

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

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Occasional Essays  
and Other Stuff  
for Christian Students

Presented by the  
President of

Central Baptist  
Theological Seminary  
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life’s urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today’s Christian students to become tomorrow’s Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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## The Christian and Fantastic Literature

### Part Six

#### The Chronicles of Narnia

In any competition for the greatest children’s fiction of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, one of the contenders is certain to be *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis. Written around mid-century, the seven volumes of the *Chronicles* have become one of the best-loved series ever written for children. Adult readers find it almost as appealing as children do.

Read simply as stories, these books can fire almost anyone’s imagination. They are filled with adventurous exploits and fantastic creatures. The plots are well designed and the characters are both believable and memorable.

The protagonist of these stories is Aslan. Aslan, as any Lewis aficionado knows, is a lion. In fact, he is *the* lion—and he is not tame. Lewis intended Aslan to be a metaphor for Christ. This allowed Lewis to use the character and activities of Aslan in the world of Narnia to illustrate the person and work of Christ in the real world.

The metaphor works well. Lewis used Aslan to explore a number of serious issues such as the nature of freedom, the relationship between justice and mercy, the problem of evil, and the nature of faith. Of particular importance is Lewis’s treatment of substitutionary atonement, depicted when Aslan takes the place of the traitor Edmund and is sacrificed on the Stone Table (a clear allusion to the Mosaic Law). The episode is a masterful and unforgettable exercise of the moral imagination. Lewis used it for two purposes: first, to help his readers understand the

notion of a substitutionary sacrifice and, second, to move his readers to respond to the sacrifice in an ordinate way.

This means that *The Chronicles of Narnia* does what fantastic fiction is supposed to do. On the surface, these are lighthearted children's adventures. Just beneath the surface, however, runs a deep aquifer of profound meaning.

Some have objected to Lewis's tales on the grounds that they contain magic, witches, and wizards. The objection is ill-conceived. The magic of the *Chronicles* operates according to the laws and principles of Lewis's invented world. It is not the same thing as the real witchcraft that the Bible condemns. At this point, the *Chronicles* must be judged according to their own *usus loquendi*. In concept, Lewis draws a clear distinction between divinely caused supernatural events and those that arise from other sources. The former he recognizes as good and right (indeed, his work turns out to be an apologetic for the supernatural). The latter are invariably the cause of much harm within his narrative.

*Narnia* is not just a story. It is a Christian apologetic, perhaps the best one that Lewis ever wrote. It is not, however, a system of evidences, for the simple reason that Lewis was no evidentialist. For Lewis, no amount of evidence could compel belief in God. The personal encounter with God in Christ was what would convince the sinner. Lewis wrote so as to help make Christ present to the mind. His tool for doing so was the imagination. Lewis was quite serious about helping his readers to imagine who Christ must be.

This is not to say that the story is without flaws. In fact, it has two defects that sharply limit its usefulness. A discussion of the *Chronicles* would not be complete without mentioning these defects.

First, Lewis sometimes puts profane language in the mouths of his characters. To be fair, Lewis would probably not have regarded these uses as profanity. Most likely he would have argued that the language was not gratuitous and, therefore, was not speaking in vain of holy things. This is not convincing, however. A certain number of oaths serve no apparent purpose other than to add color to the story. They do cross the line into profanity, which is especially disappointing in stories that were written for children. Even though these occasions are rare, once is too often.

Second, some of Lewis's theology was aberrant, and one or two of his quirks do show up in these stories. Probably the most serious is Lewis's inclusivism. In the final story (*The Last Battle*) a young worshipper of the demon Tash is admitted into the "true Narnia" — Lewis's version of heaven. Lewis uses Aslan to explain that whatever worship was offered sincerely to Tash was really offered to Aslan. Such episodes reflect one of the errors of Lewis's theology, namely, that all sincere people can be received by God, even if they have not received the truth of Christianity. This is not a minor error.

The error is compounded precisely because the fantastic presentation makes it seem appealing and palatable. The flaw is magnified further by being offered to children who cannot be expected to recognize it for what it is. Lewis's story has the power to capture the child's imagination and to render it sympathetic to inclusivism before the child ever develops the capacity to think critically about the issue. This is a serious matter.

Are these defects grave enough to place the *Chronicles* off limits? Probably not. While serious, they are isolated. Adults will be able to spot them. Children can have knowledgeable adults point out these defects and discuss them.

One way for children to gain what is valuable from *The Chronicles of Narnia* while avoiding the objectionable is to hear it read aloud by a spiritually sensitive adult, preferably a parent. Such an adult can simply omit reading the profanities and can take time to discuss the errors that occasionally crop up. In fact, this kind of discussion is useful throughout the reading of the entire series. It provides an opportunity to help children understand more clearly the many references to spiritual realities that Lewis includes.

Was it Lewis who opined that no book is worth reading at eight that is not worth reading at eighty? Judged by this standard, *The Chronicles of Narnia* is eminently worthwhile. The more mature the reader, the richer the payoff in the reading. With qualifications, the series is to be recommended. In a few places it is bad, but where it is good, it is very, very good. ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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