

## EXPLORING NARNIA, MIDDLE EARTH, AND OTHER EXOTIC PLACES, WITH SEMINARIANS

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All who have read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, or have seen one of the several film adaptations, remember Lucy's wonder the first time she stepped from the back of the wardrobe into the winter wonderland of Narnia, met Tumnus the Faun, and went to his cozy cave home for tea. Those who have read all seven books to the end will remember Aslan singing the Narnian creation into existence in *The Magician's Nephew*, or Aslan's final words in *The Last Battle*, "The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."

Speaking of holidays, all Tolkien enthusiasts would love to spend a holiday in the Shire; an invitation to an epicurean hobbit tea with Bilbo Baggins would be a very pleasant bonus. For evoking the security of safety from dangers narrowly escaped, and from dangers yet lurking all round, nothing I've read surpasses the restorative serenity and perfect hospitality Frodo and the Fellowship enjoyed in the house of Elrond in Rivendell. Who is not stirred by, and who can forget--from the book, or from Peter Jackson's film adaptation--the desperation of the battle for Gondor, or the majestic *shalom* following, when Aragorn took his rightful place as King Elessar?

### *Why Lewis and Tolkien?*

Several times in my career as a professor of Old Testament, I have taught a course on the theology of Lewis's fiction, and once, a course on the theology of Tolkien's fiction. In this essay, I will attempt to give to those who may be interested some idea of how I have designed and conducted these courses, what I think they accomplish in the theological education of our students, and what I would think of doing differently in teaching them again.

I began with Lewis, but not by teaching his fiction as a separate course. I began by referencing him so often in classes years ago, when I was teaching in Portland, Oregon, that some of my students said they would like a course in Lewis. So we did a fun course, a pure elective, for two quarter-hours credit, rather than the normal four. It was a pleasant ten weeks of conversations about a man we liked, whose fiction we discovered to be imbued with profound theological insight, delivered most of the time delightfully, sometimes disturbingly.

After leaving Portland, I did not teach Lewis again until several years after coming to NTS. Here, my course in Lewis is titled "The Theology of C. S. Lewis's Fiction." It still is a pure elective (three semester hours here) for most students. For that reason, I offer it semi-regularly in a two-week summer session; we now call them "summer modules" here.

I have offered the Tolkien course, similarly titled, only once, but probably shall do it again, fairly soon. Tolkien's Middle Earth epic offers much the same theological inventory as Lewis's Narnia and his space trilogy. This is not surprising, as both Tolkien and Lewis were catholic Christians, in the best senses of both those words. In Tolkien's Middle Earth the darkness is darker, the light more subdued, until the very end, the last few pages, following the destruction of Mordor and

Mount Doom. That, too, is not surprising, as Tolkien's view of the everyday-ness of the modern world was more pessimistic, less sanguine, than Lewis's--at least, I find it so--though both had grave doubts about the courses and outcomes of Western civilization, absent a return to the central values of the historic Christian faith.

To answer more specifically the question of my heading, I teach Lewis's and Tolkien's fiction occasionally because I think they are worthy role models, not only as stellar Christian academics--which both were--but also as followers of Christ and teachers of ordinary Christians, two who were imbued with what Walter Brueggemann has termed the "prophetic imagination." Almost all readers (and viewers) of Lewis and Tolkien find themselves called to the grand, the only, adventure--invited into God's story in fresh new ways. That also is one way to frame the calling of every pastor, of every educator in the church and its institutions of learning at all educational levels, of every missionary, of every chaplain, of anyone and everyone who works with and for the church, the people of God worldwide. Therefore, why not learn from reading and discussing two of the best?

### *Pre-Module Assignments*

The schedule of the two-week module allows for pre-assignments, to begin up to six weeks before the first class session. In the past, I have assigned only the reading of the course texts, knowing that most students will not have finished it completely by the time of our first meeting. However, most will have read substantially, and most will keep up as we move through the nine four-hour class sessions of the module.

At NTS, we now use MOODLE as our online educational support platform. In the future, teaching either Lewis or Tolkien, I will post at least two of the short-essay assignments (see below) ahead of the class sessions, and require that the first be finished and submitted by the beginning of the first class session. Some students will do both of them early, because they will want to get a jump on the course, and have a bit more breathing space during the days of the module. The reason for requiring at least one is that I will be able to turn around the first essay one day earlier; early feedback on written work gives students a chance to improve as the course moves along.

Required texts for the Lewis course are the seven books of *The Chronicles of Narnia* (now conveniently and inexpensively available from HarperCollins in one paperback volume); the space trilogy: *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, *That Hideous Strength*; *The Screwtape Letters*; *The Great Divorce*; and *Till We Have Faces*. I ask students to come to each class session having recently read the volume(s) scheduled for discussion. A few weeks to three or four months is "recently"; a year-and-a-half is not.

Of course, most people are aware of all these titles, except, perhaps, for *Till We Have Faces*. Another "of course" is that most people have at least some exposure to the *Narnia* series, though most have not read them all before taking this course. Some previously have read *Screwtape* or *Divorce*; most have not read the trilogy or *Faces*. Many have expressed the sentiment after finishing the course that reading them all for the first time, and in a short period of time, is one of the most beneficial and pleasurable aspects of the course.

For the Tolkien course, the obvious reading is *The Hobbit*; *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, *The Return of the King*; and *The Silmarillion*. I also ask students to purchase and read the collection *The Tolkien Reader*. It includes *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, entirely in verse, adding to the reader's appreciation of Tolkien as a poet. The poems also add to the lore of Bombadil, whose appearance in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, with his wife Goldberry, is so intriguingly brief. *Farmer Giles of Ham* is the longest-sustained merriment I have found in Tolkien: myth, tall tale, farce, spoof, and satire rolled into one. Both *Bombadil* and *Giles* originally were published separately.

Most important in the *Reader* are two pieces originally published together as *Tree and Leaf*. The first is an essay, "On Fairy-stories," first prepared as an Andrew Lang Lecture and given at the University of St. Andrews in 1938 or 1939. (Tolkien's note and the University's records disagree; cf. *Reader/Tree and Leaf*:2). The essay is all the justification needed for the utilization and enjoyment of good fiction in theological (or any) education. "Leaf by Niggle," a short story, serves as an example of what Tolkien discussed in the lecture/essay. It is one of the most idyllic, inviting, comforting, and eschatologically hopeful pieces I have read, outside the Scriptures themselves--and therefore challenging in an inspiring (rather than a guilt-inducing) way.

Some students usually know of, or discover, other Tolkien works (besides *The Silmarillion*) compiled and edited after his death by his son Christopher. These include, for example, *The Book of Lost Tales, Volumes 1 and 2*.

#### *In-Module Assignments, In-Class Activities*

I've always assigned significant written work in most of my courses. I realized, not many years in, that my "editorial" work in grading their papers made no difference to the majority of students; their next papers would come in with the same mistakes and infelicities of writing. (Many times I've been told, in writing, that Israel "wandered in the desert for forty years"; recently [*not* at NTS, praise be], a student reported Israel had "*wondered* in the desert" those four decades!) Still, for years I felt obliged to mark up every paper I received.

Over the last several years, I've finally gotten smarter. As part of the course materials, I post a short guide to common issues in essays and research papers. I counsel students to consult it minutely, thoroughly, and religiously *before* turning in any written work. If a student then inquires about the grade for a piece, the first requirement is to compare that piece with the guide. If s/he still thinks the grade unjustly low, *then* we discuss it. This approach has earned me a number of epithets, of course, some of which have reached my ears. Quite a few students, though, have approached me after one course or another, thanking me for giving them this opportunity, discipline, and encouragement to improve their writing skills. (Of course, *content* issues in papers still require feedback originated by me.)

Also in recent years, I have asked for *shorter* essays, one in preparation for every (or almost every) class session. In our two-week modular class format, with nine class sessions, I usually ask for six short essays. Four of them must be submitted during the module; the first essay, due the first session, is one of these. Of the remaining five essays, a student may choose to submit

any two “late,” without penalty; of course, “late” usually means a week or two after the module is completed. With so many word-processing options, fonts and font sizes, etc., available, I specify a word count, rather than a page count, usually asking for six hundred words, which amounts to about two (real, full) pages. Writing on a topic related to course reading and classroom discussion brings students to class prepared on at least part of what we’ll be dealing with, wasting less of their time and mine.

In both Lewis’s and Tolkien’s fiction, of course, the number of possible essay topics is practically boundless. At least once each time around--I do this in almost all my courses--I leave the choice of topic up to the student. I want to know what they are drawn to; what they are thinking about currently; how they are processing, on their own recognizance, what we are reading and discussing. Usually, I give opportunity for at least some students to share these in class, if they wish. I’ve found it more effective to have them read their shorter essays; impromptu summaries often run longer than the reading would have done. These self-chosen topics often are ones I also would have wished to be raised, and student-initiated class discussion often makes for closer attention. Experience has taught me to think of that phenomenon positively, as generated by peer bonding and peer solidarity, rather than negatively, as though it came from indifference to the subject or to the professor.

Usually, one assigned essay is a profile of a major character--protagonist, antagonist, or other--with special attention to that person’s character, moral/ethical stance for decision-making, and/or other “theological” issues. Every major character in Lewis’s and Tolkien’s fiction is a person, whether human or not. In Lewis, the Malacandrian *hross* Hvoi makes an excellent study from *Out of the Silent Planet*. In the first two of the space trilogy, Ransom himself is too large a figure to deal with in six hundred words, but several characters have larger roles than his in *That Hideous Strength*, so he would be manageable if discussed from that volume alone. Any of the shades whom Lewis’s character observes and overhears in *The Great Divorce* would be a suitable study.

In Tolkien, Bilbo and Frodo also would be too large to handle in a short essay. If a student wanted to trace the changes in a particular trait, belief, or attitude of either one, it could be manageable. In six hundred words, with suitable time and attention, one probably could sketch both a reasonable and a helpful profile of most any other notable character in Tolkien.

At least one essay will have a distinctly theological focus. Lewis created two different fantasy worlds (universes) in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and in the space trilogy. However, both of these parallel our own in that they exhibit the classic orthodox Trinitarian theology Lewis so passionately and vividly presented and defended in his non-fictional, non-academic writings. Of course, in the trilogy we would expect this, as our own world is an equal partner there with Malacandra/Mars and with Perelandra/Venus, as regards the principal billing of settings. Given that these two extended stories (Narnia and the trilogy) reflect virtually all points of Lewis’s own theology, a fruitful approach is to assign students to discover (or to choose from a list provided to them) a theological theme or issue that figures in one book, or section of a book. Creation, human “bent”-ness (Lewis’s word, but taken from Scripture), the divine decision for redemption, betrayal, self-sacrifice--not just of Aslan, but of other characters, also--community, greed and

avarice, hubris, Nietzsche's will to power, joy, *sehnsucht*, wisdom, folly, romantic and other conjugal love: all these and more are present, awaiting the student's discovery and consideration.

Depending on the theme or issue (and sometimes on the students), the assignment can be simply to identify and trace the theme through the work assigned, noting its effect on the characters and the narrative. A bit more ambitious would be a comparison of the theme or issue as presented in Lewis with its appearance and importance in our own world, or in the community of Christian faith today.

As I've said, coming to class having written on something we'll be discussing enriches class time. I spend a lot of class time facilitating discussion. These *are* adult learners (though most are young adults) and adults learn best when processing in several ways at once, especially when that includes making their own contributions, rather than only by hearing a professor lecture and having to process everything in a solitary mode inside their own heads.

### *A Place for Personal Story*

This will be a bit of detour, but an important one, I think, in light of what I just said. Almost never should we fill an entire class session of any length with lecture, only. Yet I find it still is true that most students want their teachers to have more knowledge and experience of the world than they themselves have acquired. They want to hear our stories of knowledge and understanding gained through our own personal experience and study, if we will tell them with appropriate humility, thankfulness, and a generous spirit. So, early in the Lewis and Tolkien courses I tell the story, from my first time in Oxford in 1987, of the afternoon I walked east from Oxford city center--detouring a block or so for a look at Tolkien's house--to just past the ring road. Turning right into a quiet residential street, I walked to the end; there, on the right-hand side, is Lewis's home, *The Kilns*. It wasn't yet open; funds still were being raised to refurbish it. I had to content myself with walking around it and peering in at a couple of windows. I could see into the kitchen quite well, as I recall; not so well into the sitting room/drawing room/parlor. (What *did* Lewis call that room? I don't know.) No one was around to ask what I was doing--a pretty astonishing circumstance, looking back on it. But that was 1987; this is 2010.

Lewis's street ends where it does because a clay pit and the site of a brick-making kiln, for which his home is named, blocks further progress. The pit is now a pond; one can (or could, then) squeeze through at a gate, go round the pond, then wander up the wooded slope and come out on a level field at the top--I think it was in hay the summer I was there.

These are the woods Lewis and Tolkien liked to walk together, the woods from which Lewis drew some of his inspiration for the country of Narnia, and Tolkien, for Middle Earth. Stopping and looking around often on my way up the slope, I could see why these two Oxford dons loved these woods. I could place there for myself the inspiration for many scenes from both their works. It was almost like *being* in Narnia with the Pevensies, on their way to Caspian at Aslan's How, or in Middle Earth with the Fellowship of the Ring, on any one of the many occasions when they didn't know whether the forest was friend or foe. Time spent walking and reflecting in and around Oxford is helpful for understanding Lewis and Tolkien, just as time spent walking

the Holy Land, meditating upon its places, people, and pivotal events, illumines the biblical story of God's wondrous redemptive work there, in and for our own world.

### *Discussing Lewis in the Classroom*

In the Lewis course, we discuss the *Narnia* series first, because it is most familiar. We deal with them in the order of Lewis's writing them, and of their original publication: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; *Prince Caspian*; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*; *The Silver Chair* (also known as *Prince Rilian*); *The Horse and His Boy*; *The Magician's Nephew*; *The Last Battle*. I cite Lewis's statement that the idea of *Narnia* first came to him as an image in his mind of a Faun carrying an umbrella and "several brown-paper parcels," and walking through a snowy wood, as described in Lucy's first meeting with Tumnus (*Narnia*:114).

We discuss *Narnia* in the order Lewis wrote the books because I think it is important to allow the first-time reader the sense of wonder and satisfaction that comes with having one's questions answered as one goes "further up and further in" or, even better, to experience the delightful surprise of connections one had not anticipated. Isn't that how we experience our own lives? We were not here at the beginning, and we are not likely to be around for the end--not on this earth, anyway. We learn about the past along the way; we anticipate the future as our own passage from the "shadowlands" to "Aslan's country." In binding all seven books into one cover--the least expensive and handiest way to own them--HarperCollins has placed them in Narnian *chronological* order. An unfortunate decision, I think, but one still can *read* them in the "proper" order, of course.

We usually move to consideration of the space trilogy next. I find Lewis's characterization of "deep heaven" hopeful and helpful, as contrasted with our usual thinking about space as mostly empty and fatally cold. Of course, the latter is the physical reality, as we measure it scientifically. However, Lewis's point is that the physical, material world is not the *only* reality, and that the two (or more) realities, both (or all) created and sustained by God, are not contradictory, but complementary, could we but know and experience them both, as Ransom did.

I read an opinion once that *That Hideous Strength* is Lewis's worst book: ill-conceived, hastily and crudely thrown together. With many others, I beg to differ. Lewis made the point, in his preface, that we will not immediately recognize it for what he called it in the subtitle: *A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups*. This is because it is set in our own familiar world, and the evil (or at least our recognition of the evil) builds gradually from within, as it were. A few ordinary humans followed the orders of their unseen masters, the "macrobes." Many ordinary humans, unaware of the great evil in their midst at Belbury, forwarded Belbury's evil plans for the enslavement of humanity out of their own ordinary, petty evil inclinations and desires: greed for money, lust for power, desire for academic prestige, the attraction of popular fame, or, more nakedly, because of their envy, jealousy, and hatred of others.

Moreover, *That Hideous Strength* is a riveting study in the most stunning paradox in all theology. Evil is allowed to use any and all power it can gain, as cunningly, as treacherously, as brutally, as it can. Goodness is forbidden the use of many instruments and avenues of power; what it is allowed, it must use honorably, with integrity. Yet, evil *cannot* win, and goodness

cannot lose! Not only is this true eschatologically. It is true, taking the long view, in every human culture and society. Soon or late, evil inevitably sows the seeds of its own destruction. Belbury came close; but England was cleansed of the stain of Belbury, mostly through the faithful waiting of a tiny, motley band, and their refusal to employ evil means to righteous ends. *That* is worth discussion in a classroom of practicing and future ministers of the Gospel of the One who defeated all evil in his own Person.

### *Discussing Tolkien in the Classroom*

In discussing Tolkien, we begin with *The Hobbit*. Of course, by now Frodo's fame far outshines that of his elder cousin (or uncle; cf. *Fellowship*:43, 55) Bilbo's, but unless one knows Bilbo and his story--Bilbo titled it *There and Back Again*--one cannot understand Frodo and the quest to return the Ring to the one place where it could be destroyed.

From *The Hobbit* we turn to *On Fairy-stories* and *Leaf by Niggle*. This is partly because Tolkien said he composed them about the time Frodo and his three companions reached Bree (*Reader/Tree and Leaf*:2), that is to say, after *The Hobbit* had been published, and early in the composition of the *Ring* trilogy. *On Fairy-stories* should be on the short reading list of everyone who loves great literature, of everyone who loves the Bible, and of everyone who would serve the church. (Do not suppose I am calling the Bible a "fairy-story"!) One of its more important contributions is the concept of humans as "sub-creators" and our work as "sub-creation" because we are made in our own Creator's image. Another, equally important for Christian theology, is his discussion of *Eucatastrophe* (Tolkien's term) in the climax of, and the epilogue to, the essay.

The *Ring* trilogy is a vast meta-narrative, as Tolkien intended from the beginning. I would not presume to tell the reader in detail how to proceed through it with students who, for the most part, will not previously have read it completely through. Go where you will; linger where you most want to linger; accommodate your students' desires, too, as you can. You probably will have to adopt the strategy I use in all my courses in biblical exegesis, as well. Don't spend all your class sessions in one location. I have had to observe a rule of no more than two of my (four-hour) class sessions in any one volume. Otherwise, we have no time left for the Middle Earth back-story (*The Silmarillion* and others), or for overview, summary, implications, etc., of the whole of Tolkien's work for Christian theology and ministry.

### *One Addition*

I have not asked students to view any of the film adaptations of Lewis's or of Tolkien's works. Next time around, though, I intend to do so. For Lewis, it probably will be one of the three film versions of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; for Tolkien, probably Peter Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. To show them in a class session would use too much class time, and would run a risk of legal action, unless one's institution has purchased and kept up to date a license to show commercial films. In any case, I've found with other classes that students enjoy watching films with family, friends, and/or classmates. Everyone having watched the film version, we will devote part of a class session to discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the film adaptation, but with our eye mostly to the treatment of theologically important issues. (Of course, "theological" is a very broad brush; ultimately, *everything* is theological.)

### *Post-Module Assignment*

I do not administer exams or pop quizzes in my courses. Rather, I ask for a final paper, usually about 3,000-3,500 words in length, and due six or seven weeks after class sessions have ended, or per the protocols of our summer modules. Students may expand on one of the earlier short essays, or choose a different topic. I always ask students to clear their topics with me by the time class sessions have ended. This is primarily to help the student who needs to refine a topic that is too amorphous, or too broad in scope, to give him/her any chance of writing a creditable paper. The final paper is the student's chance to show depth and breadth in thinking and writing about a theme, issue, character, etc., over a sustained period of time. It allows students not only to summarize and analyze something in Lewis or Tolkien, but also to draw implications and realize its potential for contribution to various areas of theological thinking and practice--biblical, systematic, and pastoral, all three.

### *Twain, Sayers, and Others*

Teaching these courses on Lewis's and Tolkien's fiction has taught me how to use creative literature in my other courses, most of which are more directly related to the Hebrew Bible and related subjects. Mark Twain continues to be one of my favorite authors, both for his fiction and for his non-fiction. (I am glad to acknowledge my colleague, Dr. Vicki Copp, for her excellent article in *Didache* 9:2, "Mentoring . . ." Without it, I may not have found the courage to accept Dean's invitation to write this one.) In January, 1870, Twain wrote a letter to his then-fiancee, Olivia Langdon, in which he declaimed on the astronomical wonders recently discovered through the use of new telescopes by which humans now could peer into the heavens to the astonishing distance of 50,000 light years (*Bible*:xv). I read this letter as one of the ways into another summer module course, "Theology of Creation." This time around, I also will read a very short chapter from Dorothy Sayers' mystery novel, *The Documents in the Case*, touching on some of the same themes as Twain's letter, but from the perspective of the late 1920s.

But I won't have all the fun. One of the pre-Module reading assignments for the Theology of Creation course is to read two hundred fifty pages of "non-expository, non-commentary" writing on creation themes. Each class session, I will invite one or two students to name one piece or excerpt and give one or two highlights, then invite brief responses. My goal is to help students understand that human beings cannot forever evade or suppress the eternal existential questions. Moreover, this aspect of the human condition is of inestimable value as we try to help people see they do not need to continue fleeing the Hound of Heaven.

As this course continues, I intend also to read other excerpts from Twain's works: *Extracts from Adam's Diary*; *Eve's Diary*; and *Letters from the Earth*. As we begin to bring together biblical creation and eschatological thought (Treating them separately has become a major source of theological and ecclesiological dysfunction in North American Protestantism.), I will reread Twain's letter to Olivia, and attempt to help students understand that Twain was much too pessimistic in his assessment of God's regard for the species we call *Homo sapiens*.



For two decades or more before his death, Twain's was the most widely known name on the planet. I use that fact as a way of emphasizing the importance of sound biblical theology in the first session of my course, "Introduction to Old Testament Theology," which I have taught yearly for most of my tenure at NTS. I read and comment briefly on excerpts from several of Twain's works and give a short sketch of his life. Twain was brilliant, and in most things exceedingly wise, but he had no one to mentor him in reading the Old Testament with understanding. Naturally, then, he misunderstood much of it. Twain's misunderstandings did not remain his private burden, however. Many of them were disseminated around the globe, and remain toxic today. Who, not being conversant in the Hebrew Bible herself, is likely to gainsay Twain? *We do* have mentors; we are responsible to learn better than Twain, and to keep an eye out for potential world-changers whom we have the privilege of mentoring, in turn.

Lewis, Tolkien, and Twain have been my favorites in the classroom. Someday, I may investigate whether a course in Twain's theology would make enrollment. That would be a different kind of challenge, for a number of reasons, and we would find ourselves countering Twain often. I have referenced others regularly, also. Ellis Peters, Agatha Christie, Garrison Keillor, and Thomas Hardy come to mind. You have your favorites, as well; don't be afraid to let them help you.

### *Conclusion*

I do not present this essay in the guise of an academic expert on Lewis, Tolkien, Twain, or Sayers. By the nature of my fields, however, I am a literary, as well as a linguistic, a historical, and a theological scholar. I know how the bodies of ancient Near Eastern and of Western literature work; as importantly, I know how to learn. With this small offering, I hope to have helped, at least a little, others who also know how to learn.

### *Works Referenced and Cited*

Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* have been in print continuously since their original publication dates. The edition cited here is Lewis, C. S. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.

Lewis's space trilogy, likewise, has been available in a number of editions. I have used:

Lewis, C. S. *Out of the Silent Planet*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965.

Lewis, C. S. *Perelandra*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965.

Lewis, C. S. *That Hideous Strength*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965.

C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce* are so widely available, both separately and in anthologies, it is pointless to reference a specific edition.

Lewis, C. S. *Till We Have Faces*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1966.

Sayers, Dorothy L. *The Documents in the Case*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.

Tolkien's work also has been published in a number of editions. I have used:

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