



Truth in Mythology: Ancient Greece and Narnia

Every legend or myth contains an element of truth—not always historical facts about what happens in the plot, but truths about reality, human nature, or divinity. J. R. R. Tolkien once told C. S. Lewis that “[we] have come from God, and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a

splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God. . . . Our myths may be misguided, but they steer however shakily towards the true harbor.”¹ This occurs in an ancient mythology like Greek mythology, as well as a more recent mythology such as C.S. Lewis’ own *Chronicles of Narnia*. The mythology of Narnia is very much an intentional Christian mythology, so it is not difficult to interpret the parallels and to understand the truths. Looking for truths in Greek mythology that point to the truths of Christianity might be a difficult task, but not for Louis Markos, author of *The Dreaming Stone*. His story about two children, Alex and Stacy, who are magically transported into ancient Greece where they participate in the mythic stories, not only demonstrates his love for Greek mythology, but also his understanding that these myths are like a candle, shedding the little light of truth on life, while the Bible is like the sun, revealing truth in a vaster and greater clarity. This understanding of myth is also found in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, along with other shared themes of faith, hope, love, and conversion.

In *The Dreaming Stone*, Alex and Stacy’s

Reepicheep with Dragon Eustace



father tells them that Greek mythology is like a candle and the Bible is like the sun. This puzzles the children at first, but through their adventures in ancient Greece they come to understand that myth contains fragments of truth about human nature and divinity. Through their experience of the Oracle of Delphi and their visit to St. John the Apostle’s cave on Patmos they understand that the voice of God was partially heard by the ancient Greeks and it was clearly revealed through Jesus Christ. They even hear St. Paul preaching to the Athenians about their altar to the Unknown God. In the story, St. Paul tells the Greeks that they have been searching for this god and the little they know about him is like a “weak candle in a huge dark room.”² He urges them to blow out their candle and come out into the sunlight—to know the unknown god, Jesus Christ. Likewise, the children drawn into Narnia come to know the one true God back home through Aslan. At the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Aslan tells Lucy that she and Edmund will never come back to Narnia. He tells them that they must come to know him as he is in their world. Their knowledge of Aslan in Narnia is meant to

help them know him in their world in a different form and under a different name. Their way into his country (Heaven) is through their own world. We the readers are like the Pevensie children and learn what they learn about Aslan and then, when we close the book, we have to re-enter our real world and learn to know him under a

different name.

Myths evince the natural human tendency for faith, a belief in the gods (or Aslan) and a willingness to follow their instructions. *The Dreaming Stone* presents several Greek myths in which the hero demonstrates faith in the gods, which produces a good result, or a lack of faith, which produces a tragic result. The hero Perseus follows the instructions of the gods to kill the Gorgon Medusa. Oppositely, Orpheus lacks faith in Hades’ agreement to give Eurydice back to him, which results in his losing his bride. Throughout C. S. Lewis’ series, the people and Talking Animals of Narnia have faith in Aslan and the stories about him. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Narnia has been under the White Witch’s power for one hundred years of winter and Aslan has not been seen for generations, yet the Animals still have faith in him and his help. All of the children who are magically brought into Narnia are also called upon to follow Aslan’s instructions. In *The Silver Chair*, Jill Pole is given four specific instructions to follow on their quest to find Prince Rilian, the missing heir of Narnia. After messing up the first three instructions, Jill and her companions are

presented with a complicated situation in which the enchanted Black Knight calls upon Aslan, which is the fourth sign:

On the other hand, what had been the use of learning the signs if they weren't going to obey them? Yet could Aslan have really meant them to unbind anyone—even a lunatic—who asked in his name? Could it be a mere accident? Or how if the Queen of the Underworld knew all about the signs and had made the Knight learn this name simply in order to entrap them? But then, supposing this was the real sign? They had muffed three already; they daren't muff the fourth.

"Oh, if only we knew!" said Jill.

"I think we do know," said Puddleglum.

"Do you mean you think everything will come right if we do untie him?" said Scrubb.

"I don't know about that," said Puddleglum. "You see, Aslan didn't tell Pole what would happen. He only told her what to do. That fellow will be the death of us once he's up, I shouldn't wonder. But that doesn't let us off following the sign."³

Jill and her friends have to choose either to follow Aslan in the face of mortal danger or to disregard his instructions for their own immediate safety. They decide to have faith in Aslan and to follow his instructions, thereby discovering and saving Prince Rilian, who was the Black Knight. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, faith in Aslan is at the heart of the stories, just as faith in the gods was an essential part of life to the ancient Greeks.

Besides belief in the gods, these two mythologies present examples of hope, which is a trusting, strong, and confident expectation either in the gods or in the power of goodness. In *The Dreaming Stone*, Alex recounts the story of Pandora's Box. Pandora was the first woman and the gods bestowed all their gifts on her. After marry-

ing her to a good man, the gods gave her a small box with the instructions to never open it, or she would bring pain and suffering upon herself. But over time her curiosity bested her obedience and her faith in the gods, and she opened the box, releasing all the evils of the world: death, disease, war, and starvation. Last of all, a small beautiful creature exited the box:

"I am hope," said the figure, "and I will help you. From now on, Pandora, there will be death and pain and sorrow in your world, but if you turn to me, I will teach you how to look ahead and to trust in the plans of the gods. It would have been better if you had never opened the box, but now that you have, I can at least give you hope that someday you will find peace and joy again."⁴

Hope is a gift from the gods to help humanity cope with the sufferings of earthly life. Alex and Stacy have a very confident hope that the magical dreaming stone they found in Greece will awaken their father from his coma. This type of hope is also a Christian hope, one that comes with our confidence in Christ's redeeming love and our salvation in Him. This trusting confidence is also seen in two clear instances in Lewis' series. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Father Christmas gives Susan a magical ivory horn which will always summon aid when blown. No one knows where this help will come from or in what form, but the magical horn is trusted in and used repeatedly. A second and more clearly Christian example of hope occurs in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Reepicheep wants to travel to the eastern edge of the world because there he "expect[s] to find Aslan's own country,"⁵ which is the equivalent of Heaven. Not only does he want to find it, but he wants to enter it. Reepicheep willingly leaves the ship and rows on alone, confident that he will arrive at his desired destination. Without hope, these characters would have succumbed to despair rather than striving for the rewards for which they

could only hope.

Completing the trio of theological virtues, love is also present in these two works. *The Dreaming Stone* presents how the Greeks possessed only a limited understanding of the different types of love that exist. The humanized gods and goddesses of Greek mythology exemplify how the ancient Greeks clearly understood romantic love and selfish lust. Hades kidnaps Persephone. Zeus kidnaps and seduces Europa. However, these gods aren't capable of any supernatural love, like the selfless and all-giving love of the Christian God. When Alex and Stacy explain to Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, who Jesus Christ is and how He died to redeem humanity, she rejects the concept because she doesn't understand how a god would sacrifice himself for mortals: "A god die, and for mortals no less. Impossible."⁶ This baffling mystery of the Christian God—"Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23)—is also represented in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Aslan exchanges places with Edmund, who has betrayed him and who now belongs to the White Witch. In a beautifully sad representation of Christ's sacrifice, Aslan allows the White Witch to bind him, to shave him, to mock him, to muzzle him, and ultimately to kill him on the Stone Table. By offering up himself—an innocent in place of the traitor—Aslan defeats death according to the rules of the Deeper Magic from before the dawn of time. The White Witch was ignorant of this Deeper Magic and had been confident that she had defeated her enemy. Like Demeter in *The Dreaming Stone*, the White Witch failed to comprehend the power of self-sacrificing love.

Both mythologies have an abundance of external evils to fight, but the internal evil is just as prevalent. In *The Dreaming Stone*, Alex and Stacy meet the hero Theseus on his journey to kill the Minotaur. Theseus tells them how he had discovered that his father is the King of Athens and how he had decided to walk to Athens instead of taking a boat because he wanted to kill the monsters on the way. He wanted to test his worthiness and to fulfill his duty of purging

his land of evil. He describes how he was often afraid and tempted to give up, but he trusted in goodness and justice, and ultimately prevailed over the beasts. Theseus tells the children, “One other thing that I have learned from my travels is that evil is not always out *there*. Often times it is *inside* of us, in our heart and our mind. . . . If you cannot conquer the beast within you, children, then you will never be able to conquer the ones that lie outside.”⁷ Christians would call this the process of conversion. One of the most beautiful depictions of conversion is found in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Eustace Scrubb accidentally turns himself into a dragon when he greedily puts on a bracelet taken from a dead dragon’s hoard. He is stuck in the dragon’s form for many days, and this begins his conversion. He learns to value his friends and to be helpful and kind. It is only through being a real monster that he could experience inner conversion. When Aslan helps Eustace to transform back into a boy, Eustace first sheds his dragon skin thrice on his own.

These skins are shallow, however, and it is insufficient—this is the human ability to grow in virtue and to convert. When Aslan tears off Eustace’s dragon skin it is deep and painful, but it also feels good. Along with the skin, Aslan removes a large portion of Eustace’s inner nastiness. This is the working of God’s grace, which is necessary for true and deep conversion. True conversion leads to being able to fight the good fight externally.

Myths record the major predispositions of human nature—to believe, to hope, to love, to improve, and to know truth. They also record our brokenness, our fears, and our sinfulness. They tell us about who we are and what we were made for, some more clearly than others. Pagan mythologies, like that of ancient Greece, contain fragments of truth, but the greatest mythology of all—“the story of Christ . . . a true myth, a myth that works on us in the same way as the others, but a myth that really happened”⁸—imparts the most important truths of all.

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References

1. Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), p. 151.
2. Louis Markos, *The Dreaming Stone* (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2015), p. 184.
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 626.
4. Markos, *The Dreaming Stone*, pp. 89–90.
5. C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 433.
6. Markos, *The Dreaming Stone*, p. 92.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 154–55.
8. Carpenter, p. 151.

New Voices

New Poetry in English

Tim Butler



Somewhere In England

The last light of this blinding summer
Pours like butter down the brambles
Burrows deep in loamy ditches
Leaves the empty lane now copper shot.

In the barn the cows are feeding
Gentle mouths upon the meal
While in the field the fungus webs
White across the hoof-prints left.

Soft dark berries have been gathered
Folded in a scald of sugar
Apples rolled home from the orchard
Laid in rows in cardboard boxes.

In the fading of the year
We return to children,
Carpets to be found in attics
Books of spells in shuttered rooms.

Mirrors melting as the evening
Tumbles like an eiderdown
In the passage floorboards creak
Bowed beneath the Great Cat’s feet.

