

All Souls Catechesis | January 14th, 2024 | Jim Beitler
On Judith Wolfe's "A Richer Mythology: C.S. Lewis & Figural Reading"

"I am a product...of endless books. My father bought all the books he read and never got rid of any of them. There were books in the study, books in the drawing room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the cistern attic, books of all kinds reflecting every transient stage of my parents' interest, books readable and unreadable, books suitable for a child and books most emphatically not. Nothing was forbidden me. In the seemingly endless rainy afternoons I took volume after volume from the shelves. I had always the same certainty of finding a book that was new to me as a man who walks into a field has of finding a new blade of grass."

- Lewis, from *Surprised by Joy*

A refresher on figural reading

"Figural readers hope to uncover the way that God's creative work integrates all reality by showing how particular parts of Scripture—God's own words—interlock with others, often across times and books and characters, through similitude, resonance, and moral form...Figural readers receive biblical words *in canonical context* and pay special attention to the way these words acquire theological and especially christological import." (Ephraim Radner & David Ney, *ATLC*, p. 4, emphasis added)

Lewis's figural readings...

1. **extend beyond the canonical context.** "Lewis grants to biblical types only slight privilege over pagan myths. He sees God's election of the Jewish people manifested in promises, covenants, laws, and God's dwelling with Israel. But...Lewis pays little attention...to the specific figurations of the Old Testament. Both by temperament and by learning, his focus is on archetypal figures, whether they be found in the Bible or in pagan philosophy and mythology." (Wolfe, pp. 328-29)
 - "In this descent and re-ascent [of the Incarnation and Ascension] everyone will recognise a familiar pattern: a thing written all over the world. It is the pattern of all vegetable life. It must belittle itself into something hard, small and deathlike, it must fall into the ground: thence the new life re-ascends....The doctrine of the Incarnation, if accepted, puts this principle even more emphatically at the centre. The pattern is there in Nature because it was first there in God." (Lewis, from *Miracles*)
 - "The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens*—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*." (Lewis, from "Myth Became Fact")
2. **are often informed by the liturgical year.** In his *Reflections on the Psalms*, Lewis "finds the natural setting for allegorical readings of Scripture in the liturgical year of the church. The allegorical power of Psalms 45 and 11 is revealed not in critical study or even in private devotion, but in their appointment, in the Book of Common Prayer, for the Mattins of Christmas Day and of Ascension." (Wolfe, p. 328)

Two readings by Lewis that point to our vocation

1. A moral reading

- While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly. “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. (Mark 14:3-6)
- “The allegorical sense of her great action dawned on me the other day. The precious alabaster box wh. one must break over the Holy Feet is one’s heart. Easier said than done. And the contents become perfume only when it is broken” (Lewis, Letter to Mary Willis Shelburne, November 1, 1954, qtd. in Wolfe, p. 330)

2. An analogical reading

- To him that overcometh will I give...a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it. (Revelation 2:17)
- “What can be more a man’s own than this new name which even in eternity remains a secret between God and him? And what shall we take this secrecy to mean? Surely, that each of the redeemed shall forever know and praise some one aspect of the Divine beauty better than any other creature can. Why else were individuals created, but that God, loving all infinitely, should love each differently? And this difference, so far from impairing, floods with meaning the love of all blessed creatures for one another, the communion of the saints. If all experienced God in the same way and returned Him an identical worship, the song of the Church triumphant would have no symphony, it would be like an orchestra in which all the instruments played the same note. Aristotle has told us that a city is a unity of unlikes, and St Paul that a body is a unity of different members. Heaven is a city, and a Body, because the blessed remain eternally different: a society, because each has something to tell all the others – fresh and ever fresh news of the ‘My God’ whom each finds in Him whom all praise as ‘Our God’. For doubtless the continually successful, yet never complete, attempt by each soul to communicate its unique vision to all others (and that by means whereof earthly art and philosophy are but clumsy imitations) is also among the ends for which the individual was created.” (Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*)

Image vs. interpretation

“For the most part...Lewis is more interested in the quality of the biblical imagery than in its interpretation. Biblical stories and pictures, especially but not only eschatological ones, do not exist to be deciphered but to be inhabited. Of course such inhabitation includes some work of interpretation. But any discursive exegesis, Lewis insists, involves translating into poorer language what God has spoken more perfectly in his own language, whether it be the language of poetry or of history itself.” (Wolfe, p. 333)

Lewis’s fictional figurations of Scripture

Lewis’s stories “refract through the prism of fantasy that light which shines with focused clarity through Scripture. Lewis’s stories are images of the many forms which God’s story with Israel, the church, and creation at large might take in otherworlds animated by the same divine goodness. Such stories are far from necessary, but neither are they superfluous as long as images are part of the way we think and understand” (Wolfe, p. 336)