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Rites of Passage: *The Chronicles of Narnia* & the Seven Sacraments

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Rites of Passage: *The Chronicles of Narnia* & the Seven Sacraments

Abstract

Sees each of the Narnia chronicles except *The Last Battle* associated with one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic and Anglican traditions.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. *Chronicles of Narnia*—Seven sacraments; Seven sacraments in the *Chronicles of Narnia*

Rites of Passage

The Chronicles of Narnia & the Seven Sacraments

Jim Pietrusz

It is quite obvious the C.S. Lewis had no intention of writing more than one book when he started the Chronicles of Narnia:

Apart from that, I don't know where the Lion came from or why he came. But once He was there He pulled the whole story together, and soon He pulled the other six Narnian stories in after Him.

So you see that, in a sense, I know very little about how this story was born. That is, I don't know where the pictures came from. And I don't believe anyone knows exactly how he 'makes things up.' Making up is a very mysterious thing. When you 'have an idea' could you tell anyone exactly how you thought of it?²

The series was not planned beforehand as she thinks. When I wrote the Lion (the Witch, and the Wardrobe), I did not know I was going to write any more. Then I wrote P[rince] Caspian as a sequel, I still didn't think there would be anymore, and when I had done *The Voyage [of the Dawn Treader]* I felt quite sure it would be the last. But I found I was wrong.³

It also becomes apparent then, that these books wrote themselves. Lewis had no intention of writing didactic books for children.

Let the pictures tell you their own moral... for the moral inherent in them will rise from whatever spiritual roots you have succeeded in striking during the whole course of your life. But if they don't show you any moral, don't put one in.⁴

But any reasonable examination of the series shows that the books are about, if not devoted to, the Seven Sacraments. What are the seven sacraments?

The sacraments in the Christian Church are solemn oaths, promises, or pledges ratified by rites, and ordained by Christ to give grace. The Catholic Church as well as the Anglican Church recognize all seven, most Protestants recognize Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Holy Eucharist). Lewis had adopted the Anglican Faith.

These sacraments are demarcation points in a person's spiritual growth; they are rites of passage that are really present in each person's life whether one is Christian or not. Baptism is a naming ceremony -- the family and the community recognizing a new individual into society. Confirmation is the individual choosing to take responsibility

as an adult. Matrimony is the binding of two individuals to progress in their spiritual life together -- traditionally to raise a family. Holy Orders is the rite of priesthood, but it can be stretched to include any vocation or career, the calling of which can be ritualized -- graduation, for example. Anointing of the Sick (Extreme Unction) is the recognition of the ending of a life and preparation for the new. Whereas these sacraments are traditionally received once, the remaining two are rituals that keep individuals on the path to growth and so are needed more or less frequently. Penance is the recognition that an individual has transgressed the way of growth and seeks to return. And finally, Holy Eucharist is the food of life, the nurture that each person needs to grow.

These rituals, these sacraments are present in the Chronicles, sometimes explicitly, sometimes inferred. Lewis is writing stories for children, stories that are Christian, stories that are about "growing up". The Sacraments as such would be unavoidable themes for a Christian writer. They are, in context, presented simply as a part of Life, the way children can understand and accept them.

But they are not presented in the logical order of reception, nor in any perceptible pattern, obviously betraying Lewis' unconscious progression of relating them in story form, or his accidental use of them at all.

For the logic's sake we will follow the order in which they were published:

<i>The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe</i> -----	Penance
<i>Prince Caspian</i> -----	Confirmation
<i>The Voyage of the Dawn Treader</i> -----	Baptism
<i>The Silver Chair</i> -----	Anointing of the Sick (Extreme Unction)
<i>The Horse and His Boy</i> -----	Matrimony
<i>The Magician's Nephew</i> -----	Holy Orders
	& Holy Eucharist
<i>The Last Battle</i> -----	(None)

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe centers around Edmund's betrayal of his brother and sisters to the Witch. It would seem to be a classic study of seduction by the tempter. Edmund is not evil, but he does an evil thing, easily lured by the promise of sweets. He needs to ask forgiveness.

There they saw Aslan and Edmund walking together in the dewy grass, apart from the rest of the court. 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. As the others drew nearer Aslan turned to

meet them bringing Edmund with him.

"Here is your brother," he said, "and there is no need to talk to him about what is past."

Edmund shook hands with each of the others and said to each of them in turn, "I'm sorry" and everyone said "That's all right." And then everyone wanted very hard to say something which would make it quite clear that they were all friends with him again -- something ordinary and natural--and of course no one could think of anything in the world to say. *

This apparent confessional scene between Aslan and Edmund is still not enough, for Aslan, Christ-like, must go through the ritual sacrifice at the table. But Edmund is forgiven and set on the right path again.

Prince Caspian is certainly a "coming of age" story. A hero on a quest -- someone rectifying justice, Caspian is seeking his future, realizing at each turn the responsibilities of being a hero -- an adult. The battle is bloody -- but Caspian stands firm -- a soldier for Christ/Aslan. In the end there is a ceremony in which Caspian takes on responsibility.

"Welcome, Prince," said Aslan. "Do you feel yourself sufficient to take up the Kingship of Narnia?"

"I-I don't think I do, Sir," said Caspian. "I'm only a kid."

"Good," said Aslan. "If you felt yourself sufficient, it would have been proof that you were not. Therefore, under us, and under the Emperor of the High King, you shall be King of Narnia, Lord of Cair Paravel and Emperor of the Lone Islands." *

But this is not yet all, for he is knighted, he knights others and a big party is thrown. Prince Caspian is now an adult with adult responsibilities--dubbed, sworn, and crowned.

The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader" is a long rambling adventure of many individual episodes. One deals with Eustace the "unbeliever," Eustace the one who cares for only himself, the one who doesn't like anyone or anything (unless he just happens to), the one who doesn't know what dragons are, the one who doesn't know Aslan even when he sees him. In short, Eustace is an ignorant baby. In using his unwise autonomy, he gets himself turned into a dragon; and only then does he realize how miserable a creature he is. Aslan takes him to a well to wash. Eustace attempts to scratch off his skin, but succeeds in only removing a few surface layers. Aslan, in one painful stroke gets rid of the old dragon to the new boy beneath. He then tosses Eustace into the Well. Later Eustace apologizes (punningly?).

"I'm afraid I've been pretty beastly."

"That's all right," said Edmund. "Between ourselves, you haven't been as bad as I was on my first trip to Narnia. You were only an ass, but I was a traitor." *

Edmund is referring to his own rite of passage. Eustace has relapsed to his old self, but has been born again, baptized by Aslan. Notice too, the *Dawn Treader* is on a voyage, symbols of beginnings and water. Convenient symbols -- intended or subconscious?

The Silver Chair is the story of being kidnapped into the Underworld, sharing the elements of the Oraneus and Tam Lin legends. Caspian's son is the victim. Caspian's wife is killed early in the story; and now he, an old man, is sailing off on a voyage from which many believe he will not return. In rescuing Prince Rilian, the children have to dig out of the underworld, the land of death. Their conversation contains expressions like:

"Whether we live or die Aslan will be our good Lord," and "it'll save funeral expenses." *

There is also the ritual that changes Caspian after his death. Aslan tells Eustace to stab his right fore-paw with a thorn.

And there came out a great drop of blood, redder than all redness that you have ever seen or imagined. And it splashed into the stream over the dead body of the King. At the same moment the doleful music stopped. And the dead King began to be changed. *

Caspian "youthens" to a boy again, awakens, and realizes that he is in Aslan's country, a land closely resembling a Christian notion of heaven. Caspian is dead, but his life is not ended, merely changed. Aslan is awaiting him at his death, to further him along. Anointing of the sick is administered with holy chrism, not blood; but blood is a rich symbol of life. Here it is Aslan's life, afterlife. This sacrament prepares one for death, dispersing the fear. Aslan has certainly presented death as a welcomed conclusion to a life. Children reading this would find death less frightening.

The Horse and His Boy is the most paradoxical element in this sacramental association. This book seems to be about marriage, but fairy tale marriage not real everyday marriage. And it certainly is confusing. Aravis has run away because she does not wish to be married against her will. Susan changes her mind about marrying Prince Rabadash; and at the end of the story, in a sort of epilogue, we find out about Shasta (Cor) and Aravis

that years later, when they were so used to quarrelling and making it up again that they got married so as to go on doing it more conveniently. *

And then we are told that Bree and Hwin (the talking horses) both got married, but not to each other.

This perplexing and certainly not positive view of marriage may be explained by the fact that C.S. Lewis was very reluctant to get married himself and was involved with Joy Davidman at this time.

The Magician's Nephew is a book for tying up loose ends. It is a book that explains the origins of the Wardrobe as well as how it came to be in the Professor's house. The Professor's name is Digory Kirke. "Kirk" is the Scottish word for "church", and what he does for the children -- providing asylum in the first story and coaching Peter for an exam in the third -- are examples of pastoral duties of the church, of the priesthood.

He starts out as a reluctant sorcerer's apprentice forced into service to save Polly from the experiments of his uncle, who we find out to be only a petty trickster descendant of someone named LeFay. Sorcerers, Magicians, Shamans, and Priests are of a similar calling. They function as power brokers. Queen Jadis, the evil sorceress, hoards her power and has a false notion of her importance. Digory sees only the good his power can be put to. Jadis eats her apple; Digory thinks only of its life giving power in bringing his mother back to health. Digory becomes a healer, bringing the grace of God to the ill. This life-giving Food can easily be compared to the Eucharist brought by a priest to the sick as Holy Viaticum, and only a priest can change bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. And finally, Digory completes his priestly duties by creating a channel from this world to the other by building a wardrobe from the wood of the tree grown from the seed of the apple he gave his mother.

Thus Lewis completes the cycle of the Seven Sacraments in the first six books. In the seventh he ends his tales. Could it be that there were no more stories once one has touched all of the main rites of passage in a person's life? This also reinforces the point of there being a lack of organization in the series. Seven Sacraments in six books is not very symmetrical. There are more symbols and more discussion possible here in relating the sacraments to the series but this is by no means an exhaustive analysis.

Christianity so pervaded the being of C.S. Lewis that anything he put his hand (or pen) to would be imbued strongly with a thorough Christian ethic. How unintentional the sacraments are infused here may be in direct proportion to the depth of Christianity that C.S. Lewis lived. The sacraments are the important rituals, the rites of passage in every Christian's life, what else could C.S. Lewis write about when he would write stories for children?

Footnotes

¹ From an idea of Lisa Mosier's and discussed at Search Summer Reflections 1985.

² C.S. Lewis "It All Began With a Picture..." in *Of Other Worlds*, ed. W. Hooper. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966, p. 42.

³ Lewis, C.S. *Letters to Children* ed. L.W. Dorsett & M.L. Mead MacMillan, 1985, p. 68.

⁴ Lewis, C.S. "On Ways of Writing for Children."

in *Of Other Worlds*, ed. W. Hooper. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966, p. 33.

⁵ Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* Collier Books 1971, pp. 135-36. All remaining references to the Chronicles of Narnia are from this boxed set edition.

⁶ *Prince Caspian*, p. 200.

⁷ *Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"*, p. 91.

⁸ *The Silver Chair*, p. 187.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹⁰ *The Horse and His Boy*, p. 216.

(Editor's Note: It is interesting to compare this article with a parallel one which focuses on an opposite theme. See "Narnia and the Seven Deadly Sins" by David Hulan, in the Narnia Conference Proceedings, published by the Mythopoeic Society, 1969.)

The Choosing from C.S. Lewis' The Great Divorce

*In the storyteller's vision
of a plain on the edge of dawn
the daytripping dead,
bearing a passport to choice,
disclose their gray town citizenship
in bodies like dirty gauze.*

*Venturing on that valley
too wide for the eye's compass,
their feet are slashed by blades of grass,
bruised by the foam of the stream.*

*But if they trudge away
from their transit's last stop,
renounce the return trip
for the trek to the sun-rimmed hills
whose shadow breathes the Shadow of Life.*

*Those thin souls will overflow with light,
transmute to blood and bone
like the firm, bright limbs of the Choosing Ones
whose tread shakes the mountains into song
and resonates the waiting air to praise.*

Nancy Ester James

Errata for Mythlore 53

Apologies to Steven Deyo for misspelling his name in the introductions to the issue.

Also, it should be noted that Donna R. White is participating in the Intensive Residential Course for Welsh Learners, not a "Presidential" Course.

Lastly, it should be noted that Gwyneth Hood, referred to in Jorge Quinonez' letter on page 52 is a "she", not a "he." Among other things she teaches creative writing and is a regular contributor to the Society's fiction quarterly *Mythic Circle*.