

Theology and children's literature: understanding the magician's nephew



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Though written primarily for a young audience, C. S. Lewis's fiction overflows with Biblical allusion and religious imagery. A Lewis narrative, indeed, becomes a vessel through which he is able to infuse his writing with his own complex theological ideology. This is evident in the events of his children's novel *The Magician's Nephew*; through the use of Biblical parallels woven throughout this work of fiction, Lewis offers a window into his own perceptions of God as well as the nature of evil.

Chapter Nine of *The Magician's Nephew*, titled "The Founding of Narnia," serves in many ways as an allegory for the creation story found in Genesis. Aslan, who serves as a symbol of God within the world of Narnia, sings creation into life and eventually appoints the Cabby and his wife as the King and Queen of Narnia—a parallel to the appointment of Adam and Eve as the rulers over the rest of the animals in the world. However, beyond simply outlining parallels between the founding of Narnia and the creation story, Lewis uses these parallels as a way of making rather bold yet subtle claims about the nature of God. Lewis does not simply leave Aslan as the creator; he bestows him with a character that reflects Lewis's own understanding of who God is. For instance, his selection of the Cabby to rule implies far more than the creation of a generic man to fill the role of Adam; Aslan is illustrating his preference for choosing the humble and the seemingly unqualified to lead. The Cabby himself acknowledges his seeming incompetence for the rule of king, for he replies to Aslan's declaration with the remark, "Begging your pardon, sir... but I ain't no sort of chap for a job like that. I never 'ad much eddycation, you see" (151). This is a clear example of the Christian understanding of God's "choosing the weak to lead

the strong." Through this, Lewis is suggesting a God that goes against people's expectations and raises up the humble and meek rather than those that appear to be the best suited for power.

As the characters continue to interact with the Lion, Lewis goes on to paint the character of Aslan—and therefore, the character of God—a proponent of forgiveness and redemption. He explains that he has chosen Cabby and his wife as the King and Queen of Narnia because he wishes that, "as Adam's race has done the harm, Adam's race shall help to heal it" (148). Instead of expelling man from Narnia as the nefarious foreigners who brought evil to a newly created world, he uses them, despite their flaws, to help protect and restore the now broken world. Lewis's choice to portray Aslan in this way speaks volumes about his own conception of the nature of God. To further this idea, Lewis also strays slightly from the story of Genesis to allow Digory two encounters with symbols of Eden; one in which he, like Adam and Eve, gives into temptation, and another in which Aslan, in full knowledge of Digory's previous failure, gives him an opportunity for redemption by sending him to fetch the apple. In both of these instances, Lewis is making a rather bold assertion about the nature of God as being one of second chances and redemption rather than portraying a God who is wrathful in response to man's sinfulness.

Lewis is also suggesting a very particular view of God in the scene where Digory asks Aslan for a cure for his mother. Lewis writes that, "great shining tears stood in the Lion's eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory's own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself" (154). Here, Lewis is <https://assignbuster.com/theology-and-childrens-literature-understanding-the-magicians-nephew/>

suggesting of God an unparalleled capacity for grief and empathy at the sorrows of man. Aslan's tears convey Lewis's belief in God as a personal God who feels the pain of his people, perhaps even more than the people themselves.

The final chapters of *The Magician's Nephew*, beyond reflecting Lewis's views on the character of God, has roots in Lewis's own individual relationship to him. When Digory approaches Aslan, he does so with the sole intention of seeking a cure for his mother, much in the same way that Lewis himself does as a child. In *Surprised by Joy*, he recounts "what some...might regard as [his] first religious experience" (20), in which he turns to prayer to produce a miracle that will cure his dying mother. Lewis writes that he, "approached God, or my idea of God, without love, without awe, without even fear. He was, in my mental picture of this miracle, to appear neither as a Savior nor as a Judge, but merely as a magician..." (21). Digory, similarly, first approaches Aslan with an almost identical motivation. Digory tells Polly, "I must speak to him... It's about Mother. If anyone could give me something that would do her good, it would be him" (131). Digory, prior to speaking to Aslan, has no desire to interact with him beyond achieving a cure for his mother. In this way, Lewis uses Digory almost as a mirror image of himself, and through him, he illustrates the learning of a lesson that Lewis himself did not realize until much later in his life. When Digory finally comes face to face with the Lion, Digory finds that he is "much bigger and more beautiful and more brightly golden and more terrible than he had thought" (146). Here, he begins to develop a capacity for the kind of awe and fear that both Lewis and

Digory initially have, and “ realize[s] in time that the Lion was not at all the sort of person one could try to make bargains with” (153).

Lewis also uses the latter half of this story to grant insight into his view of God in relation to the nature of evil, largely through the character of Uncle Andrew. For example, when Aslan begins his song, Lewis writes that Uncle Andrew’s “ shoulders were stooped and his knees shook. He was not liking the Voice” (108), and goes on to describe how Uncle Andrew talked himself out of being able to hear the animal’s voices as speech, remarking that, “ the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed” (137). Here, Lewis is implying both that evil cannot stand to be in the presence of good, and that to distance oneself from truth and God is a choice rather than a punishment for sin. Uncle Andrew becomes unable to hear and understand Aslan not because Aslan made it so, but because Uncle Andrew talked himself into a false perception of the truth until he was wholly unable to hear things as they truly were. Aslan does not, at any point in the story, bring punishment upon Uncle Andrew; instead, he remarks, “ I cannot comfort him either; he has made himself unable to hear my voice... Oh Adam’s sons, how cleverly you defend yourselves against all that might do you good! But I will give him the only gift he is still able to receive” (185). Through this remark, Lewis is suggesting that man is at fault for his inability to hear God, and that God gives to whatever extent a person can receive.