

A lionkeeper looks at Aslan

By Tim Stoffel

ABSTRACT

The recent release of ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’ as a movie is creating a tremendous interest in C.S. Lewis’s ‘Chronicles of Narnia’, and most notably, in the great lion Aslan. Most material written on Aslan has to deal with his position as a type of Jesus Christ in these quasi-allegorical tales. This paper first compares Aslan to a physical lion, showing similarities and differences. (It also shows that C.S. Lewis apparently knew a considerable amount about lions). Second, some thoughts are given on the forms that Jesus Christ may assume, and why it is not far-fetched to consider our Lord as a lion. The use of Aslan as a name of Christ is also discussed, and the paper concludes with some thought on how to use this special name.

Aslan the lion, the principal character in all seven of C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, is one of the most celebrated characters in all of literature. Aslan gained this fame by being essentially Jesus Christ in the land of Narnia. As such, Aslan is imbued with god-like power in all he says and does. This becomes the central theme and unifying factor in all of the *Chronicles*.

Very much has been written on the spiritual significance of Aslan, and his role of Christ and God in the world of Narnia. But, very little has been written on Aslan as a literal lion. Besides the enormous spiritual significance of the lion as a ‘spiritual’ animal, it is also obvious that Lewis knew a great deal about lions as real animals.

But why a lion? From a spiritual standpoint, lions are very important animals. Indeed, in Revelation 5:5-6, we see reference to Jesus as ‘The lion of the tribe of Judah’¹. Lions are found throughout scripture, often showing the power of God, or his ability to judge. We also see lions being as docile as lambs in the redemption of creation². Last, but certainly not least, lions are apparently one of the most important life-forms to God, as we see them in His compartment in various revelations in scripture. This includes the Revelations passage above, where one of the living creatures around God’s throne is like a lion³.

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- 1 “and one of the elders said to me, “Stop weeping; the lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals.” And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a lamb standing,” Rev 5:5-6 NAS
 - 2 “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” Isiah 11:6-9 NIV Also see Isiah 65:25
 - 3 “Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living being was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle.” Rev. 4:7 NIV Also see Ezekiel

Lions are also noted for the fact that they are carnivores and superpredators. They kill and eat large animals, which can and has included man. We as humans tend to find the idea of being food for wild beasts as rather repulsive. Therefore, lions carry with them, a kind of air of final judgment, in that we seem to be nothing but a big piece of meat in their eyes. However, there is a side to lions that very few people are aware of, because most people are loathe to spend any amount of time near a living lion. It is this little-known side that Lewis must have been aware of, and makes the character of Aslan that much more awesome and mysterious.

I am very privileged to be a lion keeper. I have been interested in lions for much of my life, and have been seriously studying them for nearly 25 years. For much of this time, my study has been reading books, watching videos and occasionally observing captive lions in zoos. But in 1999, I was able to spend nearly two weeks in Tanzania, East Africa observing wild lions⁴. By then, I had also become involved in Internet groups that were involved in the conservation or the captive husbandry of big cats.

One thing that was slowly becoming apparent during this time is that there are two sides to the lion. One as a superpredator. The other, as a friend to man⁵.

A golden opportunity opened for me in 2001, when I had the opportunity to move to a place where I would have lions as neighbors. It was not long afterwards that I became involved in caring for these lions (and a large assortment of other exotic cats). This place where these animals live is the Sierra Safari Zoo of Reno, Nevada, USA.

Now, I had a place where I could actively study these magnificent beasts. And what a treat I was in for. The very first day I worked at the zoo, I found Kenya the lion literally waiting to meet me! We became friends right there and then, and have been good friends ever since.

Any zoo would be lucky to have a lion as magnificent as Kenya. Indeed, in my travels to see lions in many other places, I have never seen another lion that can compare to him. Kenya apparently carries a large subset of the genes of the extinct-in-the-wild Barbary lion. He has a full, nearly black mane that is so extensive that it extends all the way down his belly and on to the fronts of his rear legs. This is about as much mane as a lion can carry. Although not huge by lion standards, Kenya is above average in size.

But, the most remarkable quality of Kenya is how gentle he is. Although no one goes in the enclosure with him, he is a perfect gentleman to nearly everyone. This behavior surprises many who are able to see it, as the public's perception of the lion is one of a ferocious killing machine. And indeed, all of the children who entered Narnia initially felt the same way about Aslan. So, now, let us take a look at the awesome Aslan as a lion.

The Aslan of Narnia is no ordinary lion. Described as 'big as a horse', Aslan would be nearly three

5:5-10 for a different description of the four living beings.

4 An account of this trip can be found at www.lionlamb.us/trip/aftrip99.html

5 Indeed, Keith Evans, who runs the MGM Grand Lion Habitat in Las Vegas (perhaps the only place anywhere where you can see humans routinely interact in the enclosure with lions) once wrote in a letter to me, 'I believe the lion is meant to be a friend with man.'

times the size of a real lion. And, Aslan gets bigger as you come to know him better. But even at the nominal size as that of a horse, Aslan is an imposing animal. Lions (and most other non-domestic cats) are almost solid muscle, and have a small internal organ volume. Their bones, although small in comparison to their overall size, are extremely dense to support all the weight and power of this animal. Therefore, lions overall are very dense. Considering that a typical male lion weighs 400-550 pounds (captive lions tend to be on the heavy end of this range), a horse-sized lion would easily weigh upwards of a ton and a half, and probably closer to two tons.

You can break the appearance of a male lion down into two principal parts: the body and the mane. The body is almost always a medium tan color, with little significant variation. (We will not consider white lions here, as they were unknown in Lewis's time.) Sometimes, faint, rosette-shaped spots are seen, especially on the hind legs of younger lions. The mane, on the other hand, can have a wide variation in color, from blond to black. A reddish hue is sometimes seen, and so is some gray, especially on lions of great age. Many different mane colors can, and often do exist on the same lion. It is this combination of colors that helps give the male lion his striking appearance.

Aslan is described as being a wide range of similar colors, from 'tawny gold' to 'bright yellow' to 'golden', which is quite fitting for a fantastical lion. The description of color varies slightly with each description, as Aslan was a bit different each time he was encountered. This could be considered in keeping with the normal variation observed in mane coloration of real lions.

The other significant fact about a lion's mane is the unusual hair that makes up the mane. It is quite coarse, like a horse's tail. But unlike a horse's tail, the individual hairs are 'crinkled' in such a way as to make them puff out. In fact, once you have seen lion mane hairs, it is hard to mistake them for anything else.

One would therefore expect that the mane would have a coarse feel to it, and indeed it does. But it is a wonderful coarse feel that is also soft. Lewis apparently was aware of this and wrote that Aslan's coat (and probably the mane, as this description is from the place where Lucy and Susan rode Aslan, and they are always depicted as sitting towards the front of Aslan⁶.) was a 'soft roughness of golden fur'⁷. How could C.S. Lewis have known this unless he had spent some time around real lions?

Despite Aslan's immense size, he could move as silently as any other cat. It is amazing that cats, especially the big cats, can be as quiet as they are. They put more weight per square inch of their paw pads than we do with our two large feet⁸.

Nearly all species of cat have retractable claws. This aids in keeping the claws sharp for their

6 Indeed, humans do occasionally ride lions, and they usually sit towards the front, as described above.

7 LWW xv 43 (186) (References to location of passages in the *Chronicles* will follow the notation developed by Paul Ford in his excellent book, *Companion to Narnia, revised and expanded* with the exception that I have based paragraph numbering on the very common one-volume edition *The Chronicles of Narnia*, ISBN 0-06-623850-1, Harper-Collins, 2001. Note that paragraph count will vary slightly between some editions. The aforementioned passage would be read as follows: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; chapter 15; paragraph 43, counting from the beginning of the chapter; page number in the aforementioned edition (in parenthesis). I have also chosen to omit the backwards paragraph count, as this will not be accurate in many editions.)

8 HHB xii 1 (283) Much to my pleasant surprise, I found a reference to deep lion pawprints.

primary function-- grabbing and holding on to moving prey. That Aslan could retract his claws is described over and over in the *Chronicles* as 'velveting his paws'⁹

How the children and other creatures found throughout Narnia physically interact with Aslan reveals a great deal about his character. On many occasions, we read that the children were eager to bury their hands or face in his mane. Or, that Aslan would touch them with the tip of his tongue¹⁰. Let's look at these interactions in some detail.

It is no mistake that we associate the character 'quality' of pride with the lion. In leoine society, this 'pride' has an essential function in that the size and strength of the lion pride's male (or males as the case may be) determines how safe the pride's territory will be from other intruding lions. As such then, lions are very conscious of their mane. The bigger their mane is, the more fearsome they look to an intruder. This is also probably the reason that lionesses seem to prefer male lions with bigger and darker manes¹¹.

Because lions are so conscious of their mane, and are very possessive of things they 'own', they therefore tend to be very proud of their mane. As a result, if you are allowed to have physical contact with a male lion, it is almost always their mane they offer to you. (It's also possible the mane is very itchy, but I don't have any credible observations to support this idea.) Kenya will press his mane into the fence so you can get your fingers into it. He likes it when you move around, and scratch him all over in his mane. He likes it less if you scratch just one spot. You need to scratch fairly heavily, so he can really feel it. Kenya also will allow keepers he really likes (this includes me) to rub him in his belly mane. Rarely does Kenya want you to scratch him in the short hair on his hindquarters. Lionesses, on the other hand, press the entire length of their bodies into the fence for contact, and want to be scratched everywhere.

For the aforementioned reasons, lions seem to want to have their mane looking at it's best. It is not surprising therefore, that lions like having their mane brushed. One lion, at a different facility that I get an occasional chance to brush, simply closes his eyes and enjoys the experience. Brushing the mane makes it puffier, and removes loose hair. (I always come away from a brushing session with a large wad of mane hair.) (The aforementioned lion also loves to be washed down with a high pressure sprayer, and we do this in a car wash. Needless to say, pressure washing a lion in a public car wash definitely draws attention!)

Therefore, it is not one bit surprising that whenever the children contact Aslan, it is in his mane. Indeed, they consider it a treat when they can bury their hands and faces in his mane¹². When Aslan is going up to the stone table to be sacrificed in 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe', he asks Susan

9 PC xi 48 (386-387)

10 PC x 43 (380), SC xvi 36 (660), among others

11 Peyton West and Craig Packer, 'Sexual selection, temperature, and the Lion's Mane', *Science*, 23 August 2002, pg1339.

A synopsis, as well as the complete paper can be found at www.lionresearch.org/current_docs/lion_mane.html

12 PC x 41 (380), VDT x, 37 (498), among others.

and Lucy to walk with him with their hands in his mane¹³. And I can tell you from personal experience that there are few places in this world where I would want my hands to be more than in a lion's mane!

If you have ever handled a puppy, or a lion cub, you will find that they like to lick you. Lions don't do this as much as dogs do, but they are more affectionate when they do lick you. (It's also like being licked by a sheet of sandpaper. Like house cats, they have a rough tongue for cleaning meat off of bones and grooming their fur.) As lion cubs become adults, the lick often degenerates into a touch from the tip of the tongue. As this is almost always performed in greeting, and as an act of affection, this tongue-touching is referred to as a 'lion kiss'. Indeed, this behavior by Aslan can be found throughout the Chronicles. One of the best descriptions can be found at the end of *The Silver Chair*, where it is observed that King Caspian gives Aslan the 'strong kisses of a King' and Aslan gives Caspian the 'wild kisses of a lion'¹⁴.

It goes without saying that Kenya the lion and I are 'best friends'. Almost without fail, when I walk into the big cat area of the zoo in the morning, Kenya will get up to greet me. He will do this even if he is hot, stuffed after a good feed, or being distracted by one of the lionesses being in heat. Although the other male big cats get nasty and defensive when their females are in heat, Kenya does not and is just as glad to see me as when the females are not in heat. Often, Kenya will make soft, breathy sounds as he is coming over to me, and wants to be touched. We call this 'lion talk'.

The next ten to twenty minutes are often the most pleasant of the entire day. Kenya will usually first give me a kiss or two. (Lions will sometimes screw up their faces after a kiss, bearing the teeth in the process. This is called 'flehmen' or 'stinky face'. What they are actually doing is smelling your scent with special organs on the roof of their mouths. Your house cat will do this, too.) Then, he will present his mane and his cheeks for scratching. Nearly all cats like having their cheeks scratched, as they deposit their scent on you in the process. (It's interesting to note that the girls in the movie were scratching Aslan's cheek in the 'right spot' while he lay dead on the stone table.) While scratching his cheeks, and often when scratching his mane, Kenya will close his eyes. This is a sign that he is ecstatically happy to being lovingly touched. After a while, he will change positions so I can scratch different parts of his mane. Often, he will flop on his back, and let me scratch his belly. Although I have to always be on my guard when I am touching Kenya (or any big cat, or for that matter most any animal at the zoo), I have little to fear around him. Indeed, I make it a habit to think good thoughts about him while giving him his 'scratching', as I think they can read our thoughts to some extent.

If I am lucky, I will get a chance near the end of the day just to go down and sit with the lions. Although they are usually very sleepy at this time of day, they are usually quite happy to have one of their 'humans' there enjoying just being with them. The lionesses enjoy my company just as much as the lions.

Once in a while, I will get a chance to sleep with the lions. I always try and be as close to Kenya as I can. Kenya will sometimes sleep next to me just inside the fence, and once he stayed there the entire

13 LWW xiv 36-37 (179)

14 SC xvi 46 (661)

night. Other times, he has pawed at the gate to his enclosure, because he wants to come out and be by me. Kenya will often roar while I am there. (On one memorable occasion, I was reading *The Magician's Nephew* while camped out sleeping next to Kenya, and he was roaring as I read the book!)

Another keeper, who raised one of our lions from a cub (a maneless male named 'Jambo') can sleep outside his enclosure. There is a spot in the enclosure fence that permits safe contact between human and lion in a casual, comfortable position for both parties. This allows this keeper and this lion to sleep hand-in-paw for sometimes hours at a time. This lion has also been observed breathing in synchronism with this keeper while they slept.

Although I can not take the risk to try it, I seriously doubt Kenya would try to intentionally hurt me if I were to go in with him. Indeed, he had a keeper (with the requisite experience) who would go in with him when he was much younger. So, in this sense, Kenya is not 'safe', but he is 'good'. And indeed, other animal trainers throughout history have had close 'friendships' with lions. And as far as I can tell, this is much more common than close friendships with any other species of big cat. Two very famous lions who were this gentle are/were Josef the actor lion, and Marjan, the one-eyed lion of Kabul, Afghanistan.

There are a number of cases on record of lions actually going out of their way to save a human life. I know of six cases, personally, and I have talked firsthand with two of the people whose lives have been spared. (The most recent episode involved a teenage girl in Ethiopia who was being abducted. Three wild lions chased off the attackers and guarded the girl until 'good' people came to her. This is most remarkable, as these were wild lions. All the other cases I know of involve captive lions who have preexisting bonds with humans.)

So as you can see from the following, lions can have positive relationships with humans, and these relationships can be very deep relationships. Far from the ferocious superpredators that lions are believed to always be, they also have a gentle, loving side that is little known. (Please don't walk away with the impression that all lions are like this. Some lions are quite aggressive and do not enjoy human company. Any lion can also 'turn' very suddenly if something or someone irritates them. I have seen even Kenya quite angry when something was happening he did not like.)

A mention has to be made about play. Just like their domestic relatives, lions like to play. Play is very useful in the life of an intelligent animal, as skills needed for survival are honed through this activity. Indeed, the more intelligent the animal, the more important the need for play is.

Aslan certainly did play. His play was an important element in the stories, but it is also illustrative of real lion behavior.

At least two episodes of play are notable in the *Chronicles*. The first is when Aslan is resurrected in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Aslan plays with Lucy and Susan as his strength is returning¹⁵. This fun wrestle is truly one of the most special moments anyone had with Aslan anywhere in the *Chronicles*.

15 LWW xv 39 (185)

Another notable incident of play is recorded in *Prince Caspian*. Trumpkin the dwarf needs to ‘find out that lions are real’. So, Aslan briefly uses Trumpkin as a toy¹⁶. Lions love toys, and will play with just about any object-- a stick, a ball, a cardboard box, a piece of rope, and even their food. Sometimes, they play games with humans, like ‘stalk’. (And just like this story, a properly trained lion can be very gentle with his teeth and claws when it comes to playing with its ‘human’.) I have also seen Kenya chase his tail, a form of play that surprisingly, is not recorded anywhere in the *Chronicles*. He will run in an increasingly tight circle until he trips over his own legs. He will roll over and end up with his muzzle firmly planted between his back legs!

One infrequently documented real lion behavior mentioned in the *Chronicles* is mane-shaking¹⁷. Indeed, this is even mentioned in the great prophecy of Aslan¹⁸. Whenever Aslan shakes mane in these stories, something happens. Lions do indeed shake their manes, but this is a behavior that needs to be studied a lot more than it has been to date.

Kenya shakes his mane regularly, and has shaken his mane many times in my presence. He shakes it for the same reason any furry animal would: To shake off water, dust, etc. Shaking the mane may also help it to puff out more to make the lion look bigger. It’s interesting to note that when Kenya shakes his mane, the air becomes full of loose mane hair. (Lions have very rapid hair turnover, even in their mane.)

The last lion behavior I will discuss is crying. Aslan cries on at least two occasions in the *Chronicles*, producing ‘big, bright tears’ that were ‘esteemed more valuable than the entire earth if it were made of solid diamond’¹⁹. Although I have never seen a lion cry, I have seen a big cat cry. And, it was a liger, so it was half-lion. It was one of the most special moments I have ever had as a cat handler.

The day before, I had been playing a game with our liger Hobbs. (He likes to invent games, and for me is more playful than any other cat.) Hobbs thought he had somehow hurt me in play, and I had walked away just after this had happened. The next day, a sad Hobbs came up to me, crying tears. It was one of those really precious moments you have in life. That day, I learned just how much this giant cat really loved me, and cared about my well-being. Our friendship has only gotten better as the years have gone on.

In any case, it is not a stretch at all to believe lions can cry. And, I believe that before I ‘go to be with Aslan’ that I will have seen a lion cry.

There are also some lion behaviors recorded in the *Chronicles* that are normal lion behaviors, but are used in an atypical manner by Aslan. Not surprisingly, some of these behaviors are important to the stories.

The first is the roar. Aslan does not roar often in these stories, but when he does, it is at significant moments. Being omnipotent in his world, Aslan’s roar is perhaps the loudest sound ever heard in

16 PC xi 46-50 (386-387)

17 PC xi 53 (387), LB xiii 73 (747)

18 LWW viii 17 (146)

19 MN xii 6 (83), SC xi 40 (661)

Narnia when it is used in it's full power²⁰. The descriptions imply it is a single, awesomely powerful sound. But his roar is not at all typical of a lion's real roar.

The sound most people associate with a lion's roar is that of an angry snarl. Lions actually do not usually make this sound unless they have been angered. The actual roar is quite a different sound, a truly beautiful, powerful sound. This sound is used not to signify anger or conquest but rather to advertise their presence to other lions. (some say a lion roars loudly just after making a kill, but they do not do this, unless calling the rest of the pride to the feast.)

The roar is hard to describe on paper. Every lion's roar is different, with the big males typically making the most majestic sound. The roar is actually a series of sounds made over a period of time lasting (usually) 15 to 30 seconds. This entire roaring cycle is referred to as a 'song'.

The roar usually starts out as a series of mini-roars and builds up to 'full power'. It is a Aaroooooww type sound, often descending in pitch, with the 'ww' often being rather guttural in quality. The best roars actually have a musical quality to them. Some lions though (females, especially), just make a Oooooooowww sound that is powerful but not musical. After the 'full power' section, which may contain ten or so 'roars', the roar dies down to a series of grunts. Usually in a pride, if one lion roars, all the lions roar together, in what is one of the most awesome sounds in nature. After a roaring 'song', lions will wait several minutes before repeating it.

How powerful is the roar? It is said in Africa, you can hear a lion's roar 5 miles (8 km) away. I heard roaring at least a couple miles off when I was in East Africa. Once, here in Nevada, in a rural area on an unusually still night, I heard lions roaring 7.5 miles (12 km) away. The lions next door aren't quite as effective, as they live in a low spot, and have to compete with the noise of a superhighway that runs just in front of the zoo. Even so, I have had Kenya roar into me from about 18 inches away. It shook every bone in my body, but yet was not unbearably loud. It is the presence of all the subsonic energy in the roar that makes it so effective. Indeed, it is the subsonic part of the roar that everyone in the distance hears when Aslan 'cuts loose' in the *Chronicles*²¹.

Another interesting behavior recorded in the *Chronicles* is that of purring²². It is said that big cats do not purr, and indeed, this is used to distinguish their genus, *Panthera* from other cats. (It should be noted that snow leopards, *Panthera uncia*, do purr.) However, they can purr after a fashion, but not all cats do it. And, they cannot do it continuously like your house cat, but only when they are exhaling. The result is their purr sounds like an intermittent rumble. I know of only one time when I have heard a lion 'purr'. It was at a sanctuary not far from here, named 'Tigertouch'. I frequently visit Tigertouch, and sometimes bring the cats treats on holidays. On this particular Christmas day, I had a big beef roast for their lion 'Rocky'. I gave it to him through a feeding hole. Rocky proceeded to proudly strut across the enclosure with his treat, in front of all the other cats he shares his enclosure with, purring as he went. He eventually ate his roast on top of a big cable spool, as if trying to show off. He was one happy

20 LWW xv 41 (185), PC xi 53-54 (387) It's interesting to note that these two mighty roars were given just after a time of play.

21 PC xi 54 (387)

22 LWW xi 27 (170), VDT x 37 (498). I am sure this occurs in other places, as well.

lion!

Our liger Hobbs is only half lion. But for whatever reason, Hobbs has ‘adopted’ me as one of his ‘humans’, an honor he has conferred on only one other person at the zoo. Hobbs purrs as described above frequently when I, or the other person he ‘owns’, is around. Only once or twice have I heard him purr when other keepers were around.

It’s interesting to note that Lewis does not say in any passage I am aware of that Aslan broke out into purring. He instead indicates that there was a hint of a purr. Perhaps he was aware of the fact that the big cats can only ‘purr after a fashion’²³.

One final thing that Aslan does frequently is breathe on people or things²⁴. This is symbolic of the Holy Spirit, for which the word in the original Greek bible is ‘pneuma’ or ‘breath’²⁵. Because Aslan is God in Narnia, this is an important attribute for him. But real lions do not generally go about breathing on things. From a lionkeeper’s standpoint though, smelling a lion’s breath is something that we try to do when they yawn, etc. The breath of a healthy lion actually smells good, kind of like fresh meat. A foul smell can indicate a problem, like a bad tooth, or an abscess in the mouth.

Lions have a characteristic smell, that one who works around them grows accustomed to. It is a musky smell, and is strongest around male lions, who like to spray just about everything with their scented urine. (The urine part of the smell dissipates rather quickly, leaving just the scent.) Unfortunately, it is not the sweet aroma frequently described as being smelled around Aslan²⁶.

I cannot call this paper complete without pointing out a couple of common lion behaviors that Aslan exhibits little or at all.

One of these is sleeping. All cats, lions included sleep about 20 hours a day. Aslan is never observed sleeping except perhaps briefly in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. As God, he has no reason to need sleep. The fact that cats sleep so much is frustrating to zoo visitors everywhere because they want to see the cats doing something.

The other is spraying. All male cats spray their urine to mark their territory. Some females do as well, including lions and tigers. Many times, zoo visitors are the intended ‘target’, which is not particularly liked. However, it is an honor to be sprayed by a great cat; it means they like you. (Thankfully, this is an honor few actively seek.) But if you work around big cats, you will get sprayed sooner or later. Kenya, Hobbs, Jambo and lioness Sierra have all sprayed me at various times. Maybe for the sake of the readers of the *Chronicles* C.S. Lewis left this detail out. After all, Aslan owns everything, anyway!

Now that the movie is out. I will add a few comments about the Aslan used in the film. This lion,

23 LWW xii 28 (170)

24 HHB xi 47 (280-281), LWW xvi 3-5 (187)

25 Not surprisingly, the study of the Holy Spirit is called ‘pneumatology’.

26 LWW xv 33 (184-185)

remarkable as he is, is completely computer generated. Rythm and Hues Studios did most of the work on Aslan. To do as good a job as they did, they had to use a real lion as a model and work from there²⁷. Some very fine details, like the ‘freckles’ on his nose, were faithfully executed. Aslan’s hair laid like you would expect it to on a real lion. His body movements are fluid and cat-like. Considerable attention was taken to make this lion as real and lifelike as possible. Other lionkeepers I know who has seen the film were similarly impressed.

Aslan’s face was, according to the producers ‘anthropomorphized’ a bit to make it more human-like. I had some initial concerns that this might make his face unrealistic. So although Aslan’s face is a bit blocky, it is still in keeping with the face of a real lion. The eyes look correct for a lion, with the tear ducts and channels properly arranged.

The integration of this graphical lion into the scene was as close to flawless as the state-of-the-art will allow. One has to really look to see any matte lines, etc. Every hair looks just like it should if Aslan were a real lion.

During the filming in New Zealand, a real lion was apparently kept on hand for observation and comparison purposes. This lion was never actually used for any scene.

The choice of Liam Neeson as the voice of Aslan was a stroke of genius. Aslan spoke with a rich, gentle voice that also suggested great power without flaunting it. One would expect Aslan’s voice to be strong and powerful. But Aslan is a lion of love and gentleness as much as he is a lion of power and judgment.

The movie Aslan isn’t perfect, though. The most notable ‘problem’ is his eyes are green on the movie posters, etc. In the film, his eyes are the correct amber-brown color. The other interesting thing about the movie Aslan is that his hips are very broad. Lions actually have rather narrow hips. You can really notice this as he is walking up the hill to the stone table.

A lioness who appears briefly in the throne room scene at the end of the film is not at all well done. She looks like a plush toy, with almost no angularity to her face. This may have been a last-minute addition, or else it is one of those spots that exist in most films where they had to save money *somehow*.

Still, great credit has to be given to the people that brought Aslan to life. They did a masterful job, and gives us a lot to look forward to in the subsequent *Narnia* films.

C.S. Lewis must have known an awful lot about lion traits and behavior to have written as skillfully as he did about Aslan. At very minimum, I suspect he did some research on the nature of (especially) captive lions to have been able to write about them as well as he did. Still, it is pleasant to think that Lewis saw all these lion characteristics in the series of dreams he had about lions, just before he started writing *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in earnest. I suspect that these dreams were no accident.

It is my hope that this paper will help you understand both Aslan and real lions better-- and make

²⁷ The lion chosen as the model for Aslan was a lion named ‘Zion’, who lives at a wildlife park named ‘Zion Wildlife Gardens’ near Whangarei, New Zealand. Zion’s keeper, Craig Busch, says that Zion is the gentlest lion in the whole world

Aslan even more special to you!

Now, let's turn our attention to matters spiritual. Let us look at the significance of a lion as God character.

As you can probably tell from my enthusiasm in working with real lions, and my interest in lions, that they are very important to me. I am not exactly sure when my interest in lions really started. Evidence of it can be seen when I was a child. I do know that my exposure to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when I was in 5th and 6th grade had a definite influence on my interest. However, my interest in lions didn't really blossom until I became a Christian in 1978. Even then, it took a number of years for it to go from 'more-than-passing interest' to 'full-blown lion nut'.

Over the years, my faith has undergone various challenges, as is the case with all who follow Jesus. As expected, these challenges have grown more 'challenging' as I got older and more mature in Christ. In the last few years though, the challenges have risen to a new level. Although I haven't experienced great challenges like a serious illness, great loss, loss of a loved (human) one (I have experienced some very painful losses of lions I knew and loved), what I have experienced has been enough of a challenge for me. One particular challenge that recently occurred happened in the life of a friend. I could not believe that God could let something like this happen in their life (essentially the reversal of a major miracle), and it shook my faith to the core of my being. I began to question if God was even a good God as his word says²⁸. For a Christian of 20+ years experience, these were not the kind of questions one should be asking. But what kept drawing me back to God? Lions! I realized that my relationship with God was somehow tied up with the lions I loved so much. Take the lions away, and I would have a much harder time seeking God. (At the same time, my faith must never rely on the physical existence of lions. Yet, my deepest, darkest fear is that man will succeed in wiping the earth clean of lions. We are sure rapidly headed in that direction, and no one has yet recognized just how much we are our own worst enemies in our attempts to preserve the lion.)

So what's this all have to do with Aslan?

Some time back, when I was seeking God for some thing, Jesus came to me as a lion (in the spirit, not literally). Of course, I greatly appreciated this. And since then, I occasionally feel a 'paw on my shoulder' reminding me that the 'Lion of Judah' is never far away.

These lion appaitions do not only occur for me. A much more dramatic story was recently related to me of two similarly-minded Narnia fans who had just come out of a powerful church service. They left

28 Of course, God is good! Here are a couple of examples: "Remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and bitterness. Surely my soul remembers and is bowed down within me. This I recall to mind, therefore I have hope. The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness." Lamentations 3:19-23 NAS "but resist him (the devil), firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen." 1 Peter 5: 9-11 NAS

church rejoicing in the Lord. It was evening, and the walk back to their apartment took them through a wooded area. While in this area, they both saw a lion-like figure who they sincerely believe was 'The Lion of Judah'. They were not afraid of it. Although they were sure they had both seen a lion, just as quickly, it was gone.

I have always been single and plan to stay that way for the rest of my life. This is a personal choice, and I feel I am much happier as a single person. I have done more things, and gone more places as a single person that I could have ever done as a married man. Furthermore, there is a special blessing that rests on single people, and they can draw closer to God²⁹. I also find that I have deeper relationships with animals. I get far more out of spending quality time with a lion (or even a cat or dog) that I have ever gotten out of any human relationship. I have come to find that the love of God that comes to us via the 'channel' of an animal is pure and unadulterated 'agape' love. This is far purer than any love I have ever received from a human being, even my family. (This is not to say my family does not love me. They love me very much, and I love them much in return.)

So, as a result, to relate to Jesus as a man is sometimes tough for me, as I am not big on human relationships. I just can't get excited at the prospect of being 'held in the arms of Jesus' when my time here is over. I much rather look forward to burying my hands and face in the mane of the 'lion of Judah', and getting 'lion kisses' in return. It does not matter that Jesus as we know Him is a man. He is God. He can take any form He cares to take. I will still hear the 'well done, good and faithful servant' the same from Jesus as a lion as from Jesus as a human.

But when things go wrong, I sometimes have serious doubts about the path I am walking on. I begin to ask questions. Some of the big question are: Do I love lions too much? Am I being drawn into idolatry, worshiping lions ahead of my Creator? Is it legitimate to see Jesus as the Lion of Judah rather than as a man? What about Aslan literally as Jesus?

C.S. Lewis carried on correspondence with children who were Narnia fans. Much of this is recorded in an obscure volume, *C.S. Lewis Letters to Children*. This book includes (among other things) the entire correspondence with an American child, Laurence Kreig. Little Laurence apparently loved *The Chronicles* very much. And he loved Aslan very much. Laurence worried though that he may be committing idolatry by loving Aslan more than Jesus. In his reply, Lewis writes that loving Aslan is really loving Jesus. And perhaps this love was greater funneled through the character of Aslan than if he tried to love Jesus directly. For a little boy, seeing Jesus in a lion-body was the same as for (most of) us seeing Him in a man-body. After all, Aslan did pretty much everything Jesus does. Lewis offered the boy a prayer to pray to help him determine if he was doing the wrong thing by loving Aslan. Apparently, it was not the wrong thing.

Shortly after C.S. Lewis married Joy Davidman, he again writes to Laurence concerning Joy's illness. In this letter, he uses 'Aslan' where most people would use 'Jesus'. 8 months later, when Joy

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 7. The entire chapter deals with whether one should remain single, or marry. The answer for most is to marry. But for those with the grace to be happily single, they should remain single. Such persons as these can draw closer to God than a married person ever can.

was improving, he writes to Laurence again, once again using Aslan where one would use Jesus. To me, this suggests that Lewis also served a Lion-King who might go officially by ‘The lion of the Tribe of Judah’ but to him, simply as ‘Aslan’.

We observe in scripture that Jesus has numerous different names. In fact, Jesus Christ is one of his shorter names. All of these names, including ‘Lion of the Tribe of Judah’ refer to some character attribute of our Lord. There is a name for our Lord for just about every character quality He has. In fact, entire books have been written about the many names of Jesus.

It is not unusual in prayers, worship songs, etc. to use new names for our Savior. Indeed, these names substitute for ‘Jesus’ and we freely worship Jesus using these names. Some of these names are quite complex. So, why not a simple name like ‘Aslan’³⁰. I think our Lord prefers the simple names, as it implies child-like faith³¹.

In the *Chronicles*, we see Aslan taking on a number of different forms. Of course, he appears most frequently as a lion. But, he also shows up as a cat³², a lamb³³, an albatross³⁴, and finally, a transformed being³⁵. In short, Aslan could appear in any form he wanted to, including I’m sure, a man.

In scripture, Jesus is (correctly) described as a man. But, we know that He is God, and he left his form of God to become man³⁶. As God, we really have no idea what form Jesus ‘officially’ takes. We do know that He can additionally take on, at very least, the form of a lamb³⁷. Since God, in his three parts is omnipotent, why can’t He take the form of a lion? And since he is Omnipresent, why can’t He be a lion for me, a lamb for you, and perhaps a ringtailed lemur for someone else?

30 There is an interesting story about a bunch of world-renowned theologians who got together on an island retreat somewhere, to come up with a description of who Jesus Christ is. After two weeks of discussions, deliberations, breakout sessions, etc. a definitive definition document was drafted. A final session was called to announce this definition. Suddenly, Jesus appeared amongst them. Drawing up to His full height, he asked in a booming voice ‘Who am I?’ The leader of the council came up to the podium, shaking, and said something like this in his best ‘stained glass’: ‘You are the only potentate, the singular son of the most high Father. You are the propitiation for our iniquities and the healer of our infirmities. You are the great and final judge who will call to himself a redeemed people to dwell with you eternally.’ Upon hearing this Jesus took one look at the leader (and everyone else) and said ‘what?’. (The origin of this story is unknown.)

31 I have since learned that ‘Aslan’ is Turkish for ‘lion’. I have also seen the name ‘Aslan’ as part of a couple of human names.

32 HHB vi 10-24 (245-247)

33 VDT xvi 60-66 (540)

34 VDT xii 59 (511)

35 LB xvi 57 (761) The last paragraph of the last book!

36 “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men, And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Phil 2:5-8 NAS

37 “And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth,” Rev. 5:6 NAS

In writing to Laurence Kreig, Lewis was writing to, and reasoning with, a child. Lewis apparently knew the mindset of children very well, and knew how to communicate with them. But what about adults? There is a rich treasury of thought in the *Chronicles* that can only be fully appreciated as an adult. In fact, I suspect that vast majority of Narnia fan are adults. (If you want proof of this, read the second chapter of *The Silver Chair*.) What are they to believe? I think scripture provides the answer in Luke 18: 16-17, “But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” “ (NIV) So, we are to be to God as simple children (which we usually are not!). All through the New Testament, we find references to believers as children³⁸. As adults, however, we are expected to be alert to spiritual danger.

So, is Aslan Lord? No. Is he a good representation? Yes, but only to the extent that he is a human creation. Aslan cannot take on every attribute of Christ. Indeed, no created fictional character can.

Can we worship Aslan? Absolutely not. Aslan is a made-up character. Even though he represents Jesus, and there are times that he is doing the work of Jesus, he is not Jesus. Only God is worthy of worship.

Can we worship the Lord through the character of (or the name of) Aslan? Absolutely, provided that we recognize Aslan as a storybook character and just a type of (or another name of) Jesus. (For those unfamiliar with this use of the word ‘type’, it means that the person/entity being described has many of the attributes of the real person/entity, and can serve as a role model for that person/entity.)

Can we believe that our Lord is a lion? I believe we can. I believe that Jesus can take any form that meets our needs and fulfills our being. Jesus knows how He made each of us, and he has unquestionably made me a ‘lion man’ and more broadly, an ‘animal person’. Also, The lions we know and love in this world are based on a model seen in heaven. These ‘heavenly lions’ are undoubtedly better than any lion we have living with us in our environment. Lions are important in God’s economy, making Jesus’s appearance as a lion all the more likely.

Can Aslan save us? Should we pray to him? No, Aslan is not our savior, nor can he answer prayers. It might be OK for innocent kids with limited faith to pray to Aslan if they recognize him only as a type of Christ. But, they must outgrow this. With this in consideration, I think we as mature Christians can pray to Aslan, but only with a full, functioning foreknowledge that this is an absolute redirection to Jesus and that Aslan is only a man-created name for Jesus. Aslan cannot stand alone as Lord and Savior. That said, I think that there are times in our lives (at least for me there are!) when it is highly appropriate for us to call on Jesus as Aslan. C.S. Lewis obviously thought so.

In conclusion: Aslan is perhaps the strongest type of Christ we will ever find in any literature, fiction or nonfiction. Aslan can draw us to Christ and deepen our faith. And, I think it’s perfectly appropriate to see Jesus as a lion. Use Aslan’s name wisely, knowing full well that it’s a man-made name, and at

³⁸ Check out especially 1 John 2 and 3. That said, also take Pauls’ admonishment in 1 Cor 14:20 to be ‘grown-up’ in your discernment!

it's best, it's a 'redirect' to Jesus. Above all, let Aslan call you deeper into the faith. As one author writes on a webboard 'Aslan is calling his people to himself. True Narnians (believers), are you hearing his call?' Come, let us bury our hands and face in that soft roughness, and go 'further up and further in' with him!

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