PRAISE FOR

LIVE LIKE A NARNIAN

“As a long-time lover of C. S. Lewis and the world of Narnia, I have read countless books about both. Joe Rigney’s Live Like a Narnian is one of the best. It overflows with an authentic sense of Narnian brightness, wisdom, and wonder. Rigney seems equally at home with Lewis’s fiction and nonfiction. He draws them together beautifully, with truth and imagination. I highly recommend this delightful book!”

RANDY ALCORN, author of Heaven and If God Is Good; Director of Eternal Perspectives Ministries

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RANDY ALCORN, author of Heaven and If God Is Good; Director of Eternal Perspectives Ministries

“Joe Rigney is a writer who really knows how to love something. I am glad that he loves Narnia.”

DOUGLAS WILSON, author of What I Learned in Narnia and Father Hunger; Pastor, Christ Church, Moscow, ID

“In our journey to Aslan’s Country, we tend to look to the right and to the left to see who’s coming with us. There is much to share, and in the sharing, we feel the fullness of resolution and the resolution of fullness. This book is stuffed full of the must-share Narnian “Aha!” moments that keep you turning just one more page. Even the moments you’ve only whispered to yourself about. I’m betting that Live Like a Narnian will prove to be a trusted companion to future Narnians who will read and re-read the Chronicles for generations.”

GLORIA FURMAN, author of Glimpses of Grace, daughter of Eve, and a queen of Narnia

“Live Like a Narnian has the quality that all good writing strives for: it is both insightful and delightful. Joe Rigney captures not only the power and poignancy of C. S. Lewis’s beloved Narnia series, but also its fun and merriment.”

DEVIN BROWN, author of A Life Observed: A Spiritual Biography of C. S. Lewis; Professor of English, Asbury University
“It has been said that what C. S. Lewis thought about everything was secretly present in what he wrote about anything, and so it’s no surprise to discover in his Narnia the sweeping worldview he detailed in his non-fiction prose. This world Lewis created is shot through with theological riches, put there like veins of gold running through a Colorado Mountain. I have long awaited a brief book that labors to excavate the major theological themes in Narnia in a simple and clear format, a book that calls on Lewis’s nonfiction writings as a commentary to illuminate his Narnian stories, and most of all, a book about that bright gold creature more terrible and more beautiful than anything in all of Narnia and this world combined. The wait is over. Live Like a Narnian by Joe Rigney is a masterful achievement.”

**TONY REINKE**, author of *Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books*; Content Strategist at desiringGod.org

“It’s evident that Joe Rigney has deeply breathed the air of Narnia for a long time, and he creatively applies Lewis’s masterpiece to Christian living with wit and wisdom.”

**ANDY NASELLI**, editor of *Themelios* Journal; Assistant Professor of New Testament, Biblical Theology, Bethlehem College and Seminary

“Halfway through reading *Live Like a Narnian*, the chapters had already had their intended effect and deepened my appreciation and understanding of Narnia. They made me want to slow down, savor them, and keep learning from them while breathing anew the Narnian air one more time. I heartily commend this book to you.”

**MATTHEW LEE ANDERSON**, author of *The End of Our Exploring: A Book About Questioning and the Confidence of Faith*; Lead Writer at MereOrthodoxy.com
“The immediate effect of *Live Like a Narnian*: I want to. Written with a fun, lively, muscular style, it succeeds both as a work of popular literary criticism and as a readable call to follow Aslan all the way to the end. If you want to recover the wisdom and beauty of the original Narnia, that vision that captivated so many of us in our youth and that continues to work its edifying magic, dive into Joe Rigney’s stirring introduction.”

**Owen Strachan**, Assistant Professor of Christian Theology and Church History, Boyce College; author, *Risky Gospel: Abandon Fear and Build Something Awesome*
Live Like a Narnian

Christian Discipleship in Lewis’s Chronicles

Joe Rigney
To Sam and Peter
May You Always Be True Sons of Archenland:
First In, Last Out, and Laughing Loudest
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A Word to the Reader

This book was written for friends of Narnia. In the author’s judgment, its usefulness is in direct proportion to one’s familiarity with the Chronicles. All of the chapters assume that the reader knows the characters in the books, the basic plot of each story, and key scenes and quotations, among other things. While no doubt some may be able to derive benefit from it without prior knowledge of Narnia, I’d recommend against it, both because without such knowledge the reader will be confused, and because I do not wish to prejudice readers should they finally enter the wardrobe themselves. I believe that what I’ve written here is true, and faithful to Lewis’s intentions. However, I much prefer people to read these chapters and say, “Ah, yes. That’s exactly what I’ve always thought about that scene, or that character, or that theme,” than to take what I’ve written and go on a hunt for it somewhere in the Western Wild.

To those who consider themselves free Narnians and sons of Archenland, in the name of the Lion, welcome. In no way is this book intended to be a substitute for reading the actual books for the seventeenth time (though I do hope they enrich the seventeenth reading). Stories are irreducibly stories; you cannot boil them down into essays, no matter how true or accurate the essays (and I do hope these essays exceed those that Lewis disparages in The Horse
Flannery O’Connor said somewhere that a story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. Lewis is a master of such narratival, tacit, and implicit communication. His way of “describing-around” something leaves a deeper imprint than any essay can hope to.

At the same time, I hope that these chapters will cause some lights to go on in your soul (and maybe even a rocket to go up inside your head). And while I’m thinking about it, some readers may find the Introduction overly technical and complicated. If that’s you, I give my glad permission to skip ahead and get right into the chapters; they’re more fun anyway. Also, it’s worth noting that, in order to accommodate the various editions of the Chronicles, I’ve chosen to cite book and chapter number rather than page number. Since most of my chapters are focused on only one Chronicle, you’ll often only find a chapter number in parentheses. Hopefully it won’t be too confusing.

Finally, while I would discourage giving this book to children directly (just give them Narnia; when they’re older they can read these chapters to learn some of what Narnia has been doing to them), I do hope that my modest efforts will benefit them in a roundabout way. In particular, I’d like Christian parents to come away eager to intentionally read the stories to their children, in hope that another generation will be shaped, molded, and matured into men and women of God, the kind that resemble the Lion of Narnia, and therefore, bear the image of the true king, Jesus Christ.
In 1956, after completing the last book in the Chronicles of Narnia, C. S. Lewis wrote a short article in the *New York Times Book Review* explaining how a childless Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature came to write fairy tales.

Dismissing the idea that he had some master plan to “say something about Christianity to children” which led him to choose the fairy tale genre, research the reading habits of children, select some Christian doctrines, and then write allegories, Lewis writes,

> Everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn’t anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord. It was part of the bubbling.¹

This “bubbling” produced some of the most beloved children’s tales in all of literature. Thousands of young children have lain in their beds and begged their parents for “just one more chapter.” Older
children have devoured entire books (sometimes two or three at a time) over a long, lazy Saturday. College students have successfully avoided studying for that big exam simply by noticing the books on a shelf and setting off to find that one line about “not being a tame lion.” Even some middle-aged adults have been known to disappear for entire afternoons only to emerge with a wistful sigh from who-knows-where murmuring something about “Beaversdam, fried trout, and sticky marmalade rolls.”

I confess to being all of these people (though I’m not quite middle-aged yet), and I think my time spent reading, dreaming, thinking, and talking about hospitable fauns, singing stars, evil witches, and a certain Lion has not been in the least wasted. And not merely because reading fictional stories is a healthy part of recreation and refreshment (which it certainly is). Had Lewis written his stories in Moses’s day, I have no doubt that Narnia would have been recommended reading on the Sabbath.

Meeting God in Narnia

My reason for viewing my hours (and days and years) in Narnia as time well spent is that I firmly believe that I am a better husband, better father, better friend, better teacher, better son and brother—in sum, a better man and Christian—because of it. Living in Narnia has profoundly shaped my view of society, culture, marriage, parenting, education, and theology. (And when I say Narnia has shaped me, I am implicitly including Lewis’s other writings as well, for as his friend Owen Barfield once said—and I hope to demonstrate in this book—“what Lewis thought about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything.”)

I have met God—the true God, the living God, the Father of Jesus Christ—in and through the bubbling that Lewis called Narnia, and I have grown in my love and affection for Jesus through breathing that Narnian air. What’s more, I believe this is exactly what Lewis (and God) intended.
In saying this, I’m not suggesting that the Chronicles are equivalent to Scripture, or that reading them has led me to neglect the Bible. If anything, my love for Jesus and the Book that reveals him has increased because of Lewis’s efforts in the Chronicles. What I am suggesting is that I have received the same sort of grace and comfort and encouragement and motivation from Narnia as I have received from expository preaching, small group accountability, theological tomes, and devotional writings. In short, I have been discipled as a faithful Christian through living like a Narnian. And my aim in this book is to encourage you to do the same. In other words, I want to make a case for Narnian discipleship, not merely as a coincidental byproduct of reading the Narnian stories, but as one of Lewis’s (and God’s!) chief goals in the Chronicles themselves.

I recognize that this is a rather bold claim, and so before proceeding to the remaining chapters, I’d like to explore what the Chronicles are. To do so, I need to say something about Lewis’s understanding of fairy tales, and something about Lewis’s vision of discipleship. So with that as the goal, let us return to those bubbling images.

**Lewis “The Man”**

Lewis writes that, as the images bubble up, the Author in him begins to long for the images to coalesce into a particular Form, whether poetry or a novel or a play. With the initial Narnian images, the Form that seemed most suitable was the fairy tale. Lewis describes his reaction to this “wedding” of Images and Form.

The moment I thought of that I fell in love with the Form itself: its brevity, its severe restraints on description, its flexible traditionalism, its inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections and ‘gas’. I was now enamoured of it.³

Lewis goes on to describe how “the Man” in him (his term for the
part of us that evaluates whether we should do what our loves and
desires are telling us to do) then began to go to work. I’ll return to
Lewis the Man at the end of this introduction. For the moment, let
us think more carefully about the particular Form that the stories
take.

ARE THEY ALLEGORIES?

Many Christian readers, upon discovering additional layers of
meaning in the Narnian stories, immediately jump to the conclu-
sion that the Chronicles are allegories. These same readers would
be surprised to learn that C. S. Lewis denied multiple times that
the stories are allegories. In a letter to Sophia Storr, he wrote, “But
it is not, as some people think, an allegory.”4 Elsewhere, he wrote,
“You are mistaken when you think that everything in the books
‘represents’ something in this world. Things do that in The Pilgrim's
Progress but I'm not writing in that way.”5

Lewis defined allegory as “a composition (whether pictorial or
literary) in which immaterial realities are represented by feigned
physical objects, e.g. a pictured Cupid allegorically represents erotic
love (which in reality is an experience, not an object occupying a
given area of space) or, in Bunyan, a giant represents Despair.”6 The
two key components of this definition are:

1. allegories are imagined (“feigned”) physical objects, and
2. they represent non-physical (“immaterial”) realities.

In denying that the Narnian stories are allegories, Lewis does
not thereby deny the Christian meaning inherent in the stories. But
his goal was more nuanced than a representation of unseen reality;
the literary device he chose is more aptly called “a supposal.” Here’s
Lewis in his own words:
I did not say to myself ‘Let us represent Jesus as He really is in our world by a Lion in Narnia’: I said ‘Let us suppose that there were a land like Narnia and that the Son of God, as He became a Man in our world, became a Lion there, and then imagine what would have happened.’ If you think about it, you will see that it is quite a different thing.7

Or again,

If Aslan represented the immaterial Deity, he would be an allegorical figure. In reality however he is an invention giving an imaginary answer to the question, ‘What might Christ become like if there really were a world like Narnia and He chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as He actually has done in ours.’8

This distinction between allegory and supposal can aid us as we seek to be discipled as true Narnians. Because allegorical figures make abstract realities in our world more concrete, the action still takes place in this world. Giant Despair simply becomes a name for our own struggles in this world. The connection between the narrative world and the world we inhabit is so tight that we never truly leave our own. (These comments should not be taken as a criticism of allegories, least of all, Bunyan’s masterpiece.)

In contrast, a “supposal” forces us out of our world into another one, what Lewis’s friend J.R.R. Tolkien described as a “secondary world.” By creating Narnia, Lewis invites us out of our own skin and into that of Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy (and later Caspian, Eustace, Jill, Shasta, and the rest). The challenges we face are Narnian challenges. The victories we win are Narnian victories. But our time in Narnia is not an end in itself. We go there so that we then can live better here. By taking us out of this world, Lewis enables us to become something that we weren’t before, something greater and grander, so that, when we return out of the wardrobe, we face our own Giants of Despair differently. We face them as true Narnians.
ARE FAIRY TALES SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN?

So then, the Narnian stories are “supposals,” a kind of fairy tale that takes us into an imaginary world in order to shape the kind of people that we are. If this is the case, then we must face two, almost opposing, questions. First, are fairy tales, with their escapism and dragons and villains, really suitable for children? And second, if they are for children, are they only for children?

Lewis was aware that many regarded fairy stories as unsuitable even for children. In “On Three Ways of Writing for Children,” he sets out to defend the fairy tale against three objections.

**Objection 1: Fairy tales give children a false impression of the world.**

On the contrary, Lewis responds, fairy stories give them a realistic impression of the world. In fact, it’s the so-called “realistic” stories that are more likely to deceive them. “All stories in which children have adventures and successes which are possible, in the sense that they do not break the laws of nature, but almost infinitely improbable, are in more danger than fairy tales of raising false expectations.”

**Objection 2: They promote escapism in children.**

Lewis responds by noting that both fairy stories and realistic stories engage in “wish-fulfillment.” But it is actually the realistic stories that are more deadly. Fairy stories do awaken desires in children, but most often it’s not a desire for the fairy world itself. Most children don’t really want there to be dragons in modern England. Instead, the desire is for “they know not what.” This desire for “something beyond” does not empty the real world, but actually gives it new depths. “He does not despise real woods because he has
read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted.\(^{10}\)

Realistic stories, on the other hand, are fraught with danger in that they tend to provoke resentment and anger. A child who reads about a boy who tells the truth despite difficulty at school and is acclaimed for it will most likely be disappointed when his own hard truth-telling is not met with the same accolades. Stories about realistic, but highly improbable scenarios send children back to their lives “undivinely discontented.” The boy feels cheated, believing that the things in the story “would have happened if the reader had had a fair chance” (38).

Objection 3: They will frighten children.

To this objection, Lewis believes that we must carefully define what we mean by “frighten.” If we mean that we must not instill “disabling, pathological fears” in children, well and good. The trouble is that we often don’t know what will trigger such phobias in children (Lewis notes that his own night-terrors as a child centered on insects, something which he received from the real world and not from fairy tales).

But in making this objection, some mean that “we must try to keep out of [the child’s] mind the knowledge that he is born into a world of death, violence, wounds, adventure, heroism and cowardice, good and evil.” However, Lewis says, we are born into a world like that, and hiding it from children actually handicaps them. “Since it is so likely that they will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage. . . . Let there be wicked kings and beheadings, battles and dungeons, giants and dragons, and let villains be soundly killed at the end of the book.”\(^{11}\)

Indeed, Lewis argues that exposing children to the second type of fear can help them to overcome the first type of debilitating phobia.
I think it is possible that by confining your child to blameless stories of child life in which nothing at all alarming ever happens, you would fail to banish the terrors and would succeed in banishing all that can ennoble them or make them endurable. For in the fairy tales, side by side with the terrible figures, we find the immemorial comforters and protectors, the radiant ones….It would be nice if no little boy in bed, hearing, or thinking he hears a sound, were ever at all frightened. But if he is going to be frightened, I think it better that he should think of giants and dragons than merely of burglars. And I think St. George, or any bright champion in armour, is a better comfort than the idea of the police.12

ARE FAIRY TALES ONLY FOR CHILDREN?

Having established that children should be allowed (and encouraged) to read fairy tales, we now ask the other pressing question, “Are such stories, with their fanciful creatures and lack of realism, only suitable for children? Shouldn’t adults be above such childish things?”

Following his friend Tolkien, Lewis recognized that the association of fairy tales with children was a relatively recent and misleading phenomenon. In fact, he wrote, “I am almost inclined to set it up as a canon that a children’s story which is only enjoyed by children is a bad children’s story.”13 Or again, “it is certainly my opinion that a book worth reading only in childhood is not worth reading even then.”14

In response to those who regard adult lovers of fairy tales as childish and suffering from arrested development, Lewis turns the tables and reminds us that the obsession with being “grown-up” is the mark of adolescence, not adulthood. “When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.”15 Growing up doesn’t mean replacing old loves as much as it means adding new ones. Thus, a love
of Aslan and Narnia ought not be limited to children, as though it were beneath adults. In fact, adults ought to be able to find more to love in the stories (this has certainly been my experience). Especially, if the author intends for his readers to be edified, educated, and discipled by them.

C. S. LEWIS VS. MODERN EDUCATION

We have seen that Lewis loved fairy tales and regarded them as beneficial for both children and adults. Lewis would have shared Peter Leithart’s assessment of the potency of stories in shaping who we are.

There are many mysteries in trying to unravel how reading shapes the self… Mimesis or imitation is one of the fundamental realities in the formation of the self. Children learn language, manners, gestures, parenting (!), and a host of other habits and passions from their parents, without either parents or children putting much conscious effort into it. And the dance of mimesis does not end with childhood: Disciples become like their masters, soldiers are molded by their commander, and college basketball players (and many flabby former players) aspire to ‘be like Mike.’ It is absurd to suggest that fictional characters, whom most readers know more intimately than they know their own parents, do not have a similar effect. Earlier critics took it for granted that literature, an imitation of life, presents models for imitation to the reader.16

The focus on imitation and habit formation brings us to the question of discipleship. My contention is that Lewis intends the Narnian stories to inculcate Christian beliefs, values, habits, and affections. By reflecting on Lewis’s critique of modern education in his brilliant little book The Abolition of Man, we can better apprehend how he viewed the process of discipleship.
Lewis regarded the trends in the educational establishment of his day as problematic on a number of levels. Choosing an English textbook as his starting point, Lewis offers a shrewd and perceptive critique of the subtle ways in which our educational assumptions and models can negatively impact a society.

The Marginalization of Value Statements

First, Lewis highlights the sly ways that modern education marginalizes value statements. The authors of The Green Book, whom he chose as his sparring partners, state that when we make a value statement about something in the world, we are not actually speaking about the thing itself, but instead making a statement about our own subjective feelings. In other words, when we stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon and exclaim, “That is glorious!” we are not really commenting about the canyon; rather we are simply communicating that we have feelings associated in our minds with the word “glory.” What’s more, due to the modern quest (some might say lust) for “objectivity,” statements about our subjective impressions are insignificant and easily dismissed as mere opinion with nothing of value to offer the world. Lewis writes,

The schoolboy who reads this passage in The Green Book will believe two propositions: firstly, that all sentences containing a predicate of value are statements about the emotional state of the speaker, and, secondly, that all such statements are unimportant. (19)\(^\text{17}\)

The Separation of Fact and Value

Second, this marginalization of value statements results in a sharp separation in the mind of the student between objective “facts” and subjective “values.” The former are rational, testable, and important. The latter are “contrary to reason and contemptible” (25). Moreover, this separation of fact and value is not a creed that is taught explic-
itly, but an atmosphere and tone that is inhaled and absorbed. It is something “in the air,” which becomes a part of a student’s mental framework and assumptions, exerting substantial influence upon him without critical analysis or reflection.

*The Creation of Men without Chests*

Third, a student who thus begins to assume this fact-value distinction will begin to display two traits that are harmful to himself and to society. First, he will begin to view ordinary human emotions disdainfully. He will look down his nose at a mother who is delighted by her children or an old man who tears up when the national anthem is played. Second, this disdain of ordinary emotions will be accompanied by a decreasing practice of classical virtues like courage, sacrifice, and honor. The reason is not hard to see. Familial affection (like that between a mother and child) is the source of self-sacrifice on the part of the mother. The tears of the patriot are intimately connected to his willingness to fight for the flag.

These two factors will have devastating effects on the student and on the society. The student will have cut himself off from the possibility of “having certain experiences which thinkers of more authority than [he] have held to be generous, fruitful, and humane” (23). The society in which he lives, which has promoted and celebrated this type of modern education, will be in an ironically broken state:

And all the time—such is the tragi-comedy of our situation—we continue to clamour for those very qualities we are rendering impossible. You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more ‘drive,’ or dynamism, or self-sacrifice, or ‘creativity.’ In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are
shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful. (36–37)

In highlighting “men without chests,” Lewis is not merely lamenting the loss of virtues like courage, fidelity, and sacrifice. For he knows that nature abhors a vacuum, and in the absence of these virtues, men will turn elsewhere to find meaning and purpose.

The Appeal to Instinct and the Rebellion of Branches against the Tree

Lewis rejects the notion that those who are debunking “traditional values” are themselves value-less. “A great many of those who ‘debunk’ traditional or (as they would say) ‘sentimental’ values have in the background values of their own which they believe to be immune from the debunking process” (43). Indeed, Lewis contends that these “skeptics” would be well-served to be a little more skeptical about their own system of values. For, having rejected the Tao (Lewis’s word for the God-given order of the world and its expressions in Natural Law and Traditional Morality), these innovators simply end up elevating “Instinct” to an ultimate value.

The difficulty with obeying “Instinct” is threefold. First, Instinct is just a word for phenomena that we can’t explain (“to say that migratory birds find their way by instinct is only to say that we do not know how migratory birds find their way,” 46). In this sense, appeals to Instinct plant our feet firmly in mid-air. Second, “telling us to obey instinct is like telling us to obey ‘people.’ People say different things; so do instincts. Our instincts are at war” (49). Finally, if we dive further into this appeal to Instinct, we discover that these innovators are borrowing from Traditional Morality in order to attack Traditional Morality. As Lewis says, this “is a rebellion of the branches against the tree: if the rebels could succeed they would find that they had destroyed themselves” (56).
The Rejection of Value and the Attempt to Conquer Nature

Finally, faced with such a self-contradiction, the innovators are forced to take one more step. Rather than attempting to separate fact and value and subsequently elevate Instinct as an ultimate value, they can simply reject the concept of “value” altogether. In the place of ultimate values, they substitute what has become a near-obsession in the modern world: Man’s conquest of Nature through science and technology. Space limits my ability to unpack Lewis’s analysis of this phenomenon, so I will simply restate his two conclusions:

First, “Man’s conquest of Nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men” (69). The reason is simply that the attempt to conquer Nature must culminate in the conquest of human nature. In other words, ultimately these innovators (which Lewis dubs “Conditioners”) have as their aim the refashioning of Mankind. But in order to remake Mankind, they must relinquish their stake in it, stepping outside the obligations that are derived from something above Man (namely, God) and the ties that bind men together in order to guide and condition the remaining men into whatever image they please.

Second, having stepped outside of the God-given order of the world that stands over and above all men, these Conditioners cease to be men at all (at least in the traditional sense of the word). “Man’s final conquest has proved to be the abolition of Man” (74). Indeed, “At the moment, then, of Man’s victory over Nature, we find the whole human race subjected to some individual men, and those individuals subjected to that in themselves which is purely ‘natural’—to their irrational impulses. Nature, untrammeled by values, rules the Conditioners and, through them, all humanity. Man’s conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature’s conquest of Man.”
To summarize, Lewis sees the progression like this: 1) the marginalization of value statements leads to 2) the separation of fact from value, which leads to 3) the creation of men without chests, which leads to 4) the elevation of “instinct” as an ultimate value, which, because of its own self-contradictions, leads to 5) man’s attempt to conquer nature through science and technology and 6) the tyranny of the conditioners over mankind, which in the end is 7) the abolition of man.

Such is the trajectory of modern education, and it is a trajectory that Lewis is committed to reversing. His means? An older—and better—view of man and education.

LEWIS’S ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF EDUCATION

Having examined the form of education that Lewis rejects, we turn now to a brief summation of his own view. The following tenets are not the whole of Lewis’s educational paradigm, but instead form some of the non-negotiables that Lewis felt were under particular attack in his day.

The Tao

Genuine education embraces the Tao, the term Lewis adopts for the God-given order in the world. For Lewis, the Tao is a combination of the absoluteness of reality and the human way of life that conforms to this reality. In other words, reality simply is a certain way, and human beings are called to order their lives by the pattern of the Tao. Lewis identifies the Tao as Natural Law, Traditional Morality, and First Principles. He believed that some aspect of the Tao was present in all major ancient philosophies and religions (Christian, Platonic, Oriental, Stoic, etc). Biblical support for such an idea may be found in Romans 1, where what can be known about God (i.e., Absolute Reality) has been revealed to and perceived by
all men because God has made it known, so that men are without excuse.

**The Doctrine of Objective Value**

For Lewis, the common feature in all manifestations of the *Tao* is the doctrine of objective value:

Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could *merit* our approval or disapproval, our reverence, or our contempt. (27–28)

It is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are. Those who know the *Tao* can hold that to call children delightful or old men venerable is not simply to record a psychological fact about our own parental or filial emotions at the moment, but to recognize a quality which *demands* a certain response from us whether we make it or not. (31)

In short, the “givenness” of the world—and in particular, the Ultimate Reality that stands behind it—means that when we are confronted with various aspects of reality, we are obligated to respond with certain rational and emotional reactions. What’s more, the doctrine of objective value is absolutely essential for human flourishing, both as individuals and in societies. “Only the *Tao* provides a common human law of action which can overarch rulers and ruled alike. A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery” (81).
The Principle of Proportionate Regard

But it’s not enough to simply feel *something* in response to the objective reality of the world. You must also feel rightly and *proportionately* to the way the world is.

“Can you be righteous,” asks Traherne, “unless you be just in rendering to things their due esteem? All things were made to be yours and you were made to prize them according to their value?”…St. Augustine defines virtue as *ordo amoris*, the ordinate condition of the affections in which every object is accorded that kind and degree of love which is appropriate to it. Aristotle says that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought. (28–29)

These three realities form the foundation of true education. They also shape the aim of education.

For those within [the *Tao*], the task is to train in the pupil those responses which are themselves appropriate…. (32)

The little human animal will not at first have the right responses. It must be trained to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likeable, disgusting, and hateful. (32)

Following Plato, Lewis believed that we ought to initiate the young into these right responses, even before they are able to rationally understand or explain what they are feeling. The goal of such inculcation of right responses is that, when a child raised in this way grows up and encounters Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, he will welcome them with open arms, because he has been prepared for, and indeed, resembles them already.

Which brings us, finally, to the function of the Narnian stories in Lewis’s vision of education. The Narnian stories display through imaginative fiction and fairy tale *the way that the world really is*. 
Here is courage and bravery in its shining glory. Here is honesty and truth-telling in its simplicity and profundity. Here is treachery in all its ugliness. Here is the face of Evil. Here also is the face of Good. A child (or adult) who lives in such stories will have developed the patterns of thought and affection that will be well-prepared to embrace the True, the Good, and the Beautiful (that is, to embrace Jesus Christ) when he finally encounters them (Him!). Like John the Baptist, Lewis and his cast of Narnians will have prepared the way.

BACK TO THE BUBBLING

It is this vision of education and discipleship that Lewis the Man brought to bear when he considered the images of a faun, a witch, and a lion that were bubbling into a fairy tale. He began to recognize the potency that such stories might have for his readers.

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which paralyzed much of my own religion since childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But suppose casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past the watchful dragons? I thought one could.18

This paragraph can give us great insight in how we ought to read the Narnian stories. We ought not begin by trying to identify every Christian correspondence or layer of meaning. We must not short-circuit the shaping process. Instead (and this is especially important
when introducing children to the stories) we ought to first immerse ourselves in the stories as stories. We must learn to trek across the Narnian countryside, swim in the Narnian seas, distinguish Calormenes from Archenlanders, and navigate the etiquette of centaurs (it’s a very serious thing to invite a centaur to dinner; they have two stomachs after all). Indeed, we must learn to breathe Narnian air, a metaphor that Lewis uses elsewhere to describe what it means to come to know God. Then, having learned our Narnian stars and feasted at Cair Paravel—in other words, once we’ve stolen past the watchful dragons—we can then turn our attention to the deeper, Christian layers of meaning, the textures of the story that have bubbled up from Lewis’s mind.

Indeed, as Aslan says to Lucy on one occasion, “This was the very reason you were brought into Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you might know me better there.”
The presence of magic in the Chronicles has been cause for concern among some Christian parents. They wonder whether exposing young children to stories containing magic will awaken a desire in them to pursue something that the Bible has forbidden. For some parents, this concern rises to the level of a conviction, and they shield their kids from any fiction (including the Chronicles) that portrays magic in a positive light. Even parents who don’t forbid the Chronicles may wonder how to think rightly and biblically about the presence of magic throughout Lewis’s stories. The aim of this chapter is to provide a brief overview of what the Bible says about magic and then a quick look at Lewis’s use of magic in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.*

First, the Bible teaches that magic is real. Simon the Magician amazed the people of Samaria with his magic (Acts 8:9–11). In Isaiah, God acknowledges “the great power” of the enchantments of the sorcerers of Egypt (47:9). The Egyptian sorcerers are able to duplicate the signs and wonders of Moses and Aaron by “their secret arts”: staffs into serpents (Ex. 7:11–12), the Nile into blood
(7:22), and the plague of frogs (8:7). So we ought not think of all magic as simply sleight of hand or eye-tricking illusions. Magic is a real feature of the world that God has made.

Second, the Bible forbids sorcery, fortune-telling, divination, and the interpretation of omens (Ex. 22:18; Deut. 18:10). Such witchcraft is often linked to other sins: idolatry (2 Kings 9:22; Rev. 21:8), sexual immorality (Mal. 3:5), and child-sacrifice (2 Chron. 33:6). The Bible is clear that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19–21; Rev. 21:8; 22:15).

Third, despite these prohibitions, faithful believers are numbered among the magicians in Gentile courts. Joseph is called to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams when his own magicians fail (Gen. 41:8, 14–36). Daniel and his three friends are numbered among the magicians and enchanters of Babylon (Dan. 1:20). Indeed, Daniel is the “chief of the magicians” (Dan. 4:9, 5:11). Of course, both Joseph and Daniel are successful as wise men and magicians because God reveals to them the interpretation of dreams and gives them wisdom and understanding (Gen. 41:16; Dan. 2:28–30). In addition to these men, the magi who bring gifts to baby Jesus do so because of their astrological efforts in following the star of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1–12). The Semitic root *magi* is where we get our English word *magic*.

Beyond this, if we adopt the standard dictionary definition of magic as “the power of apparently influencing the course of events by using mysterious or supernatural forces,” then we might think of miracles and signs and wonders as a kind of “magic.” The magical combat between Moses and the magicians of Egypt would indicate as much. A similar power encounter occurs in Acts 13. Elymas the magician is a Jewish false prophet who opposed the apostles and sought to turn people away from the faith (Acts 13:6–8). Paul, filled with Holy Spirit, calls down the power of God on that “son of the devil” and “enemy of all righteousness,” inflicting him with blindness (13:9–11). The difference between the dark magic of the Egyptian magicians and Elymas on the one hand, and Moses and Paul on the other was not what they were doing, but the source of their
power. Indeed, what distinguishes sorcery, witchcraft, and black magic from godly miracles, signs, and “white magic” is the source of power (God or demons) and the purpose of the power (worshiping the true God and serving people, or worshiping idols and dominating people). Thus, the Bible is filled with stories of prophets and men of God doing what can best be described as magic: magic bread from heaven, floating ax heads, walking on water, restoring sight using spit and mud, handkerchiefs that heal sickness, a virgin birth, and resurrection from the dead.

_Narnian Magic_

So then, according to the Bible, the power of influencing the world using supernatural forces (i.e., magic) is very real. When used to lead people into idolatry and sin or to oppress and enslave others, it is forbidden. On the other hand, when we acknowledge we ultimately do not control God and his power, and we seek power from the hand of God for the good of people, God’s miraculous signs and wonders through us might be described as a kind of good magic.

When we come to _The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe_, we see Lewis operating within these biblical categories. Black magic is certainly on display in the Witch’s enchantment of Narnia: “She has made a magic so that it is always winter in Narnia—always winter but it never gets to Christmas” (Ch. 4). The Witch conjures enchanted and addicting Turkish Delight from a small bottle, and with her wand she is able to turn people into stone statues.

At the same time, there is a kind of white magic in the stories: a magic wardrobe that is a doorway to another world as well as a “magic” in the house that came to life and chased the children into Narnia (Ch. 5). Such magic is mysterious and beyond the children’s ability to control; they’re unable to enter Narnia at will.

Beyond this general magic, there is Aslan’s enchantment-breaking magic: When Aslan is on the move, the Witch’s magic weakens and Father Christmas is able to enter Narnia (Ch. 10). Aslan’s
arrival brings an end to the Witch’s enslaving spell and the happy onset of spring. Aslan restores the stone statues to life through his powerful, life-giving breath.

So in Narnia, as in the real world, there is black magic, which enslaves and oppresses people, as well as white magic, which liberates and restores people. Black magic is power over others for the purpose of harm. White magic is power under divine authority for the good of others. But there are yet other forms of magic in Narnia, which Lewis employs to teach us something profound about our own world.

**Deep Magic Triumphs**

After Aslan’s army rescues Edmund from the White Witch, the Witch approaches Aslan and identifies Edmund as a traitor, who lawfully belongs to the Witch and can be put to death for his treachery (Ch. 13). She bases her claim on the Deep Magic, a Magic that is written on the Stone Table and “engraved on the scepter of the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea,” a Magic that the Emperor placed in Narnia at the very beginning. Deep Magic is the Law of the Emperor, the expression of his character, and upholding it is essential for the existence and integrity of Narnia. The very suggestion that Aslan work against the Emperor’s Magic is met with a shock and a disapproving frown, so that “nobody ever made that suggestion to him again.”

For Lewis, the Deep Magic is the Moral Law—what in *The Abolition of Man* he calls the *Tao*—the fundamental moral framework upon which the universe is based. It is a reflection of God’s own harmonious order, the walls around the City that make life inside possible. As G. K. Chesterton reminded us, the reason that order and structure exist in the world is so that good things can run wild.

But, in this case (to modify the apostle Paul), the Deep Magic that promised life proved to be death for Edmund. Or, at least, it appeared that way. But while Aslan will not work against the Em-
Deep Magic, and Deeper | 39

peror’s Magic, all is not lost for the doomed young boy. Aslan shows a better, and more difficult, way. For though the Deep Magic does demand blood for treachery, it also allows substitutes, and Aslan willingly gives himself for Edmund so that the Witch renounces her claim on the boy and kills Aslan in his place. Thus, Deep Magic is satisfied.

But even this Deep Magic doesn’t exhaust Lewis’s vision of the world. There is a Deeper Magic still, and it rises with the dawn on the morning after Aslan’s sacrifice. The Stone Table breaks in two and Aslan’s body is gone. Confused, Susan cries out,

“What does it mean? Is it more magic?”

“Yes!” said a great voice behind their backs. “It is more magic.”

“It means,” said Aslan, “that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward.” (Ch. 15)

This is the true picture of magic in Narnia, and it’s magic is mirrored in our own world. Conflicts of power and enchantments are real, and they matter. But beneath the power encounters and magical warfare is Deep Magic and Deeper, the inflexible solidity of the Moral Law and the breath-taking beauty of Sacrificial Love. Lewis reminds us that substitution is a kind of magic, a mysterious and supernatural force that transforms the world, overcoming every form of treachery. In Narnia, as in our world, Deeper Magic triumphs over Deep Magic. Through sacrifice, Mercy triumphs over Judgment.