

Charles Taliaferro. *A Narnian Vision of the Atonement: A Defense of the Ransom Theory*. Cascade Books, 2022. xii + 134pp. \$22.00 (pbk).

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Charles Taliaferro's new book is one that I am fundamentally sympathetic to for two basic reasons. First, I find C.S. Lewis to be a sophisticated and immensely creative theologian. When I engage his thought, I am humbled at how far he exceeds me in those areas in which I seek to have some expertise. Second, I eagerly applaud attempts to take seriously the *Christus victor* / Ransom accounts of Christ's saving work, for a range of biblical, theological and testimonial reasons. Taliaferro's work is careful, interesting and provocative, and a matter he has thought about for decades (cf. Taliaferro 1988)—so it is certainly worth a read. My concern is that the book misses key passages of Lewis in the two main texts it engages, and in so doing, omits a vital aspect of the theory of the atonement it seeks to support.

Taliaferro distinguishes “between imagining a crude ransom paid to a supernatural jailer (a kind of theology that negotiates with terrorists) who has a right over us, versus seeing the ransom exchange in the context of Christ *liberating persons from a kind of prison of our own making—a prison of sin, death, and the demonic*” (11). The ransom, he is keen to establish, is “not a payment to a supernatural jailer or terrorist who has a right over us, but *the price of our rescue from evil*” (12). On this account, “Aslan so loved Edmund that he allowed himself to be killed in order to bring life out of death and, in so doing, exposed the sham nature of the Witch as a liar and murderer” (29). The key is that Aslan “pays the cost” to “secure [Edmund's] willing liberation from the Witch's power,” while “absorb[ing] the penalty of Edmund's evil and revers[ing] the powerful cycle of evil which involve[d] a tyranny in which any resistance to the Witch ends in death”—all of which revolves around a strong (and helpful) emphasis on the resurrection (29).

Taliaferro notes (p. 24) the passage from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe's* chapter, “Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time,” where the Witch refers to “the Magic which the Emperor put into Narnia at the very beginning. You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that I have a right to a kill.” But Taliaferro argues that to understand Lewis properly, the “right” of the Witch “cannot lie in a decree from Aslan or the Emperor-beyond-Sea.” The “right” cannot “lie in the will of Aslan and the Emperor *because the Witch herself is a traitor*” (27).

But this is all very interesting, because in that key chapter, the Witch asks:

Tell you what is written on that very Table of Stone which stands beside us? Tell you what is written in letters deep as a spear is long on the fire-stones of the Secret Hill? Tell you what is engraved on the scepter of the Emperor-Over-Sea? You at least know the Magic which the Emperor put into Narnia at the very beginning. You know that every

traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to a kill.¹

And when Susan suggests going against this magic (which would not be a big deal, did it not rest on the will of the “Emperor-Over-Sea”), Aslan asks: “Work against the Emperor’s Magic?” And, seemingly in response to all that the Witch has said, Aslan says: “It is very true.... I do not deny it.”

I quote this passage because it seems to me to run directly counter to Taliaferro’s point that the “right” cannot “lie in the will of Aslan and the Emperor *because the Witch herself is a traitor*” (27). And Lewis gives us a hint at an answer in Mr. Beaver’s exclamation: “So *that’s* how you came to imagine yourself a Queen—because you were the Emperor’s hangman. I see.” Aslan hushes him—but does not disagree.

This matters precisely because of a point made by Gregory of Nyssa which I think Taliaferro has overlooked. Gregory’s question is: “Why did he [God] take a tedious, circuitous route,” rather than simply save “man by a command” (Gregory of Nyssa 1954: 291)? The answer, according to Gregory, has to do with the fact that “it is universally agreed that we should believe the Divine to be not only powerful, but also just and good and wise and everything else that suggests excellence” (1954: 296). But how does this relate to the Ransom theory? The key point is not power, but justice. “Wherein, then, did [God’s] justice consist in this matter? In his not exercising an arbitrary authority over him who held us in bondage. Also, in His not wresting us from him who held us, by His superior power, and so leaving him who had enslaved man through pleasure, with a just cause of complaint” (Gregory of Nyssa 1954: 298-9).

Of course some good explaining is in order, but if I am not mistaken Lewis and Gregory are united on this point: Satan and the Witch had some right, some legal claim or just cause in this matter, a cause or claim rooted in God himself in some way. So while God hypothetically could have rescued Edmund and ourselves by force or a command, this would in fact be a rejection of his own wisdom, goodness and justice. In face of this claim concerning justice by Gregory, and Lewis’ claim that the right of the Witch was a matter of the Stone Table, fire-stones of the Secret Hill (are these the Ten Commandments, the Law?), and the Emperor’s scepter, Taliaferro’s claim that the “right” cannot “lie in the will of Aslan and the Emperor *because the Witch herself is a traitor*” (27) simply won’t do. To be fair, Taliaferro offers a “free-will Narnia defense” (27-9), noting the way that the witch herself is a traitor, such that nothing is owed by Aslan or the Emperor to the witch; rather, the fundamental dynamic is that of free-will: “Aslan gives creatures free will either to choose to follow Aslan and serve the good of Narnia or to choose to follow and serve the witch” (14). (Taliaferro draws from other books in the series, especially *The Magician’s Nephew* and *The Last Battle* to further his argument.) My concern is that the overlap between Lewis and Gregory here (not to mention Athanasius’s *On the Incarnation*, with which Lewis was well versed), both in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and the *Space Trilogy*, push against this line of thought, calling for a more aggressive account of the role of law and justice in shaping the Emperor’s (God’s) interactions with the witch (Satan).

At the heart of the ransom theory must be a better account of the causal mechanism which explains why Aslan “allowed himself to be killed,” and how this “bring[s] life out of death,” dealing with the genuine right or claim the witch has over traitors. Of course one need not agree with C.S. Lewis and Gregory of Nyssa—but my understanding of their

¹ I refer to chapters rather than pages, given the proliferation of editions of the Chronicles of Narnia.

argument moves in a significantly different direction than the one Taliaferro explains in his Narnian vision of the atonement. With that said, of course, there is much to appreciate in Taliaferro's work, which I will enjoy engaging at greater length with my students.

References

- Gregory of Nyssa. 1954. "An Address on Religious Instruction." In *Christology of the Later Fathers*, edited by Edward Hardy. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Taliaferro, Charles. 1988. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1): 75 – 92.