



Viewing Narnia

A movie review of *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

By this time, most people who want to see *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* have probably already seen it; and everyone – whether intending to see it or not – is probably weary of the related promotional hype and endless rhetoric.

What of value can be added to the current Narnia glut? Perhaps some encouragement, observations and balance geared toward believers.

I heartily encourage believers to see this film. Take your friends and relatives to see it. See it more than once. Matinee prices are usually more affordable. Let's send Hollywood a clear message: good movies make money. Even though moviemakers seem pretty obtuse about the economic advantages of producing family-friendly films, the message that decent movies make economic sense must eventually become understood.

It is especially necessary to support a good movie produced by a company like Disney. When I first heard of Disney's plans to produce *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, I was more than mildly apprehensive. I had read *The Chronicles of Narnia* series to our children when they were young and, in spite of our family's love for the books, I couldn't get excited about the prospect of the best one being produced by Disney. Disney's less-than-stellar track record of accuracy in retelling classic tales could hardly inspire hope. But then I saw the trailer. The music and the scenes were impressive! And the hope deeply buried in this human breast began to spring eternal.

So much so, that I wanted to take my grandson to see it on opening day. More family members expressed their desire to see it. My husband and our two adult sons took time off work so that we could view a matinee with our oldest son's family.

Any time one of my favorite works of literature is made into a movie, I enter the theater with a very large skeptical chip on my shoulder and am quick to note discrepancies or inaccuracies. This time was no exception, and that's why it's helpful for me to view the movie a second time when I can get past the negatives and enjoy the positives.

The few negatives of the movie are overwhelmingly outweighed by its positives.

At my first viewing, I was disappointed in the music. One reason was my expectation that the trailer music would accompany the same scenes in the movie. (Another reason might have been that I was often distracted by watching my grandsons' reactions to the movie.) In any case, the music improved dramatically on my second viewing.

One thing that irritated me in both viewings was the remark by Father Christmas that he was able to enter Narnia because of the "hope" the children had brought. Any *Chronicles* reader can tell you that he can enter because Aslan has returned, not due to anything on the part of the children.

That remark illustrates the movie's subtle lack of focus on sovereignty and righteousness, which has been replaced with a recurring motif of family. Emphasizing family isn't a bad thing, but it isn't the focus of Lewis' book. The children in the book are encouraged to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, not because they need to stick together as a family.

Isn't that emphasis subtly indicative of a society in which popular churches cancel Sunday services so that members and staff may spend Christmas Day with family? Evangelicalism's view of a God-given gift, like family, has become warped when the individual family takes precedence over the family of God.

The characterization of Edmund raises another problem regarding righteousness. Portraying Edmund's primary failing as disobedience inaccurately limits the extent of his sin. And worse, in an unnecessary aberration from the book, it is Edmund's *disobedience in battle* that brings about the crucial destruction of the Witch's wand. I believe that - like the Harry Potter books and movies - this sends young viewers the message that they need only obey when they think it is best. This reflects modern relativism and moral ambiguity and contrasts sharply with biblical obedience. We obey because it is *commanded*, not because we understand. Determining our own terms for obedience has been a perpetual stumbling block for humanity since the Fall.

Those negative observations noted, there is a great deal to commend the movie. I am amazed that Disney produced a film remarkably accurate to the book's spirit and text. A great deal of action and dialogue has understandably been added to the movie, but nearly all of it complements the original narrative.

Asian commands respect and inspires awe while still conveying gentleness, love, and even humor. The child actors do a fine job; the personalities and physical appearances of their adult counterparts match well. Their transitions between the wardrobe and Narnia are very well done. Anyone who has seen the older *Wonderworks* versions of the *Chronicles* will especially appreciate the realistic creatures in this version. The portrayal of the White Witch effectively conveys coldness and inhumanity. Her crowns and ice palace are - literally - very cool.

A lot has already been said about the books and the movie. Some secular reviewers feel compelled to encourage readers to see the movie in spite of its obvious ties to Christianity. Some Christians have no desire to see the movie because they feel it reflects poor theology. Then there are those who identify Aslan as Jesus and the White Witch as Satan and try to force every event to fit the gospel mold. There are churches that are using the movies as an evangelistic tool.

To avoid the pitfalls of assigning either too much or too little religious significance to the movie and the books, it might be helpful to think in terms of reminders instead of representations.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe is not theology. It is a creative fantasy for children with allegorical elements that resonate with believers because they remind us of great truths of the Christian faith.

Aslan's sacrifice for Edmund fails to fully represent the scope of Christ's atonement, but it reminds us of the ultimate sacrifice of the sinless Lion of Judah who was slain for the sins of many. And Narnia's "deeper magic" reminds us of God's providential plan for salvation as well as his predestination of believers. The broken stone table reminds us of broken stone tablets and a rent veil in the temple, but we shouldn't take any perceived allegorical elements too far.

It is, after all, just a story. But it is a story in which believers recognize elements that remind us of the one true story.

Glenda Mathes

© 2014
www.christianstudylibrary.org