

Reading and Reduction: Michael Ward's Planet Narnia

by [James Como](#) (December 2018)



Prince Caspian of Narnia, Peter Maxx, 1960

Some lit crit can be too *bravissimo* for its own good. This tenth anniversary of the publication of *Planet Narnia* from the Oxford University Press is occasioning commentary on that sort of work. When I read it during its first year in print, having already read a pre-publication account of it in an English newspaper and been approached by a friend to help promote it, I was greatly impressed by its authoritative reach and

expository power: Ward knows Lewis and much else and often writes with pellucid drive. Yet, though having gained a measure of traction in the U.K., it has been somewhat less successful in the U.S. Some years ago my suggestion to the New York C. S. Lewis Society that *Planet Narnia* was a rich book well worth the read was, owing to Ward's absolutism, greeted dismissively.

In its breadth Ward's study of the presence of medieval cosmology in the Lewis *oeuvre* is the richest we have: literary scholarship and intellectual history of a high order. His chapter on Jupiter, for example, is typically excursive: probative, kinetic, virtually dispositive. Moreover, that, along with Ward's Herculean effort in getting Lewis into Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey, secures his standing as among the most faithful and effective stewards in the Republic of Lewis Letters.

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Fulsomely expounded mostly in the second half of the book, his thesis is this: the medieval conception of the seven heavenly planets provides the organizing principle of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, that each book is, so to speak, informed, or presided over, by a different one of those planets so pronouncedly as to be, finally, determinative, and that knowing this unfolds, or "decodes," the hidden meaning of the series. In Ward's words, the paradigm "determines the overall shape and feel of each story, governing the architectonics of each narrative, the incidental ornamentation, and also, most significantly, the portrayal of the Christ-like character of Aslan and the Spirit . . . he imparts." (I have not seen the doctoral

dissertation that is the basis of the book but do wonder if in it Ward makes quite the same sweeping claim.)

Unfortunately, in arguing his central proposition—the point, after all, that gives his book its moment and about which he has published a second book, with a film documentary (in which I appear) to accompany it—Ward leans too far over his skis.* My intention here is not to argue a case against the grand thesis but rather to sketch my thinking respecting some aspects of it, beginning with this analogy. You enter a house the likes of which you've never visited: re-assuring, endlessly variegated, transcendently beautiful. As you dwell therein you discover levels upon levels, corridors off of corridors, and hidden rooms each more fascinating, exciting, promising, mysterious and fulfilling as the last. You have been unsettled (were you even in the same space-time continuum that you had left?), re-settled, and, somehow, your soul has been enlarged.

Then you learn about the house. Many writers trace within its structure the Judeo-Christian mythos of a Creator-God who, after his creative act and with many trials for and guidance of his creatures, will re-appear, die, come back to life, disappear, and eventually raise the whole edifice as a new, fresh creation. Another allows that Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* was its architect's dispositive influence. Still others—it really is quite a house!—complain of *too many* explanatory keys: fairy tale and folktale lore, Greco-Roman and Nordic mythology, even the works of other architects, all jostling (as one writer puts it) “hugger-mugger without apology.” Why, even one of the architect's dearest friends (J.R.R. Tolkien, no less), when responding to the claim that this diversity exists in people's minds, said, “not in mine, or at least not at the same time.”

You are interested in these claims; after all, the architect is a font of endlessly fascinating ideas, inventions, and inspirations. Yet none of the claims alters the effect of the house proper upon your heart, mind and soul. And so, when you learn of a brilliant new pattern by which to view the house, a sort of x-ray device, you appreciate it, even though it really does not “see through” the *mysterium* (as the architect has elsewhere warned us against doing, for to see through everything is to make everything invisible). In short, seeing what may be a map of the plumbing does not make the water flow more refreshingly.

As I’ve suggested, along with his scholarship Ward’s conviction and enthusiasm pull the reader along—but also mask some potholes. To show that Lewis was sometimes secretive, even deceptive, and oblique in several of his works (argumentatively atmospheric but well-known) does not compel the conclusion that he was *secretive* about his systematic implantation of medieval cosmology as the commanding design in each of the *Chronicles of Narnia*