

# 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<sup>1</sup>

### 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”<sup>2</sup>—had categorized his whole

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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,

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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).<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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](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](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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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>

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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?<sup>7</sup> 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

<sup>7</sup> “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.”<sup>8</sup> 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,<sup>9</sup> 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 be 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.”<sup>10</sup>

*A Rose by Any Other Name?*<sup>11</sup>

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

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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.



In Christian thinking, the Messiah/Christ is ultimately revealed to be a trinitarian truth: God anoints God, *his* Son, to descend to save his chosen people, in potential, along with all humanity, reascending with them into the divine life. Only in the fullness of the incarnation-cross-resurrection and the ascension is messiahship finally defined by Jesus. Then his life and ministry, his sayings and actions, take on new meaning, a significance and understanding veiled to many during his lifetime. Whatever the expectations of messiahship, Jesus of Nazareth is *the* Messiah (therefore, *the* Christ), not *a* messiah, political or otherwise. It is fair to say that some of the Hebrew expectations were blown away by God's final revelation; whatever people expected, it fell short of what was given by God in this Jesus. People could not see or fully understand what Messiah was to be, even though with hindsight the evidence was there in the Old Testament.

The witness of the apostles, disciples, and the early church is then a form of revelation equal to Jewish scripture. The early church tradition replaces the old Hebrew categories of messiahship; the expectations of the contemporaries of Yeshua, those who knew him, saw him, and spoke with him, were fulfilled by God's revelation (even if they did not fully realize his ontic status), but not necessarily in accordance with what they desired or expected. This divergence also extended to the interpretation of messiahship that the Jewish religious authorities held to in Jerusalem. For many years the Western church concentrated only on the early church tradition and the conclusions of the church councils in the fourth and fifth centuries, often, in effect, ignoring the Hebrew tradition that Jesus of Nazareth was born into. In recent years, many theologians and Bible scholars, for example the N. T. Wright, derive most of their conclusions about Jesus of Nazareth from an understanding of the New Testament's Jewish background, a setting in the life of the times in some ways. Perhaps the answer is to hold in balance the Hebrew tradition and categories, the perceptions of the earliest church, and also the conclusions of the later church councils, about the person and nature of Jesus. This is how to see and understand the term Messiah, the Christ. In his middle years, Lewis's work is, we may assert, dominated by Greek philosophical categories and concepts; this gives way more-and-more in his mature years to Hebraic categories and concepts.

It is the intention with this work to switch between the Hebrew and English names for Jesus Christ simply to emphasize that he is not simply

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an historic, English-speaking, religious professional! In addition, we err if we forget or marginalize the fact that Jesus is a Jew, and represents nigh on two thousand years of Hebrew culture and tradition, embodying a unique religious development as representative of God's chosen people: the flock of Israel.

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet," Shakespeare had Juliet say.<sup>12</sup> What underpins the name Yeshua, and its modern equivalents, is the same: Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah, God's only Son, born in and through the chosen people.

### *"Hegelianism"*

Another piece of contextual information we need to set in place is the philosophical background in Lewis' time. Hegelianism was the dominant philosophy and "religion" of C. S. Lewis as a young man, as an atheistic apostate. It is from Hegelianism that Lewis struggles to escape as, over years, the realization that "God is" dawns on him. Hegelianism was a philosophical system issuing from Georg Hegel and can be defined by the statement, "the rational alone is real."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, to the young Lewis, only the rational categories existed. This absolute idealism dictated any religious beliefs he began to have an inkling of, so he began to invent his own pagan religion! But the Holy Spirit pressed on him—which is the story of the first chapter here.

### *"Revelation"*

In the context of Lewis's philosophical roots, we need to be clear on his understanding of revelation. Revelation is personal, as in the realization of perception and understanding many people will have—a *eureka* moment when one finds something, or when something is revealed to an individual. But it is also more than that, more than the personal and subjective. Revelation is about God's self-disclosure to humanity. Lewis understood and accepted how God had revealed of God's own self to humanity in multifarious and diverse ways down the millennia and across vast geographical and cultural eons, but as an orthodox Christian

12 Juliet to Romeo: William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene I

13 "Vorrede: Was vernünftig ist, das ist Wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig." G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821): "What is rational is real; what is real is rational."

he knew both as fact and from personal encounter that Christ was unique, the highest form of self-revelation of the one true living God. So to talk about Christ is to talk about God; to speak of Christ is to speak of revelation (John 14:7–14). Over recent centuries revelation has often been pitted against reason, against philosophical rationalism. Because of the confidence emanating from the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment, a confidence issuing from the belief that the human capacity to reason things out was all that was needed, revelation became in certain quarters, obsolete. Lewis seeks to try to hold both revelation and reason in balance; as a trained philosopher he knew and understood the background against which he was writing.

*“Doctrine of God”/“Names for God”*

Lewis the philosopher reasoned; but the distinction between reason and revelation was, for him, a supplementary dialectic between philosophical reasoning and Hebrew revelation, therefore we are “given” what we need to know and, pertinently, do: beliefs and actions. Hence, the evolving understanding and behavior of the ancient Hebrews into the Jews of the intertestamental period, even when it clashes with or contradicts rationalism: therefore, the academy and the temple stand, often offset or seeming to contradict, but this is a supplementary dialectic between the academy (Greek) and the temple (Hebrew): and the temple will replace the academy in the eschaton.

What were the Hebrews given to know about God? The names given to the Hebrews for knowing God develop, evolve, over time. Within a name is a relationship and an understanding about the nature of God in God’s infinity: we can understand something of this in how Lewis came to know God and was converted.

*Messianic–Hebraic*

Messianic (of the Messiah, the Anointed One) Jews are ethnic Jews who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, with all that is implied and asserted from the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. Messianic Jews usually seek to live in obedience to *Halakha*, religious law, including Talmudic and Rabbinic declarations and traditions in addition to the Mosaic Law.<sup>14</sup>

14 The Talmud is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law (*halakha*) and Jewish theology.

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By comparison Hebraic Christians (essentially Christians who embrace the Jewish roots of their faith) are people of any cultural background who acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and worship and proclaim Yeshua of Nazareth, *bar Yoseph*, Lord and God; they seek to worship in the way the ultra-early church did (for example, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles). Hebraic Christians are children of Abraham by faith, even if gentiles by birth, and will emphasize and cite Paul's comments to the church in Galatia: "Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham" (Gal 3:7). Therefore, all who genuinely believe are the descendants of Abraham.<sup>15</sup> This was something Lewis affirmed, as we shall see.

### *Jewish Christian*

C. S. Lewis, in all probability unaware of the term Messianic Jew (the term was not really in use in his time), referred to his wife Joy Davidman as a Jewish Christian. Born to East European Jewish parents in New York, she did not seek to live in obedience to Halakha, following her conversion, but was critically aware of the need to see how the two covenants inter-related and showed no mercy to Oxford academics and establishment Anglicans who had not even thought about these issues. In retrospect, the main difference between Jewish Christians and Messianic Jews is the crucial emphasis on the Law.

The question this work addresses then is in what manner, and how evidently Hebraic, was C. S. Lewis, and how does this awareness/consciousness change over the course of his life.

### *Identity Politics*

The West today—indeed much of the rest of the developed world—is obsessed with asserting and projecting identity politics, that is, self-beliefs and values, an identity, based on culture and anthropological detail, that claims uniqueness and therefore special treatment by governments and other people. This identity is essentially a projection of vanity and pride, self-importance (such identities are often the result of psychological delusions). However, we err if we believe that being a Jew is just another form of identity politics. That said, the Jews should not, perhaps, be considered a separate race: there is but one race—the human race. This

15 See: [https://www.myshalom.org/hebraic\\_christianity](https://www.myshalom.org/hebraic_christianity)

applies to all forms of identity politics (especially where questions of ethnicity are considered): all we can claim in terms of identity before God the Lord is that we are *human*, if more elucidation is needed, then we are *merely human*. The people that were the ancient Hebrews were selected, chosen by God; this gave them a special rank or position, but they were not a different humanoid race. (The last one available that stood alongside humanity—*homo sapiens*—were the Neanderthals!)<sup>16</sup> However, Jews have had what can be seen as a crucial witness for thousands of years as God's chosen, to which they have by-and-large held faithful.

#### 4. A HEBRAIC INKLING:

##### C. S. LEWIS ON JUDAISM AND THE JEWS: SYNOPSIS

This work is divided into three parts, thirteen chapters in all. Each chapter opens with quotes from C. S. Lewis, from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, or from some other sources. These quotes form the basis of the analysis in each chapter.

#### PART I: REVELATION

In the first chapter, **1. The Young C. S. Lewis**, we need to examine Lewis's life, the development of his religious beliefs, and his implicit political beliefs, all of which betray a mixed, developing attitude towards the Jewish people. Lewis's youth, as a boy and a young man, reflected much of the implicit anti-Semitism inherent to the public-school-educated Edwardian establishment. As a young man, he not only saw Judaism as replaced (i.e., irrelevant) but also Christianity as relegated: a form of Enlightenment-led atheistic supersessionism grounded in Hegelianism, logical positivism, individualism, and private morality. From the time of his conversion, the more Lewis studied the Bible and the Christian theological tradition the more he moved away from the Edwardian Anglican civic religion he had been raised in and imbued with in the English public school system, though he remained a stalwart of the Church of England, albeit not uncritically.

<sup>16</sup> Neanderthals (*homo neanderthalensis*) are an extinct species of ancient humans who lived in Europe and Asia until c. 40,000 years ago. They became extinct due to what is now seen as assimilation into the modern human genome, climatic change, disease, and other factors.

**Chapter 2, The Hebrews, the Jews, . . . and God. I:** Lewis's conversion happened in several stages (though, indeed, the final stage of his conversion happened with the death of his wife, Joy). Of concern to us is how in the early 1930s he re-evaluates everything in his life, particularly the demands of God in the gospel and in particular the question of sacrifice: from the ancient Hebrew practices to the temple in the intertestamental period, through to the nature of and necessity for Jesus's sacrifice. This puzzled him. The solution, the reconciliation, is in acceptance of the uniqueness of Jesus's sacrifice, in relation to pagan sacrifice as a precursor: he must see Jesus as the one true sacrifice: from a Jewish perspective. How does Lewis's conversion compare with other leading theologians, for example, the Swiss Reformed Minister and theologian Karl Barth? Different though they are, they share a common ground in relation to the Jews, and the ancient Hebrew scriptures. Their relationship to God as Christians could not exist apart from this approach, which requires acceptance of all that is Hebrew along with the continued validity of the Jewish testament. Lewis, like Karl Barth, needs to approach God from a whole new perspective: God as "God is . . ." This leads to understanding Exodus 3:14 in a whole new light: The Lord as "I Am": leading to what we may consider to be the personal relationship of, and with, *YHWH*.

C. S. Lewis and Karl Barth are examined together in the third chapter—**3. The Hebrews, the Jews, . . . and God: II.** Lewis and Barth can be considered dissimilar. Indeed, to many from a more extreme position they could be seen as incompatible. Yet, as secularism, dominated by consumerism, has taken hold in the West since their respective deaths in the 1960s, both seem closer than their denominational categories might suggest. What we can discover is how, like Lewis, the Edwardian young gentleman with an empire mentality, the young Karl Barth reflected the *Weltanschauung* of German society and its attitude towards the Jews. At least, he did prior to his conversion, his *retraktation*, his return to a traditional and orthodox Christianity and church. How does Lewis compare with his fellow inklings? Lewis's comments in relation to the Jews were more progressive than the Inklings, with the exception of J. R. R. Tolkien. There was as pervasive a veiled anti-Semitism in the innate beliefs and cultural background to some of the Inklings as there was amongst the Oxbridge common-room staff. Therefore, we will consider Barth on the Davidian Israelite, and the importance of *Israelitisch*; likewise, at this formative time, Lewis's comments in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1933), and

the approach of both to what may be considered to be at the heart of Judaism and the Hebrew covenant: the Law?

What can we establish about Lewis's understanding of supersessionism, replacement theology, and the relation of the Christian West with Israel and the Jews? This is the subject of the fourth chapter: **4. God's Chosen: Holiness, Theology and Spirituality, . . . Pride.** Lewis swam against the tide during the 1930s: he spoke out strongly against the rise of National Socialism in Germany. All ideas of a replacement theology go, along with supersessionism: Christianity and Judaism stand in complement.

For Lewis, "chosenness" is the belief that the Jews, having descended from the ancient Israelites and Hebrews, are *ha'am hanivhar* ("the chosen people"): chosen to be in a direct covenant with God as *'am qadosh* ("holy people," Deut 7:6; 14:2); cf. *goy qadosh*<sup>17</sup> ("holy nation," Exod 19:6). Why do so many find such a difficulty with the concept of a chosen people? Lewis asserts that the ancient Hebrews through to the Jews today were chosen *for the sake of the unchosen*: Abraham is weighted down with a heavy burden through which "all nations will be blest" (Gen 22:18. Cf. Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8, 16). Why does C. S. Lewis reject so firmly any belief in "supersessionism" or "replacement theology"? He does not see the church as a *replacement* of Israel, considering both in some ways complementary, but how does he arrive at such a position? Lewis points always to Paul's Letter to the church in Rome (Rom 11:17–21) about how the gentiles are grafted into the holy root of Israel. Lewis looks at the question of supersessionism and replacement theology in terms of the sins of "pride" and "superiority." Essentially, we can see how Lewis's approach to supersessionism and replacement theology is to cut through the pretense of categorizing such theories as academic, impartial propositions, and to expose them as instances of the sin of pride, which they are.

## PART II: SCRIPTURE

In the fifth chapter—**5. The Hebrew Scriptures: Historicity and Humanity**—we can examine Lewis on the Bible—essentially the Hebrew scriptures? What did he write and how do these missives compare? What

17 This is in biblical Hebrew, as distinct from modern Hebrew or Yiddish. The word *goy* is, in some circles in Yiddish and Modern Hebrew, regarded as a derogative for gentiles, but not so in biblical Hebrew.

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does Lewis consider in terms of a doctrine of creation? Lewis insists that we regard the Hebrew Bible as holy and inspired,<sup>18</sup> and therefore he deals with the question of the miraculous as part of creation.

For Lewis, genre is to be seen as closely related to the aims and objectives of the writer: Is a particular text intended to be factual, historic, or scientific? Is it meant to teach something spiritual or moral through story, allegory, or parable? Is it to be seen as simply entertaining or an amusing insight into the superstitions and magic of primitive people, as some skeptics or atheists would assert? Specifically, regarding the Hebrew Bible as literature, as Lewis does, as it is elevated into something more than itself, then the vehicle is greater than the merely human; and the range and wealth of meanings will be limitless, provided we hold to the reality of what we read. Therefore, we must consider that the pertinent question, in relation to Lewis on scripture is, what exactly is the function of the Hebrew Bible, and what is it that scripture teaches us generally? All of this adds up to what Lewis refers to in broad terms as the humanity of scripture specifically, and the historicity of the Hebrew Bible, generally. Lewis stresses how infinite wisdom comes down and is beyond complete human comprehension. Therefore, we can see how for Lewis the Bible is ruled over by a divine presence that inspires but does not dictate.

**Chapter 6. The Psalms I: Hebrew Theological Poetry:** Why did Lewis devote an entire book to a study of the Psalms: *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958)? Is this book biblical studies? Or, more pertinently, is it a personal theological survey in relation to salvation history amongst God's chosen for all humanity? We will discover how this is one of Lewis's last books and reflects considerable maturity. Professionally, from the mid-1920s, Lewis earned his daily bread as a teacher of English Literature at Oxford, then as a professor at Cambridge. He was an academic of some distinction, albeit within his primary expertise in literature. Lewis knew poetry and literature (he was an acknowledged and published poet himself). When reading, he noted how the Hebrew Bible as literature was taken up to be the medium of something that is more than merely human. For Lewis, the Psalms are primarily poems—poems that are to be sung! Lewis demonstrated how the Psalms do have a unique poetic structure, grammar, and syntax that survives translation, having been translated into hundreds of world languages.

18 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 93f.



What did Lewis write about judgement in the Psalms? Cursings, death, . . . and the fair beauty of the Lord. In **Chapter 7. The Psalms II: Judgements and Cursings—Imprecatory Poems**, Lewis sees the judgement and cursings in the Psalms as almost dialectical. While Christians of a traditional persuasion fear judgement, the Hebrew mindset in the Psalms welcomes judgement—like a plaintiff does who has been wronged and trusts the integrity of the judge. Why does Lewis digress to examine justice in the sayings of Jesus (e.g., Luke 18:1–5)? It is to emphasize an illustration of the psalmist’s Hebraic cry for the plaintiff in a civil case—the poor woman deprived of justice, faced with a corrupt judiciary calls for a judgment. Therefore, Lewis asks, why are we surprised to find in the Book of the Psalms a deep longing for judgement, without the fear of a traditional Christian? So how does Lewis define our “rightness” with God? The desire for justice must not be equated with the demand for vengeance, and vengeance must not be allowed to turn over into cursings.

So how does Lewis tackle the thorny question of cursing in the imprecatory psalms? He handles it with difficulty. For he is blind to the vast multitude of sins in the West that involve such criticisms, often cursings out of self-righteousness, backed by assumed superiority. Lewis relates all of this to the Hebraic concept of death: with the promise of eternal life withheld. Therefore, Lewis begins to identify a temporal paradox in the Psalms: have we already been saved or is salvation still to come?

**Chapter 8. The Psalms III: A Hebraic Doctrine of Creation:** Lewis understood that the Psalms can give us a sound doctrine of creation in terms of a model that complements the account in the Book of Genesis. What exactly is this understanding? At the center of any doctrine of creation is the biblical account: the Book of Genesis, the prologue to John’s Gospel, and, for example, Psalms 104 and 148: the “speech-act” model—God conceives and speaks, and creation is created. Therefore, it is important that Lewis can present this as fundamental to an ancient Hebrew agrarian economy with small urban developments—towns—merging seamlessly with the land and its crops. The majority of people were rural, living off the land: livestock and crops. This was celebrated through festivals when the harvest was gathered in. Lewis notes how when the poets write of seeing *YHWH*, indeed, longing to see God, we would be in error to see this as only a desire to be “religious” in a social setting: they were meeting with the source and sustainer of their lives. This Hebrew

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praise for the functional beauty of a landscape was commonplace. Unlike the creation myths of many of the world's religions, Lewis considers the Hebraic revelation unique: nature and God are considered *distinct*.<sup>19</sup> All is created by God, *ex nihilo*. This is clearly read from the Psalms, writes Lewis, and the condition of creation (including humanity) is to honor the Lord in love and obedience. Creation can turn away and rebel, but if it does it must live with the consequences.

Lewis takes further this detail in his Hebraic doctrine of creation. A doctrine that empties nature of any sense of pagan divinity, allows creation to be a symbol of God-like action, an expression, even as an appearance from God. What place does Lewis afford the ancient Hebrews? The Jews are the chosen people of God, and have a unique role before humanity, but they are not necessarily (along with the rest of humanity) the center of creation, and the rest of creation is not necessarily organized around humanity. All wait upon God for their sustenance, their livelihood, their very existence to be.

An important question is addressed in **Chapter 9. The Psalms IV: Hebraic Prefiguration and Meaning**. This relates pertinently to the Book of the Psalms: what is the relationship of the Hebrew Bible to other religions, but specifically, to other forms of God's revelation to humanity? This question arises explicitly from the ancient pagan religions Lewis studied (North-West European, ancient Indian, Egyptian, *et al.*). This we examine next.

If there are links of intimation between religions (for example, pagan models of the Christ), in the same way that there are intimations of God's purposes through salvation history, centered on the revelation in and through the ancient Hebrew people and their scriptures, then this raises questions, for Lewis, about subsequent interpretations, or, as he termed it, "second meanings." At the heart of agrarian societies the world over were myths of death and resurrection. A "god" who dies and is often raised up again, a "god" who through death brings life to people bears an uncanny relationship—an intimation—of what happened to Jesus on the cross and in the tomb. We will see how Lewis notes that although the story of Yeshua has remarkable parallels with the principle of descending and re-ascending within nature myths, there is no suggestion in the Gospels of a

19 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 66.

self-awareness of this parallel in Jesus or his disciples. In the incarnation story, God descends to reascend.

Lewis does consider a digression with reference to a degree of prefigurement that is comparable to the evolution of the understanding of monotheism—an analogical model—and the names for God in the ancient Hebrews. To this extent Lewis considers an ancient Egyptian poem, *The Hymn to the Sun*, by Akhenaten (circa fourteenth century BC).<sup>20</sup> What is Lewis dealing with? Some may consider there to be a problem with such prefigurement because it appears to do an injustice to the original aims and intentions of the author of the myth in asserting a second, a subsequent, level of meaning? We will see what Lewis proposed.

A consideration of second meanings leads us to **Chapter 10. The Psalms V: Yeshua, Mashiach: Second Meanings in the Psalms**. The greatest evidence of prefigurement in the Hebrew Bible is of course the promise of the Messiah: the deliverer, the rescuer, the one to save—Yeshua Ha Mashiach. So what can we read of Jesus Christ from the Book of the Psalms: prophetic previsions at the heart of the Hebrew Bible? And what did Lewis note? He analyzes typical messianic psalms; second, directly predictive (prophetic) psalms; third, mystically messianic psalms; fourth, psalms of trust in Christ; fifth, creation–new creation messianic psalms. In many ways, the second meaning issuing from prefigured interpretations represent the Christological movement of the entire Hebrew scriptures.

In an interim conclusion, we may ask, how did the Hebrews relate to the God, to their identity and status as God’s chosen, in Lewis’s estimation? How through the Davidian poems, that are the Psalms, is humanity blessed? And, we ask, what are other scholars’ assessments, judgements, criticisms of Lewis in his work on the Psalms?

### PART III: FAMILY

**Chapter 11. Sarai-Sarah: Identity . . . in the Lord**, opens with the one scholar who had begun to examine Lewis on the Jews generally, and the question of anti-Semitism specifically: Kathryn Lindskoog (1934–2003). In a brief five-page essay,<sup>21</sup> she presents a study of Lewis’s position on the Jews, in particular the historical events of the 1930s and 1940s, the National Socialist dictates in relation to the Jews, the role of legislation

20 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 73–76

21 Lindskoog, “C. S. Lewis’s Anti-Anti-Semitism.”

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in the oppression and denial of the Jews (essentially grounded in the 1935 Nuremberg Race Laws), but also his whole understanding of the Jews, contemporary and historic: that is the Hebrew-Jewish witness of thousands of years . . . as God's chosen people. She refers to Lewis's position as "anti- anti-Semitism." This attack on anti-Semitism focuses on Lewis's *The Great Divorce* (1945). How accurate is Lingskoog's assessment? Lewis's story sketch focuses on a character named Sarah Smith (a typically Jewish name, with an English family name): Sarah exudes Christ-like love—*agápē*—to her own loss.

Lingskoog demonstrates how at the fall of Western Europe in 1940, Lewis and Tolkien both realized that there were statements in their works that would have marked them as sympathetic to the Jews and also as anti-Nazi!—however, they were prepared to face the onslaught of "the tyrant Hitler and his legions" if England fell to invasion. To what extent, we may ask, do people fail to know of this stand, but also to perceive and understand Lewis's dismissal of the stereotypical picture of Jews common to the British people? To what extent is Lewis's portrait of a Messianic Jew or Jewish Christian complimentary? We will see how a key biblical text, for Lewis, that may resolve these questions is Ephesians 2:11–15.

Moving into **Chapter 12. The Incarnation Nation: The People and the Savior** we are beginning to focus more and more on the heart of Judaea-Christian revelation: Jesus of Nazareth—properly *Yeshua ben Yoseph, Ha Mashiach*. But this is more than merely one person; this is a man who has a cataclysmic role for the nation of Israel, and for humanity: beyond Abraham—people, nations, humanity. Ancient Israel consistently failed: it struggles through mistake after mistake as to what it should do and be; it kept reverting to pagan religious practices, and when it did appear to get the temple worship right, it becomes a fixed civic religion that sacrifices the prophets and refutes their warnings: thus says the Hebrew Bible. Yet it endured and bore witness, testimony, against the surrounding pagan gentiles in all their worldly success.

In general terms, Lewis warns of the dangers of nationalism and the religious confusion and nihilism that gentile nations produce. In this context, we need to consider skepticism and the scandal of particularity. likewise, we must consider, with Lewis, why God spent thousands of years forging and creating, honing and refining, at times even seeming to brutalize, a people into the right character, the right religion, the right belief and obedience—why was this so? Lewis often wrote of the

desire amongst modern, usually Western, Christians to reduce Jesus to a universal mystic, or to a non-denominational religious teacher. This marginalized the nation and Yeshua's nationality and status as a Jew. Lewis was clear on this question. God, for Jesus, raised in an orthodox Jewish culture, is the God of the Jews, the creator, *YHWH* the righteous Lord, the one true God outside of the world and beyond all other "gods." If nation is important so is blood for Lewis. We then need to consider the Passover, and specifically why blood? (This question was a stumbling block to the young Lewis, when he was ripe for conversion.) With maturity he saw the answer: simple—because the ancient Hebrews conceptualized the very life-force of an individual as being in, with, contained by, but essentially part of, the blood; people bled to death: The answer is, we will see, in the issue of blood and death; to grasp this we need to understand and comprehend Hebrew religious culture: the death and resurrection of Yeshua is at the heart of this life and death, though it can be seen as a Hebrew paradox.

Why the nation? Lewis has no intellectual qualms about naming the Hebrews as the chosen people, with Yeshua representing and carrying all with him. The people are the nation: Lewis notes how a special illumination was given to the Jews, and subsequently to Christians, but, in the context of prefiguration, there is also some divine light—fragments of the true light—that were given, and are still being offered, to other peoples, irrespective of how flawed their own religious scheme-of-things was or is. Therefore, we emphasize Lewis's often repeated aphorism that all that was best in Judaism survives in Christianity.

The final chapter, **Chapter 13. Joy Davidman . . . and the Mature C. S. Lewis**, considers further Lewis's anti-anti-Semitism, and his prophetic anti-racism! In his maturity he not only raises the Jews up as the model and template for humanity but warns of the cost of the racism he had witnessed as a privileged member of a public-school-educated elite: Lewis is unswerving in naming and shaming racism.

Lewis's view of the Jews—and associated anti-Semitism—was, as we have seen so far, turned on its head initially by his conversion in the early 1930s, but also by his marriage to Helen Joy Davidman, an American Jewish convert to Christianity, in 1956. Further, she comes to him with two sons from her first marriage and this too left its mark on him in relation to his view of Judaism. We need to consider Joy's life story and her religious pilgrimage so as to understand the profound influence

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she had on Lewis: this was a woman who as a teenager glimpsed that beauty was a sacrament at the heart of all things. She was conditioned by her parents' cultural atheism, which led her to scorn all things Jewish, likewise as a young Marxist she espoused dialectic cultural atheism. But when she embraced Christ, she also re-embraced some of her Jewish heritage, which impacted Lewis. For Lewis, religion and theology gets deeply personal and Hebraic; when one of Davidman's children—Lewis's stepson, David—sought, as a teenager, to return to Joy's birth-faith, after her untimely death, Lewis moved all to accommodate his wishes and raise him as a Jew (seeking out kosher foods, special pots and pans, etc.).

We need also to consider the final—Job-like—stage of conversion following Joy's death. Lewis's theology grew out of his personal experience of God in Christ: the death of his mother and his wife Joy Davidman, both from cancer, and his conversion experiences. These events point not to a single Damascus Road epiphany but to a process with identifiable moments.

Lewis's invocation of the shadows of eternity, intimations through the veil of this world of the life to come, revealed through Christ, which characterize and define his theology, grew out of his personal experience of God in Christ-Yeshua: the death from cancer of his mother (in 1908), which contributed to his loss of faith (the clearing out, perhaps, of a false "god"?), his conversion back to faith (to theism in 1929), and then to the Christ (in 1931), and then the death of his wife Joy Davidman, again from cancer (1960), are all staging posts in the process of conversion and reorientation, redemption and salvation, driven by serious changes in his thinking and the ideas that formed his life and character: finally, he meets with the Hebraic Jobian God who hung on a cross for Lewis, for Joy, and their family.