An Introduction to Narnia - Part II: The Geography of the Chronicles

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An Introduction to Narnia - Part II: The Geography of the Chronicles

Abstract
Part two is an overview of the geography of Narnia based on textual clues and maps. Speculates on the meaning of the geography in theological and metaphysical terms.

Additional Keywords
Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia—Geography
At Mythcon I, Glen GoodKnight had the topic "Narnia: Cosmos or Microcosm" for one of the discussion groups. I assume the point is that the Narnian world has analogies to the Human world (microcosm) but that it has also a number of interesting details which exist in their own right (cosmos). Perhaps the most interesting of these is that it is a flat world, which is revealed in a discussion of what will occur when the ship reaches the edge of the world, in The Voyage of The Dawn Treader (pp. 207-208; all page references are to the British hardcover editions). This flatness is revealed when the sun, as the ship sails west, appears larger and larger: it is first definitely stated to be bigger (i.e., closer) when the Narnians have reached Ramandu's island (p. 186), and later in the journey it appears "twice, if not three times, its usual size" (p. 197) and finally "five or six times its old size" (p. 207). I say "finally" because that is the last time the dimensions of the sun are given, but the crew journeys even closer than that by "many days" (p. 210). The last time the rising of the sun is described (on p. 218), Edmund and Lucy Pevensie, Eustace Scrubb, and Reepicheep see beyond it the mountains in Aslan's country; but whether the sun has some sort of tunnel from which it emerges, or whether Aslan's country is joined to Narnia only at some times or for some people, and there is normally a true edge to the flat world, is not made clear.

Obviously, the cosmography of a flat world would be interesting, but few details — other than the Narnian geography, which shall be considered in the next paragraph — are settled. As can be checked in several places, Narnia has one sun and one moon (the texts refer to "the Sun" and "the Moon"). It also has several planets, of which two are named: Tarva, presumably meaning "Lord of Victory," and Alamill, presumably meaning "Lady of Peace" (Prince Caspian, pp. 45 and 47). Possibly the one big "star" by the eastern horizon at dawn (The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, p. 147; it fades, p. 148; The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, p. 89) is also a planet, like our "morning star," Venus; its name is Aravir (Prince Caspian, p. 137). Whatever the status of this star, other stars there are: ...the moon and the huge stars overhead (Narnian stars are nearer than stars in our world) ..." (The Silver Chair, p. 189). Only three constellations are named: the Ship, the Hammer, and the Leopard (Prince Caspian, p. 103; The Voyage of The Dawn Treader, p. 180). But the North Star of Narnia is called the Spear-Head (The Last Battle, p. 64), which may imply a constellation called the Spear. Of course, as readers of the Narnian books know, the stars in Narnia are also a figure of speech so far as the moon is concerned, or is it also so a person? No doubt more could be said about the Great Dance of the Heavens (The Voyage of The Dawn Treader, p. 189), and about the Centaurs who watch it (Prince Caspian, p. 72; The Silver Chair, pp. 207-208; The Last Battle, p. 31), but I am here concerned with cosmography, not astrology.

Now, the geography proper. I recall writing to Jocelyn Gibs of Geoffrey Bles Publishers several years ago, suggesting that Pauline Baynes or someone do a full map of Narnia; I received a reply pointing out that there were maps in the various books of the series. True enough, but I wanted something more complete. But let us start with what we have. The map of Narnia proper appears as the front end paper of Prince Caspian which, and it is fairly satisfactory as a depiction of Narnia as that time. The main omission which I notice is that a river should join the Great River slightly south of Beaversdam, coming down a valley from two hills — hills which lie towards the north (this is the placement of the White Witch's castle in The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, pp. 42, 89, 75). The only place name which appears in Prince Caspian which I noticed as being omitted from this map is the Shuddering Wood, a broad river valley — at least the text says this is a junction of two rivers. (It is odd, by the way, that the name of Beaversdam stuck, since on p. 149 it is stated that no beavers now exist in Narnia.)

The area to the west of Narnia is unmapped. Up the Great River from Lantern Waste at the time of The Last Battle is the market town of Chippingford, which lies in a valley (pp. 13, 15). Further up river is Cauldron Pool (p. 8), the result of the waterfall pouring over the cliff which edges the Western Wild. This much of Narnia was described when Digory Kirk and Polly Plummer rode Fledge in The Magician's Nephew:

> All Narnia, many-coloured with lawns and rocks and heather and different sorts of trees, lay spread out below them, the river winding through it like a ribbon of quick-silver. They could already see over the tops of the low hills which lay northward on their right; beyond those hills a great moorland sloped gently up and to the horizon. On their left the mountains were much higher, but every now and then there was a gap where you could see, between steep pine woods, a glimpse of the southern lands that lay beyond them, looking blue and far away.

> "That'll be where Archenland is," said Polly.

> "Yes, but look ahead!" said Digory.

For now a great barrier of cliffs rose before them and they were almost dazzled by the sunlight dancing on the great waterfall by which the river roars and sparkles down into Narnia itself from the high western lands in which it rises.

> "I say, look back! Look behind," said Polly.

> There they could see the whole valley of Narnia stretched out to where, just before the eastern horizon, there was a gleam of the sea. And now they were so high that they could see a tiny-bitter jagged mountains appearing beyond the northern moors, and the plains of what looked like sand far to the south. (pp. 144, 146)

What lies where in the Western Wild is moot. In The Magician's Nephew, a hortus conclusus is found there (Ch. XIII), as its archetype is found in the west of the new Narnia in the last chapter of The Last Battle. But also somewhere in the west, beyond the mountains (and thus, presumably, beyond the Garden), is the country of Telmar, from whence the Telmarines invaded and conquered Narnia (Prince Caspian, pp. 44, 189-190; cf. The Horse and His Boy, p. 167). Despite the fact there is some human hunting in the Western Wilds (The Last Battle, p. 154). Thus, how a flat world extends to the west and how many countries and creatures exist there is largely uncertain.

A map of the opposite direction, east, appears on the front
And in another such passage, Prince Rabadash comments to his father, the Tisroc, "Narnia is not the fourth size of one of your least provinces" (p. 102). Finally, one notices that Shasta had lived too far south in Calormen to hear tales of Aslan (p. 148). By analogy, one would say that he lived in an area which had never heard the Gospel, even in a distorted form. This also indicates that Calormen is an empire which is so huge that it is not culturally unified.

From two references, there seem to be small countries around Calormen, presumably in addition to Archenland and Narnia (pp. 102-103, 196); there is also a reference to a one-time rebellion in "the far west" (p. 37). More specific are the references to places in Calormen. Aravis, in telling her story, indicates that the city of Azim Balda, which seems to be the postal center of the empire, is a four-days' ride from her father's home in the province of Calavar (pp. 37, 41). Unfortunately, the text does not indicate very precisely how close Azim Balda is to Tashbaan, except that it does not seem to be an extreme distance (p. 44). Other places in Calormen are even less precisely located. Aravis and Bree talk of the flight of Zulindreh — which may be a locality — and the taking of Toebeth, and of the lake of Mezreel, with its gardens and the Valley of the Thousand Perfumes (p. 44). Two other names are given in The Last Battle, with the same lack of locality: the salt-pits of Pugrahan (p. 73) and the Flaming Mountain of Lagour (p. 165).

The final map, that of the Wild Lands of the North, appears on the front end-paper of The Silver Chair. About this map there is less to complain, for it covers the surface adventures of the two children and the Marsh-wiggle satisfactorily. It shows the marshes in the northeast of Narnia (also shown on the map in Prince Caspian) and the River Shribble, Ettinmoor (spelled Ettinsmuir in The Last Battle, p. 170), the giant bridge across the river at the top of the moors, the mountains further north, and both Harfang and the ruined city just before it. Perhaps the map might be faulted for not showing the "countless streams" on Ettinmoor (p. 79), but streams are probably too small to be shown on the map scale. One indication of the size of the territory is that it takes the three adventurers ten days to walk across the moor (p. 79).

But the surface adventures are only one-half of the adventures told, and it would be nice to have a map of the Underworld. But before I discuss the area, let me digress on the matter of cartography. By my count (probably not perfectly accurate), this realm is called the Underland nine times, the Underworld
six times, the Deep Lands twice, the Deep Realms once, and the Shallows (in contrast to Bism) once. Thus, no regular terminology need be adopted by a critic.

The depth of the Underworld is uncertain. puddlegum suggests that the gnomes slide downward for mile (127), but his habitual pejoratism in speech renders his statement suspicious. What is certain is that after their slide into the Underworld, they pass through a natural cavern (p. 130), crawl through a small crack into a huge cave (pp. 130-131), enter another, long chamber (p. 131), and move through a series of caves down to a sea (p. 133).

Their ship voyage takes them back toward Narnia, for later (cf. p. 189) it takes them but several hours to reach the exit in "the heart of Narnia" (p. 194). How long it takes for the voyage to the underground city is uncertain: "How often they woke and slept and ate and slept again, none of them could ever remember" (p. 135).

But the Underworld is not the deepest level of sub-Narnian existence. Bism, with its fiery furnace, is below the hell of the Green Witch, (see Mary Barrows Thomas, The Fairy Stories of C.S. Lewis, an unpublished University of Oklahoma M.A. thesis, 1964, p. 50.) There is truth to this, but it needs to be heavily qualified. The "hell" of the Green Witch seems much more like the melancholy Greek Hades than the painful Christian Hölle; Bism — the "two varieties of the same place" (p. 184-187). If the Narnian world were round, Bism would be, I suppose, near its core. As it is flat, one wonders how deep it is and what is beyond Bism. But that may be like conjecturing what song the Sirens sang. (By the way, I consider Bism to be one of Lewis' least inventive coinages: it seems an obvious variant on abyss.

At this point, the survey of the Narnian geography is complete. But there remains to ask the meaning of it all. One critic, thinking primarily of The Silver Chair, suggests that one thing which Lewis has done is to build a three-story universe: the high heaven beyond the sun, the middle earth of Narnia, and the hell of the Green Witch. (See Mary Barrows Thomas, The Fairy Stories of C.S. Lewis, an unpublished University of Oklahoma M.A. thesis, 1964, p. 50.) There is truth to this, but it needs to be heavily qualified. The "hell" of the Green Witch seems much more like the melancholy Greek Hades than the painful Christian Hölle; Bism — the "two varieties of the same place" — is a place of joy. Perhaps it would be better to call the Underworld a potential hell, much like the caverns under the fixed land in Perelandra. If the Green Witch had not been defeated, her emergence in Narnia, accompanied by her silent, armored lord, and the demonically shaped gnomes, would have been like the Hellish hosts issuing forth in a medieval drama.

Further, Nan Braude (in a letter to Mythlore, 1:4 — October, 1969 —, p. 30) has suggested that Aslan's country lies to the east of Narnia because "that is the direction of Jerusalem, towards which European cathedrals traditionally faced." (I think that all Greek temples, except the Temple of Apollo at Bassae, faced the east to catch the morning sun, but there is probably no connection to the Christian practice.) Further conjectures on the significance of the placement of Aslan's country in the east may be found in Glen GoodKnight's "A Comparison of Cosmological Geography in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams," Mythlore, 1:3 (July, 1969), pp. 18-22.

To these theological ideas of Narnian geography, I would like to add two ideas which are not entirely theological. First, I would like to suggest that Narnia, as the country developed in Lewis' imagination, is a curious combination of Asia and Europe, although I do not suggest Lewis believed in Anglo-Israelism, like Blake. The identification of Narnia and England (outside of resemblances in climate and customs) rests on what is almost a pun. I was thinking about the relationship of Narnia and Archenland, two countries with human rulers, talking animals, and (evidently) a common language, but more importantly two countries with a common border and no political problems. Then it occurred to me that Archenland sounded much like a tri-syllabic pronunciation of Ireland. Perhaps Narnia echoed Anglia? If so, the relationship between the two countries, divided only by some mountains, was what the relationship between England and Ireland, divided only by a narrow sea, should have been, what an unfallen relationship would have been. (Of course, the relationship between Narnia and Archenland is not complicated by two varieties of the worship of Aslan, for that too is unfallen.) Obviously, I do not advance these puns as going beyond a suggestive identification, but Lewis' birth and childhood in Ireland and his adulthood in England lend some plausibility to it.

The relationship of Narnia to Israel (the syllables and stresses fit again) is also only suggestive. Narnia is obviously the home of the worship of the true God, Aslan, as contrasted with the worship of the demon Tash in Calormen. Since, as has been shown above, Calormen is a huge empire in Narnia a small kingdom, a parallel to the Babylonian Empire (or one of the others which threatened the Jewish nation in the Old Testament) and Israel is plausible.) On the other hand, if, instead of considering the belief in Aslan, a critic thinks of the fauns and centaurs in Narnia, with the appearance of Bacchus and Silenus in Prince Caspian (first identification on p. 141), an analogy might be made between Narnia and Greece and between Calormen and Persia, but the religious parallels are not as good, nor are the political (Greece was not a unified kingdom). If one takes these two suggestions I have made, of analogies with England and with Israel, as simply suggestive and not as authoritative identifications, then they may deepen the meaning of the books by allowing parabolic applications. (Is it paradoxical that one result of the study of Narnia as a cosmos is insight into it as microcosm?)

My second idea relates to the study of Lewis' ideation, to his creation of imaginary worlds, although it also has its moral applications. I suggest that, in a general way, this world created by Aslan resembles the world pictured in The Pilgrim's Regress, despite the latter being definitely a round world. Both worlds have northern mountains, cold and barren: the earlier work describes Savage — "a very big man, almost a giant" (Book Six, Chapter Six) — ruling over the dwarfs of the area; The Silver Chair describes the giants living in 'the burgh and castle of Harfang" (p. 84), with a way down from that area to the land of the gnomes. Dwarfs are not gnomes, nor is Savage quite a giant, but the resemblance (beyond the cold mountains) is there. Both worlds also have lands of southern heat, although the swamps of The Pilgrim's Regress and the area west of Narnia are alike. To the west of Narnia, among the mountains, is a hortus conclusus, which (as will be discussed more fully in a later installment) is strikingly like the Garden of Eden (those familiar with medieval topoi would expect no less).

In The Pilgrim's Regress, beyond the Grand Canyon or Pecatum Adae, the result of the sin of "Adam" and "Eve" (cf. Book Five, Chapter Two), lies a spot likewise analogous to the Garden of Eden: ... by continuous marching, winding their way among the peaked and valleyed lands, I saw where they [John and his companion] came down to the white beaches of a bay of the sea, the western end of the world; a place very much like the world of Tash and the Ivs of the gnomes: a place, in some sort, lying rather at the world's beginning, as though men were born travelling away from it.

(Book Nine, Chapter Five)

(Another resemblance between The Pilgrim's Regress and the Chronicles of Narnia lies in Lewis' fondness for end-paper maps: the former has one by somebody with the initials of R. L. K.,)

(continued on page 27)
Lewis's geographic imagination, then the basis for geographic
myth, and in what ways it is unique.

Correction to Part I of An Introduction to Narnia: the Chronology
of the Chronicles by J. R. R. Tolkien

Since the publication of Part One, I have noticed one major
blunder in my essay and one minor omission (why does a writer
never find these things before publication?). The minor omission
does with the Narnian time between The Magician's Nephew and The Lion,
the Witch and the Wardrobe. I still can-
not be much more precise than I was in my essay last issue,
but I should have noted that in The Magician's Nephew the text
twice indicates that the Witch left Narnia alone for "many hun-
dred years" (pp. 134, 181) because of the Shield Tree. "Many hundred years" is vague,
but certainly it is different from
"many thousand years." I am, of course, assuming that her
next attempt resulted in the magical winter in The Lion, the
Witch and the Wardrobe; if she made an earlier attack on Narnia,
there is no reference to it.

The major blunder has to do with my flat statement (on p.
29) that "There are no instances in the books of Narnian time
flowing at a slower rate than earth time." Unfortunately (for
me) there is one instance. In The Last Battle (pp. 51-2) one
week passes on earth before Jill and Eustace are able to get to
Narnia, while only ten minutes pass for Tirian, tied to a tree,
Thus Lewis' statement in The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"
about the uncertainty of the time relationships (which I cite in my
e ssay) is correct.

I wait to see what other errors other readers will find. (I
hope not many!)