



C.S. Lewis on Holy Scripture

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At the beginning of *The Silver Chair*, young Jill Pole finds herself in a wood at the top of a high mountain. She meets a lion there, who gives her the task of finding a lost prince and bringing him back home to Narnia.

The lion also gives Jill four signs to guide her on this quest. When he asks her to repeat these four signs, she does not remember them quite as well as she expected. So the lion corrects her and then patiently asks her to repeat the signs until she can say them word-perfect and in the proper order.

Unfortunately, even though she knows the signs by heart, Jill somehow manages to forget most of them by the time she needs them. The first sign pertains to Jill's traveling companion—a boy who was named Eustace Clarence Scrubb (and almost deserved it). As soon as Eustace sets foot in Narnia, he will meet a dear old friend, whom he is to greet at once so he can gain help for his journey. But by the time the children figure out that the old king of Narnia actually is Eustace's friend Caspian, the king has sailed away and they have missed their chance. "We've muffed the first Sign," Jill says impatiently. "And now . . . everything is going wrong from the very beginning."¹ And so it continues. Later in the story, when the children discover to their dismay that they have also muffed the second and third signs, Jill admits, "It's my fault. I—I'd given up repeating [them] every night."²

Whether C.S. Lewis meant it this way or not, to me this story has always illustrated the importance and challenge of Holy Scripture in the Christian life—of memorizing Bible verses, spending time in God's Word every day, and putting what it says into practice. To be faithful to her calling, Jill needed to go back every day to the will of Aslan (for of course he was the lion who sent her on the quest). Yet, as time went on, she was tempted to neglect the daily quiet time when she recited the four signs. And because of this neglect, she and her friends fell into disobedience and confusion, nearly to the point of death.

If there is an analogy here, then it is entirely in keeping with the importance that C.S. Lewis placed on biblical truth for Christian discipleship. For Lewis, Holy Scripture was the supreme authority for faith and practice, and reading the Bible had life-giving influence for the Christian. These writings are "holy," Lewis said, "inspired," "the Oracles of God."³ The way for us to know God is on the authority of His Word, which provides the data for doing theology.⁴

These strong affirmations of Scripture may seem surprising. Although C.S. Lewis seems to get quoted on almost everything else, he is not cited often on the inspiration and authority of the Bible. There are some good reasons to be hesitant about certain aspects of Lewis's doctrine of Scripture—reasons that can be explored elsewhere.⁵ Yet Lewis generally had a high view of Scripture, not a low one, and his defense of biblical truth can nourish our confidence in the Bible as the Word of God.

Submission to Scripture

To begin, C.S. Lewis believed that Christian doctrine should always be surrendered to Scripture. He had a healthy respect for theological tradition, as codified in the creeds of the church. But his theological norm was the Bible, which typically he referred to as "Holy Scripture." If we believe that God has spoken, Lewis wrote in a letter to the editor of *Theology*, naturally we will "listen to what He has to say."⁶

In his personal letters, Lewis urged his friends and other correspondents to follow this principle and submit to biblical authority. Here are a few examples:



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“What we are committed to believing is whatever can be proved from Scripture.”⁷

“Yes, Pascal does directly contradict several passages in Scripture and must be wrong.”⁸

“I take it as a first principle that we must not interpret any one part of Scripture so that it contradicts other parts.”⁹

In giving these exhortations, Lewis took both sides of a doctrinal equation: we believe what the Bible affirms, and we do not believe what the Bible denies. Furthermore, he insisted on accepting the unity and consistency of the Bible.

We see Lewis applying the principle of letting Scripture interpret Scripture to two of the doctrines he found it hardest to understand. One was the sovereignty of God over human suffering. In a letter offering spiritual counsel, he wrote:

The two things one must NOT do are (a) To believe, on the strength of Scripture or on any other evidence, that God is in any way evil. (In Him is no darkness at all.) (b) To wipe off the slate any passage which seems to show that He is. Behind that apparently shocking passage, be sure, there lurks some great truth which you don't understand. If one ever does come to understand it, one will see that [He] is good and just and gracious in ways we never dreamed of. Till then, it must be just left on one side.”¹⁰

Another example of Lewis's submission to Holy Scripture is his affirmation of the doctrine of hell, simply on the grounds of biblical authority. In *The Problem of Pain* he wrote, “There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of Our Lord's own words.”¹¹

Lewis was far more concerned with what Scripture said than with what the scholars said. When one of his readers—who was tempted to come under the influence of modernist theology—wrote to express her doubts about the Virgin Birth, Lewis sent her back to Holy Scripture: “Your starting point about this doctrine will not, I think, be to collect the opinion of individual clergymen, but to read Matthew Chapter I and Luke I and II.”¹² C.S. Lewis believed strongly that Christian doctrine should be derived from and surrendered to Holy Scripture.

The Bible as Literature

Another strength of Lewis's approach to Scripture was his sensitive reading of each biblical text according to its literary form. Lewis read the Bible as literature decades before it became fashionable to do so. Not that he read the Bible *merely* as literature, of course. In fact, he was highly

critical of any attempt to claim that the Bible had unique literary majesty apart from its sacred authorship and saving message. “Unless the religious claims of the Bible are again acknowledged,” Lewis wrote, “its literary claims will, I think, be given only ‘mouth honour’ and that decreasingly. For it is, through and through, a sacred book.”¹³

In reading the Bible as literature, Lewis was in his element. His primary calling was as an English professor, and in this he was virtually without peer. While at Oxford he wrote a famous volume on the sixteenth century for the *Oxford History of English Literature*, and in 1954 he was awarded the chair of Mediaeval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge University.

Lewis thus came to Holy Scripture as a reader, not a theologian—someone for whom the Bible was always more than literature, but could never be less.¹⁴ This is one of the things that he appreciated most about the Bible, both as a Christian and as a literary critic: in the Old and New Testaments a variety of literary forms—chronicles, poems, moral and political diatribes, romances, and what have you—have been “taken into the service of God's word.”¹⁵

Naturally, Lewis insisted on reading every part of the Bible according to its genre. Because the Bible is literature, it “cannot properly be read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different sorts of literature they are.”¹⁶ There are even different kinds of narrative—and it would be illogical to read them all in the same way.¹⁷ One has to take the Bible for what it is, Lewis insisted, and it “demands incessantly to be taken on its own terms.”¹⁸

When it came to biblical history—especially the Gospels—Lewis insisted that it should be read precisely as history. In one essay he criticized Bible scholars who regarded the Gospel of John as a poetic, spiritual “romance” rather than as historical narrative. Lewis frankly doubted that such scholars knew very much about literature at all. “I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life,” he wrote. “I know what they are like.” So if someone “tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance,” he wrote, “I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavor; not how many years he has spent on that Gospel.”¹⁹

For his own part, Lewis had little doubt that the Gospel of John was reliable history. “Either this is repage,” he wrote, “or else some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic, narrative.”²⁰

C.S. Lewis generally found critical Bible scholars “to lack literary judgment, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading.”²¹ He admitted that this was “a strange charge to bring against men who have been steeped in those books all their lives.” “But that might be just the trouble,” he wrote:

*A man who has spent his youth and manhood in the minute study of New Testament texts and of other people's studies of them, whose literary experience of those texts lacks any standard of comparison such as can only grow from a wide and deep and genial experience of literature in general, is . . . very likely to miss the obvious things about them.*²²

To use the analogy that Lewis gave, such scholars “claim to see fern-seed and can't see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight.” They “ask me to believe they can read between the lines of the old texts; the evidence is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves.”²³

Christianity versus Liberalism

In defending John and the other Gospels against their critics, C.S. Lewis was steadfastly committed to the historicity and validity of biblical miracles—another strength of his reading of Scripture. He not only believed in miracles but also defended them against their critics. In fact, Lewis saw this as the bright line that divided authentic Christianity from all its pretenders. He wrote: “To me the real distinction is . . . between religion with a real supernaturalism and salvationism on the one hand, and all watered-down and modernist versions on the other.”²⁴

What marked the dividing line for Lewis were the biblical miracles: “They are recorded as events on this earth which affected human senses. They are the sort of thing we can describe literally. If Christ turned water into wine, and we had been present, we could have seen, smelled, and tasted . . . It is either fact, or legend, or lie. You must take it or leave it.”²⁵ Readers who are familiar with the “Lord, liar, or lunatic” *tri-lemma* that Lewis posed in *Mere Christianity* have encountered this type of apologetic reasoning before. When it came to miracles, including the miracle of the Incarnation, it was all or nothing for Lewis.

What was not an option, as far as he was concerned, was to rule out the very possibility of miracles the way that modern, supposedly scientific scholars tended to do. Here is what Lewis wrote in “Fern-Seed and Elephants” about biblical scholarship that denied the miraculous:

*Scholars, as scholars, speak on [this question] with no more authority than anyone else. The canon “If miraculous, unhistorical” is one they bring to their study of texts, not one they have learned from it. If one is speaking of authority, the united authority of all the Biblical critics in the world counts here for nothing. On this they speak simply as men; men obviously influenced by, and perhaps insufficiently critical of, the spirit of the age they grew up in.*²⁶

It was because he believed in miracles—including, supremely, the miraculous resurrection of Jesus Christ—that Lewis was so critical of liberal scholarship on the Bible. He spent far more time defending the Bible than he did criticizing it, which he hardly did at all.

C.S. Lewis was so anti-liberal that many of his contemporaries labeled him as a fundamentalist. Here is how he explained their attitude toward his theology:

*I have been suspected of being what is called a Fundamentalist. That is because I never regard any narrative as unhistorical simply on the ground that it includes the miraculous. Some people find the miraculous so hard to believe that they cannot imagine any reason for my acceptance of it other than a prior belief that every sentence of the Old Testament has historical or scientific truth. But this I do not hold.*²⁷

Needless to say, Lewis's defense of miracles led many liberal scholars to treat him with suspicion. For his own part, Lewis regarded liberal scholars as wolves among the sheep, especially “the divines engaged in New Testament criticism,” whom he held chiefly responsible for undermining theological orthodoxy.²⁸

Lewis exacted his revenge in the fiction he wrote. *The Screwtape Letters*, *That Hideous Strength*, and *The Great Divorce* all feature liberal clergy who are held up to mockery. Lewis treated them this way because he believed that liberal Christianity was not real Christianity at all. Instead, it was:

a theology which denies the historicity of nearly everything in the Gospels to which Christian life and affections and thought have been fastened for nearly two millennia—which either denies the miraculous altogether or, more strangely, after swallowing the camel of the Resurrection strains at such gnats as the feeding of the multitudes.

Lewis proceeded to explain what happens when this kind of Christianity, so-called, is offered to an ordinary person who has recently come to faith in Christ. Either the convert will leave a liberal church and find one where biblical Christianity is actually taught, or else eventually he will leave Christianity altogether. “If he agrees with your version [of the Christian faith],” Lewis said to his liberal opponents, “he will no longer call himself a Christian and no longer come to church.”³⁰

Lewis made a similar point in *Letters to Malcolm* by asking a rhetorical question: “By the way, did you ever meet, or hear of, anyone who was converted from skepticism to a ‘liberal’ or ‘de-mythologized’ Christianity?” Lewis never had, which led him to claim “that when unbelievers come in at all, they come in a good deal further.”³¹ What he meant by

“a good deal further” was authentic faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

The place where Lewis learned the difference between authentic and inauthentic faith was in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which he believed to be the very Word of God. If we are wise, we will follow his example by reading Holy Scripture on its own terms, fully submitting to its authority, and completely surrendering to God’s will for our lives—lest, like Jill Pole and Eustace Scrubb, we miss the signs and lose our way.

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Notes:

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (London: Collins, 1974), 47.
2. C.S. Lewis, *Silver Chair*, 109.
3. C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958), 109.
4. “Letters to Malcolm,” Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Dep. D. 808, 48.
5. See my chapter (from which the present article is excerpted) in the forthcoming book *The Romantic Rationalist*, edited by John Piper and David Mathis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, in press).
6. C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 27.
7. C.S. Lewis, in a 1945 letter to Lyman Stebbins, quoted by James Como, “C.S. Lewis’ Quantum Church: An Uneasy Meditation,” in C.S. Lewis and the Church: *Essays in Honour of Walter Hooper*, ed. Judith Wolfe and Brendan N. Wolfe (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 98.
8. C.S. Lewis, letter to Dom Bede Griffiths, May 28, 1952, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, vol. 3, Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950–1963 (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007), 195.
9. Lewis, letter to Emily McLay, August 3, 1953, *ibid.*, 354.
10. Lewis, letter to McLay, *ibid.*, 356–57.
11. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 106.
12. Lewis, letter to Genia Goelz, June 13, 1959, *Collected Letters*, 3:127.
13. C.S. Lewis, *The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 32.
14. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “On Scripture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to C.S. Lewis*, ed. Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 76.
15. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 111.
16. *Ibid.*, 3.
17. Lewis, letter to Carnell, *Collected Letters*, 3:319.
18. Lewis, *Authorized Version*, 97.
19. C.S. Lewis, “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,” in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 154–55.
20. *Ibid.*, 155.
21. *Ibid.*, 154.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 157.
24. C.S. Lewis, letter to Sister Penelope, November 8, 1939, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, vol. 2, *Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931–1949* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), 285.
25. C.S. Lewis, “Horrid Red Things,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 71.
26. Lewis, “Modern Theology,” 158.
27. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 109.
28. Lewis, “Modern Theology,” 153.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1964), 152–53.

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