The Conflicted Jewish Imagination of Joy Davidman

“Beauty, I knew, existed; but God, of course, did not.”

These words came from the fiery pen and mind of 14 year-old Joy Davidman, reflecting her decision made six years prior that she must be an atheist. In her adult years, Davidman eventually became known for many things: she was a poet, a humanist, a communist, a nonconformist, and a fixture in New York literary circles in the 1930s and 40s. She was a practitioner of Dianetics. People described her as abrasive, animated, critical, demanding, ambitious, and intelligent. Some called her insubordinate, even vain. Davidman also became the intellectual, spiritual, and marital partner of C.S. Lewis—British novelist, poet, and academic. Their relationship and marriage were memorialized in the film *Shadowlands* (1993). Lewis’s account in *A Grief Observed* (1961), records his own personal reflection on her untimely death as well as his thoughts on grief itself.

Although all these aspects of Joy Davidman’s identity are interesting and worthy of study, her Jewishness is most often neglected and misunderstood. A Jew from the Bronx, Davidman’s relationship with the faith and cultural identity of her forefathers was, from the beginning of her life, complicated, to say the least. Many key Jewish themes and thought were significant to Davidman throughout her life and writings. She had what one might call a Jewish head. Meaning that, she thought and expressed herself in ways that are recognizably Jewish to other Jews. Yet it seems as if her heart was often conflicted about her Jewish identity—other Jewish people will be familiar with this struggle, too. Even though Davidman didn’t lead a religiously conventional Jewish life and there is, to date, no evidence that she underwent formal Jewish education, nevertheless, her mind was oriented in a Jewish way because of the culture in which she was raised and her family life.

At times in her life Joy was proudly Jewish, and at other times she was ambivalent. She experienced anti-Semitism growing up, and later some opposition to her Christian faith from friends, family, and from her son David Gresham. Hers was the life of a Jewish woman born in an unprecedented time of enlightenment, change, and opportunity: it was particularly a time of opportunity for a Jewish woman of ambition and intellect. The conflicted nature of her relationship with her Judaism did not abate when later in life she became a believer in Jesus as Messiah. Even as she embraced the Christian faith, Joy continued to live and grapple consciously and subconsciously with Jewish sensibilities and inconsistencies—issues that will be familiar to contemporary Jewish followers of Jesus.
It is perhaps in her writing where we see Davidman’s connection to Judaism most clearly demonstrated. She was conversant in the philosophic and scholarly Judaism of medieval Western Europe. She alludes to Talmud and Mishna and other rabbinic commentaries. Her letters are sprinkled with Jewish idioms, axioms, and Yiddish words, such as ‘oy vey’ (oh my) and ‘gonif’ (thief) and ‘mishegas’ (crazy).

Later in life, her closest companion, C.S. Lewis, understood and appreciated the Jewishness of Davidman’s intellect. In his foreword to Davidman’s book on the Ten Commandments, *Smoke on the Mountain* (1954), Lewis says that “... Joy Davidman’s work comes from her race. In a sense the converted Jew is the only normal human being in the world …” (7). Not only had Davidman adopted the faith of Abraham, she was also a physical daughter of Abraham. In Lewis’s estimation being a child of Abraham by faith and flesh makes you “normal”—in that you are more in touch with what is real since you inherit both blessings, whereas Gentiles only inherit one. Lewis goes on to note that, like other Messianic Jews, while Davidman’s “dispositions” as both a Jew and a Christian are “different,” they are nevertheless “complementary” (8). He further likens Davidman’s writing and thinking to a Jewish prophet. For example, he compares her analysis of sin and idolatry to Jeremiah in its ‘fierceness’ and states that “she is no more inhibited than her ancestors about diagnosis; one might frankly say, about denunciation” (9). In its fierceness and proclivity to diagnose the sins of her ancestors, Davidman’s writing often radiates the intensity and directness of the Old Testament prophets.

The development, presence, and significance of Joy Davidman’s Jewish imagination—i.e., the way her Jewish worldview pervades her thinking, writing, and response to life in general—is crucial for understanding not only her writings but also her relationship with C.S Lewis. An examination of her letters, papers, poetry, and books as well as the conclusions of her biographers reveals the extent to which Davidman’s imagination was suffused by her Jewishness. Her Jewishness here refers to her social development, education, identification, and sometimes her strained religious affiliation.

In truth, in all of her writings, published and unpublished, there is very little indication about how Davidman came to terms with her Jewishness after believing in Jesus. The most likely explanation, I contend is the simplest: she remained herself—a Jewish woman from the Bronx, a child of Jewish immigrants looking for a better life. Her family walked the Enlightenment tightrope,4 as have many other Jews, striving to view Jewish survival as important while still jettisoning the traditional Judaism of their ancestors. Thus, if one wants to understand Davidman’s body of work, one must understand her Jewishness as well as how she understood her own Jewishness. Her Jewish identity was significant—meaning that it informed her worldview and gave her the language to describe the world as she grew up—even as it was always a “work in progress.”
Childhood: Kindling Her Jewish Imagination

Like many other Jews, the Davidman family came to New York City during a great wave of Jewish immigration. As Joy describes in “The Longest Way Round,” her family “came to America … from small villages of eastern Europe where for a thousand years the Jews had held desperately to their faith against fire and terror and murder” (14). Thus, her family, like most of her Jewish ancestors, were “cut off, hemmed in, embittered.” Joy’s grandfather on her father’s side was the first to arrive in 1892 (Santamaria 4). He died of tuberculosis in 1910—most likely from labouring in “poorly ventilated sweatshops.” There were so many Jewish people succumbing to this sickness that it was “dubbed ‘the Jewish disease’ by well-to-do WASPS.”

The stress of transitioning to a new culture put understandable pressure upon the faith of many Jewish immigrants including Joy’s family. As a result, the religiously observant Judaism of Joy’s parents collapsed. Like many Jewish people of the time, they nevertheless “kept a vague and well-meaning belief in a vaguely well-meaning God” (“Longest” 14).5 Davidman also recalls in her conversion story that “boys like my father, growing up in the polyglot world of New York, looked at their small-town religion and found it absurd. Her family eventually abandoned the faith of their childhood altogether and embraced an alternate, secular faith in rationalism and socialism (15).

Although persecution of Jewish people in New York was far less blatant than in Europe, Joy still faced a subtle yet ever-present anti-Semitism. Understanding Joy necessarily involves understanding these obstacles that she faced growing up as well as her family’s reaction to it. For example, Joy’s father, Joe, determined that the way for Jews to get along in the ‘new world’ was to assimilate. He further observed that Jewish teachers were not being credentialed because of their Eastern European accents. Consequently, he decided that he would earn a partial living teaching Jews how to speak without a hint of this intonation. Her brother Howard recalled in a Q&A session on October 14, 1983, how their father taught both him and Joy to speak without this accent (Oral History [OH] 20).6 These efforts alone, though, were not sufficient to guard his children from prejudice. For example, Howard, his son, would battle to get into medical school because he was Jewish. It was because of these realities that their father focused so much on the importance of achievements,
the necessity of obtaining success in one’s career, and most of all, avoiding the “otherness” of being Jewish (Santamaria 2; cf. OH 19–20).

As a child, Joy battled for her intellectual freedom. She made the personal decision to be an atheist in 1923, when at age 8 she read The Outline of History by H.G. Wells: a 1,000-page tome that covered the themes of history as a quest for a common purpose as well as a critique of religious expression (“Longest” 15). Joy had both a “tart tongue” and a quick mind (Pilat, Oct. 31: 3X). Living together in close quarters, the atmosphere at the dinner table in the Davidman home was often tense and stormy. She describes it as “being raised in a room where you can’t sit, stand or lie down” (5).

Joy’s father wanted to set aside the theological foundations of Judaism, while still retaining its ethical system (Pilat, Nov. 1: 5). Joy thought this position was “rather as if he had kept the top floor of our house but torn down the first ...” (“Longest” 14). In response, she told her father that she disagreed with this understanding, since “there is no materialistic basis for ethics. If there is no God, nothing is wrong” (Pilat, Nov. 1: 5).
Joy’s childhood and teenage years—like most—brought inner turmoil, conflict with her parents, and changing tastes. Her childhood pleasures were confined to the artistic—reading, writing, and poetry. She complained about the strictness of her parents: as a result, her friends gave her the nickname “Forbidden Joy” (Pilat, Nov. 1: 36). At 15 years old, Joy was focused solely on the possibility of achieving an affluent American life. One year later, though, she had abandoned this dream and wrote “I believed in nothing” (“Longest” 16). At the same time, she was attracted to fantasy literature because “they are the only children’s books I know that make goodness attractive” (Pilat, Oct. 31: 5). As a teen she was an intense thinker, writing: “Is life only a matter of satisfying one’s appetite or is there more” (“Longest” 16)?

In spite of her dissatisfaction with life, Joy still had a great love for school, her teachers, and poetry; especially Hunter College in Manhattan—a cosmopolitan, municipal institution. The students at Hunter were mostly non-WASPS—Jews, Catholics, and African-Americans (Santamaria 26). Most of these students either could not afford or would not have been welcome at private schools. Joy and her friends discussed anglicizing their surnames and the college offered speech courses in flattening out European accents. Indeed, the 1933 Hunter College yearbook, *The Wistarion*, advises: “Do your part to keep undefiled your heritage, whether native or adopted. Learn English syntax; build correct sentences” (160; cf. Santamaria 26–27).

There is an astonishing ambivalence in this quote: Keep your heritage, while embracing the world. As a child of immigrants who hid their accents in order to get ahead and avoid antisemitism, Joy faced this challenge at every turn. She struggled to live a progressive life, given her many enthusiasms and ambitions, while also honoring a heritage that she probably thought represented a civilization best left behind. This uncertainty about her heritage was the soil in which Joy’s Jewish imagination and identity took root, and it followed her.

**Poetry and Prose: Giving Voice to Inner Struggles**

Even as Joy gained renowned for her writing, she did not shy away from Jewish themes, particularly questions about identity and suffering. For example, during her time as a student at Hunter College in 1934, she wrote a prize-winning short story called “Apostate,” about a Jewish girl in a Russian village who was to be baptised, in order to marry a Russian. In the story, Chinya struggles with conversion and what determines her identity:

> … Chinya wondered what made her a Jew. She could not feel anything in her body that belonged to the synagogue and the Law…. If she was baptized by the priest and lived with Ivan Mihailovitch and ate pig meat, her body would still be Chinya. Yet, for her father, being a Jew was real. (21)
We can perhaps see some of Joy’s questions about her own history and identity reflected in Chinya’s struggle.

Her Jewish sensitivities and sensibilities are also seen in the poem “Jewess to Aryan,” published in 1938 (Letters to a Comrade 83–84). In it, Davidman suggests that the whole Aryan ethos could be regarded as a kind of fog: “Our veins possess variations; our blood marches to differing tunes. ... You might distrust me, might be afraid; you clinging fog, you coward to eat the body out and leave my sound flesh corroded” (83). In another poem, “Trojan Women,” written in 1941, she resonates with the suffering of her ancestors:

In the smoke and screaming air
they got across the bridges with their children
   carrying their household gods and silverware. ...
Hurried, hurry;
   death flows at your heels like a hissing wave
chasing the children up the sand,
times we went to the beach
   Coney Island
   was the first place they landed. (A Naked Tree 202–203)

During this time, in another of her poems entitled “For the Nazis,” she heckles Hitler and his helpers: “While you rave, /say, can you see now the depth of your grave” (Seven Poets 34; cf. Santamaria 143)? Her brother Howard was in medical school during these years training to be a psychiatrist, and he was deployed to Germany to study and interview Nazis. In a letter to Howard, Joy tells him to “go easy” on them and to use a “psychological approach” because they were most likely insecure. She also recommends “laughing at them” (Santamaria 144).

In her writings during this time, Joy’s Jewish imagination is expressed through both poetry and prose. She is finding her voice, which is frequently questioning, angry, articulate, and passionate. Spiritually hungry, she uses landmarks in Jewish history and thought to express her sense of justice as well as camaraderie with her people. Even though, as Joy later admitted, she had a deep interest in Jesus during this period, she still called herself “a Jew” (“Longest” 16). This is important, because as a Jew, she was conflicted about this attraction: “cold chills” would proceed from the mention of His name. As a Jewish person surrounded by anti-Semitic sentiment, she interpreted Jesus’s will for her to mean beatings, burnings, and marginalisation. But then, she “read the Bible” and found something completely different. She was confused by the discrepancy between the words of Jesus and the behaviour of those who said they followed him—understandably, she was simultaneously drawn to the former and repulsed by the latter. Speaking of herself, she wrote: “… surely a poor Jew may be pardoned a little confusion.”
Even before her conversion, Joy found herself quoting Jesus. In fact, the cross appears in much of her early poetry. For example, her “first published poem” was called “Resurrection.” Written when she was only eighteen in 1936, it was “sort of a private argument” between herself and Jesus (“Longest” 16). In the poem itself, Davidman depicts Jesus wearing a diadem fashioned from the stars, the mark of ancient sovereigns, and she asks Jesus what the Kingdom is like (OMB 7–8). As a Jew, she is struggling with the issue of the self-proclaimed King and His Kingdom. She also asks a question Jewish people have asked for centuries: How can a King promise a redeemed life in an unredeemed world? Continuing with the theme of resurrection, she published a series of four poems under the heading “Doubts and Certainties” in 1937.

Also during this time, in a letter to her first husband Bill (September 30, 1954), Joy included a poem entitled, “The Ballad of the Jew’s Daughter:”

![Verse](https://example.com/verse)

Here again Joy finds herself talking about Jesus. She was obviously haunted by him in some way. Likely it was the result of her reading the New Testament and of reading Lewis. It was during this time of her life that she was falling in love with Jesus as a Jew. Indeed, he came to her and loved her; he as a Jew, she as a Jewish daughter.

**Tikkun Olam: Working for Change**

In 1938, as a 23-year old graduate of Hunter College, Joy joined the communist party. Members were required to have a party name, so she called herself Nell Tulchin. Tulchin was her mother, Jeanette’s birthplace—a Jewish village in the Ukraine. That same year, Davidman wrote a poem called “Jews of No Man’s Land” (A Naked Tree 86–88). She identifies with the despondency of her people and gives voice to their anguish: “Poland to the right and to the left / Sudetenland; snarled at by two frontiers. / … , we Jews / houseless … without value, without use; / we are here; remember us … .” The poem then swings stylistically: “You who pity us, you who are troubled by our names … .” Throughout this poem, Joy poignantly commands compassion for the predicament of her people as she reflects upon Jewish experiences under the yoke of various foreign empires. In the same vein, Davidman would later write in Smoke on the Mountain: “Chosen for what? Chosen for trouble!” (133).
Several years after joining the Communist Party, Davidman wrote a novel called *Anya* (1940). The story draws upon the life of a Jewish woman whom Joy’s mother knew in the Ukraine. The tale is of Old Russia and the protagonist Anya’s withdrawal from the Jewish traditions which bound her community together in the mid nineteenth-century. As the only daughter to wealthy parents, Anya defies the rules imposed on unmarried girls; gives in to her passions; and is indifferent to her vows. She rides with a Russian officer and uses marriage to hide her affairs. Joy’s brother Howard relates that “a great deal of *Anya* comes from my mother’s stories, which were then further investigated because my sister did live with a variety of relatives (OH 21).”

It is important to understand that Davidman became a communist in 1938 because she “was working for heaven on earth” (“Longest” 20). Her writing at this time echoes the Hebrew prophets who charged Israel with this task of *tikkun olam* or “repair of the world.” In a letter to Kenneth W. Porter, dated March 13, 1939, Davidman mentions that she helped draft a pamphlet listing anti-Semitic people and the publications that quote them (*OMB* 21). This was part of her mission of repair. However, she eventually became disillusioned with what she felt was communism’s corrupt philosophy and self-interest.

Joy was likely aware that the Hebrew prophets condemned the human heart as sick, wicked, and ill-equipped to carry out this mission of *tikkun olam*. In other words, they taught: if we are at war with our own heart, we will be at war with those around us (Hos. 3:6–10; Ezek. 36:26; 1 Kgs. 18:37; Deut. 10:16). The perceived silence of God and his inaction in the face of the prosperity of the wicked is also a constant refrain of the prophets. Abraham argues with God and tells him that he must *judge justly* (Gen. 18). This interrogatory nature of relationship of the prophets and God fits well within Joy’s framework. Judaism is not afraid to ask questions nor is it afraid to embrace ambiguity, neither was Joy. She was fearless.

**Undiscovered Country: Yearning for a Home**

Joy’s intense interest in fantasy and the supernatural in fiction providentially led her to the writings of C.S. Lewis. As I have written elsewhere, Lewis’s work speaks well to the Jewish imagination. He tackles themes that are at home within the Jewish imagination, such as *tikkun olam*, imagination, remembrance, story, exile, desire, joy, and law. In particular Lewis discusses the elusive idea of ‘home’ itself.

As a Jewish writer, Joy described the concept of home as an “undiscovered country,” a “never-never land,” or “the Land of Hearts’ Desire.” As her own desire to repair the world began to resemble more wishful-thinking than anything else, she began to search for a home beyond an earthly country. She described this longing, years later, after she had become a Christian:
There is a myth that has always haunted mankind, the legend of the Way Out ... the door leading out of time and space into Somewhere Else. We all go out of that door eventually, calling it death. But the tale persists that for a few lucky ones the door has swung open before death, letting them through, perhaps for the week of fairy time which is seven long years on earth; or at least granting them a glimpse of the land on the other side. The symbol varies with different men; for some, the door itself is important; for others, the undiscovered country beyond it—the never-never land, Saint Brendan’s Island, the Land of Heart’s Desire. C.S. Lewis, whose Pilgrim’s Regress taught me its meaning, calls it simply the Island. Whatever we call it, it is more our home than any earthly country. (“Longest” 17)

In works ranging from The Weight of Glory to Surprised by Joy to The Last Battle, C.S. Lewis describes this unfathomable yearning as something embedded in each of us, seeking its proper object, as a part of what it means to experience joy. He frequently appeals to the idea of another home, a place longed for. It is a longing that is deeply entrenched in the Jewish imagination: we often feel we are somewhere other than home. We were meant for another place. Jewish exile and dispersion explain why there is this desire to belong to an ideal community in an ideal place. We feel that we do not belong. This yearning for a homeland has been the constant prayer and identity marker of the Jewish people since the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. Dispersion and exile are realities which are made present through the stories of the past. This yearning persists, for no other reason than that home, in its highest form, is elusive and elsewhere. This centuries-old yearning was the narrative in which Joy found herself living.

Eventually, as Joy put it, “God came in,” making her “the world’s most astonished atheist” (“Longest” 23). In a moment of vulnerability, Davidman was “forced to admit that [she] was not ... ‘the master of [her] fate.’” She described what followed as a “direct perception of God”: “There was a person with me in the room.” It was a transcendent experience, a movement away from “dialectical materialism” and towards personal God (24).

This ‘breaking in’ was a turning point; the culmination of a larger movement in her life. Motherhood and a move to the suburbs had secluded her. Her once thriving career in New York City as an award-winning poet behind her, Davidman now found herself living in the aftermath of the atomic bomb, terrified of her own mortality. After the birth of her second son, Douglas, Davidman likely also struggled with postpartum depression. On top of Davidman’s own drained physical and emotional condition, Bill, her husband at the time, was unstable both mentally and physically (cf. Santamaria 152–174).
Following this transcendent religious experience, Davidman set about reconstructing the way she thought about herself and the world: “If my knowledge of God was not true, the thinking of my whole life had been false” (“Longest” 24). It was necessary that she look back on her life and re-examine long-held assumptions. This awakening was a painful process of realization for Joy. Part of it involved re-reading the New Testament and also studying world religions. Consequently, she relates in “The Longest Way Round”:

I found them anything but the same thing. Some of them had wisdom up to a point, some of them had good ethical intentions, some of them had flashes of spiritual insight; but only one of them had complete understanding of the grace and repentance and charity that had come to me from God. And the Redeemer who had made himself known, whose personality I would have recognized among ten thousand—well, when I read the New Testament, I recognized him. He was Jesus. (25).

Her Jewishness, though, told her that in considering the truth of Jesus’s claims, she was doing something terrible: she was, in fact, an apostate. Initially, Davidman thought she wanted “to become a Jew of the ‘Reformed’ persuasion” (25). Instead, she realized that she was in love with Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. In her biography of Davidman, Santamaria writes:

Joy had no intention of becoming a Christian. For one thing, the idea of it was excessively uncomfortable, given her heritage. “The Jew who enters Christianity is always haunted by ghosts,” she would write years later. “Voices out of his past assure him that he is making a fool of himself, betraying his traditions and his ancestors; he must keep arguing constantly, defending the truth of his new faith against the jeering shadows in his mind” (178; cf. “Chosen for What?” 49/2).18

As Joy began exploring Christianity, she used Lewis’s books as “constant reference points” (Santamaria 178). As her first husband Bill explains in his conversion account, “Lewis’s clear and vivid statement of Christian principles served as a standard by which to measure the other religions we studied” (“From Communist to Christian” 77).19 In 1946, even though she was “haunted by [these] ghosts” and “jeering shadows” from her past, she was ready to take the leap and became a Jewish believer in Jesus. Her conversion, as Davidman wrote in “Chosen for What,” “brought [her] into a new world … ” (49/1; see p. 75 in this volume of VII).
One of her first steps was to become part of a local Presbyterian church in upper New York State. Yet even as a young believer learning about her new faith, she brought her intense personality. For example, her newfound zeal annoyed her brother. She invited him to church one day and, as was her custom, held up the greeting line after church talking to her pastor, asking him a number of questions about the sermon. Her brother called her behaviour inappropriate. The psychiatrist in him could not help but judge her fervour: “My sister got converted with the same enthusiasms with which she embraced the Communist Party … and there’s similar psychological attitudes, in my opinion” (OH 12; Santamaria 188).

**A Christian Jew: Wrestling With a New Identity**

Her correspondence during this time shows that Joy wrestled with her Jewish identity in relation to her newfound theism and subsequent belief in Jesus. This identity struggle is familiar to many Jewish followers of Jesus. When her letters and papers speak of Judaism and Jewishness they are striking, challenging, and sometimes strident. She enjoys wielding words almost as weapons in combat and she assumes other people will be willing to join in a kind of “family fight.”

Along these lines, Davidman wrote several interesting letters to the Jewish poet Aaron Kramer, a communist. For example, in a letter dated September 9, 1946, she uses the phrase “our own people” (OMB 46). She later writes a very long letter in January 1948, in response to his asking for a critique of his writing. In it Davidman is candid about what she perceives as his inconsistencies towards other religions: “Anything connected with the Jewish religion seems sacred to you; would you treat a Catholic school with the same hushed reverence? I’m afraid a great many of us are only materialists where the other guy’s religion is concerned (66).”

“As a Christian Jew,” though, Davidman was careful to keep in check her “peculiarly Jewish attitudes towards the Christian” (OMB 102). For example, in a letter to William Rose Benét (February 1, 1949), she expresses concern that most Christians do not realize that Jews ‘shudder’ when they see Christian symbols. She has, however, contempt for Jewish friends who disdain Christians. Of these mostly atheist Jewish friends—who have abandoned and are disillusioned with Judaism while also hating Christianity—she is very critical. This kind of thinking, she calls the “ethos of the ghetto Jew.” Given her newfound faith and her background as a Jew, in another letter to Benét dated July 24, 1949, Davidman explains why she feels emboldened to criticize Jews: “I think, having been born a Jew, I have the right to say that a man ought to be free to criticize the Jews honestly” (107–108).

The freedom Davidman felt to criticize Jewish people and Judaism, at times, took on an angry, critical, and biting tone. For example, in a letter to poet Kenneth Porter (August 16, 1951), she calls Orthodox Judaism a mixture
of ‘ritualism and pride,’ and she declares that Jewish people are paranoid about Christians, while knowing next to nothing about the religion (OMB 121). Davidman is even bold enough to share her first husband’s ‘profound’ remark that decrying “Anti-Semitism ... is the Jew’s religion” (122). In one of the most passionate sections of this letter, Davidman says:

Well, we did crucify Christ; the Romans wouldn’t have given a damn, and what’s worse we did, as a people, reject Him—though of course throughout history innumerable Jews have accepted Him and ceased to exist as Jews. But then, as you say, everyone is always crucifying Christ. For their rejection, the Jews have paid and are continuing to pay in the spiritual heartbreak of basing their culture on false premises. The persecutions—horrible enough, though not so unremitting as Jews imagine—are only the result of the Jews willful self-isolation. (122–123).

During this time of spiritual exploration, Joy wrote many letters to her first husband, Bill Gresham. These unpublished letters give a sense of a woman occupied with the details of life, concerned about money, her children, and her career. In a letter to Bill dated August 20, 1952, Davidman calls her Jewish cousin Sol “kinfolk” (Joy Davidman Papers [JDP] 6/5). Later, on October 15, she mentions that she met a group of Jewish people in which she instantly was disappointed. She describes them as “pinkish Hampstead Jews, the system still full from herring mit borscht mit sour cream yet, busy making money out of England ...” (JDP 6/29). Based on the context, Davidman is taking offense that these wealthy “kinsmen” were putting on a pretense of Jewishness for their friends, while insinuating their way into the British upper class. In another letter, dated November 23, 1952, she remembers being critical of a friend who she recalls as “putting his hat on during the Kaddish.”—the prayer traditionally recited in memory of the dead (JDP 7/12).

The notion of ‘choseness’ can be found in several of these letters. She asks rhetorically why the Jews are chosen, and she answers often that Jews are chosen to suffer. In a letter written on September 8, 1954 Joy tells Bill that she has been “asked to address a London church on the Problem of the Christian Jew—mmm, the Goyim should have my problem yet (OMB 276)!“ The sermon she ended up delivering is titled “Chosen for What?” and subtitled “The Problem” of the Christian Jew (JDP 49/1–6).”* The intensity of her personality and her turbulent relationship with her Jewishness is on full display in both her correspondence and sermon, as she grapples with her Jewish identity in relation to her Christian faith.

* Reprinted in this volume of VII, pp. 75–78.
Once again, it is obvious that her Jewishness was driven and defined by her social development, education and identification, and at times, her strained religious affiliation. When it comes to the specifics of her Jewish identity, Davidman displays an ongoing uncertainty. This identity tension was part-and-parcel of living as a first-generation Jew in North America. When Davidman became a Christian, along with her new faith there came a whole new identity which understandably impacted her Jewish identity. The result was a kind of tribal confusion which manifested itself in both internal and external opposition and pressure.

Davidman also experienced a new reading and interpretation of sacred history, texts, and lineage. At the same time, the deep structural shift that occurred within her worldview caused some of her respondents to become strangers. These examples from Davidman’s letters and unpublished papers demonstrate the extent to which her conversion and shift in worldview created within her a sense of loss along with a sense of peace.

The Prophetic Tradition: A Desire to Speak Truth
It may be tempting to read Joy’s correspondence during this time as a kind of self-hating anti-Semitism. But a more likely explanation can be found in the Jewish prophetic tradition. For example, the prophet Jeremiah calls his own people wicked (2:19), faithless (3:14), and fools (4:22). An examination of Davidman’s articles in *Presbyterian Life* (April–May 1953) reveals how she saw herself operating within this same tradition.

The prophetic tradition was built on and thoroughly integrated with a moral foundation—justice, mercy, grace, forgiveness, and a passion for righteousness. We see in Davidman the same elements of this tradition as well as the intramural and extramural intensity that comes with it. She desired to speak truth that was derived both from divine inspiration and moral conviction. Indeed, one cannot read Davidman’s commentary on the Ten Commandments and not see her writing in the Prophetic tradition: She writes like Ezekiel, whose message is that God desires that the wicked turn from their ways and live (Ezek. 18:21). Davidman is like the prophet who argues that to serve God we need more than ritual, we also need to speak less about justice and instead practice justice.

This prophetic impetus was firmly built into Joy’s personality and faith. For example, after becoming a Christian, Joy became a regular contributor to the journal *Presbyterian Life*. In the May 2, 1953 edition, she writes with a sense of directness and conviction resembling the Hebrew prophets as she addresses those who choose atheism: “The tragedy is that we make that choice without knowing it; not by clear conviction but by vague drifting; not by denying God, but by losing interest in him” (“God Comes First” 12).

The great majority of biblical prophetic writings are directed against the perceived threat of pagan religions or, in biblical language, “worshipping
other gods” and practicing “idolatry.” Thus, the prophets railed against what today we would consider religious pluralism. Davidman, in another article for *Presbyterian Life*, operates within the same prophetic framework. In her article, “Into the Full Light,” Davidman writes:

To put it bluntly: will the average American high school graduate easily believe that a God who is not solid and measurable can nevertheless deliver more horsepower than the most thoroughly souped-up hot rod? Or does he think it indecent to imagine God delivering horsepower at all?

For many contemporaries, God has dwindled into a noble abstraction, a tendency of history, a goal of evolution; he has thinned out into a concept useful for organizing world peace—a good thing as an idea. But not the word made flesh, who dies for us and rose again from the dead. Not a Personality that a man can feel any love for. And not, certainly, the Eternal Lover who took the initiative and fell in love with us. (13)

Here Davidman echoes the words of Isaiah—“You have forgotten God your Savior; you have not remembered the Rock, your fortress” (17:10)—and Jeremiah—“Remember the Lord in a distant land, and call to mind Jerusalem” (51:50)—and God in Ezekiel 6:9—“Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me.” Further, operating within this prophetic tradition, Davidman unpacks the implications of the first commandment in “God Comes First”: “Whatever we desire, whatever we love, whatever we find worth suffering for, will be Dead Sea fruit in our mouths unless God comes first” (14).

When reading Davidman’s essays in *Presbyterian Life* as well as *Smoke on the Mountain*, it is easy to see this prophetic understanding in practice. Davidman, like the prophets of Israel, connects contemporary idols to ills of modern American society: “The real horror of idols is not merely that they give us nothing, but that they take away from us even that which we have” (Smoke 39).

C.S. Lewis noted these trends in the larger culture and recognized that Davidman was operating within this Jewish prophetic tradition. In his foreword to *Smoke on the Mountain*, Lewis observes that her writing contains a kind of ferocity that is ‘Jewish’ and prophetic, and yet is “modern and feminine, can be very quiet; the paw looked as if it were velveted, till we felt the scratch” (9). He goes on to say that Joy grew up “Jewish in blood and rationalistic in her convictions” (7). Lewis even describes Davidman as a “Semitic genius” in a letter to Dom Bede Griffiths; clearly impressed by her piercing insights into Scripture (CL 3: 1042; April 30, 1959).
Mother and Son: A Clash of Identities

Joy had two sons—Doug and David. Her elder son, David, according to her brother Howard, had a complicated and contentious relationship with his mother (OH 10f). As David began to embrace a more traditional Jewish identity, conflict ensued with Joy, who was still ambivalent about her Jewishness in some ways. David’s complicated feelings about and conflict with his mother are captured in a series of letters to Wade Center Directors, first to Clyde S. Kilby and later to Lyle Dorsett. Both David’s uncle—Howard Davidman—and aunt—Mary Ellen Gresham—observed and commented on this conflict. For example, Mary Ellen relates to Kilby in 1973, her opinion that “the emotional burden [Joy] put on [David] was too much for a child” (20/7). Joy’s brother, Howard, felt that David’s decision to become a more religious Jew offended Joy’s sensibility (OH 19–20).

As a young adult, David studied Hebrew and began speaking with an Eastern European accent, perhaps as a reaction to Joy and her brother’s purposeful abandoning of their own accents at their father’s urging. This change was perceived as an inappropriate and bizarre affectation by Joy and by Howard as well, especially in light of their own father’s focus on losing your accent. The estrangement between Joy and David continued to deepen during her lifetime, so that when his mother died in June 1960, David wrote: “I felt nothing when she died, we had grown apart” (20/13; Letter from Mary Ellen Gresham, September 28, 1973).

Overall, David felt that his mother was ‘ambivalent’ or inconsistent in terms of her attitude, knowledge, and relationship to Judaism. For example, they disagreed about the Decalogue. In a letter to Lyle Dorsett, David is critical of Joy’s writing as not being “really up to very much” (26/1; August 13, 1981). Specifically, he identifies flaws in Smoke on the Mountain based on his personal identification and knowledge as a traditional Jew. Despite this, in contrast to David’s assessment, Lewis and other readers have viewed Smoke on the Mountain as a thoughtful piece of writing on the Decalogue. Part of what seems to have offended David was the way in which his mother drew on her heritage as a Jew. He felt that she got the traditional understanding of the commandments wrong, and consequently tries to set the record straight in his letter to Dorsett.

In another letter, dated September 16, 1981, David is especially critical of Joy (26/4). He accuses her, among other things, of being self-contradictory. As an example, David describes an incident in 1953. Once, when sitting on a park bench in New Rochelle, NY with Joy, he picked up a Yiddish newspaper that had been left behind. David writes that “my mother reacted with horror” and told him to get rid of it (26/4). David explains that his mother was ashamed of her Jewishness. She was more concerned with avoiding the restrictions that society had placed on her and her brother; specifically, opportunities for study and placement in schools (26/5). She told David
that rejection of “Jewish taboos” would enable their family to integrate into Gentile society (25/6). Despite her attempts to avoid these “taboos,” David records in the letter that his mother

- read Yiddish Proverbs and other literature in Yiddish;
- read other works of Jewish interest;
- loved Jewish jokes;
- supported Israel;
- denounced anti-Semitism;
- went to Jewish restaurants; and
- was afraid of not being able to check into a hotel because she was Jewish.

David goes on to write that “in spite of her apostasy [she] remained decidedly, if not deicidally Jewish” (26/5). In this comment, David seems to be critiquing what he perceives as his mother’s hypocrisy. In his mind, because his mother had converted to Christianity and because she wanted to avoid persecution—e.g., speaking without an accent and/or avoiding reading Yiddish newspapers in public—perhaps he felt that she had no right to retain other aspects of Jewish culture. In other words, she ought to have left it behind or fully embraced it. Thus, he found it both humourous and offensive that his mother remained decidedly Jewish—a true Jew in character and temperament, specifically in her obstinacy. And yet, because of her conversion she was deicidally Jewish—meaning that she either participated in killing Jews or was trying to be ‘let off the hook’ from the frequent accusations of ‘Christ-killer’ that are aimed towards Jews. David further unpacks his accusation; that his mother was ambivalent towards Judaism in the aforementioned letter. Having observed his mother’s great “respect of learning,” David asked her about the traditional educational program of Jewish people. Her response, he recalls, was odd: “Oh I think they just go over the same texts over and over” (26/6).

When Davidman had first become a Christian, she had both David and his younger brother Douglas baptised in the church that the Gresham family attended, and the boys began to go to Sunday school. David remembers, though, that his mother still taught him the Shema—the basic creed of Judaism from Deuteronomy 6:14: “Hear Oh Israel, the L–rd our G–d the L–rd is One.” David writes: “It escaped her, of course, that this formula was incompatible with Christianity” (26/7).

Eventually Joy did support David’s interest in Judaism. For example, she arranged for him to have a Jewish education, and before she died Joy accepted a gift from David of a Hanukkah menorah (26/6–7). David further recalled that Joy tried to talk to him about her religious experiences, but he admitted, “I did not pay very much attention” (26/7).
Ultimately, though, David viewed his mother as an “apostate.” In speaking of his grandparents’s reaction to Joy becoming a Christian, David relates that, “naturally, they thought my mother’s conversion was very silly: since they did not believe in their own religion ... they thought it idiotic to accept someone else’s” (26/10; November 13, 1981). David was not surprised by his grandparent’s lackluster response “since their attachment to Judaism was so weak.” David uses the same term for one of Joy’s friends; describing JB Stern as “an apostate Jewess like my mother” (26/11; September 16, 1981).

This complex relationship extended also to his stepfather, C.S. Lewis. In a letter written to Chad Walsh dated January 9, 1977, David Gresham credits Lewis for positively impacting his life—“I owe a great deal to my step-father’s influence”—yet he still accuses Lewis of being “anti-Semitic.” This “is not surprising,” writes David, because in his 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” (8/6).²³ Indeed, the issues that separate them are ones that Jewish believers in Jesus and their families have wrestled with for centuries.

David loved Judaism since he was 11 and after his mother’s death that interest only grew. Lewis arranged for David to take private lessons in Hebrew, and David started attending the Oxford Synagogue. David Gresham observed that his mother was simultaneously proud of being Jewish yet candidly critical. In his view, her turn towards Jesus seemed to deepen this conflict between embracing her Jewish heritage and rejecting those aspects of it which she found disagreeable.

**Shadowlands: Finding Home at Last**

Throughout her life, Joy Davidman had “regarded the ‘apostate’ with traditional Jewish horror” (Dorsett 61). Eventually, though, she became the person she dreaded. She speaks of God hounding her: convinced and convicted of sin, Joy found God’s grace in the person of Jesus. When she began speaking and writing publicly of her faith, it angered and embarrassed some of her friends and relatives. Her brother was especially hurt, and their relationship was never the same (Letter from David to Dorsett 26/9; November 13, 1981). In this way, she followed in the tradition of the prophets—of not being welcome in their own country, speaking as family, as insiders—to people who preferred not to listen.

Her second husband, C.S. Lewis, was at her bedside at the end of her life. To the American Chad Walsh, Lewis wrote, “Two of the last things she said were, ‘You have made me happy’ and ‘I am at peace with God.’” (CL 3: 1199). Joy came to believe that our reality in our life here on earth is the “Shadowlands”—a place of preparation for our ultimate reality—the place that will be our true home. At present, we are homesick for a place we have
never seen. This is a longing that is deeply embedded in Joy’s and the Jewish imagination. During this life, we are somewhere other than home. This is because we were meant for another place. Because of this, Joy’s faith was heaven-oriented:

It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed, and then cried:

“I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. (The Last Battle 161; ch. 15, par. 38)

Joy Davidman Lewis: A Jewish Convert

Joy wrote to Chad Walsh in 1950 that “… the Apostles always seem to come from Missouri” — the ‘Show Me State’ (OMB 113). By this she likely meant that the disciples didn’t really understand or accept what was going on without firm evidence. Even though she related to their skepticism, as an outsider, she was decidedly not skeptical about her love for Jesus. She too was an outsider, initially in her secular, Jewish upbringing and later when she converted to Christianity. Because of this, she lived her life as if she were homeless. Like the patriarchs before her, she was a foreigner and a stranger; first to Gentiles and then to Jewish people. Even so, she fought to make herself a better person and the world a better place.

Communism, secularism, and traditional Jewish religion did not provide her with the answers for which she longed. The elusive idea of establishing heaven on earth led her, instead, to Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Throughout her life, she continued to wrestle with ambivalence towards her Jewish identity. However, her biographer, Abigail Santamaria, observes that her questions and doubts and temper “did not nullify her faith; they reinforced the purpose of redemption” (Santamaria 343). Whether from her own history or the history of the Jewish people, Joy had abundantly good reasons to reject Christianity. And yet, she was able to get to the place, as many contemporary Jewish believers in Jesus do, where she saw the difference between rejecting Christians but not Jesus himself.

The life and work of Joy Davidman can and should resonate with people of all different backgrounds. Jewish believers in Jesus will resonate with her identity crises. Traditional and secular Jews may look to her as a renegade, yet would be hard-pressed to not see her intelligence, wit, and Jewishness. Christians can be inspired by her courage: she was not afraid of being vulnerable, nor was she fearful of bearing the reproach of identifying as a Christian. Based on an examination of her letters, it seems that Davidman was even willing to go so far as to bear the same reproach as the Messiah. “So, Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own
blood. Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured” (English Standard Version, Hebrews 13:12–13).

A complex woman, Davidman was loved and loathed by many people. This may have been, in significant part, because of her consistent and continuing loyalty to the legacy of her Jewish heritage, which was often expressed in her uniquely forceful way. Indeed, throughout her life she maintained her own unique connection to Jewish tradition which was clearly articulated in both her life and in her writings.

In her award-winning short story “Apostate,” Joy closes the circle on her Jewish identity as she writes poignantly of the conflicted hero Chinya. Like Chinya, Joy was accused of being an apostate—of abandoning Judaism—, yet she was acutely aware that her body would always be Jewish. Like Chinya, no matter what Davidman decides; no matter how she lives; nor how she decides to pursue her dreams; her body would belong to the synagogue and her body would still be Jewish: “In the end, a Jewess was always a Jewess” (26).

Andrew Barron

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Notes

1 See “The Longest Way Round” [“Longest’’], p. 13. Davidman’s autobiographical chapter appears in a compilation of conversion stories titled These Found The Way (pp. 11–26). See also Bill Gresham’s chapter, “From Communist to Christian,” pp. 63–82.

2 I did not extensively research Joy Davidman’s involvement with Dianetics. To the best of my understanding it was experimental; meaning that Joy and Bill experimented with it. Davidman also performed auditing, as a kind of psycho-therapy, during her stay in London, in order to earn money. She and her first husband, also experimented with Tarot cards and the I Ching.

3 Jewish people often see Judaism as important, but don’t practice the religion actively. There is a disconnect between ancient faith and modern practice: a civilization and worldview that seems to have passed, yet seems important to associate with and to acknowledge, along with a modern progressive worldview.

4 The Enlightenment tightrope is the razor edge of seeing Judaism as important and as a preserver of Jewish civilization, while adopting progressive ideals about Jus-
vice; the tension between rejecting supernatural aspects of revelation while believing that chosenness is the work of God and not the work of man.

5 “The Longest Way Round,” (pp. 83–97) is reprinted in Out of My Bone: The Letters of Joy Davidman [OMB], edited by Don W. King (e.g., this quote appears on pp. 84).

6 Howard Davidman participated in a Q&A session after a lecture given by Lyle Dorsett in front of the New York C.S. Lewis Society titled “The Search for Joy Davidman” on October 14, 1983. The transcript of this Q&A session is housed at the Wade Center (OH/SR–79; CSL-Z-SR-5).

7 Joy was interviewed for a series of newspaper articles published in The New York Post between October 31 and November 13, 1949. Copies of these articles—titled “Girl Communist: An Intimate Story of 8 Years in the Party,” written by Oliver Pilat—are on file at the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.


9 See also “Astonished Atheist,” p. 22.


11 Published in Seven Poets, pp. 34–35. See also Santamaria, p. 143.


14 Tikkun olam is a unifying Jewish concept defined by works of justice performed to repair the world. The phrase is found in the Mishnah, the primary body of classical rabbinic commentary, and is often used when discussing issues of justice as a safeguard to those who are disenfranchised. It is often tied to or discussed in conjunction with Deuteronomy 16:20: “Justice, justice thou shalt pursue.

15 Andrew Barron, “C.S. Lewis and the Jewish Imagination.” Mishkan, issue 80, 2019 (Caspari Center, Jerusalem).

16 The ever-present longing for a homeland was necessary for Jewish development and survival. Readers interested in this topic should read any of a number of biographies of Theodor Herzl.


18 Santamaria mistakenly cites this quote in her biography of Joy as coming from Davidman’s “Unpublished notes” for “Seven Deadly Virtues” (370n178). It actually appears on page 2 of Joy’s typewritten notes for “Chosen for What?”; printed here in VII for the first time (see pp. 75–78).


20 When friends and relatives fight, they do so with a passion and intensity that is foreign to outsiders. As a Jewish man reading the New Testament, the accounts of Jesus’s debates with the Pharisees and Sadducees seem like an intramural fight in which Jesus expresses who he is dynamically in his passionate, anxious language of
care and concern. His message is far from being a diatribe against the Jewish people.

21 In Joy Davidman’s typescript the word “problem” is not capitalized in the subtitle of her sermon (i.e., The problem of the Christian Jew); however, the editors have chosen to capitalize it throughout this volume of VII.

22 In these exchanges, letters from David are addressed to Lyle Dorsett. Letters from Mary Ellen Gresham are addressed to Clyde S. Kilby. Unless otherwise indicated all letters are archived in the And God Came In/A Love Observed Archive, boxes A26–28, at the Marion E. Wade Center. All citations include folder and page number, plus date, if not mentioned in text (e.g., Box A–28, Folder 20, page 7 = 20/7; Date).

23 Letter from David Gresham to Chad Walsh, January 9, 1977. Chad Walsh Papers, Box A57, Folder 8, pp. 5–6.

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