

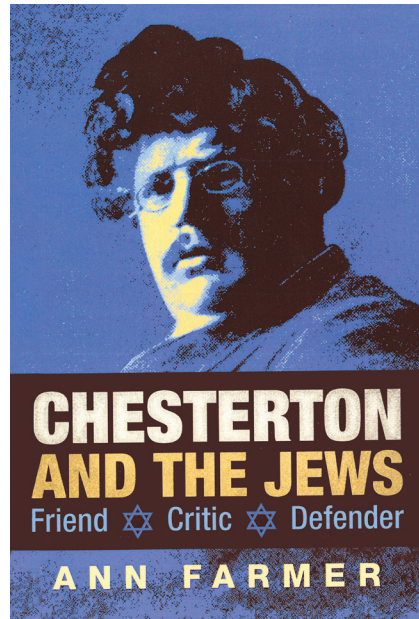
G.K. Chesterton's Jewish Problem

Review Essay

Ann Farmer, *Chesterton and the Jews* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2015), \$34.95 (hardcover); \$21.95 (paperback).

W. H. Auden confessed in 1970 that, despite a lifelong enjoyment of G.K. Chesterton's poetry and fiction, he had persistently neglected his non-fictional prose, in part because of "his reputation as an anti-Semite" ("Foreword" 11). Auden's qualms were far from unique, as many of Chesterton's peers were disturbed by the recurrence of anti-semitic sentiments and tropes in his oeuvre. As Ann Farmer observes, these concerns have shadowed Chesterton's posthumous standing as well, creating a "moral imperative" to resolve this issue (2). Although meticulous and sincere, Farmer, like most Chesterton scholars, is too ready to excuse and exonerate Chesterton's views on Jews. Such exculpation retards a forthright evaluation of his work, while risking the alienation from it of sensitive readers like Auden. Rather, scholars must admit frankly that Chesterton did possess antisemitic attitudes and explain their forms to assess fully their impact on his thought. Analyzing Chesterton's writing about Jews and contemporary and critical responses to it will reveal that his prejudice was rooted in personal, political, and social, not religious or racial, beliefs; that his peers recognized this bias consistently; and that these stereotypes helped mold the articulation, if not always the substance, of some aspects of his social criticism.

Farmer's absolution of Chesterton is grounded in untenably stark definitions of antisemitism, particularly her reservation of this designation to those who "unequivocally demonstrate that their primary driving force was hatred for all Jews" (5). A more subtle understanding of how Chesterton framed the "Jewish problem" is necessary to comprehend his outlook's inspirations



and components, before evaluating its importance for his thought. Although Chesterton's Christian faith and social criticism dovetailed frequently, his antisemitism was devoid of religious motivation. He wrote nothing endeavoring to convert Jews to Christianity, and he even praised them for discovering monotheism (*The Speaker*, 2 March 1901). Moreover, as Farmer notes, he rejected the racist theories embraced by some contemporaneous antisemites as deterministic, pseudo-scientific surrogate faiths. Judaism was more a social and economic than a religious or racial phenomenon to him, and this political conception of Jews guided his attitudes to and portrayals of them.

At least as early as the Boer War, Chesterton had accepted the traditional populist canard that a Jewish financial conspiracy ran the country, controlled the media, and instigated imperialistic wars (*Autobiography* 115). Yet Chesterton's fascination with the "Marconi affair" added crucial emotional texture to this ideological antisemitism. In 1912, Godfrey Issacs, head of the Marconi Wireless Company, attempted to secure a contract providing empire-wide wireless communications by distributing financial favors to leading politicians through his brother Rufus, the Attorney General. Moreover, the official who approved Marconi's initial tender was Postmaster-General Herbert Samuel. Chesterton's beloved brother, Cecil, publicized this now-forgotten scandal, but his journalistic exposes were so reckless that Godfrey Issacs sued him successfully for libel. G.K. Chesterton developed a permanent enmity toward the Issacs, and he deemed them and Samuel the personification of Jews who used family connections and financial power to pollute the polity for personal gain. What he had long believed intellectually now had apparent experiential validation, and the Marconi men became his archetypes for all Jews. In 1916, for instance, he declared that "international intrigues of the Marconi type" were "a Jewish tendency or tradition" (*New Statesman*, 3 June 1916). If this caricature had been present in his thought before, then, it became more deeply fixed in his mind and more prevalent in his work after Marconi. His Marconi preoccupation raised the level of Chesterton's interest in Jews while simultaneously lowering his opinion of them.

Chesterton's specific ideas about Jews fall under two general principles. First, he made the common accusation of dual loyalty. His readings of the Boer War, and especially the Marconi affair, led him to see Jews' primary allegiance as to their kin or "kind" instead of to their nation of residence; in fact, he suggested that Jewish assimilation is impossible, a "futile and unworthy policy" (qtd., 79). Thus he claimed in 1911 that "the Jew is not an Englishman, because his nationality is not English. ... They are allied, and rightly and justifiably, to their own people of their own race who are not English even in point of citizenship—Jews in Germany, Russia, France, everywhere" (*Jewish Chronicle*, 28 April 1911). He therefore implied, in 1920, that Jews, at a minimum, should be ineligible for public office because their hierarchy of loyalties makes them inherently traitorous:

With Jews the family is generally divided among the nations. ... It is in its nature intolerable, from a national standpoint, that a man admittedly powerful in one nation should be bound to a man equally powerful in another nation, by ties more private and personal even than nationality. Even when the purpose is not any sort of treachery, the very position is a sort of treason. (*New Jerusalem* 280)

Ironically, a variant of this charge had been lodged against English Catholics historically, but Chesterton did not judge the two cases equivalent, arguing that Roman Catholicism encourages love for the local *patria*, whereas Judaism is wholly rootless. Hence, "the Catholic internationalism, which bids men respect their national governments is considerably less dangerous than the financial internationalism which may make a man betray his government or the revolutionary internationalism which may make him destroy it" (*Well and Shallows* 466). Indeed, Chesterton detected Jews in the vanguard of each of those destructive cosmopolitan movements. Regarding both capitalism and communism as universalist ideologies that form loyalties based on transnational considerations, he thought them perfectly suited for Jews: as these two theories are so alike in "ethical essence," it would be "strange if they did not take their leaders from the same ethnological elements" (or, as a preceding version stated, "it would not be surprising if their same leaders did have the same kind of nose") (*Autobiography* 76).¹

If Jews could not be patriotic members of particular polities due to their loyalty to cosmopolitan creeds, what should states do with their Jewish populations? Chesterton offered short and long term remedies to this sensed dilemma. Immediately, regimes and Jews must realize that Jews cannot be assimilated. He contended that "nice Jews" agree with this assessment, but "nasty Jews" try to conceal their identities: "the nice Jew is called Moses Solomon and the nasty Jew is called Thornton Percy" (*Ball and Cross* 50). Nice Jews grant the allegation of dual loyalty, whereas nasty ones seek to evade it by betraying their heritage and striving to fit into societies that they are inherently unable to join fully. Beyond the aforementioned electoral consequences, Chesterton drew further disquieting conclusions from these premises. He asserted that attempts at assimilation tended to stoke antisemitism. For their own protection, then, Jews should accept their lot as permanent outsiders:

A number of points upon which the unfortunate alien is blamed would be improved if he were, not less of an alien, but rather more of an alien. They arise from his being too like us, and too little like himself ... let all literal and legal civic equality stand. ... But let there be one single-clause bill; one simple and sweeping law about

Jews ... every Jew must be dressed like an Arab ... we should know where we are; and he would know where he is, which is in a foreign land (*New Jerusalem* 270-72).

Even allowing for intended hyperbole, this 1920 proposal not only chills through its evocation of yellow stars, but also trivializes the tensions between Arabs and Jews. It is nonetheless an essentially accurate rendition of Chesterton's outlook: if Jews acknowledge their alien (and secondary) status, the cause of much antisemitism will be removed, and they will be unmolested. This is a supreme instance of political naiveté.

In the long term, Chesterton felt, the best way for Jews to live out their separate lives was in a separate land. Zionism was therefore the second major principle of his approach to Jews, because it promised to overcome the difficulties engendered by his first. He thought Zionism would give Jews a locality to be patriotic toward, a particular polity based on their cosmopolitan connections, thus resolving the problem of dual loyalty. Additionally, the kind of Zionism he envisioned would "regularize" Jews' "abnormal" position through the same "natural" means he prescribed for Britain:

They are traders rather than producers because they have no land of their own from which to produce, and they are cosmopolitans rather than patriots because they have no country of their own for which to be patriotic ... both could be cured by the return to a national soil as promised in Zionism. ... If he asks for the soil he must till the soil; that is he must belong to the soil and not merely make the soil belong to him. He must have the simplicity, and what many would call the stupidity, of the peasant. ... He must be washed in mud, that he may be made clean (*New Jerusalem* 296, 282-83, 288, 293-95).²

In short, Chesterton's Zionism was distributism for the Jews.

Chesterton defended this scheme against critics who considered it antisemitic. He asseverated that "Jews should be represented by Jews, should live in a society of Jews, should be judged by Jews and ruled by Jews. I am an anti-Semite if that is anti-Semitism. It would seem more rational to call it Semitism" (*New Jerusalem* 264-65).³ But the irrational principle of dual loyalty undergirded the entire project, as he admitted with unironic bluntness: "the advantage of the ideal to the Jews is to gain the promised land, the advantage to the Gentiles is to get rid of the Jewish problem. ... I would leave as few Jews as possible in other established nations" (*New Jerusalem* 299). His inability to grasp that the problem lay with his suppositions and not the Jews also colored other rebuttals to this charge. For example, he argues in his autobiography that Jews typify two of his chief ideals, grati-

tude and respect for the family. Not two sentences later, though, he asserts that it is precisely these familial ties that weaken those of patriotism. Dual loyalty was so intertwined with Chesterton's perception of the Jews that he could not even attempt to compliment them without invoking it. His refusal to renounce such notions or to concede that they might be antisemitic was so dogged that he was warning against efforts by the "Jewish financial power" to "dominate England" unto his last book (*Autobiography* 230).

Nor is this indictment just the verdict of a post-Holocaust world. From 1911-1933, the Anglo-Jewish press ran eighty-seven articles about Chesterton and his newspapers that rebutted his depictions of Jews or allegations made against them; the *Jewish World* went so far as to suggest in 1918 that he be prosecuted under the Defence of the Realm Act for slandering Jews (Rapp). And not only Jewish contemporaries saw this facet of his worldview. In 1913, for instance, Rebecca West accused him of being partially responsible for "the revival of this insane cowardice" (West 220). In 1920, the *Daily Telegraph* refused to publish some of his commentary on Zionism, and the *Daily News* averred that same year that he "is generally regarded as an Anti-Semite" (qtd., Coren 207). Even as late as 1930, Chesterton devoted an *Illustrated London News* column to responding to a *News-Chronicle* reviewer who had dubbed him "a professed Anti-Semite" (20 September 1930).

His peers' record is better than most Chesterton scholars', including Farmer's. Like many of her predecessors, Farmer engages in two sorts of blame-shifting. The first makes Hilaire Belloc and/or Cecil Chesterton culpable for G.K. Chesterton's view of Jews (99, 325, 342, 460), while the second claims that antisemitism was "ubiquitous" in Britain before the Shoah (462), and that Chesterton was no worse, and much better, than his fellows in this respect (227). But these efforts to downplay or deny Chesterton's antisemitism are anti-Chestertonian, for they seek to minimize his agency. This defender of free will and responsibility cannot have his bigotry excused on the grounds of social determinism. He may have been influenced by Belloc, Cecil, and others who cultivated this cultural atmosphere, but a man Wilfrid Sheed called "a thinker of visibly painful independence" (qtd., 270) never hesitated to rebel against other prevalent conventions; G.K. Chesterton's acceptance of this norm hence indicates a free choice of it, making him accountable for the stance he took continually. Furthermore, not everybody did it. The coetaneous work of Catholic authors such as Christopher Dawson and J.R.R. Tolkien, for example, is untainted by, and openly opposed to, antisemitism.⁴ Rather than continuing to debate whether Chesterton held antisemitic beliefs or, if he did, who led him astray, scholars should admit this failing from the outset, and focus instead on appraising its importance to his thought's overall significance.

Chesterton bears some responsibility for helping to create a climate of opinion that was insensitive at best and hostile at worst to Jewish concerns;

in Malcolm Muggeridge's phrase, he "gave anti-semitism literary credentials" (*Chronicles* 240). Chesterton was not alone in this sanctioning, nor was he as noxious an influence as others; but his writings' widespread popularity did reinforce stereotypes that eventually contributed to the hardening of British hearts against Hitler's victims, as even a sympathetic critic like Sheridan Gilley acknowledges.⁵ Chesterton's own animus toward Nazism was rooted mainly in anti-Prussian prejudices and a desire to defend Christian civilization against discerned heathen barbarism. While he condemned Hitler's "purely racial persecution of the Jews" (qtd., 236) as having "absolutely no reason or logic behind" it, he nevertheless warned to "never under-rate" the "real problem" of "the international position of the Jews" (qtd., 79), concluding that "I still think there is a Jewish problem" (qtd., Coren 211). Although Chesterton's hopes for Zionism and his religious faith would have made the Final Solution abhorrent to him, his inability to see that there was no "Jewish problem" to be settled by rational, logical, or any other means to begin with prevented him from apprehending the unique horror of Hitlerism.

Chesterton's antisemitism thus distorted his judgment and sustained ideas that had tragic consequences. Its presence in, and its deleterious effect on, his work should be conceded. But it should not become a reason for ignoring his social criticism. Although this prejudice shaped Chesterton's descriptions of what was wrong with the world, his prescriptions, in the main, do not rely on it. His proposals for decentralization, widely distributed property, defense of the family, little Englandism, and the like are not intrinsically antisemitic. Even if his views on the Jews were elements in Chesterton's specific formulation of some of these policies, each also has a logic independent of that passion and can (and should) be evaluated accordingly. Trying to similarly bracket his antisemitism when assessing Chesterton's belief that post-capitalist society required a Roman Catholic ethos is more vexing. In his own mind, tensions between Christians and Jews in Christian nations would be eliminated by establishing a complementary Jewish state, plus autonomous Jewish enclaves in Christian ones (*New Jerusalem* 297-301). Furthermore, he stressed that a distributist state would welcome non-Catholics if they affirmed distributist principles, something his interpretation of Zionism shows he felt Jews could do. Yet both of these convictions appear to exclude Jews from ever being able to attain equal status in Chesterton's Christian commonwealth. Even though his antisemitism was not fostered by his faith, then, the synergy that developed between his religion and his social remedies creates special challenges for Jews that should be noted.

Chesterton's antisemitism arose from stereotypes common in his era that he accepted freely and that were hardened by the perceived validation of personal experience. His populist contempt for financiers and xenophobic definition of patriotism spurred him to regard Jews as corrupt and untrust-

worthy, impressions that seemed confirmed by the Marconi men's behavior. He consequently saw Jews as a necessarily alien presence in any polity except for one consisting primarily of themselves, and he thus deemed Zionism the only enduring answer to the "Jewish problem." Yet his Jewish and non-Jewish contemporaries recognized that the real problem was Chesterton's adoption of and persistence in an unfounded pattern of prejudice, and they held him accountable for his words. Chesterton scholars should do likewise. His corpus contains trenchant insights about society, culture, and politics that are not dependent on his antisemitic expression of them, but these cannot be discussed profitably until that distressing dimension of his thought is admitted and understood. As Auden concluded upon finally reading the prose he had long avoided, Chesterton's antisemitism "remains a regrettable blemish upon the writings of a man who was ... an extraordinarily 'decent' human being" ("Foreword" 11-12). But such sober judgments will be rare until this considerable chaff of bigotry is harvested along with the even richer grains of wheat to be found in the field of Chesterton studies. No honest scholar can live by bread alone.

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Notes

¹ The earlier version is in Chesterton Archives, The British Library. Following the Russian Revolution, he repeated often the antisemitic bromide linking Jews to Bolshevism. See, e.g., *America*, 74, 102, 141, 219; *Illustrated London News*, 13 September 1924.

² Chesterton eventually qualified his support for certain pragmatic aspects of Zionism as it was practiced in the mid-1920s and 1930s, if not for his understanding of the theory behind it (see, e.g., *G.K.'s Weekly*, 18 July 1925, 399; *G.K.'s Weekly*, 4 May 1933, 135). Indeed, as most early Zionists were secular, liberal Jews, Chesterton may have felt the distributist model was essential inoculation against such modernist influences.

³ Owen Dudley Edwards consequently characterizes Chesterton's standpoint correctly as "anti-Semitic Zionism" (37).

⁴ Dawson, for instance, chided fascists for making Jews avatars and scapegoats of "mechanical, cosmopolitan, urban mass civilization" (*Beyond Politics* 82). Tolkien replied sardonically to a Nazi-era publisher's inquiry about whether he had Jewish origins that "I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people" (*Letters* 37).

⁵ "For all Chesterton's friendships with Jews, and his loathing of Hitler and Nazism, he did much to provide a high moral justification for the anti-Jewishness which was to bear bitter fruit after his death" (*Gilley* 41).

⁶ See, e.g., Chesterton's foreword to *Germany's National Religion, Friends of Europe* #13 (Westminster: undated, but after Hitler's rise).

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