

ENDORSEMENTS



The Medieval Mind of C. S. Lewis *How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind*

March 15, 2022 | \$22, 176 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0164-5

Many readers know C. S. Lewis as the fantasy writer of the Chronicles of Narnia or the apologist of *Mere Christianity*. But few know how deeply Lewis was formed by medieval authors like Dante and Boethius and how he saw their worldviews' relevance to the challenges of the modern world. Here, readers will encounter Lewis the medievalist to guide them in their own journey.

C. S. Lewis the Medievalist

"Without the rich spiritual and literary legacy of the Middle Ages, C. S. Lewis would not have matured into the great apologist, essayist, and fiction writer that he became. Dante scholar Jason Baxter is just the right person to open up that legacy for modern readers and trace how deeply Lewis was shaped not only by the medieval worldview but by the way the medievals thought and felt and interacted with the spiritual and natural world around them."

—**Louis Markos**, professor in English and scholar in residence at Houston Baptist University, author of *On the Shoulders of Hobbits: The Road to Virtue with Tolkien and Lewis*

"Following closely on his well-received works on Dante and on Christian mysticism, Jason Baxter here opens a window onto the bookshelves and study habits of C. S. Lewis, finding rightly that medieval authors have much more profoundly shaped his imagination and theology than most contemporary criticism has noticed. This well-written volume will be of interest both to seasoned scholars and undergraduate students; for the latter it will prove an invaluable introduction to a rich body of great Christian writing."

—**David Lyle Jeffrey**, distinguished senior fellow at Baylor Institute for Studies in Religion

"As the author of *A Beginner's Guide to Dante's Divine Comedy*, Jason M. Baxter is uniquely qualified to guide us through the medieval mind of C. S. Lewis. Those wishing to delve deeper into the ancient roots of Lewis's inspiration and imagination need look no further. Professor Baxter, like Virgil, is a trustworthy guide."

—**Joseph Pearce**, author of *Further Up and Further In: Understanding Narnia and Tolkien: Man and Myth*

"I am often lamenting about what our culture has lost. C. S. Lewis is one of our sages who revitalizes the premodern world so that we can again reclaim an enchanted vision of reality. In this book, Jason Baxter offers the church what we've longed for—the tools by which Lewis embodied the medieval worldview—so we too can imitate this forgotten way of seeing."

—**Jessica Hooten Wilson**, Louise Cowan Scholar in Residence at the University of Dallas and author of *Giving the Devil His Due: Flannery O'Connor and The Brothers Karamazov*

"In this beautifully written book, Jason Baxter invites us to breathe the air of the medieval world that was C. S. Lewis's natural home, providing rich insight into the philosophical and theological imagination that shaped Lewis's thought and writing. But much more, Baxter helps us grasp the urgency Lewis felt to convey the beauty and grandeur of that age to us moderns, who live in a mechanized universe that is robbed of transcendence. This book is a vital resource not only for understanding Lewis and his world but also for making sense of our own."

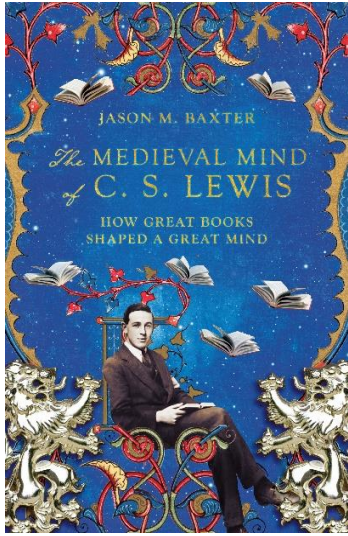
—**Gary Selby**, professor of ministerial formation, Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan University



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"C. S. Lewis described himself as a 'dinosaur'—a member of an otherwise extinct species who could still breathe the air of the Middle Ages and could therefore make it come alive for others. Jason Baxter does a great job of surveying and unpacking this whole side of Lewis's work and its sophisticated, sacramental, and symphonic qualities. The result is a thrilling, moving, and even dangerous ride. Welcome to Jurassic Park!"

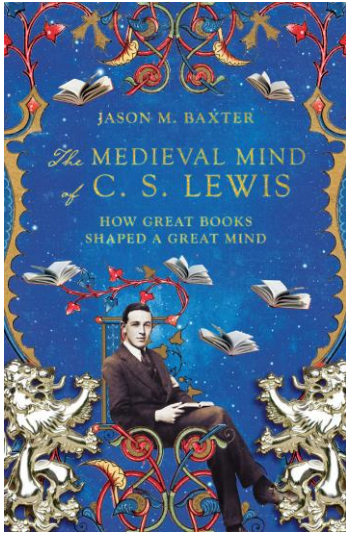
—**Michael Ward**, University of Oxford, author of *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis*



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How Medieval Literature Shaped C. S. Lewis

In the early 1960s, the editors of the *Christian Century* sent a question to one hundred of the most famous literary and intellectual personalities of the day: "What books did most to shape your vocational attitude and your philosophy of life?" The editors were trying to map the books that had shaped the minds of their generation. C. S. Lewis was among those polled.

By that time, Lewis had already been famous for two decades, as a "novelist, essayist, theologian," as the *Christian Century* summed him up, curiously leaving out something he considered essential to his intellectual identity. He was particularly admired for his *Screwtape Letters*, his war-years broadcast, *Mere Christianity*, and for his imaginative, fictional writings (especially *The Chronicles of Narnia*, published throughout the 1950s). Already in September 1947, he had been on the cover of *Time* magazine, whose feature article on him was tellingly titled, "Don vs. Devil." And over those years, he had spent two hours a day patiently responding to the letters that poured in from his devoted admirers from across the Anglophone world. He had hosted journalists seeking interviews with him and had accepted dozens of invitations to give lectures and sermons. In sum, his cultural standing was founded on his perceived mastery of psychology, his ability to recast Christianity imaginatively in myth, and for his work in apologetics. As Rowan Williams, summing up fifty years of admiration, put it, Lewis's gift was "what you might call pastoral theology: as an interpreter of people's moral and spiritual crises; as somebody who is a brilliant diagnostician of self-deception."

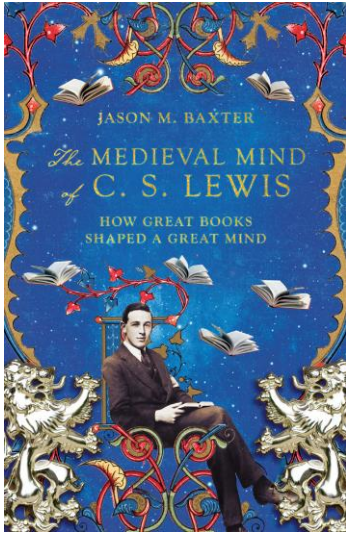
But there was, as his friend Owen Barfield once said, a third Lewis. In addition to the Christian apologist, whose sagacious words delivered over radio waves had been so comforting during England's darkest hour, and in addition to Lewis the mythmaker, the creator of Narnia and fantastic tales of space travel, there was Lewis the scholar, the Oxford (and later Cambridge) don who spent his days lecturing to students on medieval cosmology and his nights looking up old words in dictionaries. This Lewis, as Louis Markos puts it, "was far more a man of the medieval age than he was of our own." This was the man who read fourteenth-century medieval texts for his spiritual reading, carefully annotating them with pencil; who summed himself up as "chiefly a medievalist"; the philologist, who wrote essays on semantics, metaphors, etymologies, and textual reception; "the distinguished Oxford don and literary critic who packed lecture theatres with his unscripted reflections on English literature"; the schoolmaster who fussed at students for not looking up treacherous words in their lexicons; the polyglot pedant who did not translate his quotations from medieval French, German, Italian, or ancient Latin and Greek in his scholarly books; the man who wrote letters to children recommending that they study Latin until they reached the point they could read it fluently without a dictionary; the critic who, single-handedly, saved bizarre, lengthy, untranslated ancient books from obscurity. Before he was famous as a Christian and writer of fantasy, he was famous among his students for his academic lectures, which bore such scintillating titles as "Prolegomena to Medieval Literature" and "Prolegomena to Renaissance Literature." Long "before he ever thought of defending Christianity," he dedicated himself to defending "the beauty and wisdom of the premodern literature of Europe." It was this professorial Lewis who in a 1955 letter lamented that modern renderings of old poems made up a "dark conspiracy . . . to convince the modern barbarian that the poetry of the past was, in its own day, just as mean, colloquial, and ugly as our own." This was Lewis the antiquarian, who devoted much—indeed, most—of his life to breathing in the thoughts and feelings of distant ages, and reconstructing them in his teaching and writing. We find him recommending to general audiences that they read one old book for every modern one (as in the epigraph), and advising those seeking spiritual advice to old books: "I expect I've mentioned them before: e.g. *The Imitation*, Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, . . . *Theologica Germanica* . . . Lady Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love*." Likewise, we hear him confess, in a 1958



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letter to Corbin Scott Carnell that he could hardly think of any debt he owed to modern theologians. He thought Carnell had paid him "a wholly undeserved compliment," assuming his reading was greater than it was. "There are hardly any such debts at all. . . . Christendom, you see, reached me at first almost through books I took up not because they were Christian, but because they were famous as literature. Hence Dante, Spenser, Milton, the poems of George Herbert . . . were incomparably more important than any professed theologians." Later, once he had "been caught by truth in places where I sought only pleasure—came St. Augustine, Hooker, Traherne, Wm Law, *The Imitation*, the *Theologia Germanica*. As for moderns, Tillich and Brunner, I don't know [them] at all." In sum, this was C. S. Lewis the medievalist.

Even for the editors of *Christian Century*, who summed up Lewis as a novelist, essayist, and theologian, it was easy to forget that the man who had become a celebrity Christian had an ardent love for studying the technical features of medieval language (indeed, sound laws that regulate vowel changes!), manuscript transmission, old books of science, and medieval poetic form. To many of Lewis's readers, it might seem absurd, maybe even irresponsible and escapist, to devote the whole of one's adult life to the study of dead languages (Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, Provencal, medieval Italian, or Latin) or reconstructing the details of ancient bestiaries (allegorical readings on the spiritual meaning of animals). Sure, studying New Testament Greek is useful, but trying to understand the subtleties of medieval debates, say, on the exact nature of moon spots (as Dante does in *Paradiso 2*)? But Lewis, of course, did do exactly that: he devoted the entirety of his adult life to precisely these kinds of academic pursuits. But perhaps of even greater surprise is the fact that these scholarly pursuits were not separate from his personal life. Lewis did not stop thinking about medieval symbolism, cosmology, and allegory when he left the office. Indeed, what is most telling is that even in the midst of the messy and painful affairs of life and grief and loss, his mind habitually returned to the old books for comfort and consolation. For instance, in an intimate letter to Sheldon Van Auken, after his friend had lost his wife, Lewis's mind could think of nothing better than to recommend his friend read Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* in the Loeb edition, with Latin pages facing the English translation. He then followed up with the recommendation of a second medieval book: "As you say in one of your postscripts—your love for Jean must, in one sense, be 'killed' and 'God must do it.' You'd better read the *Paradiso* hadn't you? Note the moment at which Beatrice turns her eyes away from Dante 'to the eternal Fountain,' and Dante is quite content." Only a few years later, in 1961, when Lewis was suffering from grief over the loss of his own wife, Joy, his mind drifted back to the same passage in Dante. The last line in *A Grief Observed* is the same he had quoted to Van Auken: "I am at peace with God. She smiled, but not at me. *Poi si tornò all'eterna fontana.*"

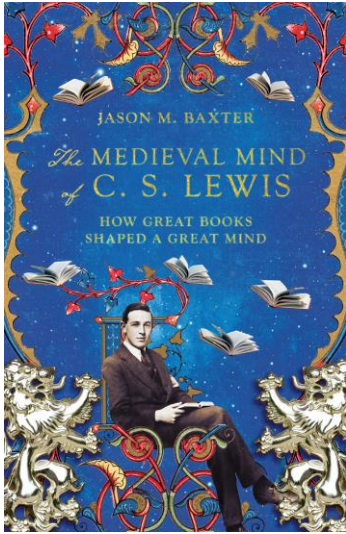
This is what I mean by the "third Lewis" emerging alongside the first two Lewises we know better, the apologist and imaginative writer. This third Lewis is the writer who spent so much time studying medieval tales and arguments, ancient grammar and vocabulary, premodern rhetoric and the rhythmic flow of ancient speech that he could barely formulate an argument, write a letter, offer a word of consolation, or weave a fictional story of his own without opening up the dam and letting all the old ideas and emotions, stored up in his memory by long reading, break forth. Medieval literature, ancient languages, and the premodern way of looking at the universe were not just Lewis's study or day job, but his passion, his love, his life's work, his spiritual formation, and even his "vocation." In his intellectual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, he famously describes three moments in his youth in which he was moved to spiritual longing through reading. He comments, "The reader who finds these three episodes of no interest need read this book no further, for in a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else." The purpose of this book is to explore how this third Lewis is just beneath the surface even in his more appreciated imaginative and devotional writings. We will see that the great medievalist was not a successful modernizer of Christianity and writer of fiction despite the fact that he spent so much time studying old, dusty books, but because of them. And this brings us back to the *Christian Century* poll.



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Among the ten books Lewis cites as helping shape his sense of vocation and his philosophy of life, there are some we would expect and some we wouldn't. They are George MacDonald's *Phantastes*, G. K. Chesterton's *Everlasting Man*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, George Herbert's *The Temple*, William Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Charles Williams's *Descent into Hell*, and Arthur James Balfour's *Theism and Humanism*. Some of these books, even if they have been largely forgotten by us, make sense in light of Lewis's interest in apologetics. For instance, Arthur James Balfour, a British politician, delivered the Gifford Lectures in 1915, in which he attempted to show, among other things, the limits of a strict naturalist philosophy. In those writings in which Lewis set himself to explaining how materialistic or naturalistic philosophy is incapable of explaining human moral and psychological development, his thought often drifts back to Balfour. George MacDonald's *Phantastes*, as readers of *Surprised by Joy* know, caught the young Lewis by surprise. As a young man, he picked it off a bookstall while waiting for a train, and instantly fell in love with the strange but beautiful imaginary landscape contained within. Lewis's mind was drawn into a foreign world where he breathed the atmosphere of something he had never known before: holiness. Chesterton (or perhaps Charles Williams) is the writer we would, perhaps, most expect to find on a list of those who influenced his "philosophy of life and sense of vocation," as Chesterton, too, was a modern, English writer who engaged a secularized public in a lively, vernacular style. Lewis was a little surprised with himself that he, an atheist at the time, liked Chesterton so much, concluding, "I liked him for his goodness." Lewis adds, "In reading Chesterton, as in reading MacDonald, I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. . . . God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous."

—Taken from the introduction, "The Last Dinosaur and the Surprising Modernity of the Middle Ages"



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