

DEEPER HEAVEN

A READER'S GUIDE TO C. S. LEWIS'S
RANSOM TRILOGY

CHRISTIANA HALE



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Deeper Heaven: A Reader's Guide to C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy

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INHERIT THE HUMANITIES

*To my parents, Jim & Anita, who gave me story,
To my siblings, Cassandra, Carissa & Isaac, who give me laughter,
And to Pastor Douglas Wilson who inspired this project.*

l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle

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A MAP OF THE
RANSOM TRILOGY COSMOLOGY

ACCORDING TO C. S. LEWIS

CAELUM
IPSUM

THE FIELD OF ARBOL

STELLATUM
THE ANGELIC
HOSTS

LURGA
FATHER
TIME

CONCORDIA
UNIVERSALIS

T H E
H E A V E N S

WHERE DWELL
THE ELDILA

GLUND
KING OF
KINGS

DANCERS
BEFORE THE
THRESHOLD

MCPILOTH

MALACANDRA

CAPTAIN OF A
COLD ORB

SULVA
THE BARREN
LANDS

ST. ANNE'S
SELBURY

THE
LONGAEVITY

THULCANPRA
THE SILENT
PLANET

HAPPY CLIMES THAT LY
WHERE DAY NEVER SHUTS HIS EYE
UP IN THE BROAD FIELDS OF THE SKY

ARBOL
THE EYE OF
THE UNIVERSE

VIRITRILBIA
THE LORD OF
MEANING

ABHALLIN

LUR

DERELANPRA
THE OCEAN OF
PARADISE

P. 12

FOREWORD

The Ransom Trilogy

One of the great ironies surrounding the publication and continued popularity of C. S. Lewis's space trilogy is the fact that everybody still calls it the space trilogy. If there was one thing that Lewis wanted people to quit calling the heavens, it would be *space*. Space makes us think of vast expanses, full of nothing but dead blackness, punctuated here and there by shapeless asteroids and inchoate oceans of flaming gas.

In fact, the popular concept of "space" has actually resulted in many moderns imagining it to be something pretty close to the biblical description of damnation—the outer darkness. This should perhaps indicate to us that one of Screwtape's relatives was likely involved in all of this, with the result that things heavenly have come to have hellish connotations for us. Something has gone seriously wrong somewhere.

This was in fact one of the dragons that Lewis came to slay, and yet for some reason his publishers continue to put "space trilogy" on these books. Contrast this with the experience that Ransom had when he was first becoming acclimatized to the "heavens":

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But Ransom, as time wore on, became aware of another and more spiritual cause for his progressive lightening and exultation of heart. A nightmare, long engendered in the modern mind by the mythology that follows in the wake of science, was falling off him. He had read of 'Space': at the back of his thinking for years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He had not known how much it affected him till now—now that the very name 'Space' seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam. (*Out of the Silent Planet*)

Apart from the collision that results with Lewis's vision, there is also the fact that the phrase is actually not descriptive enough. How many science fiction writers have there been to date? And how many of them have produced trilogies? Many of them cannot be *kept* from producing trilogies. So the chances are pretty good that the number of space trilogies can be reckoned by the score, and yet, such is Lewis's continued authorial dominance that his remains *the* space trilogy. If we are fortunate, we may be able to create some room for the others.

So words do matter, but they do not matter as much as the vision behind the words matters. Despite the fact that "space trilogy" is emblazoned right there on my set of the three books, the fact remains that Lewis has nevertheless opened up the heavens for countless readers. I am not speaking here of Heaven—although Lewis is responsible for large numbers of people coming to understand *that* better as well. Not only so, but he is also responsible for a large number of people *going* there. His vision of Heaven, as seen for example in *The Last Battle* and *The Great Divorce*, is

FOREWORD

a subject worth considering in its own right, but I am concerned here with Lewis and the heavens.

The final Heaven and the heavens we can see at night are not two separated subjects. They are closely related to one another. To the ancient and medieval eye what we could see in the night sky was not the ultimate Heaven, obviously not. But what we could see was thought of as the anterooms of Heaven, the outskirts. We were like sailors centuries ago approaching the coasts of an undiscovered and unexplored Chinese empire, knowing that the great rumors were still only fables to us. The capital city with its “stately pleasure dome” was still out of sight. What we had heard about was still far inland, if it existed at all. When we first made landfall, we could see none of that. But we could see the coastland. We could see *that* with our own eyes.

Has any mortal seen Heaven? Well, actually, all of us have seen the outskirts.

If you ask a typical modern if he has ever seen an angel, you will likely get laughed at. You are likely to get this treatment even if the modern you ask happens to be a professing Christian. “Seeing angels” is something our more excitable brethren on the charismatic fringes do, and *we* by contrast are sober, responsible, upright, not drunk, and pretty duddy. And so when one of these buttoned-up-tight Christians tells you that he has never seen an angel, has it ever occurred to you to point at the night sky and ask, “So what are those?”

After you have worked through the initial consternation, and the “are you serious?” follow up questions, you will have yourself a serious cosmological discussion. And Lewis was deadly serious about provoking such discussions. It was an essential part of his project.

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“In our world,” said Eustace, “a star is a huge ball of flaming gas.”

“Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is but only what it is made of.” (*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*)

I own an older version of *The New Bible Dictionary*, and in the entry for “Host of Heaven”, the writer is talking about the identification of celestial beings and celestial bodies, and he says this:

No doubt to the Heb. mind the distinction was superficial, and the celestial bodies were thought to be closely associated with heavenly beings. In fact, the implied angelology of C. S. Lewis’s novels (*Out of the Silent Planet*, etc.) would probably have commended itself with some force to the biblical writers. (*The New Bible Dictionary*, J. D. Douglas, ed., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1962, 543)

The heavenly host refers to God’s armies, and it also refers to the stars in all their vast array. What we are looking at through our telescopes is not the debris field and leftover gasses from a large and rather unfortunate explosion. “Lord Sabaoth is his name/from age to age the same/and He must win the battle.” Lord Sabaoth means Lord of hosts, Lord of the armies, Lord of all the stars.

We have trained ourselves in a deliberate form of intellectual schizophrenia. We believe in the modern cosmology, just as it was handed to us in our science classes and *Star Wars* movies, and if we are conservative evangelicals, we *also* believe in the account of the Star of Bethlehem, and the message delivered by the host of heaven to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. It never once

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occurs to us to try to put all those things together in one coherent whole. And if some aspiring liberal presses us on the Star of Bethlehem we defend ourselves by retreating to something called “the spiritual realm,” which is something like the 17th dimension. The main virtue of this place is that nothing can be falsified there.

Your man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to having a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. (*The Screwtape Letters*)

The distance from Jerusalem to Bethlehem is about six miles. Herod’s scholars sent the wise men to Bethlehem on the basis of Micah 5:2, but it was a *star* that led the wise men to a particular house in that same town. Now if the Bible is the Word of God, without error in all that it affirms, then stars are not what we have all been quietly assuming them to be. Either the wise men were doing some serious astrological math on the backs of camels in the dark, or a star stopped over the right house, say fifty feet up. If the former, then astrology is valid, and if the latter then a star is not millions of miles in diameter, for that would have burned all of Bethlehem, and our entire planet, to a cinder. The solution, for those who are prepared to read Lewis sympathetically, from Narnia to *The Discarded Image*, from *The Discarded Image* to the descent of the gods on Ransom’s bedroom, is straightforward, obvious, and manifestly biblical.

And that goes double for the angels who announced peace on earth, good will toward men. Angels, stars, Oyarsa, all the same kind of thing. When Luke tells us that the angels went away from them back into heaven (Luke 2:15), it would perhaps be best to visualize them as *thwapping* back into their

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spots, kind of like what the stars do in *Star Trek* whenever the ship goes into hyperdrive. Not that we put any exegetical weight on that.

Christiana Hale is particularly suited to the task of writing a reader's guide to the Ransom Trilogy. She is an intelligent lover of all things Lewis, and is a dedicated student of this material. She reads carefully, widely, and wisely, and is not hampered by having to read her material with modernist blinkers that help us all to deny what the texts are obviously saying. I have been privileged to have known Christiana as a student in a number of settings, and this book is one that I can happily commend and recommend. You will come away from it the wiser.

Douglas Wilson
Christ Church, Moscow
November 2020

WHAT IS THIS BOOK?

In 1936, two of the greatest authors of the twentieth century agreed to take on a challenge. This challenge remained incomplete, but it nevertheless led to the creation of one of the most complex and enchanting stories ever written. C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, both scholars of the highest caliber and each a genius in his own right, were dissatisfied with the lack of the kinds of stories they loved.¹ Lewis suggested that he take on the task of writing a space-travel story while Tolkien created a time-travel story. Tolkien never completed his end of the bargain and abandoned “The Lost Road,” a time-travel story intended to link his Middle-earth with our world.² Lewis, on the other hand, went beyond the call of duty. Between 1938 and 1945 he completed not just one but three space-travel stories. And the Ransom Trilogy—commonly and erroneously called the Space Trilogy (more on this later)—has captivated and bewildered readers and critics alike ever since.

C. S. Lewis remains one of the most popular authors of the twentieth century. Read and beloved by both Christians

1 J. R. R. Tolkien to Dora Marshal, March 3, 1955, in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 209.

2 Tolkien to Stanley Unwin, February 18, 1938, in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 29.

and non-Christians, his writings span an impressive range of subjects and genres and even those who do not share his faith recognize his genius. His Narnia books remain on the list of best-selling children's novels to date and will, no doubt, stay there for generations to come. Hundreds of books have been written about Lewis, his life, and his writings, but surprisingly very few concern the Ransom Trilogy, a series of books that is arguably one of Lewis's most complex works.

The trilogy itself lies somewhat hidden among Lewis's greater-known works, and many readers who love Lewis are yet unaware the trilogy exists, like a treasure mine buried in a familiar backyard. And those who have read the trilogy tend to number it among the unapproachables—just some of those books that are simply too strange and fantastical and, well, *weird* to really like. I love this series deeply, but I still relate to those people. On the surface, the Ransom Trilogy bears the marks of a sci-fi adventure. But then there are all those philosophical passages, and there's an awful lot of time spent just *talking* on Perelandra, and then Merlin (of all people!) shows up and don't even get started on Mr. Bultitude... It is for these people—indeed, for my former self—that I have written this book.

Lewis's Ransom Trilogy is a much-neglected and yet critically important part of his works. It is a distillation in novel form of one of Lewis's favorite subjects, a subject whose melody is woven into almost every other thing that Lewis ever wrote: the medieval conception of the cosmos.

Lewis's love for medieval literature and culture is no great secret. It was part of his job description. He held the position of Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Magdalene College in Cambridge University from 1954 until 1963, just a few months before his death. Strangely, this manifest passion for medieval literature throughout Lewis's

fiction goes virtually unnoticed. But unless we understand his love for the medieval world and his self-proclaimed efforts to re-awaken respect and admiration for the Medieval Model of the cosmos in the modern mind, we will misinterpret or even neglect many of Lewis's writings as strange and unintelligible. No work of Lewis's suffers more from this than his Ransom Trilogy. Where many readers stumble through the trilogy in a fog of disconnected themes and seemingly meaningless characters, there is, in fact, a deep underlying unity in the trilogy—one that can be fully understood only through the lens of medieval thought and literature.

The Ransom Trilogy's importance in the canon of Lewis's writings is, I believe, difficult to overstate. It is a synthesis of Lewis's ongoing project of exploring the imaginative and emotional effects of the medieval cosmology and the different ways these effects can be utilized in literature. We need to read and study this trilogy because it is Lewis's first foray into demonstrating how the Medieval Model retains value, even in the modern world. In the wake of the Copernican revolution, we have been far more affected by the Enlightenment than we may realize. Science is idolized and empiricism is still the reigning epistemology (despite its slow mummification in our postmodern age where truth is whatever we want it to be). So when we are confronted with medieval cosmology, our question is: *why* should we care? And until we answer that question, we cannot understand the importance of the Ransom Trilogy.

In Lewis's non-fiction treatment of the Medieval Model of the cosmos, *The Discarded Image*, Lewis says that the purpose of literature is "to teach what is useful, to honour what deserves honour, to appreciate what is delightful."³

3 C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), 214.

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The medieval cosmology, while not “true” in the sense of being *scientifically accurate*, is nevertheless true in a deeper sense. Lewis shows this truth throughout his writings. His project is to demonstrate the potent usefulness, honor, and delight that the Medieval Model yields, particularly in the literary realm. The Ransom Trilogy is this project incarnated.

We need to read and study the Ransom Trilogy because it gives us a deeper understanding of the world we live in, the world God created. These books may seem daunting—the waves are high and the ocean is dark and deep. But if we dive into these books, the jeweled realm of the coral reef awaits, teeming with shimmering fish and twisting shapes and colors, dazzling in its diversity and yet harmonious and interwoven. It is waiting to be explored and each time we take the plunge even more magic awaits.

NOTE ON HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book acts as a guide: a Beatrice to your Dante. There are several ways you can use this book. All of them are helpful and informative and will enhance your appreciation for Lewis's Ransom Trilogy and the deep riches that are to be found there. If you have already read the trilogy, first of all, well done, and now jump into this guide! The water is warm and the reef awaits. If you are a first-time reader of the trilogy, I would recommend reading *Out of the Silent Planet* before reading the corresponding section of this book, then reading *Perelandra*, and so forth.

However you implement the resources included in this project, my hope is that you will walk away with a deeper understanding of and admiration for the Ransom Trilogy as a whole. This trilogy is woven together with threads from many different works of the medieval and renaissance era. It is shot through with Lewis's love for the cosmology of that period, as well as his belief that this cosmology is necessary to a renewal of man's imaginative and emotional faculties.

So where do we start? We start as Lewis would have us start—by walking outside on a clear night and casting our eyes up towards the heavens.

INTRODUCTION



MAPPING THE UNIVERSE

The Medieval Cosmos



I hope to persuade the reader not only that this Model of the Universe is a supreme medieval work of art but that it is in a sense the central work, that in which most particular works were embedded, to which they constantly referred, from which they drew a great deal of their strength. (Lewis, *The Discarded Image*)

Before we turn to the trilogy itself, there are some essential landmarks that we must introduce. Being familiar with these landmarks will not only enhance our enjoyment of the journey through Lewis's work but will also give much needed coherence and clarity to what otherwise appears murky and disconnected.

Lewis was a medieval scholar. That was his day job, so to speak, and he was not only good at it—he loved it. And as with everything else that Lewis loved, elements of the medi-

eval world are integrated into every part of his writings, both scholarly and otherwise. As Owen Barfield once said, what Lewis thought about everything was contained in what he said about anything.¹ So we should not be surprised when we find traces of Lewis's love for medievalism and the medieval cosmos in particular throughout his other works.

Understanding the layout of the medieval cosmos is like having an insider's road-map to the Ransom Trilogy and many of Lewis's other books—a road-map drawn by someone who knows the ins and outs of the city, the little back roads and alleys where all of the interesting shops and charming nooks and crannies are hiding. With this map in hand, we have already taken a large step towards a deeper appreciation of the world of treasures yet to be discovered.

What is a cosmology? The word *cosmos* comes from the Greek word κόσμος meaning *order*. We also get our word *cosmetology* from this word (but don't confuse the two!). Cosmology is not just a study of the heavens or, as a modern man might call it, outer space. A cosmology is a system into which every aspect of reality is placed. Everything is *ordered*. And how you order things matters.

Not all cosmologies are created equal. Different ways of arranging things lead to different characteristics and personality quirks. Most of the people that we meet have eyes and ears and noses; they have the same basic features. And yet the *arrangement* of these features on the face—different nose shapes and eye colors, and so on—means that no one (with a few exceptions) looks exactly the same. People's faces express their personalities and give them individuality and character. The same can be said of cosmologies. Every cosmology puts together a model of the entire created order, arranging the

1 Owen Barfield, *Owen Barfield on C. S. Lewis* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 22.

elements in a particular order. But *how* those elements are arranged leads to a multitude of different characteristics.

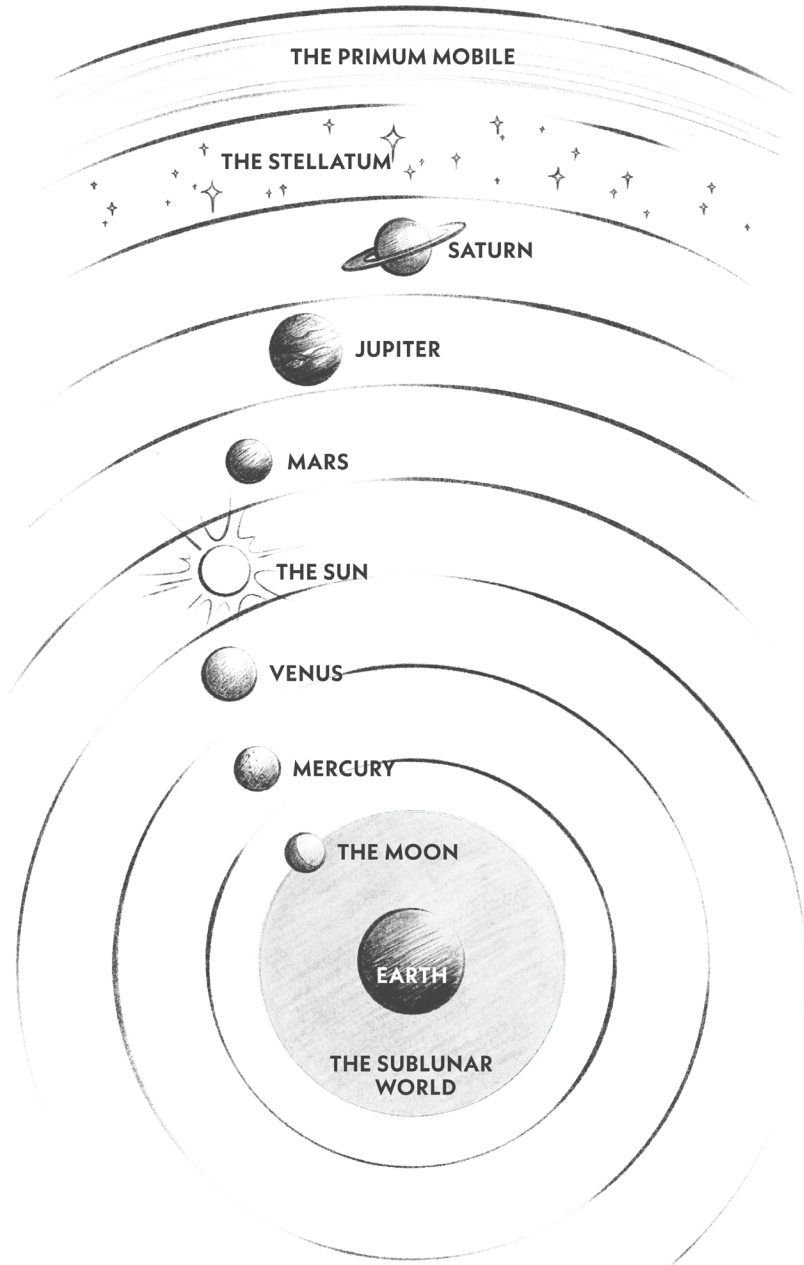
The Copernican Revolution did more than just swap out the earth for the sun on the map of the universe. It marked a definitive worldview shift (or *cosmos*-view shift) in the minds and imaginations of men and women. The old Ptolemaic map of the cosmos looked very different from the one we know today (as we will see more fully later on) but it also presented a completely different idea about what the world and the universe were *like*. The Enlightenment, that age of science and reason, led to a materialism that largely stripped the cosmos (particularly that part that used to be called the “heavens”) of its wonder and enchantment. And with the age of space exploration, that enchantment has been almost entirely removed.

We are all familiar with the modern view of the universe. Space is dark and empty and cold, punctuated by occasional dead rock or the harsh, uninhabitable planets we have so far observed and discovered. Stars are blazing balls of burning gas. Earth, thus far, is the only haven of life and light in our known universe. If there are any other forms of life out there, they will be (by necessity) barbaric and cruel, even if more technologically advanced and sophisticated.

As we turn to consider the medieval cosmology, we must recognize that understanding the *physical architecture* of the cosmos is essential to understanding the imaginative and emotional effects of that model on a culture and a people. In other words, physical design has an emotional impact. And so we must understand the *physical* makeup of the medieval cosmos before we can grasp why it had such a unique emotional impact on the people who embraced it. Lewis frequently emphasized the emotional and imaginative differences between the medieval cosmos and the modern cosmos

ARCHITECTURE OF THE MEDIEVAL COSMOS

THE EMPYREAN



described above. These differences stem primarily from the *physical* arrangement of the cosmos, as well as from other unique features of the Medieval Model. The movement away from the Medieval Model that occurred in the wake of the Copernican revolution had a ripple effect, especially concerning the imagination:

And on our thoughts and emotions (which concern a literary historian more) it [the Copernican model] was destined to have profound effects. By reducing Nature to her mathematical elements it substituted a mechanical for a genial or animistic conception of the universe.²

In the medieval period, the concept of “space”—a wild, black expanse of darkness and silence—never entered man’s thought or imagination, let alone his literature. Rather, the medieval man was “like a man being conducted through an immense cathedral, not like one lost in a shoreless sea.”³ Let us explore this cathedral.

Architecturally, the Medieval Model⁴ of the cosmos consists of a series of hollow and transparent globes called the spheres. Earth sits at the center surrounded by these spheres, one atop the other, like Russian nesting dolls. There are seven of these spheres (also called the seven heavens) and each sphere is governed by a planet (or “luminous body”) which is fixed within each sphere. The order of the planets, starting from Earth and working outward, is the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

2 C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 3.

3 Lewis, *Discarded Image*, 100.

4 For a fuller treatment of the Medieval Model and its literary history and significance see the entirety of Lewis’s *The Discarded Image*.

Beyond the spheres is the Stellatum, the realm of the “fixed stars” (meaning that the stars do not appear to move across the sky in relation to each other, unlike the planets, whose name comes from the Greek word *πλανῆται*, “wanderers”). Beyond the Stellatum is the Primum Mobile, which means the “first moveable.” This is the outermost sphere whose spinning in turn sets all of the other spheres in motion. And beyond this is the Empyrean, the *caelum ipsum* or “very heaven,” the abode of God.

Earth exists in the sublunar world, the world beneath the Moon. (The word *sublunar* is an important one to keep in mind and we will use it often in this book.) The Moon is the boundary line between the mutable (changeable) earthly realm and the transcendent realm of the Heavens. Beneath the Moon, disease and decay hold sway.⁵ The Moon marks the divide between the cold, deathly realm and the realm of light and life. The medievals believed that only the created order beneath the Moon has been affected by the Fall. Everything above the Moon’s sphere is perfect and unfallen, still singing the praises of the Lord as it has since its creation. But while the heavens are full of dancing and the music of the spheres, beneath the Moon, all is silent.

So, how does this architectural structure of the medieval cosmos affect our emotional and imaginative faculties? While the medieval cosmos was “unimaginably large,” it was still bounded by specific dimensions.⁶ It was *finite-ly* large. And, as Lewis himself notes, this actually served to make our smallness, the smallness of Earth, felt more keenly, because we have something specific to compare it to. While the modern man looks out into space as into an infinite sea of nothingness, the medieval man looked up into

⁵ *Discarded Image*, 94.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

the Heavens as one who looks up the side of a skyscraper: massive and towering, but also crafted and shaped.

[...] To look out on the night sky with modern eyes is like looking out over a sea that fades away into mist, or looking about one in a trackless forest—trees forever and no horizon. To look up at the towering medieval universe is much more like looking at a great building. The “space” of modern astronomy may arouse terror, or bewilderment or vague reverie; the spheres of old present us with an object in which the mind can rest, overwhelming in its greatness but satisfying in its harmony.⁷

If we can look at the night sky with medieval eyes, adopting a more Ptolemaic understanding of the cosmos, our emotional state will shift. A medieval looking up into the vast expanse of the shimmering heavens would feel small, just like we do, but it would be the smallness and awe that you feel looking up the side of a castle or cathedral, not the shiver of terror we feel when looking into dead, empty “space.”

We begin to see how the shape of the cosmos affects how we look at the world around us, especially as we start to see the Heavens rather than mere “space.” But to truly understand the feelings that were evoked in the medieval men by looking at this sort of cosmos, we must move beyond the architecture and layout. We must bring the whole thing to life. The Medieval Model was more than just a map, more than a two-dimensional pen and ink drawing on paper. The medieval cosmos was whirling, sparkling, dazzling, and teeming with life, music, and dance. We have assembled our instrument—now let’s make it sing.

7 Ibid.

KINDLY ENCLYNING

The Influence and Personality of the Planets

Darkness, our own darkness, draws the veil and we catch a glimpse of the high poms within; the vast, lighted concavity filled with music and life [...] the revelry of insatiable love. (Lewis, *The Discarded Image*)

One of the most unique and dynamic features of the Medieval Model is the personalities of the planets themselves. This is arguably Lewis's favorite feature of the Model. Unlike our modern materialistic view of the universe, in which all is reduced to matter and atoms, the medieval cosmos was teeming with personality, with a spiritual dimension which makes the universe not just enchanting but *alive*.

In the Medieval Model, the planets are not just physical balls of matter floating out in space. They are worlds with

rulers, and those rulers, those celestial beings, are full of exuberant individuality. While the planets exist in the translunar realm, their influences are strong enough to pierce the boundary marked by the Moon and affect Earth and mankind. Now remember, the planets exist in an unfallen realm; the medievals believed that only the creation *under* the Moon was subject to the consequences of the Fall. Hence, the planets and their personalities are not tainted by sin. Yet the influences which are powerful enough to penetrate the lunar barrier could be corrupted on Earth, since Earth is located in the sublunar realm of disease and decay. We will see more on the planetary personalities later on.

Each of the planets is named after an ancient Greek or Roman god or goddess, names with which we are still familiar: Mars, Venus, Jupiter, Mercury, etc. But if we are going to discuss the vibrant personalities of these planets, questions will inevitably arise. What did medieval man think about the planetary beings themselves? Were they the same as the Greek and Roman gods and goddesses? What about the actual physical planet in the sky?

Lewis explains this quandary in his book *The Discarded Image*. He says that the Christian medieval poets wouldn't have thought in terms of those distinctions. The physical luminous body in the night sky, the god or goddess of ancient Greece or Rome (with all of its attendant mythologies and quirks), and the planetary being itself (with its influential personality) were all one and the same.

They are planets as well as gods. Not that the Christian poet believed in the god because he believed in the planet; but all three things—the visible planet in the sky, the source of influence, and the god—generally acted as a unity upon his mind. I have not

found evidence that theologians were at all disquieted by this state of affairs.¹

In a world less concerned with defined lines, where Heaven has infiltrated Earth and where God has become flesh, it becomes less a question of “which is it?” and more a matter of “how does each one intersect and relate?”

It was Lewis’s opinion that we don’t just need to know *of* the planetary characters, but that we need to know the planetary characters *themselves*—to know them like we know our friends and family, to know them down to our bones. But why? What is so important about the characters of the planets? Doesn’t this seem like an archaic, uninformed, and well, *medieval* superstition?

To the contrary, Lewis said that the planetary characters have “*permanent* value as spiritual symbols.”² He believed the Model yet has value, that it offers truths we ought to learn from. For one thing, the imaginative and emotional potential of planetary personalities for literature alone is vast, as Lewis’s works themselves display and as we will explore in more depth in this book. But beyond this, these planetary characters teach us about the one true God. Under the lordship of Christ, the planetary personalities place various attributes of God under a microscope, magnifying them and embodying them in separate planetary characters so that we can understand each one better. The personalities of the planets give us examples in microcosm of the way that God Himself works in the world. We will come back to this theme again and again throughout the book.

1 *Discarded Image*, 105.

2 C. S. Lewis, “The Alliterative Metre,” in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), 24, emphasis mine.

Michael Ward, author of the ground-breaking book *Planet Narnia*, was the first scholar to recognize the sheer depth of the influence of the planetary figures on Lewis's writings. Ward's thesis—that the seven Narnia stories correspond to the seven planets of medieval cosmology—has been revolutionary in the world of Lewis scholarship. Like the Copernican revolution itself, Ward's discoveries regarding the “secret” behind the Narnia books has reordered the entire universe of the study of Lewis's works. The value of *Planet Narnia* and the debt we owe to Ward cannot be overstated. *Planet Narnia*, as well as Lewis's *The Discarded Image*, are essential to understanding how deeply and intricately Lewis weaves medieval cosmology throughout his writings. These two books cannot be ignored, and this reader's guide itself exists largely because of them.

Let's look at the descriptions of each planet and its influence on the Earth. We will see these personalities in action as we dive into discussing the Ransom Trilogy itself. Though the planets are typically called by their Roman names, I will also supply their Greek counterparts.

The Moon: The Moon (also Luna; Selene to the Greeks) marks the barrier between the sublunar/terrestrial realm and the heavenly realm. She is the boundary line. Her pock-marked visage still bears evidence of the great war for the cosmos that occurred when Satan fell “like lightning” (Luke 10:18). Lady Luna is associated with all things watery and damp. Her metal is silver and the influence of her rays can cause the wandering of both mind and body. In some people, this is simply the desire to travel; in others, the wandering of wits. This is where we get our word *lunacy*.

Mercury: The Mercurial spirit is a difficult one to pin down—as it should be. Lewis describes the various attributes and symbols that are associated with Mercury, but he ends by simply saying: “It is better just to take some real mercury in a saucer and play with it for a few minutes. *That* is what ‘Mercurial’ means.”³ Mercury is associated with men of action. He is the lord of language—of words and their meanings, of learning and the study of literature. Mercury is multi-faceted (“Merry multitude of meeting selves, same but sundered”⁴) and is associated with thieves and deceptions. Mercury was the messenger god of the Romans (to the Greeks, he was Hermes). Speed and nimbleness, both physical and intellectual, are possessed under his sway. Lewis’s best attempt at describing the unity of all these characteristics is “skilled eagerness” or “bright alacrity.”⁵

Venus: Venus is *Fortuna Minor*, meaning she is the most benevolent planet second only to Jupiter. Known as Aphrodite to the Greeks, Venus is the goddess of love, beauty, and fortuitous events in history. She produces fertility and abundance. She is the archetypal mother, bountiful and fruitful, and therefore sensual. When twisted, her influence can become lewd or tasteless in the translunar world. On Earth, Venus’s influence can produce “beauty and amorousness” in mortals.⁶ She produces copper in

3 *Discarded Image*, 108.

4 C. S. Lewis, “The Planets,” in *Poems*, ed. by Walter Hooper (London: Harcourt, 1964), 13.

5 *Discarded Image*, 108.

6 *Ibid.*, 107.

the earth⁷ and hence burnished, ruddy gold is a color frequently connected with her personality. We will examine her character even more deeply in our study of *Perelandra*.

Sol (the Sun): The sun god Apollo (both in Greek and Roman mythology) is the god of archery, music, dance, prophecy, healing, and more. His is the sphere of the philosophers and theologians, wise men and sages. Apollo was also known as Apollo Sauroktonos (the “dragon-slayer”) because of his famous slaying of the python, and so dragons are frequently associated with the Sun as well. The Sun brings fortunate events, but in the sublunar realm he can also produce greed and avarice. He produces gold and is associated with wisdom, benevolence, and generosity.

Mars: Mars (or Ares to the Greeks) is the god of war and soldiers. He gives men a temperament towards war and military excellence. He also produces a “sturdy hardiness,”⁸ strength and courage, justice and heroism. The Martial metal is iron: a war-like metal used for the forging of weaponry. Yet Mars is also the god of farmers. He was known as *Mars Silvanus*, the god of trees and the woods. Below the Moon where all is muddled and imperfect, the Martial influence can lead to cruelty, tyranny, despotism, and hardness of heart.

Jupiter: Jupiter (or Jove) is the King of the planets. He is *Fortuna Major*: the best planet, bringing the most

7 Venus is the “Lady of Cyprus,” being especially worshiped in that island, and Cyprus was once famed for its copper mines (copper = “cyprium”), *Discarded Image*, 107.

8 Ibid., 106.

good fortune. Jove (Zeus to the Greeks) was the king of all the gods, king of the sky and lightning. His sign was the eagle, which is why the eagle became the standard of Roman legions. Jove produces a “jovial” spirit in men. This word has been stripped of much of its depth and is commonly understood to simply mean “cheerful”. But the true jovial spirit is not an easy one to grasp. It is cheerful and festive, yet tranquil and temperate, like a king “at peace, enthroned taking his leisure, serene.”⁹ Lewis himself claimed to have been born under Jove’s influence and appointed himself Jove’s “standard-bearer,”¹⁰ always trying to make the jovial character more widely understood. Jove’s metal is actually tin which, as Lewis notes, is somewhat disappointing to our modern sensibilities. But the shining metal worked differently upon the medieval imagination. Post-canning industry, the metal appears to us worthless and common, but in the Middle Ages tin was bright, beautiful, and rare. We will explore the Jovial spirit in more depth in our study of *That Hideous Strength*.

Saturn: Saturn is *Infortuna Major*, the “most unfortunate” planet. The Roman god Saturn was the god of agriculture, death and rebirth, and time. His Greek equivalent was Kronos, also the god of time. Saturn’s influence produces a melancholy complexion in men. In the sublunar realm, he is connected with sickness and old age. Saturn is the most terrible of the seven planets, his sublunar influence promoting “fatal accidents, pestilence, treacheries, and ill luck in

9 Ibid.

10 Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 44.

general.”¹¹ In earth, he fittingly produces lead: dull, gray, and heavy.

These brief explanations of the planetary personalities feel a bit like writing a speaker introduction to be read at a conference before each panelist takes the stage. They highlight just a few of the most obvious characteristics. But in order to truly know the planets, we must get to know them like friends, not just memorize facts about them. We must spend time with them. We must go to their homes, meet their friends, get to know their family. We must soak in the atmosphere that they create and learn about their personalities from firsthand experience. We all know what it is like to walk into various homes and feel the different atmospheres. The planetary personalities work in the same way, but because they exist in the unfallen, translunar realm, their personalities have an influence so strong that they can pierce the boundary of the Moon and make their presence known even on the sealed-off, silent planet of Earth.

Through the rest of this book, we will be slowly getting to know these planets and their unique atmospheres by spending time with them in the Ransom Trilogy.

11 *Discarded Image*, 105.

WHATNESS & WHICHNESS

Donegality and Atmosphere

If a man loves wine and yet hates one of the strongest wines, then surely the sole source of pleasure in wine cannot be the alcohol? (Lewis, “On Stories”)

W e’ve talked about the architecture of the medieval cosmos and we’ve set it spinning by discussing the dynamic personalities of the planetary figures themselves. But how does Lewis actually *use* the Model? Which literary method does he use to implement his knowledge of the planetary characters in his writing and pass that knowledge on to his readers? As we saw at the end of the last chapter, the personalities of the planets create their own unique *atmosphere*. Each one is a friend who we must come to know better by spending time with them. Lewis helps us do this by using their personalities to shape and craft the atmosphere of his stories.

In Lewis's essay "On Stories," he makes an important distinction between two different types of pleasure in reading a story. There is the pleasure in the *plot* itself—the adventures and exploits of the characters and the dangers they find themselves facing and conquering. But then there is a different sort of pleasure, not unrelated to or unaffected by the first, and that is the pleasure to be found in a story due to its *atmosphere*, the world that gives the story its own unique flavor and feel. This elusive, yet essential, element of good storytelling is what makes a story truly unforgettable. It is this element that shapes childhoods and draws readers back again and again to the same story.

The atmosphere of a book can go unnoticed if done well, but we would all notice if it were gone. Narnia and Middle Earth, Sherlock Holmes's London and Tom Sawyer's Mississippi River, Robin's Sherwood Forest and King Arthur's Camelot—we all go back to these books, whether we realize it or not, in order to live in the world of that book again. We visit them like we visit old friends and we would not trade one for the other. Each story is different because they have different personalities that go beyond the action of the plot. They have different atmospheres.

A story that lacks atmosphere can still keep you glued to the book, just as action and adventure movies do. Those stories can still be exciting and enjoyable in their own right, but they cannot really hold us beyond the first reading. They don't invite us to re-read them. Lewis's problem with books that only offer "excitement" is precisely this lack of atmosphere:

If to love Story is to love excitement then I ought to be the greatest lover of excitement alive. But the fact is that what is said to be the most 'exciting'

novel in the world, *The Three Musketeers*, makes no appeal to me at all. The total lack of atmosphere repels me. There is no country in the book—save as a storehouse of inns and ambushes. There is no weather. When they cross to London there is no feeling that London differs from Paris [...] It all means nothing to me.¹

Lewis describes this idea of atmosphere in terms of a unique sense of place. Books like *The Three Musketeers* lack this sense of *place*, the place that has a peculiar *placeness* that is all its own and that we want to experience again and again. Once we've had our excitement, there is nothing left to go back to. The story has done its job. In contrast, Lewis sees *place* as the primary reason that we re-read the books we love: we want to return there.

[...] when such stories are loved at all, they are re-read perhaps more than any others. Re-reading them is like going back to a fruit for its taste; to an air for...what? for *itself*; to a region for its whole atmosphere—to Donegal for its Donegality and London for its Londonness. It is notoriously difficult to put these tastes into words; and in a similar way the taste for a narrative 'world' is difficult to talk about.²

Michael Ward adopts this word *donegality* from the above quote and uses it as a technical term to refer to this phenomenon—atmosphere, the qualitative sense of place within certain books. And this is what Ward argues the

1 C. S. Lewis, "On Stories," in *Of This and Other Worlds*, (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 29.

2 C. S. Lewis, *Spenser's Images of Life* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), 115.

planetary characters give to the Narnia stories. Each of the seven Narnia stories possesses a donegality, an intoxicating and pervasive atmosphere, that is determined by a specific planetary character.

This is how Lewis implements the medieval cosmology at a pervasive yet nearly invisible level in many of his writings. In the Ransom Trilogy in particular, Lewis mines the vast caves of the planetary personalities and uses them to shape both the plot and the donegality of the books. The goal of the whole trilogy is, in essence, to rediscover and recover the Medieval Model, a “discarded image.” From viewing Earth as the “Silent Planet” mentioned in the title of the first book, to the presence of Merlin in the third, every twist and turn of the plot is influenced by the mythology attached to the medieval cosmology.

Pinning down the way the planets influence the donegality or atmosphere of the books can be as difficult as explaining why Grandpa’s study feels different than any other study, or why Aunt Jane’s house feels different from Uncle Bob’s. We can list the ways that Lewis uses words and imagery associated with the different planets. We can try to dissect his use of adjectives and metaphors, action and plot twists. But as another great writer once said, “He that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom.”³ In the end, Lewis has taken his own advice. He knows these planetary characters from the inside out, and so he writes from *inside* this atmosphere. To ask how he does it would be to ask someone how they breathe the air around them. We can explain it scientifically, down to the atoms of air and the exchange of gases. But at root there is still something

3 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 252.

magical and mysterious that we cannot define, we can only experience. There is a spiritual dimension and we cannot escape it. It is woven into the world. If we step into that world, we will feel it.

That said, there are certain characteristics and methods that Lewis uses that we can point to when we are trying to describe the donegality of any particular book. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, we will see the characteristics and personality of Mars shape the setting and atmosphere of Malacandra. Nearly all of *Perelandra* takes place on the planet Venus, and so we will explore the way in which the spirit and influence of that fruitful, maternal character shapes the whole story. And finally, in *That Hideous Strength*, we see the great lord, Jupiter the Priest-King, shape not only the atmosphere of the book but the character of Ransom himself.

Ultimately, this is what the Ransom Trilogy is all about: recovering the image of a cosmos that is potent enough to create worlds that breathe on the page, characters real enough to teach us about God's sovereignty and man's freedom, a cosmos leaping with the life of the Triune God and singing His praises. This world is a living world, which means that it is both matter and spirit, and is therefore far more complex than we can begin to imagine. These planetary figures, vivacious and powerful, are not merely characters, though they are that. They pervade and influence every word on every page of Lewis's remarkable work. Lewis does not just tell us that the planets exert an influence on the Earth—he *shows* us. From the sphere of Mars to the influence of the kingly planet himself, Lewis stands *inside* and beckons us to join him in seeing firsthand how the spirit of the medieval cosmos is still alive.