

C.S. LEWIS, MERLIN, AND MESSY APOLOGETICS

Stephen J. Bedard on C.S. Lewis and
Pragmatic Christian Apologetics

When people think about C.S. Lewis and fiction, they often think of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, which were published between 1950 and 1956. However, Lewis also wrote an earlier and less well-known series of novels known alternatively as the *Space Trilogy* or the *Cosmic Trilogy* or the *Ransom Trilogy* between 1938 and 1945. This series is not as accessible as the Narnia books, especially for younger readers, but they have great insight both about the times in which Lewis wrote and his thinking.

The first two books of the trilogy fit together very well. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, Dr. Elwin Ransom is kidnapped and taken to Mars where he encounters a world in which, unlike Earth, the inhabitants did not experience the Fall into sin. In the second book, *Perelandra*, Ransom returns to space and this time finds himself on Venus as intelligent life emerges on that planet and witnesses the struggle of whether its inhabitants will give in to temptation.

The third book, however, can feel out of place within the trilogy. A new reader of *That Hideous Strength* could be forgiven for not realizing that this was part of a trilogy for the first half of the story. The two obvious

differences between *That Hideous Strength* and the earlier books are that the story takes place entirely on Earth and that Ransom is not the central character and only begins to play an important role later in the story.

The Space Trilogy is written as science fiction and *That Hideous Strength* definitely has aspects of science fiction, although less explicit than the earlier books in the series. One of the aspects of the final book that may feel out of place in a work of science fiction is the inclusion of Merlin from Arthurian legend.¹

Those who have read the first two books may not realize that King Arthur and Merlin eventually play important roles in the third book. And yet the fact that Lewis had an interest in King Arthur and Merlin is not surprising. These stories were of important interest to other members of the Inklings.² Lewis, both as a scholar of English literature and because of personal taste, had an interest in the stories of Arthur and so it is not surprising that someone from those legends would appear in one of his stories. But why Merlin and why in *That Hideous Strength*? Was this a self-indulgent inclusion of a beloved character in the final book of his trilogy or was there something more going on?

¹ There are other examples of the blending of Arthurian legends and science fiction. In the 1980s, DC Comics published a series called *Camelot 3000* written by Mike W. Barr in which Arthur and Merlin are awakened in the future.

² See Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis, *Arthurian Torso*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1948) and J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fall of Arthur* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

Merlin Awakes

To answer this, we must look at how Merlin is used in the story. If Ransom appears in *That Hideous Strength* less than what we would expect, Merlin appears even less so. However, it could be argued that Merlin is present throughout the story, although often in a more subtle way.

The two main characters of *That Hideous Strength* are Jane and Mark Studdock. Although a married couple, they are physically separated for much of the story. One of Jane's roles is that of having prophetic dreams. The first dream that is shared, one that occurs very close to the beginning of the story, is the awakening as from the dead of "a sort of ancient British, druidical kind of man."³ So right from the beginning, the appearance of a Merlin-like figure is predicted even if the reader cannot predict how that will affect the plot.

If Jane is known for her predictive dreams, her husband Mark is introduced in the more mundane role of being a fellow at Bracton College. Lewis is able to portray the meetings and intrigues within the College administration in an all-too-realistic fashion, based on his own academic roles. This contrasts sharply with the horror of Jane's dream. But even in the meetings and motions that are being put forward, Merlin is also hinted at. One of the debates is the College's selling of Bragdon Wood to the mysterious organization, the N.I.C.E., despite the long connection with the College. This Wood and Merlin's Well had been shown to "certainly date

³ C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (1945; repr., New York: Scribner, 2003), 13.

from Merlin's time if there had ever been a real Merlin."⁴ Thus, both Mark and Jane's characters are beginning to intersect with Merlin's world, though in different manners.

As the story unfolds, we begin to see how central Merlin is to the larger plot. We discover that the two organizations, the evil N.I.C.E. and Ransom's group at St. Anne's, are in a race to find Merlin first as both are convinced that the legends are true and that possession of Merlin is essential to their approaching conflict. Once Merlin is awakened, both groups begin the search to find this legendary figure. Humorously, both end up getting their own Merlin, although one is a tramp and one is the real Merlin who served King Arthur.

If the appearance of Merlin in a work of science fiction is a surprise to some, the specific portrayal of Merlin in this story is just as shocking. In popular imagination, there is a type of wizard, including Merlin, Gandalf, and Dumbledore, that plays an expected role. They are the wise counselor, guiding King Arthur, Bilbo and Frodo, and Harry Potter, as they seek to combat the powers of darkness. We expect to see a robed man with a white beard, holding a staff, taking a somewhat backstage role, while mainly sharing wisdom to allow the other heroes to be victorious. Lewis subverts this expectation.

This Merlin is not the kind of character that arrives to bring peace and calmness to an already fearful situation. When Merlin first appears at Ransom's doorstep at St. Anne's, there is much uncertainty as to

⁴ Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 20.

whether he is friend or foe.⁵ The size and wildness of his appearance make the reader aware that they are not meeting a kindly wizard who only wants to help. He is portrayed almost as a force of nature. Even after Ransom is convinced of the value of Merlin, his colleagues are much more uncertain. This is not helped by the fact that Merlin offers the “wise counsel” that the best action would be to decapitate Jane Studdock, even though she was a beloved part of the team. Merlin is confused that the group sees him as “a fierce and cruel man” as he sees himself in a humbly righteous manner.⁶

After all of this set up, the reader might expect that Merlin was prepared to enter the N.I.C.E. facilities by force and to bring great violence by the sword. Violence does take place, but in a very surprising way. While Ransom and Merlin are making their plans, the N.I.C.E. thinks that they also have found the awakened Merlin. The man they have is a tramp who is enjoying the attention and benefits of being such a special guest. The true Merlin shaves off his beard and disguises himself as a Basque priest who is hired by the N.I.C.E. to translate for their fake Merlin. Merlin uses his powers to control the tramp, make him speak his words and convince the N.I.C.E. that he is who they wanted him to be.

This brings the Members of the N.I.C.E., including Mark Studdock, who has been drawn into the organization, to a great banquet. Once more, Merlin, while pretending to be a simple translator, uses his powers to bring chaos. Merlin jumbles the voices of those present, basically duplicating the curse of Babel as

⁵ Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 268.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 278.

described in Genesis 11. Merlin pronounces: “They that have despised the word of God, from them shall the word of man also be taken away.”⁷ While this provokes great fear, it gets worse as wild animals that have been experimented on by the N.I.C.E. are released by Merlin into the dining hall, leading to a grisly bloodbath. It is a disturbing scene far from the charm of Lewis’s Narnia stories.

The Role of Merlin in the Story

This still leaves us with the question of why does Lewis use Merlin in this story and why does he use Merlin in this way. Merlin’s primary role in *That Hideous Strength* is to be used as a weapon against the N.I.C.E., the same organization that wanted to use Merlin against their enemies. But what does the N.I.C.E. represent? Lord Feverstone, in a discussion with Mark Studdock, explains: “If Science is really given a free hand it can now take over the human race and re-condition it: make man a really efficient animal.”⁸ Although there are other forces at work within the N.I.C.E., they portray themselves as the unstoppable force of progress and the Enlightenment ideal. With the right kind of education and scientific advancements, human effort will be enough to move the human race to the next level, a level of unimagined prosperity.

The way Lewis uses Merlin is in the exact opposite way of everything that N.I.C.E. stands for. The organization's careful plans for the future are disrupted by someone from the past, who does not even speak a

⁷ Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 348.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

modern language. The N.I.C.E. seeks to impose a strict order that would control all things and Merlin brings in a presence that turns everything chaotic and upside down. Merlin is not kind or gentle by modern standards, but he is exactly what is needed to oppose the scientific positivism of the N.I.C.E.

Merlin and Messy Apologetics

While the N.I.C.E. is a fictional organization within a science fiction novel, the worldview that it represents was true in Lewis's day and it continues today. We live in a world of technological advancement happening at a rate beyond Lewis's imagination. This is taking place at a time of increased secularization, not just the promotion of secularism, but the marginalization of religious faith. The rise of the New Atheism, with its bold confidence that science had ended any need for religious faith, was only one sign of this.

The question for Christians is how to respond to philosophies that oppose biblical Christianity. One impulse might be to look for the purest apologetic. By this is meant a Christian apologetic that is without any taint of questionable influences. The apologetic would have to be developed by Christian philosophers, theologians, and other scholars that exclude any ideas that might disturb our quest for a pristine orthodoxy.

While this may be an admirable goal, it is not necessarily realistic or effective. One of the most respected Christian philosophers and apologists of today is William Lane Craig. He is especially known for his promotion of the Kalam Cosmological Argument. The Kalam Cosmological Argument is as follows:

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause of its beginning.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause of its beginning.⁹

While many lay apologists are familiar with the argument, they may not understand the reference to Kalam. Kalam does not refer to a kind of cosmological argument but is rather a type of medieval Islamic theology that included many different philosophical arguments, the cosmological argument being only one.¹⁰ Many Christian apologists who would be uncomfortable with Islam and would reject any meaningful similarity between Christianity and Islam use an apologetic argument developed by a Muslim theologian named al-Ghazali in the eleventh century. The use of the Kalam Cosmological Argument in the face of materialistic worldview is appropriate and in this case, a-Ghazali is acting in the role of Merlin.

There are other examples of how Christian apologetics can be messy and use sources that can make the church uncomfortable. Agnostic or religiously uncertain scholars such as psychologist Jordan Peterson or historian Tom Holland have actually been helpful for

⁹ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 96-7.

¹⁰ Jon McGinnis, "Arabic and Islamic Natural Philosophy and Natural Science", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2022 edition, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/arabic-islamic-natural/>.

some people, causing them to question some of the cultural assumptions that have been obstacles to faith¹¹
¹². There is also Bart Ehrman, who has written numerous books that seem to attack Christianity, yet his book, *Did Jesus Exist?*, refutes the Jesus Myth Theory and argues persuasively that there is reliable historical evidence for Jesus.¹³ There are valid criticisms to the use of these and other scholars, but in practice, they have been effective in helping some people to question some of the arguments against Christianity. The uncomfortable tension recalls the debates in *That Hideous Strength* at St. Anne's over whether Ransom should trust Merlin.

Another area in which this comes into play is that of literature and cinema. Some conservative Christians have been known for being critical of and even condemning stories that they saw as at odds with Christian truth. *Star Wars* promoted New Age beliefs and *Harry Potter* promoted experimenting with sorcery. However, others have seen a more pragmatic use of the stories in pointing to biblical truths.¹⁴ Many of the popular stories of superheroes, fantasy, and science fiction, speak to the realities of good and evil. The use of the Force in *Star Wars* calls one to trust in something

¹¹ Jordan B. Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2020).

¹² Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic books, 2021).

¹³ Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

¹⁴ Frank Turek and Zach Turek, *Hollywood Heroes: How Your Favorite Movies Reveal God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2022).

invisible in the face to a strict scientific orthodoxy. *Harry Potter* demonstrates a powerful example of self-sacrificial love that overcomes the power of darkness. These stories may make some Christians uncomfortable and yet they have tremendous value in practice.

This is illustrated in C.S. Lewis's own experience. Lewis compared his coming to faith to "approaching the source from which those arrows of Joy had been shot at me ever since childhood."¹⁵ One of those earlier experiences of Joy for Lewis was the discovery of Norse mythology. Looking back at his immersion into those myths, Lewis stated: "Sometimes I can almost think that I was sent back to the false gods there to acquire some capacity for worship against the day when the true God should recall me to Himself."¹⁶ Lewis, who has been an important apologetic resource for later Christians, found his way to Joy through some surprising sources.

While such things may disturb a level of desired theological comfort, it is consistent with at least one example in the New Testament. In Acts 17:16-34, we find Paul in Athens and an innovative method of reaching an audience through a pragmatic apologetic. Instead of demonstrating from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah, as he had done earlier in Thessalonica, Paul does not even mention the name of Jesus. Instead, Paul points in Acts 17:23 to an altar with an inscription "To an Unknown God" and in Acts 17:28, Paul quotes from two pagan poets. Such a tactic has made some Christians uncomfortable, some even seeing this as a

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (1955; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 281.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

failure on Paul's part.¹⁷ Others have recognized this as an effective means of contextually communicating the gospel in a way that could be understood by that audience. There is a biblical warrant for Christians to use surprising sources that disrupt our comfort levels.

Conclusion

That Hideous Strength may never become as beloved a book as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It may not be the best book by C.S. Lewis on a purely literary level. However, it is a book worth reading and reflecting on, and part of this is because of Lewis's use of Merlin. The inclusion of Merlin into an otherwise science fiction trilogy was not a mistake or a selfish impulse. Merlin plays a central role in the story as the antithesis to the N.I.C.E. and their materialistic philosophy that promotes human flourishing based on scientific progress. Merlin is dropped like a bomb onto the N.I.C.E.'s careful plans and disrupts everything they have worked for. Ransom's partnership with Merlin may be disturbing to modern readers, as voiced by the company at St. Anne's. And yet this was exactly the approach that the situation required.

While not claiming that this was meant as an allegory for cultural apologetics, Merlin in *That Hideous Strength* is a picture of what apologetics can look like in today's culture. The Church is not limited to those resources that make us comfortable and that are beyond

¹⁷ Copan and Litwak examine this debate and conclude that Paul's tactic in Athen was not a mistake. Paul Copan and Kenneth D. Litwak, *The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas: Paul's Mars Hill Experience for Our Pluralistic World* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 19-26.

critique. There is a need for a pragmatic approach to use that works to disrupt the assumptions that serve as obstacles to Christian faith. Such messy apologetics will provoke discomfort and yet they have a legacy that goes back to the New Testament.

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