

2022

## Review of The Medieval Mind of C. S. Lewis: How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind

William Gentrup  
Arizona State University, [gentrup@asu.edu](mailto:gentrup@asu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal>

 Part of the [Intellectual History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gentrup, William (2022) "Review of The Medieval Mind of C. S. Lewis: How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind," *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/1940-5537.1272>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal/vol16/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

## Book Reviews

Jason M. Baxter, *The Medieval Mind of C. S. Lewis: How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022). 166 pages. \$22.00. ISBN 9781514001646.

One of this book's aims is to advance Lewis's reputation as a professional academic and a literary scholar, specifically a medieval one, onto a more equal footing with his reputation as a Christian apologist and fiction writer. Throughout the Introduction, the author is at pains to justify this Lewis who writes about what "many of [his] readers" or the book's presumed audience (American evangelicals?) might describe as knowledge in "old, dusty books" and to persuade them that it is not "absurd, maybe even irresponsible and escapist, to devote the whole of one's adult life to th[is] study" (5-6). There is a possible justification in tailoring a book on Lewis's medieval erudition to such a group (perhaps InterVarsity Press insisted on the deferential approach); after all, Lewis described himself—apologetically, though with tongue in cheek—as a living "dinosaur" (a specimen helpful to understanding the remote past) to his own generation—and in an academic setting no less. Nevertheless, one sympathizes with John Fleming's statement quoted from *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*: "The professional medievalist must be somewhat bemused by the fact that the literary scholarship and criticism of C. S. Lewis is so little known among his general readership and to some not known at all. After all, teaching literature was Lewis's 'day job,' and he expended much energy and talent in writing about it" (5, n15).

The main chapters follow a somewhat consistent pattern of explicating a medieval author, book, or set of ideas and illustrating how Lewis used them in his own works. Chapter one introduces the medieval model of the universe (expounded in Lewis's *The Discarded Image*), principally based on

Cicero's "Dream of Scipio" as commented on by Macrobius, Calcidius's *On Plato's Timaeus*, and Boethius's *De Musica*. Baxter focuses on the music of the spheres motif of these works and sees it operating in the creation scene of *The Magician's Nephew*, in which Aslan sings the universe into existence, and in the visit of the planetary intelligences to Ransom and Merlin in *That Hideous Strength*. "The important thing to note in these two passages, is that Lewis . . . set himself to re-create the medieval *harmonia mundi* of Macrobius, Boethius, and Calcidius" (32).

Chapter two touts Lewis's ability as a writer to create such compelling atmospheres of time and place that his readers can feel what it was like to visit a planet like Perelandra or a world like Narnia. Whether this talent derives from Lewis's medieval learning or is owed to the power of his own imagination is not differentiated, but Baxter claims that the medieval practice of *imitatio* in art is relevant and so echoes of Dante in *Perelandra* demonstrate Lewis's "craft as a writer" (49-50).

Chapter three describes Lewis's "medieval mind" in terms of his criticism of the modern world's hustle and bustle and mechanistic world view. He is a "new Boethius," critical of "the maladies of the new barbarians," i.e., modern humanity (59). *English Literature of the Sixteenth Century* and *The Abolition of Man* represent two of the clearest discussions of this criticism, which includes resistance to "disenchancing the universe . . . and casting doubt on the very possibility of rationality" (64).

Chapter four discusses how habits of verbal expression subconsciously convey a "cosmology" or "world picture": in particular, the "linguistic world we live in is peculiarly ill-suited to spiritual desire," preventing moderns from imagining an alternative to naturalism or a "mechanized world picture" (72-73). This "evil enchantment" is illustrated in *The Silver Chair* by the lower-world Witch's denial of the existence of Narnia above ground (74-75) and *The Abolition of Man*, which describes modern education as inculcating a Gradgrindian rule of facts and a rejection of "just sentiments," i.e., values: "modern education divorces the heart and mind" (81). Hugh of St. Victor and Thomas Traherne are quoted for their high appraisal of creation and nature, which counterposes a mechanistic perspective, and Lewis's essay "The Necessity of Chivalry" for its promotion of values like courage, civility, and gentleness.

Chapter five focuses on how Lewis admired Dante's literary modeling of "speak[ing] of spiritual realities in a way in which they felt real, attractive, and weighty" (87). "Dante taught him how an artist could cast a 'counterspell' in which the good feels weighty and attractive, a spell to overcome the 'evil enchantment' cast by modernity" (88). Lewis's work indebted to Dante that best reflects this quality is *The Great Divorce*, in which, to a hellish ghost, a blade of grass is diamond-hard and a flower is heavier than a boulder in the substantive reality of heaven.

Chapter six examines "the presence of mystical theology in Lewis's life" (104). *The Cloud of Unknowing* was one of his favorite medieval works, and Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* one of the books that most influenced his faith. Otto's theme is the numinous, and "the concept of the numinous is absolutely everywhere in Lewis's writings" (109). The most developed episode that illustrates this concept is Lucy's deep-night, mystical encounter with Aslan in *Prince Caspian*: "in this scene, perhaps more completely than any other in Lewis's imaginative writings, we find the medievalist bringing together all the varied melodic strands of his thoughts on mysticism. It is a blend of the terrible, the awful, the profound, and the transcendent; but also . . . the homely, the personal, the lovingly intimate" (118).

Chapter seven discusses the medieval concept of *praeparatio evangelica*, which refers to how "non-Christian cultures . . . played a crucial role in preparing the world for the gospel of Christ" (122). Dante's Statius and Virgil's "Fourth Eclogue" are two such touchstones. Baxter believes Lewis was personally committed to this concept since his own conversion story follows this pattern: "the idea of *praeparatio evangelica* is not just at the heart of Lewis's own conversion but also at the heart of his 'philosophy of religion'; "it was important for him to be able to explain what was true about non-Christian religions" (125). As Lewis states in "Religion Without Dogma?" "my conversion, very largely, depended on recognizing Christianity as the completion, the actualization, the entelechy, of something that had never been fully absent from the mind of man" (125). This topic applies to Lewis's life and theology but not, in Baxter's explication, his imaginative works. The chapter shifts to a treatment of "deep conversion," which is exemplified at the end of Dante's *Purgatorio* and imitated by Lewis in passages from *The Great Divorce* and Orual's repentance scene and urged as the process

of “unveiling,” i.e., “letting ourselves become known to God” (which Lewis admired so much as the point of Buber’s *I and Thou*) in *Letters to Malcolm* (139).

As expounded primarily in the Epilogue of *The Discarded Image*, chapter eight reveals why, in Lewis’s mind, modern science does not undermine a medieval “mythical” or “metaphorical” world view. First, medieval cosmology as a symbolic structure does not claim to be pure fact; second, modern science also depends on metaphorical estimations and constructs to model its theoretical conception of the universe. Hence, one can even speak of “how modern science and ancient mythology could be reconciled” (144): “For both medievals and moderns, mysterious entities, hardly understood, emerge out of darkness. . . . For modern cosmologists . . . the universe is packed full of marvels and strange entities” (156). By recognizing that “modern cosmology . . . can be seen in a religious and poetic sense” (156), Lewis was free to reuse medieval notions of the universe and invent space fiction and Narnian worlds in which theological dramas play out.

The Conclusion puts in context how Lewis, Tolkien, and other champions of the remote past found its “exuberant joy” an antidote, not just to secular unbelief, but also to a theism shorn of the supernatural and lacking the vitality of pagan religion. For Lewis, modernist faith exhibits a “dolorous piety” and is a “minimal religion” that has “nothing that can convince, convert, or . . . console: nothing, therefore, which can restore vitality to our civilization. It [modern belief] is not costly enough” (160, quoting from “Religion without Dogma?”). Their “nostalgia” for antiquity or “older” ages was really a yearning for “Other Time,” which would allow these writers to “stand outside [their] own time, outside Time itself, maybe” (160). The premoderns “peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses, nymphs and elves” (163), an inspirited world from which we moderns feel cut off, exiled. But this alienation can be an “extraordinary stimulus to hope” (162). This hope found its incarnation in the imagination of C. S. Lewis and his attention to “the old model” that embodied a “deep, human subconscious desire for a world . . . we are meant to occupy, but not yet” (164).

The book’s title and focus seem to privilege viewing Lewis as first and foremost a medievalist in his learning and writings. Certainly, he was a

great medieval scholar, but his own chronology for the life of “Old Western Man” extends well into the nineteenth century. It seems a little reductive to link his accomplishments to the study of the Middle Ages alone. He was also a great classicist, a great critic of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, viewed himself as an advocate of Romanticism, and was learned in classical and modern philosophy. Medieval traditions such as direct borrowings and literary imitation can be found in the modernist poems *The Wasteland* and *The Four Quartets*, and the ability to create tangible descriptions of the next world owes as much to Plato’s thought as to Dante: for example, in the penultimate scene of *The Last Battle*, while the chief characters race “further up and further in,” Lord Digory exclaims, “It’s all in Plato, all in Plato!” (chapter fifteen).

In addition to the analyses of direct correspondences drawn between certain medieval authors, ideas, and literary devices and Lewis’s own work, Jason Baxter’s book should be recognized for its richer, deeper, more expansive treatment of additional medieval topics in each chapter than are mentioned in the summaries above. For example, there are extended discussions of significant topics, such as time as an image of eternity, *lectio divina*, Boethius on reason and imagination, Abbot Suger on the material excess of Notre Dame cathedral and its evocation of spiritual meanings, and much else. As a scholar of the Middle Ages himself, Professor Baxter is an excellent guide to Lewis’s medieval learning and his use of it in his fiction and apologetics.

WILLIAM GENTRUP  
Arizona State University

P. H. Brazier, *A Hebraic Inkling: C. S. Lewis on Judaism and the Jews* (Eugene, OR, Pickwick Publications, 2021). 301 pages. \$34.99. ISBN 9781725291973

The author’s stated purpose in *A Hebraic Inkling* is to demonstrate the development of Lewis’s thought, from dismissing to esteeming the Hebraic mindset. “Hebraic” in the title of this book is specifically defined by the author as “relating to the Jewish people, especially the Hebrews of ancient Israel, and to Judaism, the religion of the chosen people of God”