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***The Medieval Mind of C.S. Lewis: How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind* by Jason M. Baxter**

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***The Medieval Mind of C.S. Lewis: How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind* by Jason M. Baxter**

Abstract

In his new book, *The Medieval Mind of C.S. Lewis*, Jason Baxter identifies the medieval thought and practices, and many of the specific medieval authors and texts, just below the surface in Lewis's popular writings and argues that Lewis "was not a successful modernizer of Christianity and writer of fiction despite the fact that he spent so much time studying old, dusty books, but *because* of them." (6)

Additional Keywords

Dante; Medieval; Boethius; Model; Transposition; Sacrament

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in concept—demonstrating by its existence that this topic merits and supports discussion—than in execution which often seems to be arguing against them.

For my part I have a mind to put aside Rowling and move on to a less reviled subject. I'm currently brushing up an essay on H.P. Lovecraft.

—Joseph Rex Young

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THE MEDIEVAL MIND OF C.S. LEWIS: HOW GREAT BOOKS SHAPED A GREAT MIND. Jason M. Baxter. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2022. 167 p. 9781514001646. \$22.00.

FANS OF C. S. LEWIS THE ERUDITE EXPOSITOR of Christian doctrines and weaver of intricate imaginative tales often forget, or simply never knew, that Lewis devoted his professional life to the study and teaching of medieval and renaissance literature. *Mere Christianity* and *Narnia* enjoy far greater popularity than *The Allegory of Love* or *Sixteenth Century Literature: Excluding Drama*. In his new book, *The Medieval Mind of C.S. Lewis: How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind*, Jason Baxter contends that Lewis's interest in the medieval world extended well beyond his scholarly vocation, pervading every aspect of his life and output:

Lewis is [a] writer who spent so much time studying medieval tales and arguments, ancient grammar and vocabulary, premodern rhetoric and the rhythmic flow of ancient speech that he could barely formulate an argument, write a letter, offer a word of consolation, or weave a fictional story of his own without opening up the dam and letting all the old ideas and emotions, stored up in his memory by long reading, break forth. (6)

Baxter identifies the medieval thought and practices, and many of the specific medieval authors and texts, just below the surface in Lewis's popular writings and argues that Lewis "was not a successful modernizer of Christianity and writer of fiction despite the fact that he spent so much time studying old, dusty books, but *because* of them" (6).

Baxter bookends the medieval period between 500–1500 AD, approximately from Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* to Nicholas of Cusa’s *On Learned Ignorance* (114). Lewis holds up Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as works characteristic of the medieval culture. Of course medieval thought did not begin in a vacuum. Authors such as Macrobius and Calcidius drew from the wellspring of Classical texts, such as Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio” and Plato’s *Timeous*, in their own translations and commentaries. Boethius, the Roman senator turned martyr, in particular “desperately gathered and saved whatever fragments he could from the old ‘high Pagan past’” as Rome gave way to the Ostrogoths. So too, Baxter argues, “did Lewis feel it his duty to save not this or that ancient author, but the general wisdom of the Long Middle Ages, and then vernacularize it for his world, which was now dominated by a new type of barbarian” (13), modern man cut off from his spiritual heritage.

In Chapter One, “The Lost Cathedral,” Baxter identifies the foundational characteristic of the medieval mindset as a sacramental view of the cosmos, in which the world, cathedral-like, participates in and points to something beyond itself. In Lewis’s sermon, “Transposition,” Lewis likens the physical expression of spiritual phenomena—e.g. speaking in tongues, the sacraments—to the transposition¹ of a piece of music written for an orchestra to a single instrument, where each note must represent several instruments. So too, when spiritual realities that are richer and more complex than our material world express themselves in physical phenomena, the physical phenomena take on meanings beyond their material appearance. Baxter quotes from Lewis’s *Allegory of Love* to scale up the view of transposition from individual phenomena to the cosmos as a whole: “The world which we mistake for reality is the flat outline of that which elsewhere veritably is in all the round of its unimaginable dimensions. [...] All visible things exist just in so far as they succeed in imitating the Forms.” Lewis finds this “diffused Platonism” in medieval authors such as Augustine, pseudo-Dionysius, Macrobius and “the divine popularizer Boethius” (Baxter 29, quoting *Allegory* 45-46). The harmony of the heavens, the mathematical patterns we observe in nature, all point beyond themselves to transcendent beauty and order.

The implications of this sacramental, transpositional, cosmology reveal themselves in the language, ethics, anthropology, psychology, and devotional practices of those that adhere to it. Paraphrasing Calcidius, Baxter writes “if you cultivate a perception of the deep harmony of nature, it leads to worship, because the ‘soul, fashioned after the same pattern as the celestial bodies,

¹ “Transposition” is one of the most popular terms in Baxter’s index, up there with Dante, Boethius, Narnia, and “model.”

immediately recognizes its own natural affinity to them” (27). The rest of Baxter’s book explores the medieval vision of the universe, what took its place, and how Lewis, the “British Boethius” (30), through his integration of the medieval vision and the imitation of medieval authors, sought to recover the lost cathedral.

Lewis’s *modus operandi* in his recovery effort was to imaginatively recreate, in modern vernacular, what it felt like to breathe the medieval air (30). Baxter borrows from all of Lewis’s analysis of the atmospheres of stories, the distinction between contemplation, *looking at*, and enjoyment, *looking along*, and the transcendent experience of reading old books, to describe the effect of Lewis’s own literary creations. “Lewis’s trademark as a scholar, teacher, and writer [is] his ability to *perform* ideas, to use his imaginative talent to create a *feeling* in which the ideas under consideration were no longer dead opinions” (37). Baxter points to the creation scene in *The Magician’s Nephew* and “The Decent of the Gods” in *That Hideous Strength* for example of Lewis integrating the medieval “music of the spheres” and planetary intelligences into his own work.

Lewis not only recreates the medieval atmospheres in his writing, he adopts the medieval method of composition, shamelessly borrowing elements from the writers who came before him just as medieval authors were wont to do. The greatest medieval authors, Baxter observes, were “shapers, composers, and recyclers of old materials” who “felt it their chief task to dress old stories in new garb” (46). Baxter sees this method at work everywhere in Lewis. “*Perelandra* turns out to be Dante and [Roman de la Rose author] Jean de Meun in space” (51). “Just as Lewis rewrote Boethius and Plato in *The Last Battle*, rewrote Dante in *The Great Divorce*, and rewrote the philosopher Nicholas of Cusa in the form of a lyric poem [...] so he transformed [Bernard Silvestris’s *Cosmographia*] into Ransom’s journey to visit intelligent astral races” (155).

In contrast, modern man has traded his cosmological cathedral for a machine shop and his soul for an engine. “In a story that has often been rehearsed, the hylozoistic universe (or soul-infused universe, almost as if the world were a living organism) of desire and intelligence and sympathies yielded to the inanimate world of mechanistic structures and mathematized qualities” (59). What started on a cosmological level with the advent of the machine age and the scientific revolution’s obsession with measurable quantities to the exclusion of other types of inquiry, ushered in an “ethical and social desert” by delegitimizing judgements of value and final causes (63). What began as a slow spreading “spiritual cancer [...] disenchanting the universe, moved to demystifying the human body, and ended by casting doubt on the very possibility of rationality” (Baxter 64, paraphrasing Lewis’s *The Empty Universe*). Lewis depicts this spiritually impoverished modern man in the character

Governor Gumpas, the slavery-justifying governor of the Lone Islands in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader."* He operates in world of "mid-level abstractions" like "progress" and "economic necessity" to the exclusion of the transcendental abstractions like justice and virtue or even concrete realities like "books or instruments or music or horses or armour or anything else worth having" (Baxter 78, and *Voyage*).

Lewis is partial to Dante as an author who endows his saints and heavens with *more* reality than modern man is accustomed to ascribe to spiritual entities. Baxter observes, "for most modern believers our image of heaven is watery, sallow, remote, shadowy, and faint. It doesn't have any 'weight' or gravity or thickness (or 'atmosphere'), and thus we often don't feel a positive attraction to goodness" (88). This problem is compounded by the tendency to view Heaven as a series of negation, e.g. no food, no sex, no time, etc. (Baxter 87, drawing from "Transposition"). "For this reason Lewis admired medieval literature, because he thought the old poems admirably created positive, heavy, sensuous images that gave weight in the imagination to elusive spiritual realities" (88). Lewis wrote an essay on "Imagery in the Last Eleven Cantos of Dante's 'Comedy,'" included in *Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, in which he recounts the visceral imagery Dante uses to create a sense of greater reality for his saints:

The saints in heaven, as they are variously described in *Paradiso*, shine brighter than the stars, move more swiftly than lightning, produce a more lovely harmony than the planets, glow like an unending sunrise, smile more radiantly than the sun, rush swifter than cold, mountain winds. (Baxter 95, drawing from "Imagery")

Lewis likewise tries to endow spiritual reality with weight in *The Great Divorce*, particularly with the character of Sarah Smith, the great lady, and with MacDonald's instruction regarding the comparatively miniscule size of Hell compared to Heaven. The spiritual is more real than the merely material, and goodness infinitely more real than sin.

Baxter includes a helpful chapter, "How to Pray to a Medieval God," in which he explores two medieval routes to mysticism,² the apophatic theology of the anonymously authored *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the cataphatic approach of the aforementioned *On Learned Ignorance*. In the apophatic theology, one carefully rejects the many descriptions of God as inadequate, before finally affirming them as true on a deeper level. In cataphatic one uses the things of this

² A subject he has written about before in *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*. Baxter also references David Downing's *Into the Region of Awe: Mysticism in C.S. Lewis* several times throughout this chapter.

world to better understand characteristics of their maker, for “it is also true that every creature, even if imperfectly, points or gestures toward that God who is above them” (113). Baxter likens the cataphatic approach to the glimpse one catches of Chopin’s soul in his music or of a parent’s personality and gifts in her child (114). Lewis practices both in his theological writings, while taking a cautionary posture towards mysticism overall, which itself is characteristic of the middle ages. More important than seeking mystical experience is the humble obedience and submission to the present task. He also does not want Christians to reduce God to some sort of “force” that makes no personal claims on one’s life (102-104). Only after these steps have been taken can one enjoy a more mystical experience, as does Ransom at the end of *Perelandra* with the doxologies on the mountaintop.

Before concluding, Baxter replies to potential objections stemming from the factual inadequacies of the medieval model of the universe. Lewis was as aware as we are that the medieval model of the physical universe was not strictly true, but the model’s value never relied primarily on factual proof. Its value came from an orientation or posture towards the spiritual realities of the universe and their relationship to mankind. As Baxter contends, “being able to see the world with medieval eyes could provide even modern people with a ‘model’ for thinking about the relationship between the natural and spiritual world” (22). And with the advancement of modern science, the spiritual components of the model are even more compelling. The universe is even more beautiful and complex than we had imagined, and mankind is even more anthropocentric than ever. An attitude of awe and wonder is as appropriate now as it ever was, and quite compatible with a view of heavens and stars which sing the glory.

Baxter closes with “Nostalgia for the Future.” “When comparing the drab, modern, mechanistic world in which humans are the only intelligent agents to a world of paganism, charged with spirituality, under pressure, as it were, threatening to erupt out of the ground with irrational and exuberant joy, Lewis leaned toward the pagan” (159-160). In a watered-down, minimalist modern religion there is “nothing that can convince, convert, or (in the higher sense) console: nothing, therefore, which can restore vitality to our civilization. It is not costly enough” (160, quoting “Religion without Dogma”). Considering our separation from the medieval mindset, one might feel the loss of the enchantment of the previous ages of humankind. But there is hope for those who recognize the loss. “The positive result of our exile is our painful sense of loss and longing, which speaks to a desire, not just to see beauty, but to be beauty. [...] Without exile, we might have been contented with too little” (162-3). In this way, the medieval model was not wrong, Baxter argues, “but a kind of deep, human subconscious desire for a world that, in some sense, we are

meant to occupy, but not yet" (164). A eucatastrophe awaits the hopeful.

Baxter knows he is not the first author to tackle the subject of Lewis and medieval thought. He makes good use of several of his predecessors' works, notably Chris Armstrong's *Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians*, Marsha Daigle-Williamson's *Reflecting the Eternal: Dante's Divine Comedy in the Novels of C.S. Lewis*, and Michael Ward's *Planet Narnia*, to list a few. He's a fan of Lewis's *List: The Ten Books That Influenced Him Most*. He draws widely from Lewis's texts, but omits several essays from *Christian Reflections*, such as "The Poison of Subjectivism" and "The Language of Religion" that might have been helpful on several fronts. While he incorporates a couple of poems, there were many other candidates (e.g. "A Cliché Came Out of Its Cage" and "Reason") whose inclusion might have made Baxter's work more like Boethius's, interspersed with verse. He's also willing to draw from outside the Lewis scholarship circles, taking the idea of "excarnation" from Charles Taylor (64) and citing Wendell Berry on the important relationship between words and ethics (70). The book, frustratingly, does not include a bibliography, but the footnotes do not mention either Thomas Martin's *Reading the Classics with C.S. Lewis* and Robert Boenig's *C.S. Lewis and the Middle Ages*. While the footnotes are great for easy reference, he periodically will cite the massive volume *Essay Collection* without specifying which essay he's drawing from.

The book is not free from errors, mostly frivolous typos—e.g., a misspelled, omitted, or doubled word, particularly in quoted material.³ He makes a few errors in his accounts of Lewis's fiction, leaving Susan out of scene described in *Prince Caspian* (116), referring to Jadis as the White Witch in *The Magician's Nephew* (30), and stating that "Orual wears a veil the entirety of her life" (137). Of somewhat more serious note, he talks of the Tragedian in *The Great Divorce* without introducing the character at all. He says that Lewis's sermon "The Weight of Glory" was preached on 2 Corinthians 4:17, the verse from which the title is taken, when in fact the scripture read that day was Revelation 2:28: "And I will give him the morning star."

The book's virtues far outweigh its minor flaws. Arguably one of the book's greatest virtues is Baxter's in-depth understanding of his subject matter coupled with his ability to explain it to a modern audience through winsomely chosen examples, similes, and metaphors. For such a dense topic, the book reads beautifully. Consider just a couple of examples:

³ For example: "As Diggory's comments suggest, this no mere children's story" (102, leaving out "is"); quoting Jewel from *The Last Battle*, "I have come at last! This is my real country! I belong here" (101; the quote omits the word "home"); and quoting from "Learning in Wartime," Baxter writes "take an interest in these place occupations" (17; "place" should be "placid").

Just as Christians and non-Christians alike will today talk about “light speed” or “inferiority complexes” or the “one percent,” without necessarily being advocates of or specialists in Einstein, Freud, or Marx, so too did medieval Christians and ancient pagans share a number of general “background” beliefs that made them “far more like each other than either was like a modern man.” (11, quoting *Discarded Image* at the end)

The literary scholar has access not just to ancient ideas but also to ancient feelings, and thus has access to specimens even more valuable than a paleontologist’s prehistoric insect frozen intact within amber. (42)

[I]n medieval thought pure evil is the same as nothingness, it’s like absolute zero on the Kelvin scale. (98)

He’s like the master teacher from Lewis’s “Bluspels and Flalensferes,” who invents new images to convey meaning where it would otherwise be inaccessible.

Like a medieval author, he can borrow an image from his source, and proceed to festoon it into greater significance. Borrowing from Lewis’s description of the medieval model as a great cathedral, Baxter writes:

Standing in a medieval cathedral gives you a kind of x-ray vision of the world. Meaning is everywhere, full and rich. The material world has been gathered to a saturation point. In a cathedral, then, the spiritual world feels like it is leaking in, and our response is to want to soar up and through and out. (34)

Baxter’s book invites readers to do the same.

—Josiah Peterson



DISCOVERING DUNE: ESSAYS ON FRANK HERBERT’S EPIC SAGA.
Edited by Dominic J. Nardi and N. Trevor Brierly. McFarland & Company, Publishers. August 2022. Paperback. 978-1476682013, \$49.95.

MUCH HAS CHANGED SINCE 1965 when Chilton Books, best known for its car repair manuals, decided to publish Frank Herbert’s science fiction novel *Dune*. At the time, science fiction wasn’t known as a particularly mythopoetic genre—the hard sci-fi of Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and Arthur C. Clarke still defined the field. Herbert’s story combined (among other things) Messiah narratives, Islamic references, ecology, eugenics, and mind-altering space drugs to create an epic that was certainly science fiction, but certainly also