



mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 37
Number 2

Article 10

Spring 4-17-2019

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Recommended Citation

Berman, Ruth (2019) "Narnian Stars," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 37 : No. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol37/iss2/10>

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NARNIAN STARS

RUTH BERMAN

WHEN C.S. LEWIS WAS IMAGINING THE NARNIAN SKIES, he at first followed closely the example of medieval astrology, focusing primarily on the planets (as he likewise did in his section on “The Heavens,” in *The Discarded Image*, 92-122), with a secondary focus on the constellations, mainly the constellations of the Zodiac. (The Zodiacal constellations are the only ones that can interact directly with the motions of the planets, as they all lie in the same plane; the other constellations, above or below that plane, are not crossed by the motions of the planets.) Likewise, in his 1935 poem “The Planets” (*Poems* 21-24), the focus is on the planets alone, and in the 1947 poem “The Turn of the Tide” (49-50) on the planets and the Zodiacal constellations. As he developed Narnia further, however, he departed from traditional astrology in increasingly significant ways.

Even at the start, the characteristics Lewis assigned to the stars in Narnian star-lore were slightly different from Terran star-myths. (Michael Ward, in his *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*, discusses Lewis’s use of traditional astrology per se, but even in *Prince Caspian*, Lewis made Narnian star-myths slightly different from Terran ones.) In both sets of star-myths, the planets are a separate category from the fixed stars, and represent major legendary figures. The medieval planets were the Roman planets/gods (inherited by the Romans from the Greek and by the Greeks from the Babylonians)—the Moon (Luna, identified from the Hellenic period on with Diana), Mercury, Venus, the Sun (Helios, identified from the Hellenic period on with Diana’s twin brother Apollo), Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. In Narnia the planets are not gods as such, as the Narnians are not polytheistic, but are evidently similarly powerful beings, perhaps angels. Doctor Cornelius, in *Prince Caspian*, identifies two of the planets as Tarva, the Lord of Victory, and Alambil, the Lady of Peace (IV.46). These titles sound like equivalents of Mars, the god of war, and Venus, the goddess of love, and the similarity suggests that the Narnian planets are the same as the seven known to ancient and medieval Terran star-lore. (The presentation of the seven traditional planets, and the characterization of them as angels rather than gods, had already been an important part of Lewis’s “space trilogy” of *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*.)

In the first of the books, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when the children are new to Narnia and do not know the names of any of the stars there, no names are given. But in the pre-dawn darkness before Aslan is restored to life, the narrative notes that “the stars were getting fainter—all except one very big one low down on the Eastern horizon” (XV.156-7). This Morningstar, not yet

named to the reader, a signal of impending joy, is evidently *the Morningstar*—the Terran Venus and Prince Caspian’s Alambil, the Lady of Peace. Further on in *Prince Caspian*, Lucy is happy to see again “the bright Narnian stars,” which she knows better than the stars over England, because as a Queen in Narnia she stayed up later than she did as an English schoolgirl: “three of the summer constellations could be seen from where she lay: the Ship, the Hammer, and the Leopard” (IX.111). These names are evidently not simply different names for the same constellations, but are composed of different stars in different arrangements, not directly equivalent to Terran constellations. The Narnian Leopard could correspond to the Zodiac’s Leo, and the Ship to Argo Navis (the Ship Argo), from the Greek legend of Jason and his ship. But the Hammer does not have a direct Terran equivalent, and Argo and Leo are not among the summer constellations in England’s sky. And the choice of names reflects a different attitude to star-groups. For the ancient Greeks, most of the constellations came from myths or legends of heroes. If the Narnian Ship has behind it the legend of a Narnian Jason, that legend does not come into Lucy’s mind then, or into any of the books later.

As Lewis continued his exploration of the Narnian skies, he moved into a less traditional focus on stars as individuals, and on all the stars, in their entirety, as the most striking elements of Narnian astronomical mythology. It is individual stars, rather than constellations, that seem to figure in Narnian legends. Edmund and Lucy meet two of them in *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader,”* Coriakin, the rebellious and repentant star set to govern the Dufflepuds (XI.137), and the retired star Ramandu (XIV.176). Although Ramandu tells Caspian it is not for a son of Adam “to know what faults a star can commit” (180), it seems likely enough that the Narnian stars went through a War in Heaven, of stars equivalent to angels divided by a rebellious angel equivalent to a Miltonic Satan, or to Tolkien’s Melkor (who similarly divides the Ainur in *The Silmarillion* and disrupts their singing in the creation of Middle-earth; the Narnian stars were similarly to join the singing of the creation of Narnia in *The Magician’s Nephew*).

In visualizing the Narnian skies, in *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader,”* Lewis made a small error, in forgetting to allow for the flatness of Narnia’s world. As the ship sails east, “every night they saw that there rose in the east new constellations which no one had ever seen in Narnia and perhaps, as Lucy thought with a mixture of joy and fear, no living eye had seen at all. Those new stars were big and bright and the nights were warm” (XIII.163). And Ramandu tells the voyagers that the grounded star Coriakin “might have shone for thousands of years more in the southern winter sky if all had gone well” (XIV.180). But Narnia’s sky turns, in its Ptolemaic way, once around from east to west every day. A star that is on the eastern horizon at sunset is visible over

the whole of Narnia, as it is flat, and has no globular bulge to hide the stars rising in the east from the westering lands until the sky has turned further around. Even if some geographical feature, such as, perhaps, a mountain range, were to hide the rising eastern stars from the western lands temporarily, in the course of the night they would sweep across the whole arc of the sky and become visible in the west as well. Of course, a star on the eastern horizon at sunrise is invisible in the bright daytime sunlight, but it doesn't become any the more visible as the *Dawn Treader* journeys closer to the east. In addition, as is implied by the reference in *Prince Caspian* to "the summer constellations," the Sun in the Narnian sky evidently swings around the sky on a yearly cycle that eventually has the stars that were invisible in the daytime becoming up and visible at night later in the year, in the same way that the Earth's orbit around the Sun produces a yearly cycle of seasonal constellations. (Orion, for example, is a winter constellation on Earth, invisible in the summer.) The voyagers cannot see "new constellations," unseen before, and Coriakin, when he was "in the southern winter sky," would have been visible low in the southern sky in a northern country like Narnia, rather than hidden by the equatorial bulge of a spherical world—although it would be at least possible for a geographical feature such as a mountain range to result in making Coriakin invisible in the northern sky. (The seasonal variation implied by his presence in the winter sky, however, is possible in Narnia as on Earth. His winter visibility is perhaps a hint of a certain iciness of character that led to his misdoings and so to his punishment.)

In the closing two books, *The Magician's Nephew* and *The Last Battle*, presenting the beginning and the end of Narnia's history, Lewis ignored the medieval example of focusing primarily on the planets and the constellations of the Zodiac to focus on the role of the entirety of the fixed stars. In *The Magician's Nephew*:

Then two wonders happened at the same moment. One was that the voice [Aslan's] was suddenly joined by other voices; more than you could possibly count. They were in harmony with it, but far higher up the scale: cold, tingling, silvery voices. The second wonder was that the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars. They didn't come out gently one by one, as they do on a summer evening. One moment there had been nothing but darkness; next moment a thousand, thousand points of light leaped out—single stars, constellations, and planets, bigger and brighter than any in our world. [...] [I]t was the stars themselves who were singing. (VIII.99)

(The image here is Biblical, from Job 38.4, 7: "Where was thou when I laid the foundations of the earth [...] when the morning stars sang together.")

In *The Last Battle*, Lewis again made the minor mistake of supposing a difference between Narnia's northern and southern skies and too much of a similarity between the skies of Narnia and Earth, in a brief description of how "All the great northern stars were burning above the treetops. The Northern Star of that world is called the Spear-Head: it is brighter than our Pole Star" (VI.58). (The reference to the Pole Star as a single star, a spear-head, without a description of it as part of a constellation of the Spear, seems to reflect a focus on individual stars rather than constellations.) Narnia could well have a northern star, but it might not be visible above the treetops—it would be low in the northern sky. Elsewhere in the story, the narrative is concerned with the entirety of the stars. Unlike Doctor Cornelius in *Prince Caspian*, who took Caspian to observe the gracious conjunction of planets, Roonwit the Centaur has been observing the stars as a whole, in addition to the planets' conjunctions, and he is sure that Aslan cannot really have returned to Narnia, because "the stars say nothing of the coming of Aslan, nor of peace, nor of joy. I know by my art that there have not been such disastrous conjunctions of the planets for five hundred years" (II.15).

At the end of the story, when Aslan calls the stars down out of the sky, the result is "showers of glittering people, all with long hair like burning silver and spears like white-hot metal" (XIV.151), gathering as a whole group, not differentiable into constellations. It might be asked why these stars have long hair and spears for weapons. For the long hair, perhaps Lewis was thinking of stars as having "star-beams" equivalent to the rays of light that show in some atmospheric conditions as "moonbeams" and "sunbeams," and thinking of such beams as like hair, or perhaps he was remembering that a "comet" is, etymologically, a "hairy" star, and felt that all the Narnian stars might have some resemblance to comets.

The reference to Coriakin's rebelliousness in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* if there were other stars involved in the rebellion, might indeed have led to a Miltonic War in Heaven, and spears are perhaps as plausible a choice as any for the weaponry they would prefer. Milton's account of the angels' rebellion in *Paradise Lost* armed the angels, in up-to-date fashion (for Milton's date), with gunpowder and cannons, but that choice would hardly do for Narnia's implicitly medieval level of technology. (In Milton's "Hymn on the Nativity," the angels were armed with swords, but perhaps stars would need weapons for longer-range fighting.) Lewis might also have been thinking of the stars who had not been rebellious as having "influence" on human affairs, not just in the astrological sense, but as taking some kind of a literal, active part in fighting evil in the world below. Perhaps he was remembering how in the Book of Judges, Deborah in her victory song says, "The stars in their courses fought against Sisera" (5.26.20). The Bible doesn't say how stars fighting against human

are armed, but perhaps Lewis was also remembering William Blake's most famous poem, "The Tyger," which asks, "When the stars threw down their spears/ And water'd heaven with their tears, / Did he [the tyger's maker] smile his work to see?" (Lewis was not a Blake specialist, but had a general familiarity with Blake's work. His diary, published as *All My Road Before Me*, briefly describes a discussion with Neville Coghill on whether Blake was "really inspired," and if so, in what sense of the words [4 February 1923, 236].)

The two final Narnia books' depictions of the stars—seen as a whole, and not particularly divided into constellations or between fixed stars and planets—are among the most striking in the series, and show Lewis's imagination leading him beyond the medieval models into a new way of "seeing stars."

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