

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

Jesus sells. Or better, perhaps: Christians buy. That's certainly what Mel Gibson taught Hollywood with *The Passion of the Christ*. What better, then, than a story that can be targeted simultaneously at mainstream and Christian markets, a story with Christian allegorical meaning for those in the know, and a rollicking good plot for those who aren't? What better for studio profits than a film franchise based on C.S. Lewis's Narnia books?

Each element in the title of *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* has become iconic in Western children's literature. Few people who grew up in Christian homes, I imagine, would know nothing of the four children who, straying through a magical wardrobe into another world, find themselves helping the great Lion Aslan to overturn the continual winter with which the White Witch has cursed Narnia. The book is now a literary classic, which owes much to Lewis's deft use of Christian motifs like repentance, sacrifice, and incarnation that function as mythic archetypes to enhance the story's universal appeal.

Though the film version of this classic owes much to the opportunism of the Hollywood money-men and the size of the Christian market, this should not detract from the iconic greatness of Lewis's tale, nor from Andrew Adamson's largely successful adaptation of it.¹ For most purposes, the film offers a faithful retelling of the book, with no attempt to unravel its allegorical elements. Indeed, it



had to be that way. A demythologising of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* would be like King Kong without the gorilla; like Christianity, perhaps, without the resurrection.

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Further, from the position of the financial backers, the mythological nature of the story makes it a surer bet than, say, *The Passion of the Christ*, from which the backers nervously stayed away. Allegory poses no threat to those who do not recognise its symbolic language. The money-men could thus safely invest, knowing that few in the audience would be offended by the religious

overtones that only the initiate could decode. I do know one person who, many years ago, felt so cheated by Lewis's use of Christian imagery at the conclusion of *The Voyage of the Dawntrader* that he abandoned his Catholic upbringing, but the film's financial backers could be sure that such responses would be rare among today's filmgoing audience.

It is therefore difficult to imagine that the film has had great purchase as an evangelistic tool in New Zealand. Unless a viewer discerns the Christian roots underneath the tale of Aslan's dying and rising, the film simply tells another quaint children's tale to place on the DVD rack alongside *Shrek* and *Monsters Inc.* Things could be different in the United States, where more people might recognise Lewis's primary tale. But among secular New Zealanders, only *The Listener*-reading bourgeoisie would be aware of the story's allegorical intentions.

This raises all sorts of questions, of course, about how Christians attempt to be heard in the multimedia marketplace of ideas, values, and entertainment options. Lewis certainly had evangelistic aims in

writing his story, yet that does not mean that the story continues to fulfil those aims into the twenty-first century. Even if our wine remains fresh, we might need to find new wineskins for it, however difficult it proves to find them.

It may even be that, in some respects, we understand our wine better than 1950s Christians did.

Seeing Lewis's story come to life on screen reminded me how easily Christianity tends towards doceticism in its representations of Jesus. Most would-be orthodox views of the incarnation make Jesus into a kind of Superman figure, and Lewis's allegorical Aslan is no exception. *The New Yorker* observed in a recent article² that a humble

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donkey would be a much better allegorical symbol than a glorious lion for a suffering saviour who is in fact one of us (readers of *The Last Battle* take note). How much does Aslan actually have in common with the one who had “no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him”? Consequently, when the death of Aslan is depicted on screen, it becomes a slightly anti-climactic affair in a way that the death of Jesus can never be. No doubt the money-men demanded that there should be nothing in the Narnia film to upset the children and so lose its family-friendly rating. Certainly, I remember feeling much more bereft when I read how Susan and Lucy grieved over Aslan's death than I did when I saw it in the cinema. Nonetheless, the film suffers inherently from Lewis's prescription of Aslan as an impressively majestic presence. Once he appears on screen, the film lost much of its initial, wide-eyed charm. Seeing him marshal his troops in splendid military formation, I never really doubted that he would come back from the dead. His “resurrection” seemed a much more foregone conclusion than the resurrection of Jesus could ever have done to his



disciples.

Arguably, therefore, the film suggests a sense in which Lewis misunderstood the Incarnation. Allegorically, Aslan in *The Lion, the*

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Witch and the Wardrobe always looks like the resurrected Christ whose glory is obvious to all who see him. Such a portrayal makes sense after Aslan has risen from the Stone Table, but it ignores the fragility of its source material. And surely, Christians have always insisted that the crucifixion is only good news

because it is suffered by someone like us, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief, not an invincible divine messenger rippling in luminescent CGI across emerald green fields.

Lewis may have understood this increasingly as time went on. The later Narnia stories function better as representations of the Christian pilgrimage than *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* functions as an allegorical retelling of the gospel.³ In those subsequent stories, moreover, Aslan rightly represents the risen Christ: elusive, mysterious, never tame, but always available across time and space and glory to comfort and chasten his friends. How well that transfers into cinema, we are yet to see.

Endnotes

1. Gavin Drew has pointed out to me how serendipitous it is that Adamson directed the film, since his name, “Adam's son”, marks him as a relation of the two Sons of Adam and the two Daughters of Eve who are prophesied to lift the Narnian curse.

2. Adam Gopnik, “Prisoner of Narnia”, *New Yorker* (21 Nov, 2003). http://http://www.newyorker.com/critics/atlarge/articles/051121crat_atlarge [accessed 11 Feb 2006].

3. I would also venture to say that those later stories, while less iconic, are nonetheless better stories. Once compressed into two hours, I was struck by how little happens in *The Lion* and how random are some of its elements (the climactic battle, for example). ■■

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