

## The Chronicles of Narnia: Children's Stories Modeled after Dispensationalism

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### Abstract

The Chronicles of Narnia stories and the dispensations of the Bible are instances of personal testing periods designed to produce personal change and growth with the purpose of preparing the stories characters and the people of God in the Bible for a special unique mission divinely planned. That mission requires lives that have been purified and molded in the furnace of trials, pains, sorrows, self-discovery, growth and maturation. Only lives that have been deeply touched by the divine are able to look and see beyond themselves. That is why the testing parameter in The Chronicles and in the Bible turns out to be so vital and unavoidable. This work examines the seven Chronicles of Narnia in light of the seven biblical dispensations. According to this view, the participants in God's plans are changed into better persons, come to a new understanding of themselves, and are ready to fulfill the mission assigned to them. But the active participation of these individuals is required in order to bring the mission to complete fruition at a determined and specific moment in human history. In The Chronicles of Narnia, the changes are operated and produced with the intervention of Aslan, the divine being. He is the Christ-like figure, who works to bring about important changes in the present or future situation of the kingdom of Narnia, affecting the overall story plot. This study also proposes that each story of The Chronicles of Narnia series represents one of the seven dispensations in the Bible.

**Keywords:** story, dispensation, model, seven, change, results

### Introduction

*The Chronicles of Narnia* stories and the dispensations of the Bible are instances of personal testing periods designed to produce personal change and growth with the purpose of preparing the characters in the story—and the people of God in the Bible—for a unique and special mission divinely planned. That mission and the tasks that support it require lives that have been purified and molded in the furnace of trials, pains, sorrows, self-discovery, growth and maturation. Only lives that have been deeply touched by the divine hands are able to look and see beyond themselves. That is why the testing parameter in both *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the *Dispensations* turns out to be a vital and unavoidable need.

In regards to that, it is the purpose of this study to point to the fact that *The Chronicles of Narnia* are organized after the dispensational perspective. According to this view, the participants in God's plans are transformed into better persons and come to a new understanding

of themselves, and are thus ready to fulfill the plans that have been designed since the beginning of time. But the active participation of these individuals is needed in order to bring those plans to complete fulfillment at a determined and specific moment in human history.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the transformations are operated and produced with the intervention of Aslan, as the Christ-like figure, with pivotal results that bring about important changes in the present and future situation of the kingdom of Narnia, affecting the overall story plot. All through the development of the story plot, it looks as if Lewis was familiar with C.I. Scofield's biblical dispensational view when he wrote each Narnia book. He seems to have followed the schematic cycle of the dispensations, in which God puts man to a particular test, man fails, and judgment has to be exercised because of man's disobedience. Nevertheless, out of His mercy and loving-kindness, God weaves a new way in the fabric of human history to restore His fallen creature, giving him another opportunity. And this in spite of the fact that he now has to live with the consequences of his bad choices—sin, in biblical terms.

Then again, in each dispensation God has to adapt the consequences of man's disobedience to new situations that are called for due to the change of plans caused by that disobedience. History is then seen as a result of the choices man makes during his lifetime. In the Narnia stories Aslan—the King Lion—sets things to right for the general good. In order to do this Aslan resorts to the use of trials and hardships that the characters have to face, endure, to finally succeed in dealing with them. In the process, they gain through these experiences a new self-awareness and insight.

Reading the whole of the Chronicles, as a related unity, therefore, is like seeing the whole of human history as written in the Bible. The parallel is there and clear to be seen by the Christian who is knowledgeable of the Bible. There is a beginning and an ending to all things in both works, with diverse events taking place in between, before the last battle ensues and defines all things for eternity. Thereafter eternity is begun with absolute newness of life—New Heavens and New Earth, and a New Narnia—to be enjoyed forever by the ones who gave heed to what was really important and responded to the call for righteousness and good in the spiritual realm.

## 1. The Chronicles of Narnia as Fairy Tales

C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* belongs to theological fantasy fiction, in the opinion of scholars Ross Murfin and S.M. Ray (153). However, as far as a widely recognized literary classification goes, the Narnia series belong to the genre of the fairy tale. The fairy tale is usually characterized as belonging to children, and the Narnia stories are certainly for children. More generally speaking, however, *The Chronicles of Narnia* are not merely adventure stories of young children, and for children, but elaborate tales which deal with many subjects such as overcoming one's transgressions and sins, resisting temptation, conquering personal fears, fighting physical and spiritual battles, dealing with good and evil, growing personally, learning and maturing, coming to terms with oneself.

The *Narnia* stories are full of theological and biblical references from both the Old and New Testament accounts. Lewis drew heavily on the Bible to produce this literary work. The seven *Narnia* stories contain important moral lessons that teach a moral and ethical code of

living, especially to the children who read them. In regards to that, in his essay *Myth and Truth: The Origins of the Chronicles of Narnia*, author Mark Bane points out that

In the process of writing the Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis gradually expanded the breadth and scope of his literary ambitions. What was foreseen from the outset as a collection of stories for children developed into a complex depiction of an entire moral universe. As the seven books progress, Lewis unfolds the whole Divine plan for this universe from its creation to its apocalypse. However, the uniqueness of Lewis' literary achievement stems from the fact that Lewis manages to do two things at once. That is, he remains faithful to his original intention to write stories for children while adding in subtle moral and spiritual complexities. These complexities do not seem like authorial intrusions or editorializing. They are instead woven into the very fabric of Lewis's creative universe. Thus, the Chronicles of Narnia are a series of books that can delight the senses as they challenge and stir the soul.

As fairy tales, *The Chronicles of Narnia* are something quite apart because they represent the humanity of man in all its aspects but not from a theological or religious point of view, but from the altogether unusual perspective of the fairy tale for children. Thus, the value of the stories lies precisely in that they are profound theological teachings, but not with a theological approach. No child can remain immune to these delightful and enchanting stories. And not only children, as proven by author Ken Gire, when he shares his personal experience, as a grown-up man, stating that

Since childhood, I have believed in heaven. I believed it was a real place and hoped that someday I would go there. I heard, however, that you have to die to get there, and not being much interested in doing that very soon, I was not eager to make the trip. There were other reasons for my reluctance. It seemed a vague, cloudy place, sedate and serious, from what I could piece together. And ponderously slow. I could never imagine running in heaven, which as a young boy I enjoyed immensely. And if there were no running, it was inconceivable to me that there would be any playing. The two seemed so intertwined that I could not, in my child's mind, separate them. Of course, if you go to church long enough, or to seminary, you get a fuller picture of heaven. Still, it wasn't church that stirred my longing for heaven. And it wasn't seminary. It was a fairy tale (202).

The fairy tale that accomplished in Ken Gire what Lewis intended when he wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* is *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. In the final lines of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, another story of the Narnia series, when Lucy and Edmund are told they will never come back to Narnia, they get very sad at the news. Edmund then asks Aslan if He is also in their world, to which Aslan answers and states his famous lines so widely quoted by Christian authors and commentators of all times: "I am," said Aslan. "But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there" (VDT, 270).

The children will thus become perhaps more aware of Jesus Christ and of the Christian faith in their own world. This is because after meeting Aslan they have now a new perspective of

the divine. The children also possess a new awareness of spirituality. They have actually experienced and tried how good it tastes to be comforted, taken care of, ministered to, and nurtured by the mighty hands of a God. Aslan then serves as a two-way door both to new life in Narnia and in the real world of the children. In the same line of thought, Gire goes on to say how the fairy tale, referring to the Narnia story, has a special impact on the life of the Christian:

The story of Christ's crucifixion is one that many of us have heard in some form or another since childhood. If we have gone to church very much over the years, we've heard it a lot. Even if we have just popped in on Christmas and Easter to pay our respects, we've heard the story. Our familiarity with the story doesn't breed contempt, but it does breed complacency, often inhibiting us from feeling about Christ's crucifixion the way we should feel. Which is why the fairy tale works so well. It steals past our complacency with new images and atmospheres (206).

In regards to their literary classification, fairy tales are a primitive or ancient sort of literature or genre, which means that they have been around from the beginning of recorded history. Chesterton says that "civilization changes; but fairy-tales never change" (Caughey, 79). Because it has existed in many cultures of the world from ancient times, "the fairy tale is a simple form that can be called a form of folk literature, appealing to children as well as adults and to people with simple literary abilities as well as the literati of society" (Ryken and Lamp Mead, 101).

The fairy stories and the way they are presented are certainly an invitation to look at old things in a new way. *The Chronicles of Narnia* tales belong in that category. They are the mirror that reflects our own story, since the beginning of time until the end of everything, as seen in the Christian perspective. In the Bible, for instance, there is a Judas Iscariot who betrays his Master. In Narnia we have the corresponding character of Edmund, who betrays his siblings. Thus, the *Narnia* story is everyone's story. It is the mirror in which children—and not just children—can look at themselves and see how they are doing in the moral sense of the word, just like the Holy Scripture is the mirror for the human soul. *The Chronicles of Narnia* awaken the human spirit to higher things, and challenge the readers to seek that which is good, or better, in the moral sense of the word. But *The Chronicles* are not theological or evangelical books but fairy stories (Schakel, 118). They are not religious treatises but plain fairy tales intended for children's understanding and entertainment.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia* Lewis created characters that transmit or reflect all the moral lessons he meant to impart to his young readers. Over time not only children but adults alike have had their very favorite characters like Reepicheep, Puddleglum, Bree, Shasta, Lucy, maybe even Edmund, and so many others. People might well identify with a character or the life and personal traits of a character. However, "the apex of C. S. Lewis's literary, mythopoeic, and apologetic gifts is the character of Aslan, because this Lion comes straight from the heart of Lewis's contemplation and enjoyment of God and of the world God made" (Ford, 55).

Aslan then embodies all that is good, someone who seeks the good in others. Colin Duriez ponders that there are many biblical allusions surrounding Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and points out that "Lewis balances Aslan's wildness and terrifying nature perfectly with his approachability, beauty and gentleness" (68). For Peter Schakel, "an additional factor that

contributed to the success of *The Chronicles of Narnia* was the emergence of the great lion, Aslan” (34). In the theological sense of the word, Colin Duriez refers to Aslan and comments, for instance,

Aslan is a figure of Christ, out of many possible figures of him. If a reader is unaware of this, he or she can still enjoy the stories in their own right; if he or she is aware, the meaning of Christian truths often comes strangely alive. Many readers are moved to tears for instance at the death of Aslan though they may be as familiar with the gospel narratives as to be unmoved by the accounts of Christ’s death (69, 70).

Nevertheless, being such a key figure in the stories, Aslan is seen and perceived in different ways by various characters in the story. There are those who see Him as someone only to be feared and hated, like Nikabrik the Dwarf, in *Prince Caspian*; Prince Rabadash of Calormen, in *The Horse and His Boy*, and the Bad Dwarfs in *The Last Battle*. Others, however, only love him and are happy to be near Him, as is the case of Lucy, Susan, Caspian, Eustace, and many others.

C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* series of seven books are among Lewis’s most widely read material, according to Clyde S. Kilby (116). The stories were written between 1949 and 1954, and up to the present time 100 million copies have been sold in 47 languages. However, even when *The Chronicles of Narnia* are considered as a beloved literary masterpiece, Lewis and his Narnia tales are not without detractors. Clyde S. Kilby claims that the stories are not without defects and that there are errors in them. He cites, for example, “the unmotivated appearance of the underwater people” toward the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the appearance of Father Christmas in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as incongruous, and says that there is “a lapse in good judgment for Lewis to make Aslan the trickster who in *The Horse and His Boy* changes Rabadash into an ass.” Nevertheless, for Kilby “the defects are as nothing compared to the excellencies” of the tales (145).

Fantasy and magic realist author Naomi Wood, on her part, comments in an essay in *Revisiting Narnia* (Caughey, 2005), that

Professional critics and reviewers of children’s literature as frequently condemn as praise *The Chronicles*: acclaimed children’s author Penelope Lively writes that Lewis’ “underlying savagery... makes the books so sinister” that she was “disturbed, even... sickened” by them, and Peter Hollindale asserts that “the Narnia books reveal a startlingly immature and vindictive sensibility.” More recently, agnostic Philip Pullman has expressed his disgust with the series’ racism and sexism, while Christian John Goldthwaite objects to the books’ designation of the beautiful people as the only heirs of the kingdom of heaven, as well as the petty and violent retributive acts legitimized by the narrative (55).

Notwithstanding, the fiercest of critics of the *The Chronicles of Narnia* tales is the renowned British atheist fantasy author Philip Pullman, who also has a religious view to portray in his children’s stories. In Pullman’s case, however, it is as different from Lewis’s as it could possibly be. In fact, Pullman’s books have been called “C.S. Lewis for atheists.” In a noticeable contrast to *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *His Dark Materials*—Pullman’s trilogy written precisely to oppose *The Chronicles of Narnia* stories—upturns almost every stereotypical Christian value.

## 2. The Dispensations as a Form of Interpretation

Cyrus Ingersol Scofield, the man who popularized the concept of biblical dispensations, was an American theologian, minister, writer, and a lawyer by profession. He was born on August 19, 1843. In 1872 he was appointed U.S. attorney for the district of Kansas. When his *Scofield Reference Bible* was published in 1901, it quickly became the most influential statement of dispensational pre-millennialism, a Christian doctrine that stresses the second coming of Jesus Christ and all the events related to it.

In C.I. Scofield's framework of reference, a dispensation is in its theological sense a period of time during which man is tested in respect to his obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God (Ryrie, 27). God uses certain methods and ways during specific eras in human history with the purpose of putting into effect some specific plans that He has in His sovereign wisdom. God in His sovereignty always seeks what will be best for His children and adapts His plans to accommodate the new condition of man.

The word that is used in the Greek New Testament to refer to a dispensation is *oikonomía*, derived from *oikos*, house, and *nomos*, law. The word refers to the "management of a household or of household affairs, and more specifically, to the management, oversight, administration, of other person's property; the office of a manager or overseer; stewardship; administration; dispensation," according to Thayer and Smith. Thus, a dispensation is man's administration or stewardship of God's ordained plans for humanity. The word *dispensationis* translated into English as stewardship, administration, management, direction, arrangement, order, or plan.

Within the framework of each dispensation man causes certain results to occur according to his attitudes, behavior, and choices. An important fact about a dispensation is that it "involves responsibility, accountability, and faithfulness on the part of the steward" (Ryrie 33). So, the testing aspect is always present in the idea of a dispensation. The testing can have rewards according to the willingness of man to participate and contribute to God's plan in a specific era or time.

Darby and Scofield claimed that this threefold distinction gives a better understanding of Scripture in general. Scofield believed that between creation and the final judgment there are seven distinct eras of God's dealing with man—the seven dispensations—and that these eras were a framework for understanding and explaining the total message of the Bible (SRB 4).

It was Scofield's belief that dispensations show the progressive order of God's revealed dealings with humanity, with the increasing purpose of having man responsible for specific and varying tests in regards to his obedience to God, from the beginning of human history to its end (SRB 4). Dispensations are then a progressive and connected revelation of God's dealings with man, given sometimes to the whole human race, and at other times to a particular people, Israel. These different dispensations are not separate ways of salvation. During each of them man is reconciled to God in only one way —by God's grace through the work of Jesus Christ that was accomplished on the cross and vindicated in His resurrection. In the dispensational view, before the cross, man was saved in anticipation of Christ's atoning sacrifice, through believing the

revelation thus far given to him. Since the cross, man has been saved by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom revelation and redemption are consummated.

In the dispensational framework of reference man's continuing requirement is obedience to the revelation of God given in each dispensation. This obedience is a stewardship of faith. Although divine revelation unfolds progressively, the truths or divine principles of the earlier dispensations are not discarded but cumulative. Thus *Conscience*, or moral responsibility, the second dispensation, is a permanent truth in human life. This is seen in the biblical citation by the apostle Paul, "For when the Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, they, not having the law, are a law unto themselves, which shows the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts between accusing and excusing one another" (Romans 2:15). Other references are Romans 9:1 and 2 Corinthians 1:12 and 4:2. However, *Conscience* does not continue as a dispensation later on.

Similarly, the ones that are saved in the present dispensation, *Grace* (the Church era), do not live under the Law as a specific test of obedience to divine revelation, as expressed in Galatians 5:18, "But if ye are led by the Spirit, ye are not under the law," and again Galatians 2:16 and 3:11, yet the Law remains an essential part of the Holy Scriptures which, to today's Christian, is useful for "instruction in righteousness," according to what the Bible attests to in 2 Timothy 3:16, 17 and Romans 15:4.

The purpose of each dispensation, as Scofield sees it, is to place man under a specific rule of conduct, but this is not a condition of salvation. In every past dispensation unregenerate man has failed, and he has failed in this present dispensation and will fail in the future. Yet salvation has been and will continue to be available to man by God's grace through faith.

The seven dispensations as outlined by C.I. Scofield are *Innocence*, as seen starting in Genesis 1:28; *Conscience*, or *Moral Responsibility*, by what is expressed in Genesis 3:7; *Human Government*, cited in Genesis 8:15-17; *Promise*, as revealed in Genesis 12:1-3; *Law*, as it is given in Exodus 19:8; *Grace*, also called the *Times of the Church*, as seen in John 1:17. This dispensation of *Grace* corresponds to the present time, when the Church is active on earth and is fulfilling the plans that God has determined for all the ones that are part of this organism to achieve. The last dispensation, Kingdom—also known as the *Millennium* or the *Millennial Kingdom of Christ*—is presented in Ephesians 1:10. Many Christians in different parts of the world adhere to this system of biblical interpretation and live in accordance with its teachings.

Dispensationalism, as a Christian Protestant doctrine, has been the target of numerous attacks over the years. Charles C. Ryrie, a strong defendant of the dispensational system, is of the opinion that "almost all opponents of dispensationalism try to make much of their claim that the Scriptures do not use the word dispensation in the same theological and technical sense that the dispensational scheme of teaching does" (38). Ryrie also cites Oswald T. Allis, for whom "the Bible ceases to be a self-consistent whole" because of the dispensational system of interpretation (38). The renowned theologian Louis Berkhoff refers to the doctrine of dispensationalism saying that "this theory is also divisive in tendency dismembering the organism of Scripture with disastrous results" (Ryrie 38).

It is also Ryrie's opinion—after more than forty years of studying and defending the dispensationalist method—that even today the system continues to create heated debate within

the Christian world, to the point that some even associate it with names like the Catholic Church, Hitler and National Socialism, Christian Science, and Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others consider it "heresy" (16).

Summarizing, dispensationalism is a system of literally interpreting Scripture. This theological movement started in the nineteenth century with John Nelson Darby in Ireland. Later, C. I. Scofield popularized it in the United States, and since then the system has found an echo in many Christian groups around the globe. The people who adhere to this system of interpreting Scripture hold the belief that a dispensation is a period of time during which God administers the world in a certain way and subjects man to a test with the purpose of producing in him good deeds through obedience to God. In the model of interpretation designed by Scofield, the Scripture is divided into seven dispensations.

### 3. The Chronicles of Narnia and the Old and New Testament Model

There certainly is a close relationship between *The Chronicles of Narnia* seven books and the seven dispensations in the Scofield system of approach to understanding Scripture. Lewis emphasized one of the seven dispensations in each one of the seven Narnia books. The stories and the dispensations possess elements and characteristics that bind them together in a unique and remarkable way. An overview of the seven dispensations in their chronological order indicates that each one of them corresponds to one Narnia book, in spite of the fact that not everything in the story is a reflection of that particular dispensation. However, there undoubtedly are major indicators that lead one to assume that each story in *The Chronicles of Narnia* is a representation of a dispensation in the Bible.

Proof of this is a striking mathematical detail indicative of Lewis's applying one dispensation to each of the Narnia books. This can be seen from the very beginning by the main division of the *Chronicles* in two great blocks that correspond to the bigger view of the Old Testament, with the overall dispensation of *Law*, and the New Testament, with the overall dispensation of *Grace*. In general, the *Narnia* stories are developed in the following system:

→ **Five stories** correspond to the first five dispensations of *Innocence*, *Conscience*, *Human Government*, *Promise*, and *Law*, which cover the entire **Old Testament**.

→ **Two stories** correspond to the dispensations of *Grace* and *Kingdom*, which cover the **New Testament**.

→ Why is that? Because of the fascinating result we obtain doing some numbers. It goes like this.

→ There are 39 books in the Old Testament. Adding those two numbers, we have  $3 + 9 = 12$ . Now taking into consideration that 7 is an all-special and symbolic number in the Bible and the fact that the *Chronicles* consist of 7 volumes, and that there are seven Dispensations, we use that number as a reference and subtract it from 12. What do we get? We get a 5! So, doing a simple operation there is the following result:

**39** Old Testament books

**$3 + 9 = 12$**



$12 - 7 = 5$  Chronicles of Narnia stories that belong to the Old Testament dispensations.

→Then the correspondence of Old Testament dispensations and *Narnia* stories goes as follows:

1. Story *The Magician's Nephew*→dispensation of *Innocence*
2. Story *Prince Caspian*→dispensation of *Conscience*
3. Story *The Horse and His Boy*→dispensation of *Human Government*
4. Story *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*→dispensation of *Promise*
5. Story *The Silver Chair*→dispensation of *Law*

→In regards to the **New Testament**, there are 27 books in this section of the Bible. Adding  $2 + 7$  the result is 9. Then comes the subtraction of  $9 - 7$ , which gives 2. This time the equation goes like this:

27 New Testament books

$$2 + 7 = 9$$

$9 - 7 = 2$  Chronicles of Narnia stories that belong to the New Testament dispensations.

→The correspondence of **New Testament** dispensations and the *Narnia* stories here is the following:

1. Story *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*→dispensation of *Grace*
2. Story *The Last Battle*→dispensation of *Kingdom*

## Conclusion

From what has been presented above, it can be concluded that *The Chronicles of Narnia* constitute a system organized in the same manner as the Bible is, with five books representing the Old Testament, or the overall dispensation of *Law*, and two books representing the New Testament, or the overall dispensation of *Grace*. C. S. Lewis's children's seven stories, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, then, are modeled after the seven dispensations in the Christian Bible, as shown in this study.

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