

Joe R. Christopher
English Department, Box T-0300
Tarleton State University
Stephenville TX 76402

A Hermeneutical Approach to the Narnian “Chronicles” and Their Sources

I. Introduction

A large and somewhat conflicted literature has grown up about the seven Narnian so-called “chronicles” and their sources. The word *chronicle* derives from the Greek *khronika* meaning “annals.” Obviously, the Narnian accounts are not, in any sense, a year-by-year listing of events, and so “Chronicles” can only be used in a loose sense. However, it is the traditional term, and will be occasionally used here. (For one account of the term’s origin, see Green and Hooper 245; obviously, this is too late to be the true origin.) Possibly, the original material worked into these narratives was a chronicle—fragments of a diary kept about Eustace Scrubb appears in chapters two and five of *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”* and an “Outline of Narnian history so far as it is known” has come down in a separate manuscript tradition—most scholars classify it as part of the Narnian Apocrypha. The purpose of the present essay is simply to survey the problems connected with these materials—the edition published by their modern editor, Lewis, is merely a presentation of the received text, without even introductions to the works. Even the symbolic number of volumes—seven—is uncertain, for a dramatic version has come

down to us that combines two of them (Seymour). Although this dramatic treatment—one might as well call it a miracle play—is usually listed in the pseudopigraphia, not the canon, it nevertheless indicates an early understanding that the texts as we have them are not stable.

Finally, it should be clear that the present discussion does not touch on the value of the religious and social messages found in this heptalogy; those have been evaluated by other writers (Foulen; Holbrook; Lindskoog, *Lion; etc.*). Also, this discussion does not attempt to evaluate the literary merits of the seven books; again, appreciations of the text as delivered have been made by others (Manlove, Schakel, *etc.*).

II. The Evidence of Different Source Materials

A short discussion of the differences between texts can show the problems that face the scholar in evaluating the materials. Four instances are sufficient. One may begin with the most bothersome matter of all—the fragmentary beginning of what must be *The Magician's Nephew* in a piece that scholars refer to as “The LeFay Fragment” (Hooper 65). Although this is now placed in the Narnian Apocrypha, not the Narnian Canon, no evidence suggests it is later in time than the canonical *Magician's Nephew*. But it is a curious work in which Digory, in this world, can talk to trees and to squirrels; the usual division between worlds—this symbolism will be mentioned again—is not sustained. It is also true that some connections with *The Magician's Nephew* are apparent: Polly Plummer lives next door to Digory, and Digory is living with an aunt. But major differences between this work and the canon are also apparent: Digory lives

with just his aunt, who has a personality like that of the Head of the Experiment House in *The Silver Chair* (11, 216)—the aunt in the fragment is named Gertrude and in *The Magician's Nephew* is named Letty (more formally, Letitia); Digory seems to have no uncle and no living mother—they are not mentioned; and Pattertwig, the squirrel, appears in this world, not in Narnia as in *Prince Caspian* (68-69). Equally disruptive of the canon, Mrs. LeFay appears as Digory's godmother, not just mentioned as Uncle Andrew's, as in *The Magician's Nephew* (21-23). She also seems to be a good person in this fragment, not evil as in the canon. Scholars have had, of course, an extensive debate about this material. The general agreement that Mrs. LeFay is an interpolation into the Narnian material from medieval writings about Morgan le Fay; one scholar, Peabody, has conjectured that the fragment was largely destroyed by a scribe because its treatment of LeFay was so removed from Morgan's traditional role. However, Schick has argued, following the tradition of *The Magician's Nephew*, that this is not Morgan le Fay but a descendant of hers. Schuffer has pointed out that *The Magician's Nephew* assumes such creatures as fairies exist, or have existed, in this world (23); since the main source of the Narnian material keeps a separation between this world and magic, he argues that this is a second reason to assume an interpolation here. Both Peabody and Pumpernickel have tried to explain why the material would accept this-worldly magic in both of these early accounts of the beginnings of Narnia, as both of them do in the talking to trees and squirrels in one and universe-traveling powder from Atlantis in the other. Since their arguments about the use of magic do not agree, this is an area for a later scholar to reconsider.

. It should be mentioned that one scholar, Lindskoog, denies the placement of “The LeFay Fragment” in the Apocrypha, putting it in the Narnian Pseudopigraphia instead, mainly on the basis of style (*Sleuthing* 111). The argument, while important in its way, need only be mentioned here; other aspects of the works will occupy this essay.

So far the discussion has been restricted to an example of an alternate account. The other three examples will point to simple discrepancies in the text of the canon itself. One does not expect materials that were no doubt originally handed down orally and then in manuscript form to be consistent. But the variations are important for several reasons. One of these three—the longest in text—is the description of the mariners leaving the Dark Island in *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader.”* The Dark Island is, it will be recalled, a place where dreams—particularly nightmares—come true. The full passage will not be quoted here, but one of the variations can be given. One manuscript tradition reads: “And all at once everybody realized that there was nothing to be afraid of and never had been. They blinked their eyes and looked about them” (170-71). The other tradition reads:

And just as there are moments when simply to lie in bed and see the daylight pouring through your window and to hear the cheerful voice of an early postman or milkman down below and to realize that *it was only a dream: it wasn't real*, is so heavenly that it was very nearly worth having the nightmare in order to have the joy of waking; so they all felt when they came out of the dark. (Qtd. Ford 150)

Obviously, the longer version is the earlier, although some touches in it, such as the references to a postman and a milkman, have been updated by a scribe or an editor. But

it is a truism of textual studies than scribal copying most often reduces the length of passages. In this case, not only did a scribe shorten the material, he misunderstood it, for the original version does *not* say that a nightmare is not something ever to be frightened of. It speaks only of the relief of escaping the nightmare.

The other two examples can be discussed more briefly. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the White Witch exclaims about the Deep Magic in Chapter Thirteen. In one tradition, she asks three questions: “Tell you what is written on that very Table of Stone which stands beside us? Tell you what is written in letters deep as a spear is long on the fire-stones of the Secret Hill? Tell you what is engraved on the scepter of the Emperor-Over-Sea?” (139). In the other tradition, the second question reads, “Tell you what is written in letters deep as a spear is long on the World Ash-Tree?” (qtd. Ford 447-48). Scholars have not successfully identified “the fire-stones of the Secret Hill,” although many hills, more sacred than secret, have been proposed. What is certain is that the reference to the World Ash Tree, in capitals, can only refer to Yggdrasill of Scandinavian tradition. This is a clear signal that at least one of the traditions of the material in the book has been shaped by its believers dwelling at one time in northern Europe. The other example of textual variation will also support this. In the same book, two references appear to the Captain of Queen Jadis’s secret police: in one tradition, the name that appears is Maugrim (59, 93; see also 105, 125), but in the other, the name is Fenris Ulf (qtd. Ford 189-190). Fenris, in Scandinavian and Germanic tradition, is the wolf who kills Odin, king of the gods, on the Day of Ragnarök. Again, no certain identification of the name *Maugrim* has been made; it may be no more than maw + grim.

But if it, or the Secret Hill, could be properly identified, it would solve a problem of these two traditions.

This identification of two traditions, one Northern and one otherwise, is the beginning of understanding the sources which were combined into the heptalogy. It is true that an early scholar, Shramko, identified three sources which, he claimed, had been combined into the received text. He named these the C, S, and L sources. Another scholar, following Shramko, argued for a J source (Christopher). But the scholarly consensus is that this identification of four sources is premature—indeed, Schuffer has suggested that the identification of four sources may have been influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by the JEDP sources found to make up another traditional, religious work.

The one thing that can be said with some certainty is that the materials in the Narnian series consists of materials from different times and different cultures. This is the next topic.

III. The Major Sources

The earliest strands of the material seem to come from pre-Christian cultures in the Near East, which was no doubt the original home of the peoples who believed in the teachings of these seven books. For example, the name *Aslan* is Turkish in origin, meaning simply *lion* (Ford 63 n2). Some scholars—especially Pumpnickel—have claimed this does not matter, since the lion Aslan in the books is obviously a fantasy figure, not realistic in his presentation. (He speaks at length about the drawing of Aslan

walking on his hind legs, with his forelegs clasp behind his back [*Lion* 132].) But the majority of scholars follow the lead of Schick and Schuffer in seeing Aslan as a totem animal of a tribe. Connections have been drawn to the winged lion at the Gate of Xerxes at Persepolis and, although strictly outside of the Near East, the Lion Gate of Mycenae. Probably these should not be taken as anything more than indications of the significance of lions in the pre-Christian cultures, not as direct influences. It is also true that in the creation account in *The Magician's Nephew* the stars briefly sing with the creator, “cold, tingling, silvery voices” (98); this ties to the creation account in the Book of Job (more correctly, of Eyob) in which “the stars of the morning were singing with joy” (38:7). Although the Book of Job is collected in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is notable that none of the characters are Jewish—Job himself being of “the land of Uz” (1:1), probably in southern Edom. Thus, the cultural parallel is Near Eastern again. Since the Book of Job is often dated to the beginnings of the fifth century B.C., perhaps this gives a date for at least the Narnian creation account.

The question of Aslan is different. Once one sees that he is the totem animal of a tribe, then various accounts of his actions can date from various times, over a long period. Probably Schuffer is correct in suggesting that the early tribal practices involved a ritual in which a priest or another dressed in a lion skin, leading dances or other rituals of the tribe. The Hopi dances with the impersonation of the Kachinas is a modern example of this common religious practice. Thus, the Narnian people—to use a common phrase—would be used to seeing a lion as a semi-human.

If one accepts a Near Eastern origin, then—still in pre-Christian times—the tribe must have been displaced and settled in Italy, in Umbria more precisely. The Romans

conquered Nequinium in 299 B.C., renaming it Narnia (after the river Nar). Seven references to Narnia appear in Latin literature (Ford 297-98, 299 n1). After the region was Christianized, Romanesque cathedral was built in Narnia; the most popular of the Umbrian saints of the region is the Blessed Lucy, “whose uncorrupted body” (it is credibly report in one account) “lies in a side-chapel of the cathedral” (Green and Hooper, rev. and exp. ed., 306-07). The scholarly consensus, best argued by Peabody, is that the original name of the heroine of three of the so-called Chronicles was altered during this period, gaining the name of Lucy from the saint.

Before the Christian influence, obviously from the pagan Italy and through it from the pagan Greece, such characters appear as the satyrs and fauns, the centaurs, the dryads and hamadryads (see the entries in Ford). One only need mention Mr. Tumnus the faun in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (esp. Chs. 1 and 2), Bacchus and Silenus in *Prince Caspian* (138-141), and Pomona also in *Prince Caspian* (22).

But this causes a great problem in dealing with the Germanic influences. Some of those have already been mentioned, when discussing the two textual traditions, such as the wolf named Fenris Ulf. The giants which appear in *The Silver Chair* are probably, not certainly, an influence from Norse mythology (Chs. 6-9); certainly the protagonists travel north from Narnia to their meeting with the giants. Only one critic, Schuffer, has asserted that the Narnian tribe (if one may call it that) dwelt first in northern Europe and then in Italy. He has been influenced by reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* allegorically, taking the change from a snowy Narnia to a spring-like Narnia as reflecting a tribal change of place. This certainly is possible, for both Pumpernickel and Schick have suggested, although with less certainty, that it may reflect a later move from perhaps

Germany or at least northern Europe to the more moderate climate in England or possibly Ireland. Peabody has suggested that the tribe had become split, part of it settling in Italy and part in Germany. We have seen in modern times such splits, as that between the two groups of Cherokees in the United States. But Peabody has gone further, hypothesizing that the original move out of the Near East had created a rather Gypsy-like tribe, with much movement back and forth between Germany and Italy, before a substantial part of the tribe settled in the British Isles. One cannot say that Peabody has provided much hard evidence for his suggestions, but obviously it is one way of explaining the texts as they have come down to us.

Perhaps a few further Germanic or Nordic influences should be noted. One passage in *The Magician's Nephew* obviously is indebted to the accounts of early Europe which have come down in the *Red Book of Westmarch* and certain related texts. The reference is to the legends about Telperion the Silver and Laurelin the Golden Trees (for one account of several, see Tolkien 38-39, 74, 76, 98-99). The critical agreement is that the *Red Book* shows a heavy influence of what one may call proto-Germanic. In *The Magician's Nephew*, a very corrupt version of this legend persists. No doubt the corruption is due to the oral nature of the transmission, since oral transmission is sometimes trustworthy and other times not, depending on whether the transmission is through trained bards or through the common people. The Narnian reference is to the account of the half-sovereigns and half-crowns which were accidentally spilled on the soil of the newly created world and which grew into two trees, one made out of gold and one out of silver (130, 163, 169). Both the nature of the trees is reduced to minerals, rather than light-bearing, and the origin of these trees is reduced to accidentally dropped

coins. But the point is that the inclusion of the two trees in the Narnian context shows the influence of the greater legendarium.

The other Germanic influence to be discussed here is the appearance of Father Christmas in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, in which he brings presents and food for several Narnians and three of the visiting humans (100-03, 108). Of course, scholars are certain that the Christian reference could not be part of the original materials, and they agree the emphasis on the snowy Narnia at the time of Father Christmas's appearances points to a Northern origin. Pumphnickle has suggested the original version depicted the god Odin at this point, since Odin is well known to wander the world. But Schick has argued that the original account concerned the god Thor, since he was the patron god of peasants and the lower classes—which the Narnians Father Christmas rewards are, during Queen Jadis's rule. This lack of agreement between scholars again suggests future students have their work to do.

The four areas mentioned—the Near East, Italy, Germany, and the British Isles—have been well established, although the last seems so obvious from the settings of parts of most of the books in England that it has not been developed here. Perhaps worth mentioning is that almost no scholar has taken the depiction of Calormen in *The Horse and his Boy* as proving yet another place where the Narnian tribe settled. The Narnians are depicted as only visiting Calormen, or in one case as being a slave there, and that does not suggest any tribal settlement. It is also significant that the depiction of this country, which some scholars place in northern Africa, does not have a cultural influence throughout the books, appearing only in *The Horse and his Boy* and with the depiction of Calormenes as invaders in *The Last Battle*. On the other hand, Peabody, true to his

thesis of the Narnian tribe being Gypsy-like, has hypothesized a more extended return by many tribal members to their place of origin in the Near East, finding it to be changed by the beliefs of those who drove the Narnians out originally. Ford also agrees on Calormen being in “the Near [or] Middle East” (see his listing for the country), but neither Peabody nor Ford explains the likelihood of an invasion from the Near East into Britain. Perhaps, as Schuffer has suggested, the whole account of the invasion in *The Last Battle* is simply a confused recollection of the conflicts between the Moors and the Europeans in Spain. The polytheism that is depicted in Calormen has yet to be explained, except as a recollection of the displacers’ original religious orientation.

IV. The Significance of the Drummian Material

V. The Folk Materials

VI. The Implied Histories

VII. The Late Christian Additions

VIII. Conclusion

This paper has had only space enough to suggest some of the scholarship based on the Narnian Heptalogy, if the most significant. Although many readers still turn to these materials as if they were Holy Scriptures (Huttar), obviously scholars, *qua*

scholars, must be objective as they attempt to understand the implications of these ancient and, when well considered, most curious materials.

PUMPERNICKEL PEABODY SCHICK SCHUFFER

Works Cited or of Significance

THE CANON

Lewis, C. S. *The Horse and his Boy: [A Story for Children]*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1954. The subtitle appears on the dust jacket only.

---. *The Last Battle A Story for Children*. London: The Bodley Head, 1956.

---. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe: A Story for Children*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950.

---. *The Magician's Nephew: [A Story for Children]*. London: The Bodley Head, 1955. The subtitle appears on the dust jacket only.

---. *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia*. London: Geoffrey Bles, n.d. [1951]. The dust jacket has also the sub-subtitle *A Story for Children*.

---. *The Silver Chair: [A Story for Children]*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953. The subtitle appears on the dust jacket only.

---. *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader": [A Story for Children]*. London: Geoffrey Bles, n.d. [1952]. The subtitle appears on the dust jacket only.

THE APOCRYPHA

Lewis, C. S. "The LeFaye Fragment." *Past Watchful Dragons: The Narnian Chronicles of C. S. Lewis*. By Walter Hooper. New York: Collier Books, 1979. 48-65.

---. "Narnian Suite." *Poems*. Ed. Walter Hooper. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1964. 6-7.

- . "Outline of Narnian History so Far as It Is Known." *Past Watchful Dragons*. By Hooper. 1979. 41-44.
- . [Other Narnian fragments.] *Past Watchful Dragons*. By Hooper. 1979. "This book is about four children[. . .] 29-30. "Plots" [of a version of *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"*]. 46. A variation from the galley proofs of *The Silver Chair*. 47. A draft version of Eustace Scrubb's diary in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader."* 68-71. Lindskoog indicates her suspicion of the authenticity of these (*Sleuthing* 346) but only comments on the first two (109-111).

THE PSEUDOPIGRAPHIA

- Christopher, Joe R. *Inside a Wardrobe*. Stephenville, Texas: The Carolingian Press, 1980. A privately printed chapbook published in an edition of 69 copies. Poems. Three were reprinted in *Mythlore* 8:1/27 (Spring 1981): 3.
- Christopher, Vandy. "The Lady of the Green Kirtle." *Sign of the Hammer* 2:4 (Sept. 1976): 10-11. Also illustrated by the youthful author.
- Gaiman, Neil. "The Problem of Susan." *Flights: Extreme Visions of Fantasy*. Ed. Al Sarrantonio. New York: Roc (part of the Penguin group), 2004. **-**.
- Norris, Curtis. *Return to Deathwater*. Narnia Solo Games, No. 1. New York: Berkley Books, 1988. Illustrated by Ellisa Martin-Schobe. A book with 349 short scenes, almost all with choices for the reader at the end, each choice leading to a different scene as sequel. See also Schraff. (This book was loaned to the author by Anne Janet Braude.)
- Schraff, Anne. *The Sorceress and the Books of Spells*. Narnia Solo Games, No. 2. New York: Berkley Books, 1988. Illustrated by Ellisa Martin. See Norris for a

description. At least two other books were announced: *The Leap of the Lion* and *The Lost Crowns of Cair Paravel*—of which at least the third appeared.

Seymour, Alan (screenplay). *Prince Caspian and the Voyage of the “Dawn Treader.”*

Alex Kirby, director. BBC Television and Wonderworks production; distributed as a commercial videotape by Bridgestone Group/Multomah under license from Public Media. CHECK DATE

A RELATED TEXT

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Silmarillion*. 2nd ed. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

THE COMMENTARY

Christopher, Joe R. “On the CSL Theory of Composition of the Chronicles of Narnia.”

Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society 2 (August 1971): 4. (Later the *Bulletin* was titled *CSL* and this title became a subtitle.) See also Linden and Shramko.

Ford, Paul F. *Companion to Narnia*. 4th ed. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.

Foulen, Jacqueline. “The Theology of C. S. Lewis’s Children’s Books.” M.R.E. thesis. Pasadena, California: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1962.

Green, Roger Lancelyn, and Walter Hooper. *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.

--- and ---. *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*. Rev. and exp. ed. London:

HarperCollinsPublishers, 2002. This version was expanded by Hooper after Green’s death.

- Holbrook, David. *The Skeleton in the Wardrobe: C. S. Lewis's Fantasies: A Phenomenological Study*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1991.
- Hooper, Walter. *Past Watchful Dragons: The Narnian Chronicles of C. S. Lewis*. New York: Collier Books, 1979.
- Huttar, Charles A. "C. S. Lewis's Narnia and the 'Grand Design.'" *The Longing for a Form: Essays on the Fiction of C. S. Lewis*. Ed. Peter J. Schakel. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State UP, 1977. 119-135, 219-220.
- Linden, William. "New Light on Narnia; or, Who Beat the Drum?" *Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 2 (April 1971): 9-10. See also Christopher and Shramko.
- Lindskoog, Kathryn. *The Lion of Judah in Never-Never Land: The Theology of C. S. Lewis Expressed in his Fantasies for Children*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973.
- . *Sleuthing C. S. Lewis: More Light in the Shadowlands*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer UP, 2001.
- Manlove, Colin. *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Patterning of a Fantastic World*. Twayne's Masterworks Studies (No. 127): Children's and Young Adult Literature. New York: Twayne, 1993.
- Peabody, Pumpnickel, Schick, Schuffer. Critics cited on a ms. form of "The Lay of Leithian." *The Lays of Beleriand*. By J. R. R. Tolkien. Ed. by Christopher Tolkien. *The History of Middle-earth*, Vol. 3. See pp. 150-51, 315-329.
- Schakel, Peter J. *Reading with the Heart: The Way into Narnia*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.
- Shramko, Richard. "The Composition of the Chronicles of Narnia." *Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 2 (April 1971): 7-9. See also Christopher and Linden.

