

The Horse and His Boy

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Notes and Ideas for The Horse and His Boy, by Andrew Dósa, Esq.
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For our most recent reading of a book in the Chronicles of Narnia, *The Silver Chair*, we relied on the insight of Michael Ward, as presented in *Planet Narnia*. He believed that the seven books each reflected characteristics and themes of the seven medieval planets, starting with Earth, then on to the moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. (The sun was situated between Venus and Mars.) Of all the theories about Lewis's intentions behind the Chronicles, Ward's seems the best.

Lewis did not dispute a heliocentric cosmos. However, Lewis loved the medieval cosmos and the "spiritual symbols of permanent value" found there. "On the imaginative and emotional level it makes a great difference whether, with the medieval we project upon the universe our strivings and desires, or with the moderns, our police-system and our traffic regulations."¹

The modern, scientific, and "true" cosmos is cold, dark, devoid of sound, empty, and almost nihilistic. Extraordinary in its structure, the cosmos, in the modern take, is not vibrant. On the other hand, the medieval cosmos was alive. Now, in our urban existence, we can see stars at night, but our electrical light blurs our vision. Lewis wants us to understand the contrast; he encourages us to know the cosmos is vibrant: "You must conceive yourself looking up at a world lighted, warmed, and resonant with music."² The medieval stargazer sensed or saw God in the cosmos. Lewis wants us, as amateur stargazers, to look up and out and see so much more:

[I]aying aside whatever Theology or Atheology you held before, run your mind up heaven by heaven to Him who is really the centre [sic], to your senses the circumference, of all; the quarry whom all of these untiring huntsman pursue, the candle to whom all these moths move yet are not burned.³

The Characteristics of Mercury (both a planet and a Roman god)

In *The Discarded Image*, Lewis offers various thoughts on Mercury. He suggests there is a quickness and almost unmanageable aspect to Quicksilver, the metal Mercury. Various medieval writers have identified other qualities. Dante sees beneficent men of action. Another suggested Mercury was the patron of profit. Others saw traits of study, clerks, learning, literature, and writing. Lewis's particular descriptors were "[s]killed eagerness" and "bright alacrity". "But 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."⁴

From *Planet Narnia*, we get an expanded explanation of Mercury's influence. We have the twins, as Gemini is ruled by Mercury. Roman mythology gives us the twins Castor and Pollux, who are

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge at the University Press, 1967), 94.

²Id., at 112.

³Id., at 119.

⁴Id., at 108.

models of Shasta and Corin. Castor was the “breaker” of horses, a horseman. Pollux was a renowned boxer. Shasta learns to ride, and, by his bravery, ”breaks” Bree, who says he was beaten by a boy.⁵ Hermes, the Greek predecessor to Mercury, invented boxing. Corin wanted to box everybody, and always came out on top.

Shasta and Corin regularly squabbled. Lewis dedicates the book to David and Douglas Gresham. We do not know if they regularly squabbled, but we do know they charted dramatically different courses for their own lives, careers, world views, faith, and closeness or relationship to Lewis.

While there is only one set of twins, there are many examples of echoing or pairings or contrasts in *The Horse and His Boy*. We have two horses, two girls, two boys, two friendly neighboring countries, two contrasting types of ethnic or spiritual countries. We see division and reunion which hints at Mercury as God of crossroads. Hermes was typically carved into signposts, at junctions, and at boundary markers.

Mercury is probably best known for the characteristic of speed. He is the messenger. The heels of his shoes have wings as does the band or head covering that he wears. Thus, the idea of speed or urgency is central to this book. Like in the gospel of Mark, there is a sense of immediacy, pressing danger, or the threat of lost opportunity.

Perhaps the chief skill of Mercury was the skill of speech. Lewis contrasts the pattern of prose, maxims, and poetry of the Calormenes with that of the Narnians. The former was loquacious, excessively flowery, and pompous. The latter was brisk, blunt, and concise.

The messenger-speaker connect cannot be denied. While the messenger does not create or craft the message, he is still responsible to deliver it to the recipient with the force and power intended by the author.

In the books of Acts, the audience in Lystra was so impressed with the Barnabas–Paul tandem, they called them gods. “Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, because he was the chief speaker, they called Hermes.”⁶

As we noted earlier, there is a studious side to Mercury. Shasta, once he was recognized as a prince, was set on the path of learning. After reading and writing, he would then be taught heraldry. But before he would begin that more “noble” preoccupation, on his journey to Archenland, he followed the pattern of raiding and thieving. Mercury is the patron of pilferers.

The Particularities of *The Horse and His Boy*

This book is perhaps the most straightforward adventure tale among the seven books. It feels like it could be a part of *The Arabian Nights*. It is the only book set entirely in the Narnian world, yet we are never taken to Narnia itself; all the action is outside of Narnia. The human protagonists are native children. This is the only book where English children are not the stars of the story. We have the first real romance and marriage in the Chronicles.

⁵C.S. Lewis, *The Horse and his Boy*, (Collier Books, 1970), 145.

⁶Acts 14:12. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, Revised Standard Version (New York, Oxford University Press, 1977)

While it was the fifth published book, Lewis finished writing it before The first book was published. In the linear history of the Chronicles, it is the third book. This adventure is referred to in The Silver Chair, and key people of the book appear in The Last Battle.

There are several prominent themes in the book. First, “Narnia and the North!” is often repeated rallying cry, mostly by the horses. They remember Narnia, love it deeply, and long to return. Aliens in a foreign, lesser country, they know a better place or home is waiting for them. While the phrase drives the horses, and they do get back to Narnia, Shasta and Aravis do not. Of course, they marry, so they are together in Archenland. But Narnia is their respected and loved neighbor, and we can assume that just as the horses visit Shasta (Cor) and Aravis, the two children regularly visit Narnia.

Second, God is directly involved in the lives of the protagonists. His providential work and guiding hand are evident throughout the story, most notably in how Aslan protected and directed Shasta. Aslan also prominently orchestrates the meeting of Bree and Shasta and then their connection with Hwin and Aravis. The four traveling companions are shepherded through Tashbaan, and particularly in how Shasta comes into the court of Edmund and Susan, and how Aravis is “rescued” by her Lasaraleen, and both Shasta and Aravis become privy to startling and “insider” knowledge.

Aslan provokes the horses and their riders to greater speed and onto a more direct path. He even metes out punishment to Aravis, that she might know, among other things, how others are harmed or affected by her choices. Aslan gives justice by this punishment to the servant.

Third, speech and the language of the Calormenes and Archenlanders/Narnians are played up, along with the fact that Shasta as the mercurial messenger is just beginning to master important and meaningful speech.

There is a heartwarming power in the second of these three themes; it is the message of redemption. Aslan is present at the outset of Shasta/Cor’s life, and his role in bringing him to Archenland reminds of the role God wants to play throughout our lives.

Shasta is us. Believers are like royalty or nobility. That is our character, our potential. Yet we were strangers in a foreign land. Just as Adam and Eve are torn from paradise by their sin to become aliens, we live in the world, not of the world, yet fitting entirely in the world. We can be redeemed and transformed.

Born of greatness, we are kidnaped. We wear the rags of a servant, not of a loved child, in the home of an adopting parent, who is more like a harsh employer than a loving father. We escape the harsh life, but must journey out and away to the place of our true home. There, on our return, we trade the rags for more noble clothing, we are raised up and loved, and we are taught. And we reign with the king. When Shasta is transformed, he wears princely clothes, he receives his education and training, and he is elevated, just as we are if we are submitted to God.

Fourth, there is the fall of pride. Bree loses some of his conceit. Aravis is drawn out of her arrogance. The humble, noble Shasta is raised up.

Finally, this book, along with the entire Chronicles, offers a picture of the power and independence Lewis sees in and for women.