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The Wardrobe as Christian Metaphor

Abstract

Notes the frequency and importance of the door as a symbol in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Relates this to scriptural examples of the door as the way to God and/or salvation, and to Christ as the door.

Additional Keywords

Doors as symbols in the *Chronicles of Narnia*; Lewis, C.S. *Chronicles of Narnia*; Lewis, C.S. *Chronicles of Narnia*—Christian symbolism

The Wardrobe as Christian Metaphor

Don King

One of the most outstanding characteristics of C.S. Lewis' non-fiction prose is his use of metaphor.¹ Regardless of the work, examples of metaphor abound as Lewis uses word pictures to clarify his arguments and ideas.² For instance, in *The Abolition of Man* Lewis notes that "the task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts" (24). In *Surprised by Joy*, about the numerous books available to him as a child, he writes: "I had always the same certainty of finding a book that was new to me as a man who walks into a field has of finding a new blade of grass" (10). And in the "Preface" to *Mere Christianity* he includes a disclaimer that cautions the reader against regarding his mere Christianity "as an alternative to the creeds of the existing communions — as if a man would adopt it in preference to Congregationalism or Greek Orthodoxy or anything else" (11-12). To make his point clearer, Lewis creates a helpful metaphor:

It is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in. (12)

At the same time, Lewis is aware of how frequently the door is used metaphorically in the New Testament. References are made to "striving to enter [heaven] by the narrow door" (Luke 13:24), to "the door of faith" (Acts 14:27), to "a wide door for effective service [being] opened" (1 Cor. 16:9), to "a door [being] opened for me [Paul] in the Lord" (2 Cor. 2:12), and to God opening up to us a door for the word " (Col. 4:3). Jesus Himself is often associated with a door. For example, after Jesus relates to His disciples some of the signs of the end times, He says: "When you see all these things, recognize that He [God] is near, right at the door" (Matt. 24:33). Better known perhaps is Christ's famous statement in Rev. 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me."

However, it is the passages where Jesus claims to be the door to communion with God that we see the fullest operation of this metaphor. In John 10 we find the best example of this. In verses 1-5 Jesus uses the parable of the shepherd whose sheep will only respond to His voice to indicate His own relationship to His disciples. St. John notes that because the disciples did not understand "this figure of speech," Jesus has to go on and make explicit His meaning: "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep... I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (7:9). Later He finalizes the metaphor by answering Thomas' question regarding how they would find Christ after His crucifixion: "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father, by through Me" (John 14:6).

Lewis' knowledge of these Scriptural passages is put to work throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia*.



Doors are used significantly in the stories and echoes of the Biblical references made above resonate clearly. Four specific points about Lewis' use of doors are noteworthy: 1) Literal doors lead to the Door, Aslan; 2) Aslan is a two-way door; 3) Passage through the different literal doors into Narnia is always unplanned; and 4) All who enter the doors are called into Narnia, but none are compelled to stay; indeed, some who are called do not seem to belong.

First, in every instance the literal doors that the children use to enter Narnia eventually lead directly to the Door, Aslan. The doors themselves take on different forms, from the wardrobe door in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to the framed picture in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* to the railway station in *Prince Caspian and The Last Battle* to the magic rings and the Wood Between the Worlds in *The Magician's Nephew*.³ Literally, the doors function to take the children out of their real world and into a new other world; that is, the doors serve to move them from a mundane, everyday experience to a new world, a new reality, a new life. More importantly, however, the doors inexorably lead to Aslan, Lewis' Christ figure, who offers the children an additional "new life" experience. Edmund, for instance, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* confers with Aslan after betraying his brother and sisters and after being rescued by Aslan's forces. Of their conversation "there is no need to tell you (and no one ever heard) what Aslan was

saying but it was a conversation which Edmund never forgot" (135). From this point on Edmund, though far from perfect, is a "new creature" with Aslan confirming this by becoming the sacrificial door to Edmund's new life.

Second, the children only become aware of Jesus Christ in their own world after meeting Aslan in Narnia; Aslan, then, serves as a two-way door -- both to new life in Narnia and in the real world of the children. The best example of this occurs in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. At the end of the book, Lucy and Edmund meet Aslan in the form of a lamb. To Lucy's question about how to enter Aslan's country, the lamb replies: "For you the door into Aslan's country is from your own world" (215). That the children fail to make the immediate connection between Aslan and Jesus Christ is clear when, after the lamb is transfigured into Aslan, Edmund asks: "Are -- are you there [in our world] too, Sir?" In Aslan's response we see more of Lewis' use of his Scriptural knowledge since he employs one of the Biblical names of God to begin: "I am.... But there, I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there" (216). Aslan makes clear that the children's experiences in Narnia up to this point have just been preparation for the more important event of meeting Him in their own world.

In addition, Aslan promises to "open the door in the sky and send you to your own land" (215). We see that Aslan functions here, as in Scripture, as both the agent (who opens the door) of new life and the object (He is the door) of new life. He is the two-way door to new life.

In an episode from *The Horse and His Boy*, a variation on this idea occurs. After King Lune and his twins sons, Cor and Corin, have been re-united and the Calormenes defeated, Prince Rabadash is brought before them for judgment. In spite of Lune's goodness towards Rabadash, he mocks and scorns the king: "I hear no conditions from barbarians and sorcerers.... The bolt of Tash falls from above!" (207-08). In the midst of this Aslan suddenly appears and warns Rabadash to forget his pride and to accept the mercy of Lune. When Rabadash sees Aslan, however, he calls him "demon," "the foul fiend of Narnia," and "the enemy of the gods." He curses Aslan and calls for "lightning in the shape of scorpions [to rain on him]" (209). In a quiet warning by Aslan, the door as a metaphor associated with Him is used: "Have a care, Rabadash.... The doom is nearer now: it is at the door: it has lifted the latch" (209). Then, because Rabadash rejects Aslan's warning, he is turned into an ass. The use of the door here is to show that not everyone who meets Aslan in Narnia makes the appropriate connection -- that He is God -- and, furthermore, that those who scornfully reject him will be judged. The door as a two-way opening functions here as one leading to judgment rather than mercy.

Another variation on this theme takes place at the Stable Door near the end of *The Last Battle*. Once the children and the others are thrust through the door, they are surprised to find themselves not in a dark, damp stable, but "on grass, the deep blue was overhead, and the air which blew gently on their faces was that of a day in early summer" (136). Actually they have entered Aslan's country through the stable door He created. As if to emphasize the metaphorical function of the door in terms of the Christian doctrine

of regeneration, Lewis includes the story of Emeth, the devout Calormene. In a passage that makes some Christians wince because of its suggestion of universalism, Lewis makes this clear: "If any man swear by Tash an keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn.... Unless they desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek" (165). Aslan as a two-way door into new life is obviously clear here.

In still another place we see this idea. At the end of *Prince Caspian* Aslan is revealed as the door out of Narnia and back into the real world. There He "caused to be set up two stakes of wood, higher than a man's head and about three feet apart. A third, and lighter, piece of wood was bound across them at the top uniting them, so that the whole thing looked like a doorway from nowhere into nowhere" (208). In order for the children and the older Telmarine men to return to the real world, they must pass through this "door in the air."

Third, entry through the various doors is almost unplanned by those who enter. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* the children, individually and collectively, stumble through the wardrobe door, seemingly by accident. In *Prince Caspian* the four children are unexpectedly jerked off a railway platform and thrust into Narnia life 400 years after they had left. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* a picture of a sailing vessel on a wall suddenly comes alive and Lucy and Edmund tumble with their cousin, Eustace, into the waves and are hauled on board by Caspian and the men of the Dawn Treader. In *The Magician's Nephew* Polly and Digory are used by Digory's mad uncle to experiment with magic rings that send them to the Wood Between the Worlds where they eventually make their way into Narnia. In each case the children are not seeking directly to enter Narnia; when they find themselves there, they are surprised.

Only in *The Silver Chair* and *The Last Battle* do we find instances of the children trying to get into Narnia; these cases, however, bear qualification. In *The Silver Chair* Eustace and his classmate, Jill Pole, do ask to be taken into Narnia. Yet their initial request is not honored; indeed, it is only after they are roused from their call to Aslan by bullying schoolmates that, in desperation, they try to flee through a locked door in a garden wall. Of course the heretofore locked door opens this time and the two children, unexpectedly, enter Narnia. And in *The Last Battle* the children, although actively seeking to use the magic rings again in order to respond to the mysterious apparition of Tirian who calls upon them for help, actually enter Narnia for the final time as a result of a train crash that has killed all of them, a fact they do not initially comprehend.

The fact that the entries tend to be unplanned suggests two things. On the one hand, the unexpected entries parallel Lewis' own realization about his life long quest for Joy. As he records in *Surprised by Joy* it became a kind of obsession. The one characteristic thing about his experiences of joy was that its occurrence was unexpected. If he tries to seek it of find it or produce it, he never had success; it had to occur spontaneously. Eventually the experience of joy itself came to have a slightly different meaning for him: "I believe... that the old stab [of joy], the old bittersweet, has come to me as often and as sharply since my conversion as at any time of my life whatever. But I now know that the experience... was valuable only as

a pointer to something other and outer" (238). In a similar vein, I believe he arranges the unexpected entries into Narnia so that the children will experience the awe and wonder of Narnia not at their own bidding, which could become cheap and worn out, but at the bidding of Another. Familiarity, after all, breeds contempt. To underline this point, Lewis has the Professor at the end of *LWW* answer the children's question about their possible return to Narnia with: "Of course you'll get back to Narnia again some day.... But don't go trying to use the same route twice. Indeed, don't try to get there at all. It'll happen when you're not looking for it" (186).

On the other hand, I believe that a second reason the entries appear to be an accidental parallels the process by which some people experience spiritual regeneration. That is, some people have come into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ almost (dare I use the phrase?) by accident. Faith in Christ may have been the furthestest thing from their minds —indeed they may have been openly hostile to the Christian message — and yet, for whatever reason, they were suddenly struck by the beauty and truth of Christ's call and found themselves irresistibly drawn to faith in Him. The unexpected surprise by joy that the children experience when they tumble through the varying Narnian doors is an apt parallel to the joy the new believer in Christ often experiences.

The final significant use of doors as a metaphor concerns those who enter. Specifically, all who enter Narnia are, in one way or another, called to be there. This point may seem to contradict my previous argument that characters enter Narnia unexpectedly, but, of course it does not. Just because the characters may have not been planning to enter Narnia does not mean that they were not called. The evidence that characters are called into Narnia is overwhelming. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* the children have been called into Narnia at the exact time that they are in order to fulfill several prophecies and to coincide with the precise return of Aslan; their entry through the wardrobe door may have surprised them, but it was planned and predetermined by Aslan. In *Prince Caspian* the children are literally called into Narnia when Caspian, in desperation, blows Susan's magic horn. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* the children are called into Narnia in order that they can discover, as has already been mentioned, that Aslan exists in their own world as Jesus Christ.

In *The Silver Chair* Eustace and Jill only think they are calling Aslan; actually, He has called them. After Jill passes through the normally locked garden door, she meets Aslan and has a conversation with Him. After he rebukes her for having caused Eustace to fall over the Narnian cliff, He says that "the task [to help you find the lost Prince Rilian] for which I called you and him here out of your own world" (18) would be harder now. When she tries to correct Aslan by saying that she and Eustace had been called to "Somebody," Aslan replies: "You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you" (19). Lewis is paralleling here the Biblical notion of God calling to Himself all those who are willing to come to Him. In the John 10 passage referred to earlier we see this: "He who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep... and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out.... And his sheep follow him because they know his voice" (2-4).

In *The Magician's Nephew* Digory is called into Narnia so that he can be the agent of both death and

life. Because of his pride he causes Jadis and her attending evil to enter Narnia at its creation; yet, Aslan uses him to bring back the seeds from the silver apple tree that are planted and bring forth the tree of protection. In passing it is worth noting that Lewis again alludes to the John 10 passage, for when Digory approaches the place where the tree is, he encounters a high wall and door. Above the door is the following inscription:

Come in by the gold gate or not at all,
Take of my fruit for others of forbear.
For those who steal or those who climb my wall
Shall find their heart's desire and find despair.
(156)

In John 10:1 we read: "Truly, truly, I say unto you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber." Lastly, in *The Last Battle* the children are called into Narnia for the last time both to help Tirian in the final defense of Narnia and so they be taken into Aslan's country.

Yet not all who are called decide to stay in Narnia, the most notable being Susan, who, we learn in *The Last Battle* is "interested in nothing now-a-days except nylons and lipstick and invitations" (135). Others, however, refuse to stay in Narnia one they have entered through the door because they are unable or unwilling to see what Narnia is all about ("They have eyes but see not; they have ears but do not hear"). Eustace might have been like this had he not been transformed into a dragon and seen himself for what he really was; as a result, he changed and later enters Aslan's country. More to the point is Digory's Uncle Andrew. Although his entry into the pre-Narnian world appears to be accidental, he is actually called by Aslan so that he might be given the chance to re-focus his life away from black magic and egocentricity and towards righteousness and selflessness. Unfortunately, Uncle Andrew does not respond because his sensibilities have been deadened. For example, while Aslan sings his song of creation, Uncle Andrew "was not liking the Voice." Later, all he could hear was "nothing but roaring in Aslan's song":

And when at last the Lion spoke and said "Narnia, awake," he [Uncle Andrew] didn't hear any words: he heard only a snarl. And when the Beasts spoke in answer, he heard only barking, growlings, bayings and howlings. And when they laughed... such a horrid, bloodthirsty din of hungry and angry brutes he had never heard in his life.
(126)

Aslan Himself sums up Uncle Andrew's problem later in response to Polly's request that Aslan remove the old man's fear: "I cannot tell that [the meaning of His song of creation] to this old sinner, and I cannot comfort him either; he has made himself unable to hear my voice. If I spoke to him, he would hear only growlings and roarings. Oh Adam's sons, how cleverly you defend yourselves against all that might do you good!" (171). Uncle Andrew's failure to heed Aslan's call is reminiscent of those in Jesus' parable who failed to respond properly to a wedding invitation: "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14).

Lewis' frequent use of the door as metaphor having to do with Christian themes and ideas is both subtle and clear. The literal doors lead to the Door,

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pleasant mixture of them all" (*Hobbit*, p. 51). The company's stay at Beorn's house is an extended dream of bread and butter and honey and clothed cream. The buildings of Lake-town are also of above-ground (above-water) construction, but are described by Tolkien without judgement, a place of neither peril nor joy (at least while Thorin and company are present); nor does the home of the eagles, because unenclosed, lend itself to this comparison. In *The Lord of the Rings* underground dwellings vary widely in their association with light and dark, good and evil, etc.; see Hugh T. Keenan's comments in "The Appeal of The Lord of the Rings: A struggle for Life," in *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings"*, ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbaro (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 74.

- 10 See Micra Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), concerning the religious significance of the dwelling-place.
- 11 "The House is not an object...; it is the universe that man constructs for himself by imitating the paradigmatic creation of the gods" (Eliade, pp. 56-57).
- 12 T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), p. 83.
- 13 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, rev. 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, [1987]), I, 71. Subsequent references to *The Lord of the Rings* will be to this corrected printing and will be given in the text.
- 14 Dwarves had always used the East-West Road "on their way to their mines in the Blue Mountains" (I, 52); Brandybucks go into the Old Forest "occasionally when the fit takes them" (I, 118); Tom Bombadil is evidently an acquaintance of Farmer Maggot (I, 143); occasionally the hobbits of Bree travelled "as far as Buckland, or the Eastfarthing," and it is still remembered that once there had been "much coming and going between the Shire and Bree. There was Bree-blood in the Brandybucks by all accounts" (I, 162).
- 15 Grahame, pp. 11-12.
- 16 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil and Other Verses from the Red Book* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), p. 9.
- 17 Verlyn Flieger, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 154.
- 18 J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 23.
- 19 J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. and ed. Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 236.
- 20 As the Fellowship prepares to depart, standing before Rivendell, "a gleam of firelight came from the open doors, and soft lights were glowing in many windows." "Tolkien claims in one letter (*Letters*, p. 365) that Bilbo, and Frodo and his hobbit companions in the Quest of the Ring, were "especially graced and gifted individuals." "Only about one per mil" among hobbits had any trace of "spark" or latent desire for adventure. In another letter (*Letters*, p. 329) he notes that Sam is "a more representative hobbit than any of the others that we have to see much of," though even he has special qualities: "his education by Bilbo and his fascination with things Elvish." Of Tolkien's principal characters in *The Lord of the*

Rings, however, only Sam works for a living, which makes him (in my opinion), if not wholly "typical" among hobbits, at least more "ordinary" from the "ordinary" reader's point of view.

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Aslan; Aslan functions as a two-way door; entry through the doors is unplanned; and all who enter are called but not compelled to stay. In his sermon "The Weight of Glory" Lewis employs this same metaphor, and it is appropriate to conclude by quoting him:

The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret. And surely, from this point of view, the promise of glory, in the sense described, becomes highly relevant to our deep desire. For glory meant good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgment, and welcome into the heart of things. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last... Apparently, then, our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation. (11-12)

Notes

- 1 For a thoughtful discussion of Lewis' use of metaphor in his fiction, see Kath Filmer's "The Polemic Image: The Role of Metaphor and Symbol in the Fiction of C.S. Lewis," in *Seven: An Anglo-American Review*, VII (Longmont, Colorado: Book-makers Guild, Inc., 1986), pp. 61-76.
- 2 Chad Walsh has some helpful general comments on Lewis' use of metaphor in his *The Literary Legacy of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 203-205.
- 3 Michael Murrin offers an indepth analysis of the Platonic nature of the doors into Narnia in "The Dialectic of Multiple Worlds: An Analysis of C.S. Lewis' Narnia Stories," in *Seven: An Anglo-American Review*, III (Wheaton, Ill.: Heffers, 1982), pp. 93-112.

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