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I Lay Down My Life for Edmund: Atonement Theology in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

“When a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward” (Lewis, ch. 15). With this sentence, every key element to C. S. Lewis’ atonement theology, as portrayed in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, is laid bare. Although sometimes derided for theological reasons, Aslan’s sacrifice for Edmund is a rich and beautiful scene which lends much power to the book as a whole. Moreover, while this narrative would not fit into anyone’s systematic theology, there are several themes present in Lewis’ atonement story which both shed light on Lewis’ thought in general and might provide some helpful corrective foci for broader evangelical understanding. In particular, the sacrifice of Aslan for Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* brings together the essential mysterious, personal, and redemptive-historical dimensions of the atonement in a typology that impresses itself upon the heart in a way few stories can do. Taking note of these themes will not only enable the reader to better appreciate what Aslan did, but what Jesus did to which Lewis intended Aslan’s sacrifice to point.

Before looking at the actual key elements of this Narnian atonement, though, some analysis of what took place in the novel and how Lewis meant these events to be interpreted is probably in order. Anna Blanch in her article “A Hermeneutical Understanding of *The Chronicles of Narnia*” makes the case that allegory or metaphor is not the right way to

understand the Narnia books and events, but rather that typology was Lewis' intent. The differences are subtle, but the main point is to let the story point somewhere as a story, rather than each element in the story having a specific and consistent symbolic meaning. This was, she claims, how Lewis saw the dying-and-rising god myths leading up to Christ, as "types" that ultimately pointed to Christ the "True Myth." With this in mind, the basic story is straightforward. After entering Narnia, Edmund ends up giving his allegiance to the White Witch. Eventually, because of his family and Aslan's efforts, he returns to them and betrays her, which gives her a claim on his life based on "deep magic from the dawn of time." Yet Aslan convenes privately with the Witch and offers his life in exchange for Edmund's. The Witch kills him on the Stone Table, but the next day he returns and liberates her prisoners (whom she had turned to stone). Finally, Aslan and his freed creatures battle the Witch and her forces, eventually winning as Aslan kills the Witch. The climax to all of this is clearly Aslan's death and resurrection, and the function of this event as a type of atonement provides many valuable insights, beginning with its mysterious nature.

Evident first in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the controlling fact of the atonement for Lewis is mystery. Aslan's death and resurrection, just as Christ's, does not save in any easily schematized way. Indeed, before his conversion the mechanism of the atonement was a major problem for him, the "how" question leading him away from accepting the reality. In the end as a Christian, mostly due to the influence of J. R. R. Tolkien and another friend showing him the significance of "true myth" to his atonement approach, "Lewis remained reluctant to assume full working knowledge of the atonement, which he saw as wholly mysterious" (Vanderhorst 29). In Narnia, this reality comes across in Aslan's cryptic and fundamentally magical explanation of why he was alive again after dying in Edmund's stead:

“But what does it all mean?” asked Susan when they were somewhat calmer.

“It means,” said Aslan, “that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know: Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.” (Lewis, ch. 15)

A magic deeper than “Deep Magic” is the clearest possible sign that Lewis is signaling away from the “how” instead to focus on the “what.” This also accords with what Lewis states about the atonement in *Mere Christianity*, namely that, just as one does not need to understand nutritional theory to be nourished by a meal, one needs no understanding of atonement theory to be saved by Christ’s work (55). Surely this is the case for Aslan and Edmund, since no one but Aslan himself understood anything about this deeper magic from before the dawn of time. This fixation on mystery, on an unexpected and inexplicable appearance of grace in self-sacrifice, makes for a brilliant story, and evangelicals would do well to learn from Aslan than the atonement must retain its essentially inscrutable character.

The second essential element to the atonement captured in the Narnia story is personalism, i.e. the framing of the atonement as primarily a reality involving real and particular people, as opposed to abstract individuals or groups. While many evangelical *presentations* of the atonement take a personal shape (“Jesus died for you because of how much He loves you!”), few evangelical *articulations* do. The focus is usually on a financial or legal metaphor, which, as useful as such may be, cannot be truly personal. Yet Aslan’s sacrifice is deeply personal, as he

steps up specifically to save Edmund by dying in his place. There is no abstract or behind-the-scenes soteriological rationale given. Edmund was going to be killed, so Aslan died in his stead. This was a personal sacrifice, which could not easily be separated meaningfully from the people intimately involved. Again, this theme could well be integrated not only into evangelical Gospel presentations, but into proper theological accounts of the atonement. For indeed, Paul seems to recognize precisely this personal aspect of the atonement when he says that Christ “loved me and gave Himself for me” (*Holman Christian Standard Bible*, Gal. 2:20), just as Aslan loved Edmund and gave himself for Edmund.

The final theme in the Narnian atonement which has probably been mostly ignored in favor of other questions (such the resemblance to ransom theory) is the redemptive-historical function of Aslan’s death. While, as just mentioned, Aslan’s sacrifice was intensely personal, benefitting no more than Edmund directly, or perhaps the whole Pevensie family, Aslan’s death quickly leads to Narnia’s salvation. After his resurrection, Aslan is free to roam and work unhindered by the Witch, since she assumes he is dead. He can go to her castle and breathe new life on all of the creatures which have been turned to stone, and lead a mighty army back to defeat her. This is not the result of any arbitrary or abstract atonement concept, but rather the historical causal result of the atonement for Aslan’s followers. More than the other points, this redemptive-historical element has often been forgotten altogether in Christian atonement theology. Many atonement accounts treat Christ’s work as something which did or could have functioned out of context, by any death under any circumstances, since only an artificial and metaphysical role is involved. Yet, as with Aslan, Christ’s death paved the way for the survival of the people of God. By establishing the new pattern of suffering unto death without violence, and the advance guarantee of personal resurrection, faithful Jews who followed Him were able to

survive the impending doom of Jerusalem and the Temple not just physically, but also religiously, as they had moved on to a new Way. Moreover, the rejection of Christ by the Jews historically pushed the gate open to new circumstances in which Gentiles could enter the people of God as Gentiles. In both the case of Aslan's ransom and Jesus' crucifixion, there is an irreducible historical core that grounds the benefits of atonement in actual, causal effect. This entire working is mostly forgotten in evangelical theology, but like these other themes might find recovery when the Christian imagination takes a romp through Narnia.

In the final picture, C. S. Lewis portrays a rich and varied view of the atonement in his typological treatment in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Not easily identifiable too closely with any one theory, Lewis held open the mystery that the blood on the altar works because grace has provided it (Lev. 17:11). He painted a profoundly personal picture, a type which reveals the love of God in Christ for each person *as* a person, and quite significantly, perhaps without even realizing he did so, Lewis presented a clear analogy for the redemptive-historical function of atonement. These three elements, even aside from the more obvious and often analyzed themes of substitution and ransom, provide a helpful corrective to the lack evident in many atonement accounts of present-day evangelical theologians. All would do well to drink from this Narnian well, and to find in Aslan a beautiful and ultimately worship-inducing pointer to Jesus Christ.

Works Cited

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