**The Last Battle, Revisited**

**Jupiter and Saturn fight over Narnia.**

**By**[**Michael Ward**](https://www.plough.com/en/authors/w/michael-ward) **PLOUGH MAGAZINE**

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During the First World War, “the war to end all wars,” C. S. Lewis saw active duty in the trenches of France as a teenaged lieutenant in the British army. He recalled “the smell of H. E. [high explosives], the horribly smashed men still moving like half-crushed beetles, the sitting or standing corpses, the landscape of sheer earth without a blade of grass.” He did not use the word *apocalypse* to describe what he had witnessed, but in its sense of “utter, world-ending destruction” it applies aptly to his experience. It applies also to [*The Last Battle*](https://bookshop.org/a/78/9780060234935), the final volume of seven in his Chronicles of Narnia: the beautiful land of Narnia is reduced to a frozen waste, the moon turns to blood, the stars fall from the sky. And Lewis dares to do something not usually associated with children’s literature: he kills off every single character with whom the story opens. And yet the story is not simply about destruction. Something is also being unveiled – the literal meaning of “apocalypse” – as Narnia reaches its rendezvous with death: an apocalyptic conflict between Jupiter and Saturn.

Lewis had a lifelong interest in medieval cosmology. In the Middle Ages, it was believed that Earth was stationary, surrounded by seven concentric “heavens,” each with its own planet which in turn had particular influences on Earth, affecting people and events in various ways. While we might consider this cosmological model entirely outdated, Lewis found some continuing importance in it. He described the planets as “spiritual symbols of permanent value” and wrote about them extensively. The best planet, according to medieval thought, was Jupiter, responsible for “heartsease” and prosperity, bringing about festivity and magnanimity in peaceable kingdoms. The worst planet was Saturn, sponsor of death, destruction, darkness, and disaster. The very word “disaster” means “bad star,” and Saturn was the most malignant of the wandering stars.

Lewis remarked that his own generation had been “born under Saturn,” doomed to experience an especially bleak period in history. Having endured the horrors of the Great War, some of his contemporaries had adopted a fixed attitude of pessimism and cynicism. They had come to believe that the universe was, in Lewis’s term, “Saturnocentric.” Hence the modernist tendency to focus on chaos and disorder, T. S. Eliot’s “heap of broken images” as he calls it in “The Wasteland.” Hence also the new impetus behind such artistic and philosophical movements as absurdism and nihilism. For how could there ever again be purpose and hope in the wake of the Battle of the Somme? On the opening day of that battle, July 1, 1916, almost twenty thousand British soldiers were killed and nearly forty thousand wounded. What further proof need there be that gallantry and patriotism are folly? The poet Wilfred Owen took aim at the schoolboy’s Horatian tag, *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (“it is sweet and seemly to die for one’s country”), calling it “the old Lie.”

Lewis readily acknowledged that his generation had been “born under Saturn,” but he did not draw the conclusion that the universe was fundamentally Saturnocentric. Indeed, he viewed the spiritual symbols of the seven heavens as “especially worthwhile in our own generation” for the very reason that Saturn did not stand alone in this venerable model of the cosmos: there were six others. And Saturn was not even the most important planet. That status was reserved for Jupiter, the King, the one whose wisdom “dominates the stars.”

Lecturing about medieval cosmology at Oxford, Lewis told his audiences that those born under Jupiter (also known as Jove) are apt to be cheerful, festive, loud-voiced and red-faced. He would then pause for dramatic effect and add, “It is obvious under which planet I was born!” – which always got a laugh. He was indeed a Jovial man, with a florid complexion and a hearty relish for life. Though he belonged to a Saturnine generation, he felt himself to be much more under the influence of Jove. And he was troubled by the fact that changes in outlook since the Middle Ages had “almost annihilated Jupiter” from the modern imagination. As he notes in [*The Discarded Image*](https://bookshop.org/a/78/9781107604704), “We find no difficulty in grasping the character of Saturn.” Jupiter, on the other hand, has “almost evaded us.” Therefore Lewis could write, “Of Saturn we know more than enough. But who does not need to be reminded of Jove?” He thought of the Saturnine shadow cast over his generation as a historical accident, and believed a much better way of symbolizing the heart of spiritual reality was through the imagery of kingship associated with Jupiter. He structured the opening Narnia tale, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, to embody and express that Jovial spirit. According to Lewis’s poem “The Planets,” Jupiter brings about “winter passed and guilt forgiven.” For this reason, the central events of the first Narnia story are the passing of the White Witch’s hundred-year winter and the forgiving of Edmund’s guilt. Edmund has betrayed his siblings to the Witch, and for his sake the Christlike lion, Aslan, “the true King,” dies a sacrificial death and rises again to new life. Jupiter’s kingship is not self-serving or self-protective, but sacrificial. As Lewis wrote elsewhere: “the huge reddish spot which astronomers observe on the surface of Jupiter is a wound and the redness is that of blood. Jupiter, the planet of Kingship, thus wounded becomes … another ectype of the Divine King wounded on Calvary.”

Though the Narnia series thus begins on a Jovial note, the final volume in the septet, *The Last Battle*, draws on Saturnine imagery. One of the most obvious ways in which the story features the influence of Saturn is through the presence of a character called Father Time. As Lewis noted in an academic work, “Our traditional picture of Father Time with the scythe is derived from earlier pictures of Saturn.” The Narnian Father Time is “the hugest of all giants” who stretches out an arm “thousands of miles long” so as to grasp the Sun and squeeze it like an orange to put out its light. Instantly, total darkness falls on Narnia. The end is nigh.

At first glance, Lewis might seem to have got himself in a bind by deciding to tell a story through the symbolism of Saturn. Lewis would not entertain “dark” theologies or flirt with the idea of an ambiguous deity who created evil or was beyond both good and evil. How then could he deploy Saturn (sponsor of disaster, coldness, ugliness, decrepitude, terror, treachery, and death) to depict an apocalypse? It would seem to allow no room for Christian hope. This is where his admiration for Dante helps clarify matters. Lewis loved Dante’s masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, and regarded its third part, *Paradiso*, as “the highest point that poetry has ever reached.” Dante made Saturn’s sphere the home of contemplatives, the heavenly resting-place of those with a special gift of insight. Saturn, alongside all his pestilences and plagues, has that one good thing to bestow: on those who respond aright to his influence he confers an ability to see beyond the surface of things and penetrate the heart of reality with a wise, godly insight, undeflected by superficial appearances to the contrary.

This is precisely what we see happening in the story of the last king of Narnia, Tirian. Tirian is troubled by “horrible thoughts.” He fears for a moment that the Christlike Aslan and the demon Tash are really one and the same. But these desperate thoughts soon clear: he realizes it is “nonsense about Tash and Aslan being the same and [knows] that the whole thing must be a cheat.” Tirian makes good use of Saturnine influence by piercing the deception with a calm spiritual insight, and choosing to be faithful despite his apparent forsakenness, even as his life and the life of his entire kingdom approach their end. Far from presenting Lewis with a problem, Saturn’s influence enables him to meditate upon that Christian attribute that he wrote about more than any other: faithful self-surrender.

Of all Biblical passages, the one which occurs most frequently in Lewis’s writings is Christ’s cry from the cross: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” [Matt. 27:46](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt.%2027.46), [Mark 15:34](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2015.34), quoting [Psalm 22:1a](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ps%2022.1a)). The cry of dereliction, although not directly quoted in *The Last Battle*, can be heard echoing in Tirian’s cry from the tree where he stands bound and bleeding:

And he called out, “Aslan! Aslan! Aslan! Come and help us now.”

But the darkness and the cold and the quietness went on just the same.

In spite of such desolation, Tirian persists with his prayer:

“Let *me* be killed,” cried the King. “I ask nothing for myself. But come and save all Narnia.”

And still there was no change in the night or the wood, but there began to be a kind of change inside Tirian. Without knowing why, he began to feel a faint hope. And he felt somehow stronger.

Tirian experiences a “kind of change,” though what happens is admittedly vague: it involves no “knowing why,” it comes about “somehow.” But it is not nothing; it is something. Aslan does not “come and help” in the way Tirian wants, but ultimately Tirian is stronger for having called on him. Aslan appears to him like a transparent silhouette: nothing substantial, but at least the outline of a shape. In that gap is the thing that Lewis is trying to communicate, “the conviction of things not seen” ([Heb. 11:1](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb.%2011.1)). Tirian finds Aslan perceptible despite his invisibility and so resolves to take “the adventure that Aslan would send,” for “we are all between the paws of the true Aslan.” As a result, after death, Tirian receives the divine accolade, which echoes the words of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel ([Matt. 25:23](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt.%2025.23)): “Well done, last of the kings of Narnia who stood firm at the darkest hour.”

Perhaps the most direct theological message of *The Last Battle* is that death is not the worst thing that can happen. “All worlds draw to an end,” Aslan says, and “noble death is a treasure that no one is too poor to buy.” It is better to embrace death with Aslan than to cling to a prolonged life without him. Tirian learns that it is sweet and fitting to die for his country.

But Saturn does not succeed in making all the characters in *The Last Battle* into wise contemplatives. Others in the story regard dulce et decorum est as no more than an irrational sentiment; they treat noble self-sacrifice with skepticism and cynicism. These cynics are the dwarfs, to whom everything is a sensory wilderness: a rich feast of fine food is received by their palates as hay and turnips and raw cabbage; wine is ditchwater; violets are stable-litter. The dwarfs are probably modeled on the young, highly educated men, “angry and restless,” full of “distrust” and “contempt,” whom Lewis identified as the inhabitants of the modern Saturnocentric universe.

This does not imply a blithe denial of real suffering and pain. Lewis was no Stoic and he allows space for the expression of grief. Tirian and his fellow faithful Narnians weep freely at their losses. Their sorrow is described as a “virtue”; its omission would be a “discourtesy.” But it is a beatitudinal mourning, not a desperate moping, a recognition (as Lewis wrote in other places) that, although “it is somehow good to die,” nevertheless, “it is a real brook” that has to be crossed: “something is being ended.”

In a letter to a friend, Lewis reflectively comments that the times he most desires death are not when life is harshest: “On the contrary, it is just when there seems to be most of Heaven already here that I come nearest to longing for the patria. It is the bright frontispiece [which] whets one to read the story itself.” This metaphor of the frontispiece recurs in the final paragraph of *The Last Battle* when we are told that the children’s “life in this world and all their adventures” in Narnia “had only been the cover and the title page.” Now “they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.” It is a paradoxical image with which to finish a story, but a paradox which nicely expresses the good fortune that Saturn may bring to those who respond positively to his influence, finding their beginning in their end.

Once the imagery in *The Last Battle* has moved from ends to beginnings Saturn is no longer the sole presiding influence over Narnia. He helps focus the heart upon the beginning which is to be found in the end of life; like the prospect of being hanged, he wonderfully concentrates the mind. However, his dominance is over as soon as new life is conceived. In Lewis’s novel *That Hideous Strength* Saturn is “overmatched” by Jupiter. In *The Last Battle* the same conquest happens. The book is about 175 pages long; the first 125 take us up to Tirian’s death. In the closing section, Saturn’s effects begin to fade and Jupiter’s to take over. The air changes. Father Time is given a new name, which remains unspecified but is surely “Eternity.” And then, in a beautifully discreet wink to the reader, Lewis presents this little dialogue:

“Isn’t it wonderful?” said Lucy. “Have you noticed one can’t feel afraid, even if one wants to? Try it.”

“By Jove, neither one can,” said Eustace, after he had tried.

This is the first mention in *The Last Battle* of Jove and it is an indication of where Saturn will take his children if they hold firm “in the darkest hour.” He will take them to the true King, Jupiter, but only if they resist the gravitational pull toward belief in a Saturnocentric universe.

And we must resist too. A Saturnocentric universe may sometimes seem emotionally plausible, but it finally makes no sense; it is rationally self-defeating. Radical pessimism needs an account of the light by which it sees the darkness it reproaches, but where can that light be found if the universe is fundamentally benighted? In his address “De Futilitate” (“On Futility”), Lewis points out that when a “good atheist” hurls defiance at an apparently ruthless and idiotic cosmos, it is really

an unconscious homage to something in or behind that cosmos which [the atheist] recognizes as infinitely valuable and authoritative: for if mercy and justice were really only private whims of his own with no objective and impersonal roots, and if he realized this, he could not go on being indignant. The fact that he arraigns heaven itself for disregarding them means that at some level of his mind he knows they are enthroned in a higher heaven still.

Despair or outrage at crookedness only makes sense if one has a notion of the straight, and that notion could not have arisen if everything were bent, or even if everything were dualistically good and bad, for dualism is a truncated metaphysic which cannot account for the natural human preference for happiness over sorrow. Saturn with his plagues and pestilences therefore cannot be sovereign, however much he may appear so. Indeed, it is only by virtue of his deference to Jove that Saturn can exert his true influence, making his patients into contemplatives who see beyond sorrow. Saturn turns out to be a servant of Jupiter.

Lewis’s model of the universe has standing room for bleakness, but no throne. As a member of the Great War generation, Lewis could not deny the power of Saturnine influence. It would be naïve in the extreme to suppose one’s passage through life could be achieved without deep sadness and sorrow. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to conclude from the unavoidability of darkness and death that the universe is ultimately Saturnocentric. On the contrary, Lewis maintained, it is centered on joviality, for Jupiter is a spiritual symbol of the true King who lays upon the altar the dearest and the best, sacrificing himself for the salvation of his people, enduring the cross, despising its shame, and so entering upon the eternal joy that is set before him.

This article is adapted by Michael Ward from his [*Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis*](https://bookshop.org/a/78/9780199738700) (Oxford University Press, 2007).

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