# A Hebraic Inkling: C. S. Lewis on Judaism and the Jews

## Introduction

"If we are not Christians we shall dismiss this with the old gibe, 'How odd of God to choose the Jews.' This is impossible for us who believe that God chose that race for the vehicle of His own Incarnation, and who are indebted to Israel beyond all possible repayment."

C. S. LEWIS[1]

### 1. C. S. LEWIS . . . AND THE JEWISH QUESTION

This work originated in a comment by an old and dear friend, an Anglican religious in her eighties, who commented that a guest staying within their monastic community dismissed C. S. Lewis as anti-Semitic. The guest, a seeker, had come to stay in visitors' quarters, joining in with the chapel services and meals, but she slept separate from the enclosed contemplative community. There were many discussions, intense, as is the way with seekers, and the woman—who by the sister's description was something of "a 1970s liberal Anglican"[2]—had categorized his whole

1 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 24.

2 The term appears to have been coined by the Revd Andrew Wakefield (1956–2016), letter to *The Church Times*, July 21, 2006. In essence, a form of identity politics where Revd Wakefield identified himself as such and lamented how the progress represented by his education and training as "a 1970s liberal Anglican" was being eroded. The priest was looking back nostalgically at his theological education and formation in the 1970s, where the gospel was re-written to accommodate the socio-sexual, cultural-political revolution of the late 1960s. This also encompassed a liberal theological agenda that questioned the supernatural, the divinity of Christ, and the authority of the Bible,

oeuvre and belief system as anti-Semitic on the basis of one line in Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. This belief about Lewis, it appeared, was a relatively ill-informed but common one amongst those who self-identify as liberal Anglicans. The seeker's comment was about a character in Lewis's story *The Great Divorce*, a hard-bitten character, a left-wing progressive who is dead, in hell, and rails against the Jews (and the Vatican and all political parties except the one he still ideologically believes in).[3] The man is indeed a left-wing anti-Semite, but he does not reflect Lewis's views. In fact, the portrait is accurately presented as a *criticism* of such a man (with echoes of the anti-Semitism of the National Socialists in the early years of the political party, always blaming the Jews for whatever goes wrong). Indeed, the portrait, though written in the early 1940s, could equally apply to certain politicians in the British Labour party today, which is currently having to face accusations of endemic anti-Semitism in its policies and approach to Israel, Zionism, and Hebrew revelation.[4] This anti-Semitism, wrote Lewis, in the character, is one reason, among others, why the man is condemned to an eternity in hell, and can no longer change his beliefs. There is another character later in the book who is Jewish, a young woman who is presented as saintly, altruistic, and Christ-like! That is, after Yeshua the Nazarene: Jesus Christ the Jewish Messiah. The two characters could not be more opposite: and one, the anti-Semite, is hell-bound by his own prejudiced political identity politics; the other, a Jewish woman, is beautifully, paradisiacally, heaven-bound; she will descend to the fringes of hell to attempt to draw some souls out of damnation into their own salvation. She is Jewish but hides not in identity politics.

These portraits are not painted by an anti-Semite. But what did Lewis have to say about Judaism and the Jews, the ancient Hebrews and the Jewish Bible (the church's "Old Testament"), supersessionism, replacement theology, identity politics, and Israel, and therefore the status before humanity of God's chosen people?

and refuted most of the propositions within the Creed. See also, on the perceived decline and threat to 1970s liberal Anglicanism, Revd Maggie Guillebaud, letter to *The Church Times*, Aug. 13, 2008. See also, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberal_Christianity.

3 Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, ch. 7.

4 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antisemitism_in_the_UK_Labour_Party.

## 2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this book is to examine precisely what C. S. Lewis believed and wrote about the ancient Hebrews, their scriptures, their status as God's chosen people, and about today's Jews. It also asks, what can we conclude about Lewis's political beliefs, particularly in regard to contemporary humanity's obsession with tribalistic identity politics?

Lewis commented about how many of his contemporaries, especially at Oxford (essentially British academics, a cultural elite, especially high-ranking Anglican clerics), considered it questionable that God chose the Jews for his people, especially in the context of the cursings and violence, vitriolic vindictiveness, even lasciviousness in the Psalms; often the criticism was that they were not "Christian"—or pertinently, the Jews did not hide behind polite pietism! Lewis's proleptic response was to assert how orthodox/traditional Christians, essentially Catholic-Evangelical, found no quarrel with this choice, ". . . God chose that race for the vehicle of His own Incarnation" therefore we are "indebted to Israel beyond all possible repayment."[5] The key to humanity and the world comes through the Jews (not through the European Enlightenment), likewise a right understanding of fallen humanity before God comes from the ancient Hebrew tradition, salvation comes through the Jews, through a Jewish Messiah: "Jesus wasn't actually a Christian. He was a temple worshipping, kosher-keeping, circumcised, first-century Jew, who loved the Book of Isaiah and called God 'Abba.' . . . [He was a respecter of] God's promises as laid out in the Hebrew scriptures."[6]

Neither Lewis nor the detractors of Judaism fully understood the objection that questioned God's choice of the Jewish peoples: God did not "choose" the Jews as individuals; God selected, nominated, adopted, ordinary people—indeed an ordinary man: Abram—to be his chosen (Abraham) and Abra(ha)m's descendants to become the Jewish people, God's chosen. God did not choose a people that already existed; instead, through his election of Abraham, he created a people, whose very existence and identity was constituted by divine election. What the detractors should

5 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 24.

6 Revd Giles Fraser, speaking on the "Thought for the Day" three-minute broadcast, as part of the Today news and current affairs radio program on BBC R4 (Mon–Fri, 06:00–09:00am; Sat, 0700–9:00). Broadcast, Jan. 1, 2018, 07:47–07:50. See, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00szxv6. Archive of recordings: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00szxv6/clips

have said, in their pagan politicized prejudices, was that they, in their expertise, were not satisfied with God's creation of a chosen people. The Jews were not already in existence and subsequently chosen: did not God create them, mold and forge them from the stuff of ordinary humanity? As we shall see, Lewis's understanding of Israel in God's purposes may not be flawless—indeed, he failed to understand what "chosen" and a "created people" meant. Nevertheless, his stand against anti-Semitism was grounded in a deeper biblical appreciation of the Jewish people than many of his contemporaries. Therefore, there is a need to assess his understanding of the Jews and Judaism, the Hebrews and their scriptures.

It is important to remember against the backdrop of somber religion that there is an important thread of humor in the Hebrew Bible, a thread that continues through Jewish culture and tradition to this day. Perhaps most Christians fail to see the humor in the Bible, indeed, fail to see how humor can have a parabolic/analogic role to play in illumining God's truth; indeed, C. S. Lewis noted in correspondence to a Mr. Lucas that he had learned from his wife, Joy Davidman, who had been born and raised an American Jew, how God's chosen people see humor in the Hebrew Bible where we Christians do not. Or do we sometimes fail to perceive the paradoxical humor in a religious context?[7] How important is this thread of humor to Lewis in his works? Does it give him a distance from the establishment at Oxford? Lewis understood this long before he met and married Joy Davidman because throughout *The Screwtape Letters* (1942) there is in every chapter a self-effacing mild humor in heaven amongst the redeemed whereas by contrast hell is defined by a cold, steel-hard, absolute deadly seriousness—thus, hell's inhabitants have made themselves unalterable, irredeemable. Generally speaking, Lewis believed that we must picture hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his or her own dignity, and particularly about advancement, where all have a grievance, a complaint, and where everyone subsists with deadly serious passions: envy and self-importance, superiority and resentment. Laughter in heaven can be self-effacing; it brings us down to size, keeps us in our place, defeats pride, where pride has been traditionally seen as the root and heart of irredeemable sin. As the senior tempter and demon Screwtape notes regarding the humor found in heaven, "Humor and laughter of this kind does us no good and should always be discouraged. Besides, the phenomenon is of itself disgusting and

7 "Lewis writing to Mr Lucas, Dec 6, 1956." In Lewis, *Collected Letters, Vol. III*, 814–15.

a direct insult to the realism, dignity, and austerity of Hell."[8] Lewis may have been writing in the early 1940s—and could see something of this in the development of nationalistic socialist movements (Marxism in Russia; Nazism in Germany), but there is something of an epidemic of this deadly seriousness in the West since Lewis's death in 1963 given the development of (individualistic) identity politics, often through tribalistic sexual identities.

Many Jews see humor and hyperbole in the sayings of Jesus. Hyperbole is also found in poetry (often known as known as auxesis), hence it can be found in the Book of Psalms, and also the Proverbs, to evoke strong feelings and impressions. Such is not meant to be taken straightforwardly but analogically. For example, Jesus's use of the mustard seed,[9] which is not actually, scientifically speaking, the smallest of all seeds and does not become the largest of trees, but the intention of Jesus is to draw attention to the contrast between the size of the tiny seed and that of the mature plant, and then to draw an analogy between this and how salvation and the kingdom of heaven develops from seemingly insignificant beginnings yet appears, in some ways, limitless.

Why speak of *A Hebraic Lewis*? Why we might talk of Lewis as Hebraic? Because this is something of a hidden side of Lewis that is quite distinct from your average Church of England theologian and philosopher (remembering that Lewis was an Anglican) and this element contradicts the implicit anti-Semitism that has marked the British political and religious establishment, to an extent. It is fair to say that today, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, we are, perhaps, more conscious of the need to see something of a balance between the Christian West (or what is left of it) and the Jews, the eternal Israel, and the ancient Hebrew witness and scriptures. Therefore, the aim and objective of this book is to uncover and analyze this Hebraic seam to C. S. Lewis: the man and his work.

8 Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 54; Chapter 11 features Screwtape's complaint with the subject of humor as compared to the seriousness of hell, though the dialectic as such is spread throughout the work.

9 Matt 13:31–32; Mark 4:30–32; and Luke 13:18–19.

## 3. EXPLANATIONS, QUALIFICATIONS

A few terms need to explained, and qualified in their use, before we proceed. Some readers familiar with Lewis's books may not appreciate the full meaning and use of the terms used here. Professionals familiar with these terms may still gain some understanding of the Hebraic context in which they are used in this book. Many Catholics and Evangelicals are familiar with these terms derived from New Testament Greek, and from *ecclesial* (i.e., church) Latin—ironically it is often Lewis's Anglicans who are ignorant of them.

### *Election*

In a sense, this is a book about election: rhetorically we may ask, Who is elected, and for what? Elected to serve? Elected to represent? Elected to salvation? But first we must ask, who elects? God elects. Election is about God's search for humanity—fallen humanity; it is about those elected to demonstrate and guide humanity, those elected to salvation: but saved from what and to what? The ancient Hebrews were elected by God through Abraham to be a chosen people. What does Lewis say about this? Jews are elected to this status, and how does this affect us? Are we gentiles elected too, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah? The apostle Paul says much on this and how gentiles are enfolded into the election of the Jews. Lewis confirms this. The need for election originates with the fall—original sin: humanity separated themselves from God. The process of election starts in essence with one person: Abraham, and culminates with Jesus. Election is about atonement: how we are forgiven and thereby reconciled to God, and therefore no longer lost, but saved. There are many words and concepts here, but in essence Lewis sees the ancient Hebrew patriarchs as the root of atonement and election. Now, the conflicting and often contradictory propitiatory elements in doctrines of atonement have been, and still are, the cause of profound disagreements amongst the churches, and have caused much disagreement and deep puzzlement, as we will see in the young Lewis. Why should atonement focus down onto a dead Jewish religious man two thousand years ago? Yet, the gospel claims that through his death and resurrection we gentiles are enfolded into God's chosen and saved from ourselves to the glorious life of heaven, though only if we so wish! Many reject their election,

preferring the nihilistic chaos of hell. Or as Lewis said in relation to this, "All get what they want, they don't always like it."[10]

### *A Rose by Any Other Name?*[11]

At the center of this work is Jesus Christ. Jesus and Christ are modern English names, but are the same reality as their counterparts in Greek *iēsuos christos* (Greek) and *Yeshua Ha Mashiach* (Hebrew). Yeshua is Jesus' proper name: Yeshua ("the one who delivers," "rescues/rescuer"; "God is savior") is what he was named shortly after he was born, the name above all names given to Mary by the messenger Gabriel. Yeshua is an ancient Hebrew name, all Jews are given Hebrew names, for it has been the language of Jews for nigh on 4,000 years! The name "Jesus" is simply Yeshua in an Anglicized form. *Ha Mashiach* means the Anointed One (derived from the ancient Hebrew tradition of anointing the king with oil). The word "Christ" (from *Christos*, the Greek translation of *Mashiach*) has taken on a global meaning in the West, and is often divorced from its Hebraic roots.

Like many ancient names that had cultural or religious meanings, the name Jesus, Yeshua—given to Mary by Gabriel, the angel/messenger at the annunciation—was known to those who heard it as signifying "God is savior," or "Jehovah is savior," "the one who delivers"; Christ means "Anointed One," Messiah. The word Messiah was commonly used in the intertestamental era (i.e., the time between the end of the Old Testament and the start of the New), the concept of messiahship having developed in later Judaism from its earlier roots in the anointing of kings and priests. Messiah was not necessarily a name, but a label, an office, a role, essentially a title. By the time of Jesus of Nazareth, the title "Messiah" was often attributed to those set apart by God for certain roles, such as priests and kings (though there were no more Jewish kings after the exile). It's not about those whom the people "like"—popular votes were nothing to do with it. However, to be the Messiah was to be the one anointed at the end of days, chosen to deliver and rule Israel. Jesus is taken by many of those around him to be the Messiah; hence the early attribution that he is the Christ. Therefore, Jesus Christ, in name and title, was God's salvation, the Anointed One. This is not to be confused with the idea that Jesus was

10 Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*, 162.

11 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene I

the second person of the Trinity. The trinitarian perception, however, is part of the dawning realization in the early church, with ample pointers and examples of Jesus's divine nature in the books that became the New Testament (texts produced by the earliest church in the years after the resurrection and ascension): starting immediately after the resurrection with the concept, Son of God; the title "son of God" in the NT often simply means Messiah—as the Davidic king was the "son" of God (for example, Ps 2:7); later, based on Jesus of Nazareth's assertion that he was *Huios tou Patéra* (Son of the Father: to quote the Greek of the Gospel narrative, written later in the first century).

Around the time of Jesus's birth, messiahship carried expectations. Some saw the coming messiah as a political leader who would expel the Romans; others expected a messiah who would be a partisan revolutionary whose aims were unclear; to yet more, the messiah would return the temple religion back to a happier time, he would oversee the restoration of Israel. To an extent, these can be seen as purely human offices. During the intertestamental period there were many false messiahs, men raised up to realize a revolutionary, political, or religious role supported by a group or sect to save Israel in some way or other. However, false messiahs lapsed, disappeared, or were killed by the Romans or the Jewish religious authorities. The Jews were left still hoping.

The idea of redemption, of salvation, was part of these multitudinous expectations of a messiah figure during the intertestamental period—but saved *from what*, redeemed *to what*? The answers to those questions were as varied as the messianic expectations of these would-be messiahs. As a redeemer figure, expected and foretold, Jesus does not necessarily live up to the expectations of his fellow Jews. However, on reflection, the clues were there all along in Jesus's life and ministry, and crucially in the Old Testament. The ancient Hebrew priests and kings were anointed, they were messiahs (Exod 30:22–25); later, this messiahship became focused on one anointed by God as a leader, a king from the line of David. Therefore, Jesus of Nazareth was perceived by many who saw and heard him to be the long-awaited Messiah, with different and often subjective expectations as to his role. What is important is that *a posteriori*, after the event, the earliest church interpreted this messiahship in the context of Jesus's role as God descended to earth to judge and forgive humanity, hence the use of the Greek word *Christos* by the writers of the New Testament. Jesus is then the final Messiah of messiahs.