between him and J. R. R. Tolkien.<sup>89</sup>

Lewis had a holistic view of myth. What this means is that he felt comfortable drawing from and using mythic imagery from various sources, both in writing and interpreting. This was because he saw myth as something that served as a window into some higher truth and reality about the universe. Ancient authors drew on universal truths when they wrote stories about their pantheons of gods and goddesses, and Lewis attempted something similar in many of his writings. Charlie W. Starr makes this clear in the first chapter of his book *The Faun's Bookshelf*, and gives an example of how Lewis used this concept in his book *Perelandra*:

So, again, what appears as myth in our world may be a reality in some other. But what exactly does this mean—what point is Lewis trying to make? Is he only doing fiction, or is he speculating about things he believes genuinely possible? In his vision at the end of

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88. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," 341–342.

89. Tolkien criticized *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* because he felt that Lewis drew on characters from too many different mythologies.

*Perelandra*, Ransom is shown that our human conception of the gods comes in part from real angelic powers bound to the other planets in our solar system. There are governing angels of Mars and Venus and the other planets. Ransom wonders how knowledge of such beings could come to the old poets of Earth. How did the pagan writers learn to associate Ares with war and Aphrodite with a birth from the foaming sea? The angelic beings Ransom encounters tell him that such knowledge comes directly and through multiple stages.<sup>90</sup>

Through the character of Ransom and his encounters with these angelic beings, Lewis reveals that he sees all myths, whether Greek, Norse, or Egyptian, as being informed by some higher reality. Similar to the idea of Plato's Cave, there is a higher reality that humans are unable to see. There is a spiritual realm that humans are connected to, and myth is a person's primary way of connecting with this spiritual realm.

### PART III: ESTHER

#### **Introduction**

So far this paper has explored Lewis's life, his thoughts on biblical inspiration, and also his thoughts on the function of myth. It will now conclude by analyzing the book of Esther in particular and offering suggestions for why Lewis may have doubted its historicity.

Unfortunately, much of this section will be conjecture on the author's part. While Lewis wrote much on his opinion of Scripture, he does not appear to have written very much about Esther in particular. Therefore, in light of his views on Scripture and myth, this paper will look at some particular characteristics of Esther that may have caused Lewis to doubt that it recorded actual history.

The place in his writings where Lewis states most explicitly that he doubts that the book of Esther is historical is in a letter he wrote to his friend, Corbin Carnell, on April 4, 1953. Lewis

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90. Charlie W. Starr, *The Faun's Bookshelf* (The Kent State University Press, 2018), 22–23.

and Mr. Carnell appear to have been having a dialogue on the historicity of various books of the Bible. Lewis said to Mr. Carnell that he was uncomfortable ascribing the same degree of historicity to every single book of the Bible. He cited Jonah and Esther in particular as two books that he thought the Bible does not present as historical. Lewis said this:

In what sense does the Bible "present" the Jonah story "as historical"? Of course it doesn't say, "This is fiction," but then neither does our Lord say that the Unjust Judge, Good Samaritan, or Prodigal Son are fiction (I would put Esther in the same category as Jonah for the same reason). How does a denial, a doubt, of their historicity lead logically to a similar denial of New Testament miracles? Supposing (as I think is the case), [sic] that sound critical reading revealed different kinds of narrative in the Bible, surely it would be illogical to suppose that these different kinds should all be read in the same way?<sup>91</sup>

Lewis defended himself, saying that his reason for doubt isn't a desire to be "rationalistic." In keeping with his views on Scripture, he didn't doubt Esther because it presents a miracle or event that would be categorically impossible. The issue for Lewis was that this book (and Jonah) seems to present itself as a fictional tale, rather than as history like the accounts of King David. I believe there are primarily two reasons Lewis may have had for doubting the historicity of Esther in particular.

### **Historical Evidence for Esther**

One major reason Lewis may have had for doubting the historicity of Esther is its lack of corroboration from outside sources and several internal discrepancies that are a part of the text. Michael V. Fox, in his commentary on Esther, lays out well several issues with the historicity of Esther.

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<sup>91</sup> Lewis, C.S, *Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy*, vol. 3 of *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2007), 319.

Fox proposes that there are several inaccuracies in Esther's presentation of Persian history, especially compared with Herodotus's account of this period. There are discrepancies between the number of provinces King Xerxes ruled over. The opening chapter of Esther says that Xerxes ruled over 127 provinces, while Herodotus and several monuments identify the number as twenty to thirty-one. Likewise, the book of Daniel lists 120 *satrapies*, a sign for Fox that the Jewish authors have significantly inflated the historical account.<sup>92</sup>

There is also the issue of Xerxes' wife. Herodotus identifies a woman named Amestris as Xerxes's wife at the time he was supposed to be married to Esther. Likewise, Herodotus reports that the king of Persia, according to Persian law, had to marry a woman from one of Persia's seven noble families. Although Esther is identified as the queen in Esth 2:17, this law would have ruled out her ability to become Xerxes' queen. Fox notes several other inaccuracies about Esther, such as an application of Persian law that he considers nonsensical. Both Daniel and Esther state that the Persians were forbidden to change their laws. This concept is found only in these two books, and Fox sees it as impossible that a government could be run according to this principle.<sup>93</sup>

There is also a lack of historical corroboration for a number of the characters, including Esther herself. Fox writes it off as improbable that Xerxes would have allowed the battles of Esth 9:5–10 and Esth 9:16–17 to happen without his intervention, and also sees a lack of outside historical evidence for these events. These things all lead Fox to the conclusion that Esther is not a historical account, but is instead written at a later point in time.<sup>94</sup>

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92. Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 132.

93. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 133.

94. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 133–134.



Christopher Bryan makes the point in his article for *Sewanee Theological Review* that Lewis was very sensitive to the different literary styles of the Bible.<sup>95</sup> Several other books of the Bible, such as accounts about David and the other kings of Israel, are supported with numerous genealogies and connected to the geography of the land of Israel and its surrounding nations. This serves to verify that their records of characters and events are actual histories. While Mordecai and his cousin Esther are identified as Benjamites, there is little else to connect them to other Old Testament characters. These internal issues of Esther stand in contrast to more historically verifiable books (to Lewis) of the Old Testament, like 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, and 1–2 Chronicles. This contrast may have pushed Esther from "historical" into the category of "fiction" in Lewis's mind.

However, Sandra Beth Berg, in her commentary on the motifs, themes, and structures of Esther, notes that the issue is perhaps more complex than what Fox would believe. She believes that the narrator of Esther writes in the manner of a historian and that the author even appeals to outside historical sources in Esth 10:2. She sees the author's knowledge of Persian court etiquette and its government's administration as evidence of Esther's accuracy. Along with this, the Persian words and Aramaisms of Esther are a sign that it was composed close to the time and place that its events occurred.<sup>96</sup>

The purpose of this paper is not to defend the historicity of the book of Esther. It is merely to point out issues with the historicity of the account that Lewis himself may have been aware of. As demonstrated above, Lewis was not married to the idea that every event in Scripture needed to be historical to be considered inspired by God. There are enough questions about the

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95. Christopher Bryan, "C.S. Lewis and the Art of Reading Scripture," *Sewanee Theological Review* 55:2 (Easter 2012), 180–181.

96. Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book Of Esther*, SBL Dissertation Series 44 (Atlanta, Scholars Press: 1997), 2.

history of the account of Esther that is not unreasonable to see why Lewis would have doubted the book's historicity.

### **Esther's Mythological Function**

Earlier, this paper offered a concise analysis of how Lewis viewed the function of myth within a culture group. A culture's various myths and stories didn't function as a dry chronology of historical events. Instead, the function of myth was to answer a group's questions about its meaning, purpose, and goals. Lewis believed that the Hebrew people, just like every other culture, had a mythology to answer questions of purpose and meaning. The difference between Hebrew mythology and another culture's mythology was that Hebrew mythology was the one God chose to help communicate the miracles of the incarnation and resurrection. For Lewis, this communication occurs more in some books of the Old Testament than it does in others.

Adele Berlin in her commentary on Esther notes that for a Jewish audience the significance of the book of Esther is almost entirely focused on its connection to the festival of Purim, which celebrates the rescue of the Jews from Haman. She makes the case that Esther serves as a kind of satirical commentary mocking Persian court life, acting as a kind of burlesque to help the Jew who returned process their period of exile.<sup>97</sup>

Furthermore, Berlin notes that Esther served as the authoritative text on Purim for the post-exilic Jewish community. Esther gives the background story for why a Jew would have celebrated this festival and a reason for why they ought to continue to celebrate it. Berlin offers evidence that Purim was already being celebrated by Jews during the Hellenistic period, citing a

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<sup>97</sup>. Adele Berlin, *Esther*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), ix–xix.

reference to "the day of Mordecai" in 2 Macc 15:36. A large body of midrashic commentaries on the book of Esther is also evidence that the events of the book of Esther had particular significance for Jewish communities living in the shadow of the exile.<sup>98</sup>

However, Sandra Berg notes several problems with the view that Esther is primarily an origin story for the festival of Purim. As she writes, "the story focuses primarily upon the court intrigues surrounding the conflict between Mordecai and Haman, and upon Esther's rescue of the Jews. Purim is not central to the narrative."<sup>99</sup> Similarly, she points out that the narrator seems to refer to Purim almost as an afterthought, mentioning it only in passing in Esth 3:7 and only directly at the end of the book, in Esth 9:23–28. She believes that the origin of Purim is difficult to nail down and that its place in the book of Esther may have been a later addition to the story.

Again, it is not the purpose of this paper to settle the question of how closely the festival of Purim is connected to the book of Esther. However, it is clear that for a Jewish person living during the years following the exile and return, the festival of Purim and the story of Esther held a special significance. It is possible that Lewis felt Esther was primarily an artifact of the Hebrew mythology that God elevated to serve as a vehicle for truth. Regarding it as unhistorical had little effect on the larger, more important fact of Jesus's incarnation and resurrection.

### **Was Lewis Inconsistent?**

Lewis said in his book *Mere Christianity* that as an apologist for Christianity it was never his intention to convert someone to any particular denomination or sect. He identified himself in this book and elsewhere as "a very ordinary layman of the church of England" who didn't hold

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98. Berlin, *Esther*, lii–liii.

99. Berg, *Esther*, 3–4.

strongly to any particular trend within the church. His goal was always "to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times."<sup>100</sup> Throughout many of his writings, he reaffirmed that he tried to focus his readers' attention on the things that all Christian denominations had in common, leaving heavier theological matters for the professional theologians.

However, Lewis has been accused of breaking this principle, differing from common church doctrine more than he might care to admit. Marcel Sarot, in his paper on Lewis and his theology, claims that Lewis's inconsistencies show through in his writing, accusing Lewis of a degree of theological "creativity."<sup>101</sup>

Lewis's book *The Great Divorce* seems a particularly egregious example, in Sarot's opinion. He accuses Lewis of departing from the traditional teaching of hell as a real place. He says that Lewis modified his view of hell in light of Copernicus's theory of heliocentrism and that Lewis believed hell is a state that a person enters into, rather than an actual place they reside in after damnation.<sup>102</sup>

He also claims that Lewis is inconsistent in his belief in *post mortem* conversions. He accuses Lewis of being influenced by contemporary views of justice, citing examples where Lewis seems to view punishment as a way to reform and rehabilitate, rather than as a means of retribution for sin. Sarot says that Lewis extends this view to his belief of hell, seeing it as a place where a person can be purified from their sins instead of being a place of final judgment. He points to the main character in *The Great Divorce*, a man given a vision of heaven and a

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100. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007), 6.

101. Sarot, "A Barricade across the High Road," 5.

102. Sarot, "A Barricade across the High Road," 5.

chance at repentance, as an example of a place where Lewis puts his belief of *post mortem* conversions into writing.<sup>103</sup>

A case might be made that Lewis was being inconsistent in his beliefs about Esther and several other Old Testament books. As demonstrated in his biography above, Lewis wrote on a variety of occasions. His writings were often formed by his struggles and revelations. Is it possible that by doubting the historicity of Esther, Lewis was merely being inconsistent?

I don't believe so. Lewis's doubts of Esther track very well with his larger views on Scripture and the function of myth. He didn't view it as a necessity that every book of the Bible had to be historically accurate to be inspired by God. He thought it quite possible that God could take the ordinary myths of the Hebrew people and elevate them to the status of Scripture, regardless of how well their historicity could be validated. He is silent on what Esther's significance might be for Christians, but it is clear that the book had significance for post-exilic Jews. Whatever the case might be, Lewis's primary concern was that Jesus and the Gospel accounts were historical. The historicity of the Old Testament did not concern him nearly as much as its mythological truthfulness.

### **Conclusion**

Lewis was a Christian who believed that the events of the Gospels were historical and true: Jesus was God incarnate, born, died, and raised again. He spoke out vehemently against men like Bultmann who attempted to "demythologize" the Bible and warned his listeners against the trends he saw in liberal theology.

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103. Sarot, "A Barricade across the High Road," 5.

Lewis was also a firm believer in the power of myth and story. The importance of a myth was not in its factual retelling of historical events, but rather in the underlying questions it answered. This is why Christianity was so important to him. It was the fact that in Jesus all of the mythological truth of previous cultures had finally become true historically. Because God became man in Jesus, all of the big questions that cultures had been asking about meaning and purpose finally had an answer.

Lewis's conversion experience and his love of mythology permeate his writing. This may be why his stories ring particularly true for twenty-first-century believers. Christians live in an age that is becoming increasingly hostile to the message of Christ crucified. They also live in an age where a plurality of mythologies and narratives can confuse a person's understanding of their position and purpose in the world. Lewis's stories help because they tie together the central truths found in these different myths and narratives. By identifying what these things have in common, he makes a case that Christianity is ultimately where all these different myths find their fulfillment.

While pastors and laypeople would do well to be aware of some of the differences between Lewis and confessional Lutherans, I hope that more people will continue to investigate Lewis. There's much to be learned by studying what he wrote. His life story, his clear style of writing, and his unique perspective on the Christian faith can be a great benefit to anyone who might find themselves struggling through the same questions that Lewis did.

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