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## Aslan's Sacrifice and the Doctrine of Atonement in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

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### Aslan's Sacrifice and the Doctrine of Atonement in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

#### Abstract

Recommends reading the scene of Aslan's sacrifice as a typological narrative, as was common in medieval readings of scripture and of writers like Dante.

#### Additional Keywords

Atonement; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Aslan

## Aslan's Sacrifice and the Doctrine of Atonement in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

Jay Ruud

IN chapter 13 of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, entitled "Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time," the lion Aslan volunteers himself as a substitute for Edmund, whose life has been forfeited to the White Witch according to the Deep Magic written on the Table of Stone. The Witch herself, encouraged by Aslan to articulate the law, says, "You at least know the magic which the Emperor put into Narnia at the very beginning. You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to a kill" (138-39).

There seems to be no way out of the dilemma. Even Aslan seems powerless to stop the execution. Again, as the Witch puts it, "do you really think your master can rob me of my rights by mere force? He knows the Deep Magic better than that. He knows that unless I have blood as the Law says all Narnia will be overturned and perish in fire and water" (139). Clearly, blood must be spilt to satisfy the Emperor's Deep Magic, and the only way to save Edmund is for Aslan to volunteer his own life in exchange.

But death is not the end of Aslan. In chapter 15, Aslan rises from the dead. Susan and Lucy hear a great crack, see the Table of Stone split in half, and see Aslan himself, no longer dead but alive enough to romp with them in spontaneous joy. What Aslan tells the girls is this:

[T]hough 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. (160)

Even the casual reader cannot help but see the parallels between the story of Aslan and the story of Christ. Both sacrifice their lives to save others. Both are humiliated and are executed horribly. Both rise in triumph from the dead. The

Old Law, suggested by the Stone Table (like the commandments of Old Testament law), is superseded by the New Law of the New Testament.

But despite the obvious similarities between Aslan's death and Christ's, critics have been unable to agree on just what Lewis was *doing* with this episode (Is it an allegory? Why or why not? If not, what is it?), or indeed about what exactly he meant to convey *through* it.

Walter Hooper sees this episode as the "closest parallel" between Aslan and Christ, but insists that Lewis here, as everywhere, "disguises" the intention so as not to make it too obvious (111). Peter J. Schakel calls the scene "the most nearly allegorical" in all the Chronicles of Narnia, paralleling clearly the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. But as Schakel points out, Lewis insisted the episode was

not allegorical but suppositional: suppose there was a world like Narnia and that Christ chose to incarnate and die and rise again in that world, this is what it might have been like [. . . T]he general meaning of Aslan's death is very similar to the meaning of the death of Christ in our world, but one does not need to know or refer to the story of Christ to gain that meaning. The story itself [. . .] conveys the magic of grace, which is more important here than the idea or theology behind the magic. (27)

This preference to call the episode anything but allegory seems fueled by the fact that the closer one looks at the two episodes of Aslan's and Christ's sacrifices, the more differences one sees. Mark Freshwater points out, for example, that "whereas Christ is portrayed as passing after death into a life that has its own new Nature, Aslan has no such dramatic physical change after his resurrection" (103). Sara Dudley Edwards adds the fact that Aslan "never had an incarnation," and therefore cannot portray the kind of frustration or weakness that Christ in his human form could (435). And Charles A. Huttar notes the most basic difference of all: Aslan "dies for Edmund alone, not for the whole world. The Atonement of mankind is a doctrine unique (so far as we may suppose) to Earth." Thus Aslan's death does not "mean the same thing to Narnia that Christ's means to human history, because Narnia is not Earth" (132).

In contrast, Thomas C. Peters points out that, though not allegorical, Aslan's sacrifice on the stone table and its aftermath is an example of Lewis's way of taking us to "another time and place to explore the basic ontological and doctrinal questions. [. . . T]hough the episode is not intended as a direct metaphor, it can certainly serve as a help in understanding the complicated issue of atonement"

(83). Peters does not elaborate on his assertion but the meaning of atonement is key to the importance of Aslan and, on Earth, of Christ, and therefore I want to examine more closely exactly what the White Witch and Aslan say about the sacrifice to see what they might suggest concerning Lewis's theology of atonement.

I suggest that most of these critics are reading Lewis on the wrong level, and that if we recognize Lewis's technique for what it is, there is no inconsistency with reading the episode as pertaining to atonement. For a medieval reader and writer, a fourfold interpretation of scripture (and by extension of other imaginative texts as well) was commonplace—that is, a given passage of scripture could be interpreted on literal, allegorical, typological, or anagogical levels. What all of the previously cited critics fail to discuss is that Lewis, a renowned scholar of medieval literature, was employing in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and particularly this scene, the typological approach to literature so common in medieval readings of the scriptures and in medieval writers like Dante. This fact was first pointed out by Marsha Ann Daigle in "Dante's *Divine Comedy* and C. S. Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles*," wherein she defines typology this way: "God's saving action, as recorded in the biblical prototypes, is foreshadowed and/or repeated throughout biblical history, and, according to Christian doctrine, throughout all of man's history as well" (42).

Thus Dante uses a typological narrative technique in *The Divine Comedy* and, in the same manner, Lewis "reenact[s] a biblical typos in terms of its significance or essence" (Daigle 43)—as, specifically, he does when "the Creator-King of Narnia offers himself as a substitute sacrifice, dies, and is resurrected" (43).

To understand Lewis's technique in this episode, then, it is important to understand the context of his thinking: entrenched as he was in late medieval and renaissance literature, history and philosophy, it is easy to see how a technique of writing, and reading, popular in the fourteenth century might find its way quite naturally into his own storytelling. At the same time, it would not be surprising if some of the philosophical and theological ideas popular in Dante's time might find their way into Lewis's work as well—and in order to understand clearly the meaning of Aslan's sacrifice, it is necessary to explore some of those late medieval ideas.

The most profound and lively presentation of the late medieval theology of atonement in all of medieval literature appears in the fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman*. As a medieval and renaissance scholar, Lewis was quite familiar with the poem, and admired Langland's style, particularly his sense of the sublime. "What is truly exceptional about Langland," Lewis says in *The Allegory of Love*, "is

the kind, and the degree, of his poetic imagination.” Most specifically, Langland possesses a “power of rendering imaginable what before was only intelligible,” for which Lewis cites Langland’s lines on the Incarnation in C, ii (160).

But it is Passus 18 of *Piers Plowman*, the renowned Harrowing of Hell episode, that remains the most famous part of the poem, a point Lewis acknowledges in *The Allegory of Love*. Langland describes Lucifer and the other devils awaiting Christ’s arrival in Hell. Lucifer seems absurdly confident as he says

“No death may do this lord harm, nor any devil’s trickery,  
 And his way is where he wishes—but let him beware of the perils.  
 If he bereaves me of my right, he robs me by force.  
 For by right and by reason the race that is here  
 Body and soul belongs to me, both good and evil.  
 For he himself said it who is Sire of Heaven,  
 If Adam ate the apple, all should die  
 And dwell with us devils: the Lord laid down that threat.  
 And since he who is Truth himself said these words,  
 And since I’ve possessed them for seven thousand winters,  
 I don’t believe law will allow him the least of them.” (18.275-85)

Here Lucifer sounds very like the White Witch of Narnia. Like her he speaks of rights granted him at the beginning of the world by the Lord. Like her he justifies his own brutality by this law that cannot be set aside. And as with the Witch, the penalty for transgression according to this ancient law is death.

When Christ confronts Lucifer in hell, he argues that his sacrificial death has saved all of humankind, previously condemned through Adam’s sin:

“Lo, here’s my soul in payment  
 For all sinful souls, to save those that are worthy.  
 Mine they are, and of me—I may the better claim them.  
 Although Reason records, and right of myself,  
 That if they ate the apple all should die,  
 I did not hold out to them hell here forever.  
 For the deed that they did, your deceit caused it;  
 You got them with guile against all reason.  
 .....  
 [A]nd all that man has done amiss, I, man, will amend.  
 Member for member was amends in the Old Law,  
 And life for life also, and by that law I claim  
 Adam and all his issue at my will hereafter.

And what Death destroyed in them, my death shall restore  
And both quicken and requite what was quenched through sin. (18.327-34,  
341-46)

Again, the Old Law is not destroyed but fulfilled as Christ has died in place of humankind. But, like Aslan, Christ argues that his innocent death has now superseded the Old Law, and an age of grace has come—a new dispensation stemming from the “Deeper Magic” prepared by the Lord before the beginning of the world.

Langland is here presenting two medieval views of the theology of atonement. How precisely did Christ's crucifixion restore the relationship between God and man that had been torn asunder by sin? The two popular medieval theories are summed up neatly by James Simpson in his analysis of Langland's Passus 18. The first is known as the “Devil's Rights” theory: “In the early Middle Ages, up to the eleventh century, the dominant theory was that the Devil had rights to man through man's original sin, but forfeited those rights when he unjustly laid claim to Christ (who tricked the Devil through his disguise as a man)” (209).

As Simpson adds, a new theory was developed in the eleventh century by Anselm of Canterbury in a tract entitled *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why [did] God [become] Man?*) Specifically, Anselm logically disintegrates the “Devil's rights” theory by noting that the devil could have no rights, since there was no justice on his side:

[S]ince neither the devil nor man belong to any but God, and neither can exist without the exertion of Divine power, what cause had God to try with his own creature [. . .] or what should he do but punish his servant, who had seduced his fellow-servant to desert their common Lord and come over to himself. (Anselm 201)

Anselm goes on to note that God, wishing to repopulate heaven after the fall of the angels who followed Lucifer, has made man for that purpose. But Adam's sin has broken the relationship between God and man, which must be repaired. It is a rift too wide for human beings to mend on their own:

For now you see how reason of necessity shows that the celestial state must be made up from men, and that this can only be by the forgiveness of sins, which man can never have but by man, who must be at the same time Divine, and reconcile sinners to God by his own death. (278)

It would have been possible for an omniscient God to simply forgive human sin and ignore His own justice, but, as Simpson puts it, “as a way of demonstrating

His love for mankind, and as a way of satisfying the demands of justice, He became a man himself, satisfying God through the crucifixion” (Simpson 209). It is God, by his own unbounded compassion, who becomes man in order to repair the damaged relationship, to reunite man to himself. His only motivation is love. As Anselm gushes in his twentieth chapter:

[W]hat compassion can excel these words of the Father, addressed to the sinner doomed to eternal torments and having no way of escape: “Take my only begotten Son and make him an offering for yourself”[. . .] Or can anything be more just than for him to remit all debt since he has earned a reward greater than all debt, if given with the love which he deserves. (Anselm 300)

What does all of this mean, then, for Lewis and Aslan? Clearly, Lewis the children’s writer is also very much Lewis the theologian and Lewis the medieval scholar. Not only does Lewis use the motifs of medieval romance literature (the quest, the ideals of chivalry, the fantastic) in his narratives; not only does he use the very medieval technique of typology in paralleling and recalling biblical events in his own tales; but his theological perspective in the *Chronicles of Narnia* is also colored by his knowledge of medieval narratives like *Piers Plowman* and medieval theologians like St. Anselm.

Lewis has in mind both the old Devil’s Rights theory of the atonement and Anselm’s challenge to that interpretation, as well as Anselm’s own new “satisfaction” theory, which Lewis clearly accepts. The White Witch, confident that “every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to a kill” (*Lion* 138-39), and like the devils in *Piers Plowman*, insists on rights that she does not really have. Justice might demand that Edmund be punished for betraying Aslan, but it is not the White Witch but the Emperor to whom reparations are due. Besides, as man was seduced by the devil and did not fall unprovoked, so the Witch’s own guilt in luring Edmund to his betrayal should preclude her, in justice, from claiming any part in the justice meted out to Edmund. Typologically, the devil’s rights to man are negated by his own deceit in causing man’s fall: as Langland’s Christ tells Satan,

“the deed that they did, your deceit caused it;  
You got them by guile against all reason.  
For in my palace Paradise, in the person of an adder,  
You stole by stealth something I loved.” (18.333-36)



But Aslan's sacrifice undoes the Deep Magic and cracks the stone table—what Aslan says was ordained by the Deeper Magic “when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead” (160)—that is, when Aslan, like Christ, makes a willing sacrifice out of love and compassion, satisfaction has been made and human beings are restored to a right relationship with God. That relationship is typologically pictured in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in the curious but joyous scene immediately following Aslan's resurrection, when he enjoys a playful romp with Lucy and Susan: “It was such a romp as no one has ever had except in Narnia; [. . .] and the funny thing was that when all three finally lay together panting in the sun the girls no longer felt in the least tired or hungry or thirsty” (161).

This divine romp that satisfies all spiritual hunger or weariness is the restored right relationship with God. As Christ's sacrifice satisfies God's justice and restores man's relationship with God, so Aslan's sacrifice has restored the children in Narnia, and his romp with them, like his sacrifice itself, demonstrates his love and compassion—what Anselm saw as the motivation for Christ's actions.

Lewis clearly wanted to make a point about the atonement in his typological representation of Christ's sacrifice. It is not necessary to know Anselm or even *Piers Plowman* to appreciate the power of Aslan's story, and children or young adults reading the Narnia tales will inevitably be moved by the story of Aslan's sacrifice even if they never think about the theological ramifications of the story. But an examination of the medieval sources of Lewis's typology suggests that, despite the power of the storytelling, theology is never far from Lewis's mind.

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