HEAVEN IN C. S. LEWIS’S COSMOLOGY: THE REWRITING OF REVELATION 21. 1-22. 5 IN THE LAST BATTLE

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Abstract

In the last chapter of the last volume of The Chronicles of Narnia, the protagonists arrive in Aslan’s country, Narnia’s equivalent of Heaven, or at least its outskirts. C. S. Lewis’s portrayal of this imaginary world is of course inspired by the Bible, and by previous literary depictions such as Bunyan’s Celestial City in The Pilgrim’s Progress or Dante’s Paradiso in The Divine Comedy, but it also has a unique quality. Although on the surface Lewis sometimes seems to contradict the Biblical hypotext, he never betrays the spirit of Chapters 21-22 of the Book of Revelation. Indeed, he achieves the masterstroke of fleshing out this highly symbolic description of the new Jerusalem by presenting his young readers with a vivid and concrete picture, reassuring those of them who might dread being bored in paradise. The way in which he represents Heaven is arguably one of his most successful attempts at overcoming children’s potential misgivings and he accomplishes it by addressing the reader’s imagination through myth.

Keywords: Narnia, The Last Battle, Heaven, Paradise, Biblical intertextuality, Revelation.

INTRODUCTION

To offer an appealing depiction of the Biblical heaven is a challenging task, even more so when it is destined for children. Few authors have attempted to describe paradise and, among those who have tried, even fewer have done so successfully.
Dante’s *Divine Comedy* comes to mind as the best and most famous example. In the English language, *Paradise Lost* is another instance. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, several authors have attempted to create their own versions of paradise, both before and after C. S. Lewis. However, very few, if any, have managed to make the reader want to enter the heaven they described. Arguably, in Lyle Smith’s words, “Lewis’s imaginative realizations of Heaven are the best and most convincing to appear in English literature since John Milton’s *Paradise Lost.*” (199) So why is writing about heaven successfully so difficult and how did Lewis achieve it?

There are several reasons why depicting heaven is hard: Lewis was aware of them and he mentioned them in his writings.

One reason is that heaven is a place of perfection. Since we ourselves are flawed beings, we find it far easier to speak of an imperfect world than of a perfect one. In *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis mentioned the fact that Satan was “the best drawn of Milton’s characters” (100) for precisely this reason, and that when we try to draw a character better than ourselves, “[h]is whole inner landscape is one we have never seen, and when we guess it we blunder.” (101) In a letter dated March 15th 1954, he also confided in Harry Blamires about his struggles while writing *The Screwtape Letters*, a correspondence between two demons on the best way to tempt a human being. Lewis confessed that he “had thought of having letters to the guardian angel from an archangel side by side with those from Screwtape to Wormwood” but had “funked it” (*Collected Letters* 440).

Lewis further argued that we find it challenging to imagine a “spiritual body” since, as he wrote in *Miracles*, “spirit and nature have quarrelled in us” (163). Because of our fallen nature, we tend to associate the body with entropy, decay, and death, and we cannot reconcile this concept with that of spiritual life, that is, eternity spent in adoration in the presence of God.

In spite of these difficulties, Lewis undertook the task of depicting Aslan’s country to his young readers when he got to the seventh volume of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In the closing chapters of *The Last Battle*, which describes the end of Narnia and the beginning of a new life in a new world, Lewis drew inspiration from the Biblical text while at the same time trying to find new images which would be more appealing to children and, by addressing their imagination through myth, to present them with a concrete and attractive picture of Heaven.

**HOW TO MAKE A PERFECT WORLD ATTRACTIVE**

In the book of Revelation, John has not yet joined the world of the dead, but is given a celestial vision to help him depict the afterlife. In order to describe the indescribable, he resorts to a very symbolic language. Lewis
understood that the Biblical description of a perfect life in the New Jerusalem had to be taken symbolically and he even made fun of people who pretended otherwise in *Mere Christianity*:

All the scriptural imagery (harps, crowns, gold, etc.) is, of course, a merely symbolical attempt to express the inexpressible. Musical instruments are mentioned because for many people (not all) music is the thing known in the present life which most strongly suggests ecstasy and infinity. Crowns are mentioned to suggest the fact that those who are united with God in eternity share His splendour and power and joy. Gold is mentioned to suggest the timelessness of Heaven (gold does not rust) and the preciousness of it. People who take these symbols literally might as well think that when Christ told us to be like doves, He meant that we were to lay eggs. (137)

However, if Lewis felt no compassion for detractors, whom he described as “facetious people who try to make the Christian hope of ‘Heaven’ ridiculous by saying they do not want ‘to spend eternity playing harps’” (*Mere Christianity* 137), he understood that images have a major impact and that children, especially, might not find the idea of living in a dazzling metallic square-shaped city very alluring. So, in *The Last Battle*, he tried to retain the notions behind the symbols but adapted them in order to make them more engaging.

Both in the Book of Revelation and in *The Last Battle*, paradise contains urban and rural elements. However, whereas the emphasis is on the city in Revelation, it is on the garden in Lewis’s narration. As a Romantic inspired by Wordsworth, Lewis was not enthralled by cities, so he chose to have King Tirian and his friends arrive in a lush natural setting when they entered Aslan’s country through the stable door in Chapter 12 of *The Last Battle*.

In a chapter on “The Romance of the Rose” in *The Allegory of Love*, published in 1936, twenty years before *The Last Battle*, Lewis already welcomed Jean de Meun’s description of heaven as a “green park with its unearthly peace, its endless sunshine and fresh grass and grazing flocks” (153) and opposed it to previous attempts as “dull catalogues of jewellery and mass-singing” (153).

Nonetheless, Lewis’s depiction in *The Last Battle* bears resemblances with the golden city adorned with precious stones. Thus, the waterfall is “flashing like diamonds” (162). Once Jill swims up the waterfall with her friends, she goes up and up “with all kinds of reflected lights flashing at you from the water and all manner of coloured stones flashing through it” (163, emphasis mine). Once the group reach the garden, they notice “trees whose leaves looked like silver and their fruit like gold.” (165) When Lucy looks down over the wall of the garden, she spots “shining cliffs” (168). In Lewis’s rendition, the lexical field of brightness is present but it is mostly linked to Nature rather than to the artificial.
The Biblical text frequently refers to perfection in terms of absence, through the use of negative phrases. In the New Jerusalem, there will be no tears, no pain, no death, no illness (Rev 21. 4), no sea (21. 1), no night (21. 25), no sun, no moon (21. 23). Though some of those absences will be welcomed, others might be more difficult to imagine and to embrace. No one will complain if death, pain or illness disappear. However, some might miss natural elements we are used to on earth, as the sea, the sun, the moon or the night.

Aslan’s country contains Narnia, our world and much more, therefore, it also features seas and, though the group do not experience night time in the narrative, the reader may assume its existence, since the sun is still there. This could, at first sight, seem to challenge the Biblical text. However, it is to be understood symbolically. Biblicists have noticed that throughout the Bible, the sea is associated with chaos and evil (Brown).\(^1\) The same can be said of the night, which is often linked with spiritual darkness and opposed to light, as in the first Epistle of John: “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1. 5) As for the reference to the sun and the moon, they might be understood as possible stumbling blocks for people who were tempted to worship them as deities. So their absence could simply suggest that, in Heaven, God will have no rival in the heart of his worshippers (Guthrie). It does not necessarily mean that in John’s vision of paradise, there literally was no sea, no night, no sun or moon. Consequently, Lewis’s paradise does not contradict Revelation as far as the spirit of the text is concerned.

In his essay “Transposition”, Lewis mentioned a widespread fear among believers due to the fact that “any adult and philosophically respectable notion we can form of Heaven is forced to deny of that state most of the things our nature desires” (274). Therefore, “our notion of Heaven involves perpetual negations; no food, no drink, no sex, no movement, no mirth, no events, no time, no art.” (274) He also suggested a solution to this problem: “We must believe—and therefore in some degree imagine—that every negation will be only the reverse side of a fulfilling.” (275)

In *The Last Battle*, we find an application of this theory as the negations are transformed into positive elements. Thus, as Peter Schakel writes, the characters find themselves

in a huge land of light and joy. It is a place of youth (as Jill puts it, the Professor and Aunt Polly aren’t “much older than we are here”), of health (Edmund’s knee ceases to be sore and the Professor suddenly feels unstiffened), of abundance (they have crowns on their heads and are in glittering clothes), and of freedom (it feels

\(^1\) As for the literary critic Northrop Frye, he suggested in *The Great Code* that the sea in Revelation 21. 1 refers to the Dead Sea and thus to death (166).
like “the country where everything is allowed”). And it is a place of beauty and of bounty . . . (2010).

Gold is not as present as in the New Jerusalem, but there are still golden gates and crowns and the whole group are dressed as kings and queens. Here Lewis “increases the emotional appeal by drawing on fairy tale tropes” (Coley 101) which speak to the child and to the child in us.

Another reason why perfection might sound dull is that it conjures up a static image to us, leaving no place for development, progress, movement. The idea that perfection might be compatible with a degree of improvement is suggested in Hebrews 5. 8, referring to Jesus Christ’s time on earth: “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” As for Lewis, he saw no contradiction in the association of perfection and improvement, as Aslan’s rallying cry makes clear: “Come further in! Come further up!” (149) Lewis’s cosmology was influenced by Dante’s vision of paradise in The Divine Comedy. In Paradise, the narrator goes up and up through the nine circles of heaven till he reaches God. In Lewis’s narrative, the characters keep going up and they also discover that the further they go in, the bigger the world gets: this is true of the stable which is their entry door to the after-life (129), but also of the “garden of Eden” they come across during their journey (167). In Mr Tumnus’s words, it is “like an onion: except that as you go in and in, each circle is larger than the last.” (169) As Joe R. Christopher points out, the image is not exactly the same as in Paradise, but it follows the same principle:

Dante’s description in Il Paradiso of angels—the Intelligences of the spheres—circling God (Canto 28) does not make the inside of something larger than the outside; but it does suggest an inversion of what had been experienced to that point: God is not only outside of the Heavens, beyond the stars, but He is also the center of the universe, the point about which everything revolves. In short, Lewis’s Garden, like Dante’s solar system and stars, is ultimately paradoxical. (72)

Just like the New Jerusalem contains elements which link it to the garden of Eden—water and the tree of life—, the characters come across the garden where Digory was tempted by the Witch in The Magician’s Nephew. However, the idea of improvement is suggested again by the fact that the silver apples have now become golden—gold being a more precious metal than silver.

2 The idea of improvement is also present in Revelation: “In the final stage of the vision, we discover Jerusalem is a garden city, glorified Eden. She is not a “restored” Eden; creation has advanced beyond Eden. She is not a return to first things; first things have passed. But she is not entirely other than the first things either.” (Leithart 400).
The very last words of the narrative emphasize the idea that the end is really a beginning and that improvement is still possible:

All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before. (172)

To children who have just finished reading wonderful adventures which made them dream they could go to Narnia, the “great Story” metaphor will certainly seem engaging.

HOW TO RECONCILE BODY AND SPIRIT: “A NEW EARTH” AS WELL AS A “NEW HEAVEN”

In his youth, while experiencing the horrors of the war during the battles of the Somme, Lewis decided that matter was evil and that only the spirit was good. When he embraced Christianity, he realised that this was a Platonic idea rather than a Christian one. In Miracles, he explains why the concept of a spiritual body seems paradoxical to us. He believes that, because of the Fall, our bodies do not obey us as they used to. But Jesus’s miracles give us a foretaste of what it will be to regain control over them: “In the Walking on the Water, we see the relations of spirit and Nature so altered that Nature can be made to do whatever spirit pleases.” (154) This is even truer of what Lewis called “The miracles of the new creation”, like the fact that Jesus’s resurrected body could go through walls and disappear at will.

Lewis illustrated this by having the group of friends run as fast as they liked without being out of breath, be such wonderful swimmers that they could swim up a huge waterfall without being “smashed to pieces by the terrible weight of the water” (163), and be able to see very far away by adjusting their eyesight (169).

The narrator remarks on the pleasure of having super powers: “If one could run without getting tired, I don’t think one would often want to do anything else.” (162) He thus appeals both to children who are fond of stories of super

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3 In The Phaedrus, Plato describes the body as the prison of the soul, who longs to go back to heaven where it originally came from.

4 The whole idea of travelling upwards at great speed without effort could come from The Pilgrim’s Progress: “the City stood upon a mighty hill, but the pilgrims went up that hill with ease” (112) although the reason given by Bunyan is that they are being helped by angels.
heroes, and even fonder of them when the protagonist first appears to be a totally average person, and to adults who might have health issues and wish their bodies were not ageing and getting weaker.

In his vision, John “saw a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21.1). According to French historian Jean Delumeau, in the Middle Ages and up to the Renaissance, painters and writers tended to take this verse literally and therefore created very material depictions of paradise. However, with the progress of science, heaven emptied itself and became a “utopia”, in the sense Thomas More, who coined this word, gave to it, that is to say a “non-place” (467).

Without being naïve, Lewis refused the idea that heaven was just “a state of mind” (Miracles 165). To him, that was what every great religion except Christianity would say. But Christian teaching by saying that God made the world and called it good teaches that Nature or environment cannot simply be irrelevant to spiritual beatitude . . . By teaching the resurrection of the body, it teaches that Heaven is not merely a state of the spirit but a state of the body as well: and therefore a state of Nature as a whole. (Miracles 165)

As a consequence, throughout The Chronicles of Narnia, simple bodily pleasures like eating or drinking or admiring a flower or listening to a bird’s song are being enjoyed by good characters, while evil ones, like the White Witch, reject them. Once in Aslan’s country, the senses do not disappear, on the contrary, they are magnified. The fruit they discover there is “such as no one has seen in our world” (129), fruits compared with which “the freshest grapefruit you’ve ever eaten was dull, and the juiciest orange was dry” (129).

When the group arrive in the garden on top of the hill, wondering whether they will be allowed to enter, “a great horn, wonderfully loud and sweet, blew from somewhere inside that walled garden, and the gates swung open.” (165) A little bit later, “all of them passed in through the golden gates, into the delicious smell that blew towards them out of that garden and into the cool mixture of sunlight and shadow under the trees, walking on springy turf that was all dotted with white flowers.” (167) As in Medieval descriptions of paradise on earth, all the senses are awakened.

5 For more details on this topic, see author, 2011, pp. 133-135.
6 Milton’s garden in Paradise Lost is also situated on a hill.
7 For example, in Josaphat’s vision of paradise of The Golden Legend: “. . . he was brought into a meadow arrayed with fair flowers, there where the leaves of the trees demened a sweet sound which came by a wind agreeable, and thereout issued a marvellous odour, and the fruit was right fair to see, and right delectable of taste, and there were seats of gold and silver and precisely adorned, and right clear water ran thereby. And after that, he
Not having to give up the idea of earth altogether also implies being able to be reunited with old friends, including non-human ones. As Lord Digory tells them, “All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia through the Door.” (159)

When the group arrive at the golden gates, they are greeted by all the famous people and creatures of ancient Narnia—Reepicheep the mouse (165), Fledge the flying horse (167), Mr Tumnus the faun (168)—just as Christian meets famous people from the Old Testament in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Their reactions vary. For instance, when meeting Reepicheep, the Pevensies are delighted to see their old friend again, while Tirian is awestruck about being face to face with a great hero. Later, when the young king meets his deceased father, it brings back happy childhood memories.9

The passage combines two attractions. On the one hand, being reunited with loved ones has always been part of the appeal of heaven, for children and adults alike. The fact that the Pevensie children meet their parents at the end of the story also fulfils the desire of the children who are happy to live great adventures away from their parents—absent parents being a trope of children’s literature—10 but are equally happy to find that they are still present in their lives once the story is over. On the other hand, the readers’ appetite for encountering characters they loved from previous books is also satisfied. This particular literary device is at the heart of the success of series, trilogies, etc.

In Lewis’s version of paradise, not only is matter present, but it is more “real” than matter as we know it on this earth. This idea, inspired from Plato’s theory of the forms, is especially prevalent in *The Great Divorce*, where the ghosts who arrive from the grey city, a foretaste of Hell, are so immaterial that they cannot bend even a blade of grass in what they discover to be an antechamber to Heaven. This is also true of Narnia. The Allegory of the Cave is strongly hinted at in several passages of the *Chronicles*, and in *The Last Battle* more than anywhere else. In Book 7 of *The Republic*, Plato describes a cave full of chained

entered into a city of which the walls were of fine gold, and shone by marvellous clearness, and saw in the air some that sang a song that never ear of mortal man heard like. And it was said: This is the place of blessed saints.” (Voragine) In Dante’s paradise, there are also a forest, a stream, a breeze, birds that sing, and flowers.

8 “Then I saw in my dream that the Shining Men bid them call at the Gate, the which, when they did, some looked from above over the Gate, to wit, Enoch, Moses, and Elijah, etc.” (Bunyan 215)

9 As for Jewel the unicorn, he is very shy in front of the mighty and noble winged horse Fledge, while Polly and Digory rush to kiss it (167).

10 Although in more recent books, this tends to be less true: “...parents and other adults, no longer bastions of authority to the same extent as in previous generations, may be drawn into the adventure as more or less equal participants with the children.” (Butler 225)
men who never see daylight, do not even suspect the existence of an outside world, and know only the shadows projected onto the wall thanks to the light of a fire behind them. Aslan alludes to this when he tells Lucy that she will never have to go back to “the Shadowlands” in reference to her earthly life (171). A little earlier, Professor Kirke had explicitly referred to the Greek philosopher when explaining the difference between the Narnia the children knew and the real one:

But that was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and always will be here: just as our world, England and all, is only a shadow or copy of something in Aslan’s real world . . . and of course it is different; as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream . . . It’s all in Plato, all in Plato: bless me, what do they teach them at these schools! (159-160).

By insisting that matter in itself is not evil and should therefore not be discarded and by revisiting Plato’s theory and shedding a Christian light on it, Lewis created a highly original vision of heaven, reversing the old fear of it being a place of immateriality and making it, on the contrary, a place so real that everything else pales in comparison.

CONCLUSION

The author of the book of Revelation attempts to “uncover, lift the veil”, which is the meaning of the Greek word “apocaluptein”. However, what he sees in his vision is impossible to describe with precision because it is beyond human comprehension.

Lewis was conscious of this impossibility and he made it clear at the end of The Last Battle: “the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them.” (171) In his essay “The Weight of Glory”, he showed the limits of his own creation by stating that “Heaven is, by definition, outside our experience . . . The scriptural picture of heaven is therefore just as symbolical as the picture which our desire, unaided, invents for itself; heaven is not really full of jewellery any more than it is really the beauty of Nature . . .” (100). It might help young readers to imagine a heaven like the one depicted in

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11 In Lewis’s works, Plato’s doctrines “are filtered through St. Paul, Augustine, the Florentine Neo-Platonists, and the Christian Humanists.” (Johnson and Houtman 75-87).
12 Hell is a place of immateriality in The Great Divorce. It also appears to be rather immaterial in Narnia, at least in the narrative, since the reader is told that the people who swerved to Aslan’s left “disappeared into a huge black shadow”, that “the children never saw them again”, and that “[the narrator doesn’t] know what became of them.” (144)
Narnia rather than the Biblical one, but in the end, it is just an image among others and we need to be “iconoclastic”.¹³

However, Lewis was also aware of the power of imagination, especially what he called “baptised” imagination, and he believed that what was impossible in the real world could be achieved through art, literature, and especially fantasy, or mythopoeia.

In an essay entitled “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said”, Lewis explained how he had been put off religion as a child. Although he did not begin with this aim in mind, while writing The Chronicles of Narnia, he suddenly realised that they could help children who had had the same experience:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told 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 to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by 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 those watchful dragons? I thought one could. (119-120)

To Lewis, the best way to make spiritual concepts—including those concerning the afterlife—“appear in their real potency” had to do with the literary genre of mythopoeia, in which he classified The Chronicles of Narnia as well as Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings. Commenting on his friend’s masterpiece in a review, Lewis argued that “by dipping [things] in myth, we see them more clearly.” (“Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings” 117) Other authors of fantasy agreed with him. American author Madeleine L’Engle, who was a great admirer of The Chronicles of Narnia, described them as “a fantasy world, a world which has more depths of reality to it than the daily world . . . ” (xiv) Critics also commented on

¹³ Lewis wrote about the necessity of being iconoclastic in A Grief Observed: “Images, I must suppose, have their use or they would not have been so popular. (It makes little difference whether they are pictures and statues outside the mind or imaginative constructions within it.) To me, however, their danger is more obvious. Images of the Holy easily become holy images—sacrosanct. My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? The Incarnation is the supreme example; it leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins. And most are offended by the iconoclasm; and blessed are those who are not. But the same thing happens in our private prayers. / All reality is iconoclastic.” (65-66).
the evocative power of Lewis’s fantasy. Peter Schakel wrote that “[Lewis’s] myth supplies not answers but experience of a larger existence than we can know cognitively. Such an experience touches depths the intellect cannot reach” (2002, 65).

It is no mean task to speak of another world, a place of perfection, where body and spirit are reconciled, a place one has never seen, when the only information one has about it is the highly symbolic Biblical text. In his depiction of heaven in The Last Battle, Lewis attempted to achieve this. In order to do so, he adapted the Apocalyptic imagery by changing the city into a rural landscape, by transforming the negations into positive notions and by alluding to the possibility of eternal improvement. He also imagined perfect bodies, that could control nature rather than being controlled by it, he drew a very sensuous paradise, and one where it is possible to be reunited with loved ones and famous people from the past—human and non-human alike. Inspired by Plato, he thought of heaven as a place more real than earth. The world he created through mythopoeia was incredibly powerful, and it helped him to reach out to children—as well as adults—in a unique way. Arguably, in Monika Hilder’s words, “Lewis has done more than any other modern writer to engage the reader’s imagination with a persuasive and overwhelmingly attractive picture of Heaven.” (97) However, this attractiveness never led him to sacrifice fidelity to the Biblical text. This is why Carol Zaleski wrote: “In eschatology, as in other aspects of Christian doctrine, Lewis has nothing new to say to us, but a wonderfully innovative way to say it.” (35)

Works cited


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