**READING LEWIS RIGHTLY ON EMETH**—E. Stephen Burnett, 2011

C.S. Lewis had some issues. Every Christian author has them, right? And we need not die on a hill to defend everything he wrote or believed any more than we ought to shun him and call him a heretic. Still, it would be sinful and slanderous to repeat things like “Lewis didn’t believe in the Biblical Hell” or “Lewis was a universalist” without reading reminders from those better informed about what the fantasy and nonfiction author wrote in his full body of work.

[Last week I started](http://www.speculativefaith.lorehaven.com/refuting-universalism-slanders-of-c-s-lewis-part-1/) with reminders that Lewis *clearly* stated in his nonfiction that he believed in a final punishment in Hell for those who refuse to repent of their evils. That’s indisputable. Call him fuzzy on why Christ died on the cross or on the Bible’s inerrancy, but he wasn’t universalist.

Now we come to one of the trickier issues: the seemingly strongest place, in Lewis’s fiction, in which he seemed to say you didn’t need to be “saved” to enter “heaven.” That is, in *The Last Battle*, Emeth, a “noble pagan,” did not at first believe in Aslan, yet still somehow crossed over from old Narnia into the lower parts of the new Narnia. Christians get confused about this, perhaps bypass it as a quirk; others use it to reject Lewis entirely as a heretic or universalist.

But readers ought to apply right “hermeneutics” to Lewis the same as we should with Scripture.

**Reading Lewis rightly**

Christians who profess to follow Scripture must remember how they’re meant to read the Word: mindful of the whole picture, seeking the original meaning of a text, and reading in context.

That’s hermeneutics. We should not [salvage pieces of the Bible](https://speculativefaith.lorehaven.com/2011/01/salvaging-scripture-for-our-own-story-parts/) for alternate intents. Similarly, readers should not salvage Lewis quotes merely to prove him a false teacher or heretic, *or* to imply that he was Saint C.S. without any doctrine issues. Whether reading Lewis’s nonfiction or his fiction, we must stay **mindful of the whole picture, following the genre’s rules**.

This applies when answering this common accusation about Lewis’s beliefs: *Lewis believed universalism, because in*The Last Battle*, a pagan character goes to heaven*.

Another Scripture reading rule applies to Lewis’s works: clear parts interpret not-so-clear parts.So if you’re reading *The Last Battle* and it seems to be showing universalism — that Emeth got into the paradise of Aslan’s Country even though he was a pagan — bear in mind that Lewis more clearly wrote elsewhere that universalism was a lie. That’s clear enough from *The Problem of Pain*. And in his allegorical story *The Great Divorce* he repudiated the notion by name.

By contrast, the Emeth Element is more vague, and many other interpretations could be pulled from it. But none of them will make sense unless readers are willing to see that *The Chronicles of Narnia* **are not meant to be allegorical, but a supposal**. Lewis asked (and directly made known his mindset in several quotes) *What would happen if God made another world, like Narnia, and Jesus appeared and acted there similarly to how He works in our world?*

If Aslan represented the immaterial Deity in the same way in which the Giant Despair *[from*Pilgrim’s *Progress]*represents despair, he would be an allegorical figure. In reality however he is an invention giving and imaginary answer to the question “What might Christ become like if there really were a world like Narnia and He chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as He actually has done in ours?” **This is not an allegory at all**.

*—*The Letters of C.S. Lewis*, page 283 (boldface emphasis added).*

Thus **in Narnia, salvation works differently**. There’s no metanarrative of redemption throughout an Old and New Covenant, no sacraments of Communion or baptism, no official Church. Christian readers who try to find these ideas in *Narnia* will be frustrated — and worse, contradict the author’s intention, the same way we should avoid doing with the Bible itself.

**Exploring with Emeth**

Now let’s get this specific story straight. Emeth, a pagan but noble Calormene who devoted his life to service of the evil entity Tash, somehow makes his way into Aslan’s Country. But he’s in a kind of in-between status. There Aslan meets him and Emeth immediately repents, sorry he has lived all his life for Tash. Aslan, though, reassures Emeth that Aslan has nevertheless counted his good deeds as service to Aslan instead of Tash. Then Aslan leaves Emeth to ponder that.

Is Lewis hinting only that *a nonbeliever could go to Narnian-style heaven?* That’s one possible interpretation, but it has competition. For example, [Isaac McPheeters](http://theculturegrid.blogspot.com/) suggested this about Emeth (he and I in 2009 also hosted [a NarniaWeb podcast](http://www.narniaweb.com/2009/05/episode-52-the-situation-of-emeth/) about the Emeth Element):

If you read what Emeth says, he’s talking not about people but about worship and actions that are good and evil. Nothing truly evil can give glory to God, and nothing truly good can ever be used in Satan’s service, no matter who might try and claim them. Besides, Lewis only gives a few examples of the process of salvation in the books. Shasta is sinful in the stories, yet he’s in Aslan’s country at the end. How? There’s nothing in the books alluding to Aslan’s sacrifice in *[Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe]* to be for anyone than Edmund. How is his blood paid for? In short, it’s not necessary for the purpose of the story. It would make the stories too convoluted if every character’s conversion experience was elaborated on in that way or if the process was explained *ad nauseum*.

But even if that’s not Lewis’s only intent with Emeth, some other idea is being shown here. What he says can’t be supporting universalism — not when we see happens just a few pages before. **(‘Ware *The Last Battle* spoilers.)** Aslan ends the first world of Narnia, and hordes of creatures rush to a gateway between that world and the next. **And many of them fear and hate him. They turn away and are forever lost in “his huge black shadow**.”“The children never saw them again,” Lewis notes. “I don’t know what became of them.”

**Is it heresy to humbly wonder or ask what-if?**

Still, Lewis writes elsewhere of his wish that somehow, in some way, all people might be saved. Unlike some, I don’t automatically consider him beneath other Christians who might not have (or admit that they have!) the same secret wish. Yes, it may be a failing of Lewis, but if so it’s a failing common to us all because of our flawed awareness of how bad human sin is and how holy and just God is. Admitting our weakness is not sin. Wondering what-if-in-another-world is also not sinful, so long as we, in our hearts, love the truthful Gospel.

Does that secret hope or those what-if questions make someone a *heretic*? Not if they’re said out of ignorance and without willful rejection of clear Biblical truth. I seriously wonder if Lewis ever found either on this old Earth, and thus was open to other ideas — even while affirming enough of the Gospel to count for salvation: *Christ died for my sins*.