Book Review Supplement

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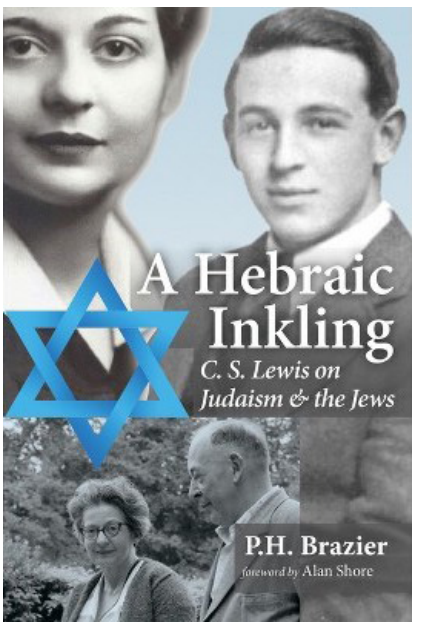
P.H. Brazier, *A Hebraic Inkling*: *C.S. Lewis on Judaism and the Jews*. (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2021.)

"I owe a great deal to my stepfather's influence."
David Gresham, C.S. Lewis's stepson



After his mother Joy Davidman's death in 1960, David Gresham's interest in his Jewish identity blossomed. C.S. Lewis, at that time David's guardian, arranged for David to take private Hebrew lessons. David started attending the Oxford Synagogue. In a letter to Chad Walsh, quoted from above, David remembers that Lewis sought advice from the Rabbi and nurtured his stepson's enthusiasm for Judaism (Letter from David Gresham to Chad Walsh 5-6). Oddly, in the same letter, David accuses Lewis of being an anti-Semite! "This is not surprising," because in Gresham's estimation, anti-Semitism "is probably concomitant with devout Christianity, for the failures of Jesus' contemporaries to accept him as the Messiah must be something that requires a bit of explaining for Christians" (5-6).

David was navigating his Jewish identity at a complex moment in Britain. He and Lewis lived at a time when the perceived otherness of the Jewish people was coupled with their historical and modern rejection of Jesus as Messiah. In English Christendom, there was an incongruity and ambivalence in the attitude towards Jewish people, and it was related to this unbelief. Before WWII, it had been commonplace to speak in a way that was offensive and bigoted against Jewish people.

P.H. Brazier asserts that Lewis did not participate in this bigotry. In *A Hebraic Inkling*, Brazier investigates what Lewis "believed and wrote about the ancient Hebrews, their scriptures, their status as God's chosen people, and about today's Jews" (3). His intention "is to uncover and analyze this Hebraic seam to C.S. Lewis: the man and his work" (5). Brazier says that

he resolved to undertake this investigation because of a comment by an unnamed old friend of his who scorned Lewis as anti-Semitic.

This volume is accessible, challenging, and refreshing. Brazier provides a charming and comprehensive addition to a topic I am personally invested in. As a Jewish follower of Jesus, I have been profoundly touched by Lewis (Barron and Walker). My only criticism is that Brazier's analysis of Barth, Platonism, and Hebrew thought is overly opaque. Additionally, the biographical information on Lewis did not offer new information or insights for me.

Brazier clearly defines his objectives and lays out his book in three parts:

Part 1 (Revelation)

Brazier reviews Lewis's early years, religious beliefs, and worldview, as well as the evolution of his attitude towards the Jewish people. A crucial contention is that Lewis absorbed a learned racism towards Jewish people (27). Yet the only support Brazier gives for this is a quote in a 1921 letter from Lewis to his brother Warnie, in which he calls the ancient Hebrew religion "primitive" (27). This seems to me to be a conventional label (even Jewish people use this term) but doesn't seem anti-Semitic without other evidence to point in that direction.

When he became a Christian, Lewis re-evaluated his worldview. Brazier posits that Lewis also re-evaluated his understanding of the Jewish people. Comparisons are made between Lewis and his fellow Inklings who held "a veiled anti-Semitism in [their] innate beliefs and cultural background" (14). For Lewis, Israel's rejection of Jesus is partial; their resistance is not the final word. He is clear that Israel remains God's people even in its refusal. Israel is still chosen, listening, and speaking. Brazier is at his best when he shows a pattern of Lewis's positive orientation to the concepts of election and chosenness: Lewis writes that "God chose that race for the vehicle of His own Incarnation"; therefore, we are "indebted to Israel beyond all possible repayment" (*Reflections on the Psalms* 124). God created a new people through the unmerited choice of Abraham. This choosing would bring Abraham's descendent: the Messiah. For Lewis, the Jewish people were chosen "for the sake of the unchosen" (*Miracles* 123-24).

In a stunning rebuke to Nazi ideology, Brazier quotes Lewis from a letter to Arthur Greeves in 1933:

> … nothing can fully excuse the iniquity of Hitler's persecution of the Jews, or the absurdity of his theoretical position. Did you see that he said, "The Jews have made no contribution to human culture and in crushing them I am doing the will of the Lord." Now as the whole idea of the "Will of the Lord" is precisely what the world owes to the Jews, the blaspheming tyrant has just fixed

> his absurdity for all to see in a single sentence and shown that he is as contemptible for his stupidity as he is detestable for his cruelty. (qtd. in Brazier 47)

Part 2 (Scripture)

This section assesses Lewis's view of the Hebrew Bible (that it is ruled by a divine presence that inspires but does not dictate), the miraculous, and the doctrine of creation. Other chapters in this section focus on *Reflections on the Psalms*, covering topics such as Hebrew theological poetry, a Hebraic doctrine of creation as found in the Psalms, and issues of Hebraic prefigurement regarding Messiah. This section emphasizes the identity and status of the chosen people and how, through David's poetry, humanity is blessed.

Part 3 (Family)

This section examines the essay by Kathryn Lindskoog, "C.S. Lewis's Anti-Anti-Semitism," which proposes that the subject of Sarah Smith's identity in *The Great Divorce* was a veiled attack on anti-Semitism (Brazier 194). When Lindskoog approached Lewis to compliment him on *The Great Divorce*, she did not yet see how the work contained a hidden message. Lewis called *The Great Divorce* "his Cinderella," but Lindskoog would only understand the parallels between the stories later: much like Cinderella conceals her true nature, Lewis used his book to furtively promote his views (Lindskoog 33-37).

Brazier also covers Lewis's marriage to Joy Davidman, a Jewish Christian, and the influence this had on his later views of religion and theology. Brazier asserts that Lewis was "at his most Hebraic after the death of his wife" (250). What is this Hebraic kinship that Brazier locates in Lewis? The way Lewis expresses his grief and the interrogatory nature of his cries and complaints were steeped in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. Brazier asserts that Lewis, despite his overwhelming grief, found a way out of his anguish-filled confusion and rebellion via this Hebraic understanding of the Scriptures.

Lewis and the Hebrew Imagination

Lewis knows how to get hold of, and challenge, the Jewish imagination. To me, the Jewish imagination is seen in the longing for home, expressed through story, remembrance, and imagination. Lewis suggests that our reality is the "Shadowland," or a preparation for the real reality that comes in another world. Heaven is the real reality: what we experience before heaven is only half real. We are presently homesick while we are home.

My people's history is exile and homelessness. As Jewish people read Lewis, we find a friendly heart, an associated way of thinking, a desire for depth of wisdom—often through allegory—that is soothingly and disturbingly familiar. The crucial point of the Jewish imagination is also the crucial

point of C.S. Lewis's imagination: home. For Davidman, this homeward longing haunted her years as an atheist and led her to Christianity.

I believe that for Jewish readers of Lewis, he appeals to this center of Jewish experience. Exile and dispersion explain why the desire to belong to an ideal community in an ideal place pairs with the feeling that one does not belong in exile. The yearning for a homeland that has been the constant prayer and identity of my people since the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD persists, for no other reason than that home, in its highest form, is elsewhere.

Brazier writes with affection for Lewis and my people, understanding our heritage, chosenness, and desire for home, and echoing sentiments expressed by Davidman:

> In a sense, the converted Jew is the only normal human being in the world. To him, in the first instance, the promises were made, and he has availed himself of them. He calls Abraham his father by hereditary right as well as by divine courtesy. He has taken the whole syllabus in order, as it was set; eaten the dinner according to the menu. Everyone else is, from one point of view, a special case, dealt with under emergency regulations . . . we christened gentiles, are after all the graft, the wild vine, possessing "joys not promised to our birth"; though perhaps we do not think of this so often as we might. (*Smoke on the Mountain* 7-8)

Brazier shows what the heart of being Jewish is about: The Jewish people were chosen and continue to be chosen "to bear witness to humanity for humanity's sake" (39). Lewis teaches us appreciably that Israel is still Israel and that the church is blessed through Israel's unconditional calling.

A Hebraic Inkling was a delight to read. Brazier deals deftly with the complicated proposition that the locus of God's revelation and dealing with humanity—salvation history—is the Hebrew people and their Scriptures (146). This book is a stimulating exploration of a specific evolution in Lewis's life, religion, and worldview. With time and understanding, Lewis concluded that the Jewish people were chosen for the sake of the world.

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