1984

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Narnia and the Seven Deadly Sins

Abstract
Gives a brief history of the “seven deadly sins” in Christianity, and of Lewis's knowledge of them as indicated in his non-Narnian works. Argues that each book in the Chronicles of Narnia “seems to portray one deadly sin above all others.”

Additional Keywords
Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia; Seven deadly sins in the Chronicles of Narnia
Several years ago while teaching a fantasy literature course, I discovered an interesting relationship between the seven deadly sins and C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia. As I was giving an overview of the seven Narnian tales, it struck me that Lewis, a medieval scholar, had an intimate knowledge of the medieval ecclesiastical and literary tradition of seven deadly sins. I remember suggesting that someone ought to study the relationship between the tales and the sins, intending of course that one of my students do so. I did not realize then that most were ill-equipped to tackle such a task. Thus, it has fallen to me in this paper to explore the nature of this relationship.

Let me begin by briefly summarizing the history of the seven deadly sins in the church and then go on to illustrate Lewis' knowledge of them by referring to several non-Narnian works. The development of a list of seven especially damning sins is shadowy. Early church fathers (Hermas, Tertullian, Augustine), while never actually listing specific "deadly" sins, did suggest that some sins were worse than others, perhaps, with 1 John 5:16-17 in mind.

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.

What eventually resulted, therefore, were numerous lists of especially harmful sins. However, the list that came to be most influential in the church was that developed by Gregory the Great (540-605) characterized by its Latin acronym, saligia: superbia (pride), avaritia (greed), luxuria (luxury, later lust), invidia (envy), gula (gluttony), ira (anger), and acedia (sloth). As well as their appearance in church writings, the frequent reference to these sins in secular literature testifies to their importance.

For instance, William Langland's Piers Plowman, Dante's Divine Comedia, Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales ("The Parson's Tale") and Spenser's The Faerie Queene all devote serious attention to these sins. It is not surprising then, that Lewis knew them so well as is clear in his The Allegory of Love. Throughout this study of allegory, Lewis refers to the seven deadly sins. There, for example, while commenting on Langland, Lewis says that Langland's "excellent satiric comedy, as displayed in the behavior of the seven Deadly Sins belongs to a tradition as old as the Ancren Riwe." In addition, in other works he refers to specific sins on the list. For instance, in Mere Christianity he saves an entire chapter for pride ("The great sin"), in Screwtape Letters he devotes letters to lust (IX, XVII), gluttony (XVII), and pride (XXIV); and in The Great Divorce he pictures sinners unable to choose heaven because of greed, sloth and envy; and finally, in Poems he focuses an entire poem, "Deadly Sins," on each one of the seven deadly sins.

Since Lewis so readily refers to the seven deadly sins in many of his other works, it is my contention that he may either consciously or subconsciously have emphasized one of the seven deadly sins in each one of the seven Narnian books. Let me add here that it is certain Lewis dealt with multiple sins in Narnia; in fact, each book reflects this. Nonetheless, each book does seem to portray one particular deadly sin above all others. What follows is a careful study of each book and its deadly sin.

In The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, the
In this tale, Prince Caspian's uncle, King Miraz, is clearly guilty of profiteering in his desire to gain power, wealth, and position. After Caspian's father had died, Miraz initially ruled as "Lord Protector" for Caspian. However, after Caspian's mother died and after Miraz carefully "weeded" out any lords loyal to Caspian's father, he allowed himself to be proclaimed King by planted flatterers among the people. Dr. Cornelius, Caspian's dwarf tutor, neatly describes the process of Miraz's lusty grab for power:

And then, one by one, all the great lords who had known your father, died or disappeared. Not by accident, either. Miraz weeded them out. Belisar and Uvilas were shot with arrows on a hunting party: by chance, it was pretended. All the great houses of the Passarids he sent to fight giants on the Northern frontier till one by one they fell. Arlian and Eriman and a dozen more he executed for treason on a false charge. The two brothers of Beaversdam he shut up as madmen. And finally he persuaded the seven noble lords, who alone among all the Telmarines did not fear the sea, to sail away and look for new lands beyond the Eastern Ocean, and, as he intended, they never came back.6

Later the truth of Miraz's lust for power becomes crystallized for Caspian as he learns that Miraz had in fact murdered Caspian's father; furthermore, Caspian learns that to establish himself permanently as the rightful ruler and guarantee his line, Miraz plans to kill him on the night the queen gives birth to a son.

I think Lewis intends to demonstrate through Miraz the effect luxuria, when embodied in its rulers, can have on a society. While Miraz rules, truth is suppressed; talking Narnian creatures are outlawed as well as tales about such creatures. There is little trust between the members of society and even Narnian creatures are afflicting. For instance, at one point a leader of the Black Dwarves is willing to call up the spirit of Jadis to fight Miraz: "'I'll believe in anyone or anything,' said Nikabrik, 'that'll batter these cursed Telemarine barbarians to pieces or drive them out of Narnia. Anyone or anything. Aslan or the White Witch, do you understand?" Such a disintegration of society is to be expected when government becomes first concerned with consolidating its own power and authority and only later with the welfare of its people.

In The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, Lewis emphasizes greed, pictured in the thoroughly obnoxious Eustace Clarence Scrubb. Eustace, besides being entirely egocentric and thoroughly selfish, is greedy beyond bounds. His greed and its consequences provide the central episode of the tale. After an exhausting storm drives Eustace and his shipmates to an island where they intend to re-stock their supplies, Eustace, feeling picked on, slinks away to the center of the island where, to his shock, he encounters a dying dragon. He watches the dragon breathe its last gasp and begins "to feel as if he had fought and killed the dragon instead of merely seeing it die."7 Eustace is then driven by a rainstorm into the dragon's lair where he discovers the dragon's rich treasure hoard. Delighted by his find, he greedily stuffs his pockets with diamonds and slips a large diamond bracelet above his elbow. Once he realizes he can carry no more, he
falls asleep upon a pile of golden coins.

When Eustace later awakens because of a pain in his arm, he sees before him a dragon's claw. Much to his consternation he notices that whenever he moves, the claw moves. At first he thinks the dead dragon's mate has come to avenge its death, but soon he realizes the truth. He had turned into a dragon while he was asleep. Sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself (p. 75). His transformation, of course, explains the pain in his arm ("the bracelet which fitted very nicely on the upper arm of a boy was far too small for the thick, stumpy foreleg of a dragon"), and becomes an appropriate reminder to Eustace of his greed.

In Eustace, Lewis illustrates the negative, egocentric effect greed has upon an individual. Such a person is useless to himself and to society. The greedy person is only interested in elevation of self and is more than willing to use others for his own advantage. Fortunately for Eustace he "sees" the light and is re-transformed, though only through an extremely painful experience. Unable to shed his dragon skin himself, Eustace submits to the fierce claws of Aslan and is reborn as a new, whole person.

The Silver Chair portrays the dangerous effects of sloth, a disgust with the spiritual because of the physical effort involved. Jill Pole is confronted by Aslan early in the tale and commanded to set to memory four important signs that will aid her and Eustace as they quest for a lost prince of Narnia. The importance of remembering the signs is paramount as Aslan indicates:

Remember, remember, remember the Signs. Say them to yourself when you wake in the morning and when you lie down at night. And whatever strange things may happen to you, let nothing turn your mind from following the Signs... Take great care that [the Narnian air] does not confuse your mind. And the Signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. This is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearances. Remember the Signs and believe the Signs. Nothing else matters.

Here Lewis is obviously echoing Deuteronomy 6:6-9:

And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the door posts of your house and gates.

The thrust of this parallel is clear: just as God gives man certain rules, commands, and signs to live by, so Aslan gives his followers similar rules. The stress in each case is on binding or remembering the signs in order that life be lived in direct accord with the controller.

Jill fails, as do many of us, because of sloth. That is, her sloth is not so much overt laziness or reckless disregard as it is gradual wearing away of devotion, ever creeping numbness regarding the spiritual tasks set before her. Indeed, at first she is keenly aware of the signs and tells Eustace about them; however, within a matter of hours after her arrival in Narnia "she had forgotten all about the Signs and the lost prince for the moment" (p. 37).

Consequently, they stumble along on their quest and as the going gets rougher, her diligence to remembering the signs fades: "They never talked about Aslan, or even about the lost prince now. And Jill gave up her habit of repeating the Signs over to herself every night and morning. She said to herself, at first, that she was too tired, but she soon forgot all about it" (pp. 79-80).

Jill's lack of diligence eventually turns to irritability whenever she is called upon to remember the signs; for instance, during a snow storm (that blinds them all to one of the signs) Jill is asked which sign they should be looking for: "Oh come on! Bother the signs...Something about someone mentioning Aslan's name I think but I'm jolly well not going to give a recitation here" (p. 87). Lewis points out that:

She had got the order wrong. That was because she had given up saying the signs over every night. She still really knew them, if she troubled to think: but she was no longer so "pat" in her lesson as to be sure of reeling them off in the right order at a moment's notice and without thinking. [The] question annoyed her because deep down inside her, she was already annoyed with herself for not knowing the Lion's lesson quite so well as she felt she ought to have known it. (pp. 87-88)

Fortunately for Jill, however, Aslan intervenes by means of a dream and re-awakens her faithfulness. As a result, later on after having failed to recognize the first three signs because of sloth, she does recognize the fourth, and she acts to follow it, even though the risk is enormous. In Jill, Lewis portraits all who fail to persevere, who fail to keep the vision. Like Jill, many are susceptible to the weary grind, the dull repetition of routine, the easy slide into self-fulfillment at the cost of spirituality. Yet like Jill too, Lewis suggests we can break the chains of sloth; we too can regain a spiritual vision.

Pride characterizes three key characters in The Horse and His Boy. Bree, a talking Narnian war horse is acutely conscious of how he looks; as he travels towards Narnia, he does all he can to make sure he acts and looks the part. Aravis, an escaped princess of Calormene, holds an extremely high opinion of herself and her position; she is royalty and demands respect, in spite of her runaway status. Most indicative of her pride is her tendency to use others, regardless the consequences for them. However, Prince Rabadash, the evil heir of Calormene is Lewis' penultimate example of pride. And in him Lewis creates a comic episode appropriate to the sin of pride.

Rabadash, after having let a Narnian princess he wants to marry slip through his fingers at sea, rushed an armed sortie to attack Narnia overland. During the ensuing battle, Rabadash is captured in a most embarrassing way. As he is hemmed in at the top of a wall, he decides to jump down into the midst of the battle raging below:
And he meant to look and sound—no doubt for a moment he did look and sound—very grand and very dreadful as he jumped, crying "The bolt of Tash falls from above." But he had to jump sideways because the crowd in front of him left him no landing place in that direction. And then, in the nearest way you could wish, the tear in the back of his hauberk caught on a hook in the wall... And there he found himself, like a piece of washing hung up to dry, with everyone laughing at him.7

Lewis' use of humor to attack pride is, of course, traditional. He himself elsewhere quotes both Thomas More's "The devil...the proud spirit...cannot endure to be mocked" and Martin Luther's, "The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn."10

Lewis continues the humiliation of Rabadash's pride, therefore, with comedy. When he later arrogantly refused surrender terms, Aslan appears and says to him: "Forget your pride (what have you to be proud of?) and your anger (who has done you wrong?) and accept the mercy of these good Kings" (p. 208). Unfortunately, Rabadash lashes out at Aslan, calling him a demon, a foul fiend, an enemy of his own gods. Furthermore, he invokes the aid of his own god, Tash. Aslan warns him calmly to "have a care... The doom is nearer now: it is at the door: it has lifted the latch" (p. 209). Still Rabadash abuses Aslan until he turns Rabadash into an ass:

"Oh, not a Donkey! Mercy! If it were even a horse—even a horse—e'en—a—hor—eh—eh—auh, eeh—auh." And so the words died away into a donkey's bray...Of course the Donkey twitched its ears forward—and that also was so funny that everybody laughed all the more. They tried not to, but they tried in vain (210-11).

So, just as Eustace's greed turned him into a dragon, Rabadash, whose pride makes him act like an ass, gets turned into one. In Rabadash, Lewis reminds us that "pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling" (Proverbs 16:18).

The sixth Narnian tale, The Magician's Nephew, portrays the deadly nature of anger. The tale, which reveals both how Narnia was created and how evil first entered it, revolves around the adventures of Polly Plummer, Digory Ketterley, and Digory's Uncle Andrew, a somewhat ludicrous black magician who Digory thinks "mad", an obvious pun used for effect throughout the story. Uncle Andrew's madness is concerned with diabolical experiments (he develops rings that whisk people out of this world and into others); however, his madness is also concerned with anger. Digory, too, evidences a quick temper. An episode early on provides a typical example of how anger works in this tale.

After Uncle Andrew has tricked Polly into trying on one of the rings and she has disappeared, Digory confronts him with cheeks that "were flaming with anger."11 Not to be frightened, his uncle, "bringing his hand down on the table" said: "I will not be talked to like that by a little dirty schoolboy. You don't understand. I am the great scholar, the magician, the adept, who is doing the experiment" (pp. 22-23). Digory replies by shouting at him, telling him to "shut up," speaking fiercely at him, and wishing he was "big enough to punch [his uncle's] head!" Later when Digory and Polly are attempting to enter another world, they argue: "And Polly gave him a pretty sharp answer and he said something even nastier in reply. The quarrel lasted for several minutes..." (p. 38)

Later they discovered a world inhabited by people who are standing perfectly still, apparently in some kind of suspended animation. They find an inscription directing the reader to "strike a bell and bide the danger" or wonder "till it drives you mad." Digory, impulsive and brash, wants to strike the bell while Polly does not. Once again their anger surfaces. After he insults her timidity as childish, she "who was now in a real rage," threatens to leave him, calling him a "beastly, stuck-up, obstinate pig!" (p. 51). Digory, responding "in a voice even nastier than he meant it to be," struck the bell before she could disappear; his act, motivated primarily by anger at Polly, unintentionally set into motion the process whereby evil, in the person of Jadis, eventually entered Narnia.

Once Jadis enters the story, the focus of anger shifts from the other characters to her. For instance, while she is in London for a short time, she is so angered by Digory's Aunt Letty's lack of respect that she "caught Aunt Letty round the neck and the knees, raised her high above her head as if she had been no heavier than a doll, and threw her across the room" (p. 80). Later, she comes riding down the street on the top of a hansom: "her teeth were bared, her eyes shone like fire, and her long hair streamed out behind her like a comet's tail. She was flogging the horse without mercy" (pp. 86-87). Before she can do more damage, Digory manages to grab her (and inadvertently several others) and whisks her into a brand new world, one just created, Narnia.

They all hear the song of creation and witness the making of that world. But for Jadis it is a hateful experience: "She hated it. She would have smashed that whole world, or all worlds, to pieces, if it would only stop singing" (p. 101). When she comes face to face with the singer, Aslan, the highest irony of the tale occurs. In her anger and rage, she takes an iron bar and throws it at Aslan, striking him "fair between the eyes." Instead of hurting him it glances off and, because of the land's creative fecundity, it begins to grow into "a perfect little model of a lamp-post." From here Jadis goes skulking off determined to thwart Aslan, to get her own way. And for a while she does get her way, a way that causes Narnia to be winter always, but "never Christmas." The frozen landscapes and hushed streams her way brings are appropriate emblems of the effect wrath can have; it brings about a coldness in relationships and life that penetrates deeply, freezing to the roots the necessary interplay of human wills.

The pettiness of wrath, the demand that all others must agree and consent to "my way," is at the same time both comic and tragic; comic in that those on the outside can so easily see the ridiculous position of the angry person; tragic in that those same people can do very little to assuage the violent passion that this sin evokes. That the focusing sin in The Magician's Nephew is wrath is finally underscored in the last lines of the book where we read Uncle Andrew's evaluation of Jadis: "A devilish temper she had,' he would say. 'But she was a dem fine woman, sir, a dem fine woman'" (p. 186). In these words
Lewis hints at the key problem of wrath: it is of the devil. Jadis' "devilish temper" is emphasized time and time again in the story, as she at one point even mimics Milton's Satan in the temptation scene of Paradise Lost. Lewis would have us see that anger, uncontrolled rage, is another form of blindness. It turns us away from a right and whole vision of the truth, and instead leads us towards egotism, expressed by choler and revenge.

In The Last Battle Lewis displays the devastating power of envy. Envy, the inordinate desire for someone else's possession or position, is unique in the list of seven deadly sins since it is the only one also mentioned in the Ten Commandments: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:17). The focus of envy in this tale centers upon the attempt of an ape, Shift, to usurp the position and authority of Aslan by having his dim-witted donkey friend, Puzzle, impersonate Aslan while being manipulated about by Shift.

Fashioning a make-shift lion's skin for Puzzle to wear, Shift hopes to pass the ass off as Aslan:

No one who had ever seen a real lion would have been taken in for a moment. But if someone who had never seen a lion looked at Puzzle in his lionskin, he just might mistake him for a lion, if he came too close, and if the light was not too good, and if Puzzle didn't let out a bray and didn't make any noise with his hoofs.12

When Puzzle protests against the presumption of pretending to be Aslan, Shift counters with clever words arguing that together they could do much good, promising "to advise you. You know, I've the mark of sensible orders for you to give. And everyone would have to obey us, even the King himself. We would set everything right in Narnia" (p. 10).

Shift's desire to take Aslan's place is urgent on account of Aslan's infrequent appearance in recent Narnian history. Indeed, Shift does not really believe in Aslan, for when Puzzle wonders what will happen if the real Aslan shows up while they are impersonating him, Shift replies: "I expect he'd be very pleased... Probably he sent us the lion skin on his head" (p. 26). And although the king still enjoys the loyalty and love of most true Narnian subjects, he eventually loses all real political power to Shift.

However, much more debilitating is the spiritual upheaval caused by Shift's envious power grab. Motivated by selfishness, expressed most often by demands of tribute nuts, oranges, and bananas, Shift uses Aslan's name to force the Narnians to placate his desires:

Now attend to me. I want--I mean, Aslan wants--some more nuts. These you've brought aren't anything near enough. You must bring...twice as many...by Sunset tomorrow, and there musn't be any bad ones or any small ones among them (p. 27).

In fact Shift substitutes his will for Aslan's. He claims that "I'm the only one Aslan is ever going to speak to... He'll tell me what you've got to do, and I'll tell the rest of you" (p. 29).

All this leads to a kind of spiritual heresy, for when the animals question Shift, he associates Aslan with Tash, the cruel god of the Calormenes: "Tash is only another name for Aslan... Tash and Aslan are only two different names for you know who... Tash is Aslan: Aslan is Tash" (pp. 31-32). The impact of Shift's argument is terrible:

You know how sad your own dog's face can look sometimes. Think of that and then think of all the faces of those Talking Beasts--all those honest, humble, bewildered birds, bears, badgers, rabbits, moles, and mice--all far sadder than that. Every tail was down, every whisker drooped. It would have broken your heart with very pity to see their faces (p. 32).

The eventual result of Shift's envy is the physical destruction of Narnia. The Narnians are defeated in battle with the Calormenes, although the end of the tale is far from tragic as Aslan intervenes once more. Nonetheless, the envy of Shift does much disservice to Aslan and the cause of truth. Innocent lives are taken and a world is destroyed. Once more, Lewis illustrates the destructive power of a deadly sin in the context of a Narnian tale.

The thrust of my argument in this paper has been simple: that Lewis apparently emphasized one particular deadly sin in each of the seven Chronicles.
of Narnia. The evidence I have presented is only indicative of a good deal more. What Lewis would have us draw out of all this is a clear moral vision of right and wrong, good and evil. That is, while the Chronicles exist in their own right as imaginative vehicles of Lewis' creative energy, they are not works set in a moral vacuum. Lewis would agree, I am sure, with his "master," George MacDonald at this point:

In the moral world...a man may clothe in new forms, and for this employ his imagination freely, but he must invent nothing. He may not, for any purpose, turn its laws upside down... The laws of the spirit of man must hold, alike in this world and in any world he may invent. It were no offence to suppose a world in which everything repelled instead of attracted the things around it; it would be wicked to write a tale representing a man it called good as always going bad things, or a man it called bad as always doing good things: the notion itself is absolutely lawless. In physical things a man may invent; in moral things he must obey—and take their laws with him into his invented world as well.13

C.S. Lewis has done just this in his Chronicles of Narnia. He has taken the seven deadly sins into Narnia, shown their destructive power, and set before us examples to avoid. Although each book highlights a different sin and illustrates its particular effect on particular characters, the message in each case is the same: the grip of sin is deadly.

NOTES

1The best in-depth study of the seven deadly sins is found in Morton W. Bloomfield's The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature, n.p.: Michigan State University Press, 1952, rpt. 1967.


4The Allegory of Love, p. 70.

5Lewis may also have had in mind the concept of the pride of life as found in 1 John 2:15-16: "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world"

6C.S. Lewis, Prince Caspian (New York: Collier, 1970), pp.55-56 (all subsequent references in text).


9C.S. Lewis, The Horse and His Boy (New York: Collier, 1970) p. 188 (all subsequent references in text).


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