

# Other and Brother

*Jesus in the 20th-Century  
Jewish Literary Landscape*



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desired culture: the West. The look at the floating church, in Goldberg's case, expresses perhaps less a nostalgic sentiment than a desire for a cultural and aesthetic world that was left in the West, while the poet herself emigrated eastward. While Goldberg longs for European culture, Yeshurun laments the Yiddish one.

Though the younger generation of Israeli writers embraced Yeshurun for his lament over Jesus, these writers longed more for Leah Goldberg's European Jesus than for Yeshurun's Yiddish Jesus. In this respect, Yeshurun differed not only from his own generation of writers, but also from those who followed him. He offered a poetic use of the figure of Jesus unlike any other in modern Jewish poetry.

## *Epilogue*

### *The Ironic Gaze at Brother Jesus*

*Don't leave me alone with god!*

*My friends, don't leave me*

*Alone with god!*

(HANOCH LEVIN, *The Sorrows of Job*, 36)

*The Crucifixion*

*a dress rehearsal,*

*delayed ignition,*

*musical version*

*Jesus super-double.*

(DAVID AVIDAN, *Principal Poems*)

AS WE HAVE seen throughout this book, for twentieth-century Jewish writers, the figure of Jesus functions as a kind of mirror reflecting the image—and in many cases the *desired* self—of the author. In this final chapter I would like to discuss another mode of this reflection, which I will call here “the ironic gaze.” Irony is a situation of incompatibility between competing meanings, between proffered and implied alternatives.<sup>1</sup> The basic feature of irony is its dual structure: it assumes a conflict between two orders.<sup>2</sup> This gap of meaning creates a “space” between what is said and what the readers know to be the truth or the norm. The intention beyond what is stated needs to be reconstructed by the readers. An ironic statement or situation therefore calls for: a) recognition of the tension between reality and its representation, and b) reconciliation of this tension by reconstructing the hidden meaning, what we assume to be the real intention of the author. This duality in the nature of irony, along with its ability to hide the real intention of the author while making it available only to certain readers, is perhaps one of the reasons for its attractiveness in general, and its appeal to Jewish writers who wrote about Jesus in particular. Employing the ironic gaze as a mode of representation

involves a choice to write about Jesus to two communities of readers. This could be read as a division between Jewish and non-Jewish readers, but on a deeper and more interesting level, it also distinguishes between “sophisticated” readers, perhaps conscious of the irony, and more naïve readers, who most likely will not recognize it.

Ironic representations, perhaps more than any other mode of representation we have dealt with in this book, may provide us with a glimpse of what the Jewish writers *truly* thought about Jesus. This may sound a bit far-fetched, but as Wayne Booth suggests in his discussion of irony’s rhetorical power, our ability to determine that a statement or a dramatic situation is ironic depends on our assumption that the author meant it to be that way:

No matter how firmly I am convinced that a statement is absurd or illogical or just plain false, I must somehow determine whether what I reject is also rejected by the author, and whether he has reason to expect my concurrence. . . . Dealing with irony shows us the sense in which our court of final appeal is still a conception of the author; when we are pushed about any “obvious interpretation” we finally want to be able to say, “It is inconceivable that the author could have put these words together in this order without having intended this precise ironic stroke.”<sup>3</sup>

In our case, irony may serve as a tool for examining the emotions, and perhaps even the state of mind, that are absent and yet somehow resonate in the works we have addressed. Indeed, most of this book assumes certain sentiments toward Jesus. In this last chapter I argue that such latent sentiments come to the foreground in texts where the ironic mode calls attention to the conflict between the authors’ stated and unstated intentions. In a sense, irony provided Jewish writers with the freedom to take a stand on the question of Jesus’ metaphysical nature. As we have seen in some of the works discussed in chapters 1 and 2, this was not the case for many writers—at least not many of those born and raised in Europe.

Perhaps even more importantly, the ironic mode may reveal the authors’ assumptions regarding readers’ ability to read beyond what is said. The writers’ trust in readers’ capability to capture the ironic meaning assumes that a certain type of reader shares the writers’ norms and social, cultural, and religious values. In this respect, irony forces us to examine identity in the broadest terms.<sup>4</sup> And when dealing with the question of Jewish representations of Jesus, irony pushes us to examine the *collective* identity. According to Jonathan Culler, our perception of irony depends on a series of cultural norms,

which we assume that we share with the narrator.<sup>5</sup> The writer himself, I would add, relies on this series of cultural norms and expectations. He needs these norms both in order to break them and in order to create the assumption of shared values, which guarantees that his readers will be able to recognize the irony and reconstruct the meaning beyond it. In a sense, irony allows the writer to engage in an indirect and sophisticated dialogue with his readers.

Indeed, as Booth stresses, “irony is such a powerful weapon so much enjoyed by authors and readers alike. Perhaps no other form of human communication does so much with such speed and economy.”<sup>6</sup> This is true of many modern works, but in the case of modern Jewish authors writing about Jesus, the “weapon” of irony allowed the forbidden to be uttered. Moreover, in some cases ironic representation prompts a reflexive look in the mirror, providing readers who “get” the irony with a new way of thinking about their own assumptions.

Emphasizing the role of the reader in the process of recognizing irony, Culler states:

The irony of a text offers a more complex dialectic: the mind does not simply judge itself and judge itself judging itself; it must judge the text against expectations which result from judging the text and must judge itself judging the text against those expectations.<sup>7</sup>

An ironic representation thus results in a more conscious reading, and in many cases, an even more conscious writing. This is why I reserved my discussion of some of the more complicated and yet important works for this final chapter. A high level of self-awareness and conscious reading is crucial for understanding the figure of Jesus in modern Jewish culture. This concluding chapter adds the ironic gaze, thereby bringing us a more conscious perspective on our subject. Moreover, this new angle allows us to revisit the book’s principal arguments and provide some closure.

### *Toldot Yeshu*

One of the earliest Jewish attempts to address the Gospels’ story of Jesus is *Toldot Yeshu* [The history of Jesus]. This is actually the title of a few different versions of the story of Jesus’ life based on oral traditions composed sometime between the third and seventh centuries.<sup>8</sup> It does not belong to the corpus of works at the center of this book; yet being among the first Jewish attempts to tell the story of Jesus, and because of its influence on later Jewish writing on Jesus, I begin with a brief discussion of this fascinating and, as we shall see, ironic text.

Since *Toldot Yeshu* is the title of several combined compositions from different periods of time, we must be careful to avoid overgeneralizing. Yet it is safe to say that its main purpose is to ridicule the figure of Jesus. In order to do so, it subverts the Christian narrative of Jesus' life, particularly the New Testament's stories of his birth and death. The plot itself is similar to that of the Gospels in terms of time and geography, but *Toldot Yeshu* hardly deals with Jesus' moral teachings and miracle making.<sup>9</sup>

Because of this ideologically motivated retelling, *Toldot Yeshu* is commonly referred to in scholarly discourse as a "counter-history," a term coined and applied to *Toldot Yeshu* by the late intellectual historian Amos Funkenstein.<sup>10</sup> As he explains:

Counter-histories form a specific genre of history written since antiquity. Their function is polemical. Their method consists of the systematic exploitation of the adversary's most trusted sources against their grain. . . . Their aim is the distortion of the adversary's self-image, of his identity, through the deconstruction of his memory. . . . [*Toldot Yeshu*] employed the sources of the adversary—in this case, the Gospels—in order to turn Christian memory on its head.<sup>11</sup>

Counter-histories, according to Funkenstein, are "inauthentic narratives"—historical writings that lack basic grounding. He argues that "everything in them is a reflective mirror" and that their authors subvert their own identities as weak, since those who write counter-histories base their own identities on the denial of the Other.<sup>12</sup>

One important device used in counter-history is irony. Indeed, in *Toldot Yeshu*, irony is used to mock the figure of Jesus and to reconstruct the Christian story. Since this deviates from our main discussion, I shall present here just one episode of several: the story of Jesus' death. Interestingly, *Toldot Yeshu* uses the basic elements of the New Testament story, only to retell the story of the crucifixion and reduce it to farce:

And then the sages put their hands on him and said: "You are Jesus the seducer who makes people believe that he is the Son of God and a messiah. Where are your miracles and wonders? At that time Jesus shuddered and stood frightened and dumb. . . . And Jesus knew that he would be executed by stoning and would later be hanged on a tree, and since he knew the pronouncement of the tetragrammaton, he adjured all the trees not to receive him for hanging. And that day was Friday

and the sages wished to hang him immediately, to fulfill the verse "and you shall purge the evil from your midst" (Deuteronomy 21:21). And they took him and tied him by his legs and hands and brought him first to the stoning place. And they stoned him and he died. And just before the evening they tried to hang him on a tree; but the tree refused to receive the corpse since the tree had been adjured—and so did all the other trees. And the pupils of Jesus, who saw that the trees were not willing to accept him, became emboldened, and said that this was because Jesus was the son of God. But an old man was there, Rabbi Judah of Bartota, who had a garden. In his garden there was a very thick cabbage stalk. Since the cabbage-stalk is not a tree, it was not adjured; and so they hanged Jesus on the cabbage-stalk, and it did not break. And he was hanged on it till the late afternoon, and the boys and the women threw stones and dust at him. And as the evening came, the elders sent to take him down from the stalk, to fulfill the verse "his body shall not remain overnight upon the tree, but you shall bury it the same day (Deuteronomy 21:23)."<sup>13</sup>

This story treats Jesus and the New Testament narrative of his agonizing and heroic death ironically. The irony here emerges from the gap between the early and the later texts. This gap produces another story that reveals Jesus' cowardice and fear of his own death, which was so great it led him to adjure all the trees in order to avoid hanging. The narrator portrays Jesus as a Jewish magician, rather than as himself possessing divine powers. He was not the Messiah and was surely not the Son of God. Moreover, Jesus is portrayed as careless, forgetting to include the cabbage stalk in his haste. But all this reveals only the surface of the irony. To understand the deeper layer, let us have a closer look at the biblical verses quoted.

But first, a small detour. The narrator of John had stressed that after the crucifixion, the Roman soldiers, at the request of the Jewish elders, broke the legs of the two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus, apparently in order to hasten their deaths, and let them be buried before the Sabbath (John 19:31–33). However, the soldiers, thinking that Jesus had already died, did not break his limbs. At this point the narrator commented:

He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe. For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled "not a bone of him shall be broken." (John 19:35–36)

The prohibition against breaking a bone in the passover sacrifice had appeared in Exodus 12:4.6, which the narrator of John cited so as to present Jesus as the new passover sacrifice.

The text of *Toldot Yeshu* follows John in describing the execution of Jesus as fulfilling scripture. But the precepts observed were actually the commandments to purge evil (Deut. 21:21) and not to leave the body of an executed criminal hanged overnight (21:23). Indeed, the passover sacrifice bears a resemblance to the latter prohibition: one is not allowed to leave the meat of the passover sacrifice overnight. Thus, the narrator of *Toldot Yeshu* suggests that the crucifixion of Jesus fulfilled not the prohibition related to the passover sacrifice, but rather a somewhat similar prohibition. This bold reconstruction of the story of the crucifixion transforms Jesus from God's sacrifice for the sake of humanity into a common criminal (who should still be honored as a human being).

But *Toldot Yeshu's* reconstruction of the crucifixion contains an even deeper irony. Scripture provides an explanation for the prohibition against letting the body of an executed criminal hang overnight: "ki kilelat Elohim taluy" (Deuteronomy 21:22). That is, to let the criminal hang is to curse God, insofar as it desecrates a human body created in God's image.<sup>14</sup> Jesus' followers, at least, considered him God. The narrator of *Toldot Yeshu* suggests that Jesus did indeed have a divine element—just like the rest of humanity, for all men are created in God's image. Thus, while Christianity considers Jesus superhuman and divine, *Toldot Yeshu* allows him to achieve certain godly features, but in a manner so degrading that he appears as barely human—and thus barely divine.

### *Mocking Jesus' Suffering*

According to Ora Limor, Jesus is presented in *Toldot Yeshu* as a tragic hero, but "the author as well as the readers do not sympathize with Jesus, since *Toldot Yeshu* is not a tragedy but a satire."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Jesus in *Toldot Yeshu* is not a tragic hero, since the Jewish version of the Christian story omits the agonizing, suffering aspects of his figure. Moreover, as we have just seen, it depicts the elements associated with his suffering—particularly its emblem, the crucifixion—as a farce. The author does not sympathize with Jesus' suffering and even mocks it.

As we have seen throughout this book, what many modern Jewish writers have taken from the Christian story and placed at the center of their works is Jesus' suffering. This suffering has become a symbol of human

pain in general—and Jewish suffering at the hands of Christians in particular. But modern Jewish writers used Jesus' torment also to mock this emblem, specifically by comparing it to the suffering of the Jewish people. As we may recall, in his poem "Uri Zvi in front of the Cross INRI" Greenberg portrays Jesus' suffering on the cross as a spectacle, incomparable to the real suffering of Jewish victims of pogroms and the pioneers' struggles and death by disease in the Land of Israel. Several of Greenberg's other early Yiddish poems use a similar ironic mode in regards to Jesus' suffering. As we saw in chapter 2, Greenberg mocks the false suffering of Jesus, presenting him as a spoiled, self-centered idol. Greenberg explicitly ties Jesus' inability to empathize with the suffering of others to his captivity inside the walls of the Christian Church. The object of the irony in this case is not so much Jesus' suffering itself, but the use—and, in a sense, abuse—of Jesus by institutional Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

Mocking Jesus' torment is a typical theme in the poetry of many of Greenberg's Yiddish contemporaries as well. Writers such as Melech Ravitch, Moshe Leyb Halpern, H. Leyvik, and Itzik Manger used the tormented, agonized Christian image of the figure of Jesus to give voice to their secular, humanistic worldview. In many cases, the comparison between the agonizing Jesus and real human suffering stands at the center of this ironic treatment.

An example is a rhyming poem by the poet and playwright Itzik Manger (1901–1969), "*Di balade fun dem layziken mit dem gekreytsikn*" ["The Ballad of the Crucified and the Verminous Man"]. In it, a verminous man wakes the crucified Jesus from his sleep and demands that he explain why his pain is considered holier than the man's pain:

"Forever a stranger, wherever I go,  
Lice, flicker like stars, in my shirt they glow."  
[. . .]

"There are pitying lips for each of your wounds;  
How holy is your body, the crucified man.

For each of your thorns someone kneels,  
How holy is your cross, the crucified one.

While I, like shadows or dogs that bark,  
Or howl, abounded on roads after dark."<sup>17</sup>

Manger uses the dialogue between the verminous man and the crucified to depict the everyday suffering of mankind. By comparing the verminous man to the agonizing Jesus, he shifts our gaze from Jesus as the symbol of eternal suffering to man's everyday suffering. Similar to Greenberg, Manger compares Jesus' torment to that of humanity, but unlike Greenberg and many of his Hebrew peers, Manger ignores Jesus' Jewish roots and his national bonds. Instead, through the voice of the verminous man, Manger expresses an existential worldview.

The irony here is created by the repetition of the rhetorical questions "How holy is your body, the crucified man?" or "How holy is your cross?" A basic ironic mode is achieved by placing such questions at a point where they clearly cannot be simple requests for information. It implies that the man does not think that Jesus' body and cross are holy. Asking such a question draws attention to what it does not say outright. The ironic sentence pushes to the front the "unholiness" of Jesus' body, and even more important, the very human and mundane nature of the pained body of the verminous man.

This simple irony reveals not only Manger's view of Jesus' metaphysical nature, but also his contempt for what he depicts as a religious myth. Depicting Jesus through the eyes of the verminous man presents both Jesus and the man as equally distant from holiness. Comparing the torment of Jesus to the pain of the verminous man reveals Jesus' humanity, without sacralizing the mundane (as in the works of Yoel Hoffmann, for example). Rather, it degrades and demeans human existence and its needs for such basic and earthly things as a loaf of bread and love:

Jesus stammers, "O wretch, I believe,  
Your dust is more holy, more holy your grief!"

And from the cross trickles a thin, silver cry,  
Smiling, the verminous man turns away with joy

With heavy steps toward the evening village,  
For a loaf of bread and a pitcher of wine.<sup>18</sup>

The verminous man finds consolation in Jesus' admission that the man's pain is greater and holier than Jesus' own. This ridicules the notion of Jesus as a consoling god whose suffering brought salvation to humanity. The irony here is more sophisticated than it seems, as it is directed not only at Jesus himself, but also at the man who ridicules him. By comparing Jesus' suffering to his

own, the verminous man emphasizes man's need to find comfort in suffering as such. Being the greater sufferer—and prompting Jesus to admit it—satisfies the man. The "competition" that the man provokes between himself and Jesus is meant to make Jesus admit that humanity is the ultimate victim. In this respect, the poem reflects upon the question of suffering and its place in the mundane lives of men.

In his book *From Rebel to Rabbi*, Matthew Hoffman discusses the status of Jesus in Yiddish poetry as a universal emblem of tragedy. Hoffman suggests that one of the first Jewish poets to depict Jesus as a tragic hero was H. Leyvik, a leading Yiddish poet in New York in the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>19</sup> Leyvik came to America in 1913 at the age of twenty-five and joined Di Yunge.<sup>20</sup> Its poets were interested in the experiences of the individual and, according to Benjamin Harshav, "introduced a cosmopolitan spirit into American Yiddish poetry."<sup>21</sup> No wonder that some of these writers chose Jesus as a symbol of cosmopolitan, universal suffering—and, in a few cases, used his suffering to show the forlorn nature of this symbol of agony.

Leyvik was among the first modern Jewish poets to present the suffering figure of Jesus and the suffering of humanity ironically. In his poem "Yezus" (1915), for example, he depicts Jesus as a lonely man hanging on the cross, while below him humanity is sound asleep:

Covered to their necks in gray they lie sleeping  
head to head and hand to hand, their feet pointing toward the  
window;  
Up above, somewhere in the corner, trapped in cobwebs  
Jesus hangs on the cross, his mouth coiled and his eyes closed.<sup>22</sup>

The poem can be read as a realistic portrayal of Leyvik's own experience of four years as a prisoner in Russian and Siberian jails. Hoffman suggests that the setting appears to be a hospital or a prison, where a crucifix would likely be hung on the wall.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, it seems that Leyvik uses this setting as a metaphor for the relationship between humanity and Jesus. Jesus' suffering is depicted as an artificial agony, and he is presented as ignorant of the real pain below him. The distance between him and the sleeping men who are packed together in endless lines of bodies,<sup>24</sup> creates the stark opposition between Jesus' believers and the figure in the corner above them, expected to suffer for their sake. This disconnect between sleeping humanity and Jesus' suffering figure paints an ironic picture of this aloof and helpless god, his body twisted in pain and his eyes closed to the pain of the world around him.

Only a few years later, most likely without knowing this poem by Leyvik, Greenberg would depict Jesus' nakedness as a metaphor for his departure from humanity, while simultaneously referring to Jesus' exposed body as a symbol of his humanness. Both Leyvik and Greenberg counterposed the suffering of humankind with the suffering of the figure of Jesus. Greenberg, in his poetry, called this Jesus to look around him and see how the world suffers; but in Leyvik's poem, no one tries to call upon Jesus: apathy is what Jesus and the world share.<sup>25</sup>

We find an even sharper irony toward Jesus' suffering image in another poem by Leyvik titled "Er (1918)." The setting of this long poem is a psychoanalytical session, in which Jesus comes to pour out his heart. The first-person narrator is a therapist to whom Jesus talks about his life and childhood. In a clear allusion to Freud, Jesus blames his mother for his current mental agony. The first part of the poem's title, "Er" (meaning "He"), alludes to the Talmudic designation for Jesus, namely "that Man," meant both to avoid pronouncing his name and to stress his humanity. The second part of the title specifies a year, suggesting a symbolic connection between Jesus' humanity and that point in time. The year 1918 marks the end of World War I, as well as the year following the Russian Revolution, which is symbolically referenced via a knife and hammer covered with blood that Jesus is carrying with him when—toward the end of the poem—consumed with existential anger and despair, he is about to commit murder. Leyvik presents here an ironic look at both the modern figure of Jesus and modernity itself. These allusions to historical markers of modernity, including an anti-Jewish pogrom, reveal Leyvik's harsh criticism of the atrocities carried out in the name of modernity and the suffering it brought. In the post-war world, Jesus is a mentally unstable man trying to find solace in yet another great achievement of modernity, namely, psychotherapy.

These allusions to various tragic events at the beginning of the century play another role in the poem. They contribute to an ironic perspective on Jesus' suffering. Considering that in 1918 in large parts of the world people were still licking their wounds, Jesus seems pathetic, obsessed with his mother, and feeling sorry for himself for being an admired god. The Jesus of the crucifix hung on the wall in the poem "Yezus" is now a real man; but in a similar way, he does not care to see other people's suffering, and his own torment seems more like self-pity than a heroic or even tragic agony.

On his lips runs a hysterical smile,  
in his eye floats up a crippled hope  
his finger, with its sharp and neglected nail  
silently begins to shake.<sup>26</sup>

The irony is created by placing the figure of Jesus in the modern world, imagining him as a man of the time, and using different episodes from the New Testament as material in his psychotherapy session. Blaming his parents, in particular his mother, for his current suffering, Jesus recounts:

... Since my father went to heaven he is no longer my father,  
And my mother denies her motherhood. . . .  
[...]  
Kissing me with her hot passionate lips,  
As if she is my bride and not my mom.<sup>27</sup>

Jesus does not want to recall these memories and yet brings them up in a typical psychoanalytical manner. He tries to cure himself by revealing the memory of his mother's kisses, blaming her for admiring him so much that her admiration made him a god, when he simply wished to be loved as her son.

We can see that Leyvik uses the figure of Jesus to mock modernity and its trends. In depicting the figure of Jesus as a neurotic man searching for a cure in psychoanalytical therapy, both Jesus and the rising trend are being ridiculed and rejected as mere myth. Psychotherapy is presented not as a solution for man's problems but as yet another problem of modern times. By setting Jesus in a therapeutic context and depicting him as a hysterical patient, Leyvik stresses Jesus' humanity and even human weakness. The irony here is directed both at Jesus' metaphysical nature, which is far from divine, and at modern man's desire for something to believe in, be it Jesus or Freud.

Leyvik, similar to many Hebrew writers, imagines the figure of Jesus as a modern man. Yet whereas Aharon Avraham Kabak (see chapter 1) stresses what he sees as real dilemmas embodied in modern national lives, and therefore portrays Jesus as a tragic figure caught between these harsh choices, Leyvik's Jesus is a parody of modernity and the advent of modern man.

The striking difference between the nationalist, in some cases messianic, suffering Jesus typical of the early twentieth-century Hebrew works, and the mocked eternal sufferer in the Yiddish poems, suggests a meaningful difference between the two Jewish literatures and how they saw their respective renaissances and understood modernity at the beginning of the twentieth century. To be sure, many of these writers wrote in both languages, so a dichotomy cannot be readily drawn. Yet the two literatures' agendas do seem to have differed. The Zionist writers (see chapter 1) shaped the figure of Jesus as the ideal type of the New Jew. They were attracted to Jesus as a symbol of

Jewish nationalism and when it came to his agony, they tended to depict him as a tragic hero. For Leyvik and later Manger, as well as many other Yiddish poets in Europe and the United States, the figure of Jesus offered a universal symbol of suffering, which, at the time, was used to mock the very notion of an eternal sufferer. As Manger laconically comments in his poem "Ecce" (1929):

All the wandering ways,  
lead to the cross.  
Whether Jesus is crucified,  
Whether the night, whether I, whether you.<sup>28</sup>

Manger refers to the cross and the crucifixion as universal symbols of pain, but Jesus himself is not unique in his agony and does not "own" the crucifixion. Manger extracts from the Christian myth the symbol of the cross, to serve as an existential emblem of the suffering world—while Jesus himself, he stresses, is one of many sufferers.

As we have seen, Jesus' torment stands at the center of many modern Yiddish poems, but in many of these poems this torment is being ridiculed and undermined, especially in comparison to human suffering. Jesus, in these poems, is mocked for abandoning humanity, and for presenting himself as the great sufferer. The agonized Jesus is depicted as all too human, or as an idol with no empathy for human suffering.

### *The Suffering Jesus as a Portrait of a Cliché*

As we saw in chapter 3, Israeli writers tend to empathize with the agonizing Jesus and in many cases present his torments as a symbol of the tormented artist. In this respect, they portray his suffering in a serious manner. But here, too, exceptions to this trend reveal nuanced agendas—and, in particular, suppressed ones. One such exception is a controversial satiric play composed in 1971 by the writer, artist, and publicist Amos Keynan (1927–2009). Its title, *Haverim mesaprim al Yeshu* [Friends remember Jesus—literally, "friends tell about Yeshu"], is a satiric paraphrase of the 1952 book title *Haverim mesaprim al Jimmie* [Friends remember Jimmie—literally, "friends tell about Jimmie"], which marks the beginning of an Israeli genre of anthologies of stories by the friends and family of fallen soldiers, to commemorate and glorify their lives and deaths.<sup>29</sup>

Jimmie was the nickname of Aharon Shemi, a young commander in the Palmach (pre-statehood Jewish battalions), who was killed in the 1948 war at

the age of 22. Oz Almog, in his book *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*, describes Jimmie as "a cultural model" who, like some other fallen soldiers, became a mythic figure in his death. Jimmie joined the collective memory through what Almog calls the memorial anthology genre. Almog stresses that most of these anthologies deal with the life of the sabra (native-born Israeli Jew) and stress the sense of duty to excel in military service to the end, noting that the fallen soldiers are depicted as models of the New Jew. These young fallen soldiers "were greatly admired by the members of their generation because of their noble images, which were burnished and polished in the memorial literature."<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, the man that emerges from the 1952 book fits the image of the ideal sabra: courageous and charismatic, a bright and talented officer who not only fought in the heroic battles, but also was a master of strategic planning. Jimmie was one illustration of Zionism's successes in begetting the New Jew. A little more than two decades after Klausner portrayed Jesus as a model for the New Jew, Israeli soldiers were emulated as the fulfillment of this vision. *Friends Remember Jimmie* tells the story of a soldier's life and death as a manifestation of the ethos of friendship and sacrifice, which was the core of this genre. The genre was meant to show that soldiers like Jimmie were the center of a community of friends—in most cases, fellow soldiers—that held friendship and their commitment to one another at the core of their principles.

Amos Keynan, himself a veteran of both the 1948 and 1967 wars—the last of which ended shortly before he began writing the play—uses both the mythic story of Jimmie and the memorial anthology genre to satirize the ethos of friendship and sacrifice. The play opens with a large cross and a tombstone located in the middle of the stage. A man is hanging on the cross, and stage directions include "sad music from one of the Passions" playing in the background.<sup>31</sup> The entire play takes place in a symbolic cemetery, whose caretaker is called *Ha-zaken* (the Old Man; or the Elder), possibly in allusion to David Ben Gurion—Israel's first prime minister—who was occasionally referred to this way, or to Israel's founding fathers. The Jesus figure is designated as "Man" (*Ish*, evoking the classical Rabbinic designation of Jesus), and he remains onstage throughout the play. It opens with a long monologue by *Ish*, who invites everyone to the "huge sale" of the state of Israel. In the middle of this monologue, the graveyard's caretaker enters. He points at Jesus and tells a woman entering the graveyard that this is the "pearl of our collection." Urged by the Old Man to say something, *Ish* joins the conversation:



ISH: Lady, I am telling you, don't think twice. Look at this suffering face. Look at these helpless arms, my legs. Pay attention to the four directions, each bears a symbolic meaning of its own. It is a safe investment; its value goes up every year.

WOMAN: Who painted this picture?

OLD MAN: This is auto-portrait.

WOMAN: It looks so much alive.

[...]

OLD MAN: Sometimes it seems to me as if he is capable of stepping down from the wall. It is a scary idea.

WOMAN: But he is nailed to it.

OLD MAN: These nails are falling apart. The whole thing is falling apart.

The idea is that the buyer can put it together by himself the way he wants it.

You'll be surprised how much imagination people have!<sup>32</sup>

Jesus is presented here as a ready-made product, a picture on the wall that functions as a mirror, reflecting to the viewer whatever he wishes to see in his sorrows. Jesus' figure is associated with visual art, as in many Israeli works. As we saw in chapter 3, Israelis imagine Jesus as part of the world of Western culture; and even when they recall his historical figure, they associate it with the world of pictorial art more than with Christianity. But here, Keynan mocks this association. Depicting Jesus as valuable merchandise, he underscores the way that Jesus' pain has been used as an aesthetic object meant to give the viewer the pleasure of finding his own suffering in it.

Indeed, in the rest of the play Jesus turns out to be a mirror that reflects each viewer's own self. Thus, he takes part in a dialogue with a dead soldier who is buried in the cemetery, and together they recall the way they died multiple times, each time in a different war. This recollection is an ironic allusion to *Friends Remember Jimmie* and its genre. The fact that the two men are dead and that they died many times, mentioning specific wars and battles, mocks the idealizing nature of this genre, which glorifies the lives and the deaths of its subjects. The dialogue reveals what *Friends Remember Jimmie* tries to conceal—the ugly, futile aspects of heroic death.

Here, the ironic use of Jesus' suffering is more complicated than in the previous works we have examined. The suffering itself is not being mocked, but rather its use, and even the pleasure that it provides. Moreover, Keynan is not interested in the credibility of this suffering or its historical or religious aspects. For Keynan, Jesus is a symbol of suffering and sacrifice that has been used as a tool to glorify martyrdom. The play uses Jesus' suffering

as an emblem of unnecessary sacrifice in order to criticize the ethos of war and victimhood in Israeli society. Keynan depicts Jesus as a symbol of Jewish suffering in order to criticize the way this suffering has been used to motivate people to pay the ultimate price for the sake of their country. Almost every scene in the play ends with *Isb* calling out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—a constant reminder of Jesus' role as a martyr. But such suffering for the sake of the state is depicted here as worthless, and the cause that motivates it is empty. Moreover, it is presented as an ideal that leaders and politicians "sell" to the common people. The people fall into the trap due to their wish to become like Jesus; they then find themselves in his agonizing figure.

When only the woman and *Isb* remain in the graveyard (and on the stage), she imagines that a pogrom is about to occur. When Jesus asks what is going on she responds:

I don't know. There is always someone coming to kill us. A few years ago they killed daddy and before then grandpa was killed. Now it is our turn.

ISH: But why do they want to kill us?

WOMAN: Because they don't like us.

ISH: Why don't they like us?

WOMAN: Because we are different.

ISH: I am not different, I am like everyone else.

WOMAN: No. You are not like everyone else. Everyone is those who kill us. We are different, we are being killed.<sup>33</sup>

The national collective consciousness of victimhood appropriates Jesus as its eternal sufferer, the one who is forever killed and whose eternal agony reflects the suffering of the Jewish people. This dialogue touches upon the question of whether Jesus is a victim or a victimizer; by establishing the dichotomy of "us" and "them," it turns the question into one of collective identity. Since Jesus is the one who is being killed, he is being embraced as "one of us"—that is, Jewish. Keynan parodies the historical Jewish relationship to Jesus by presenting it as conditioned by Jesus' victimhood. As long as Jesus is a victim, he belongs to "us," the Jewish people, because we are the eternal victims. Keynan mocks the Jewish collective consciousness of victimhood, not so much by mocking Jesus as by mocking the modern Jewish perception of his figure and the Jewish attempts to claim him for the side of the victims.

In 1972, the Committee of Israeli Cinema and Drama decided to forbid the performance of this play. The committee argued that its content might offend some viewers. An appeal to the Israeli Supreme Court, which included a commitment by Keynan to change the name of the play to *Friends Remember Spartacus*, was rejected. The decision was based on the assumption that the play was offensive to two very different Israeli groups: religious people, both Christians and Jews, and parents of fallen soldiers. The committee used the phrase *arakhim mekudashim* (sacred values) when explaining to the court why the play should be forbidden. When asked by the court to explain what sacred values the play might offend and which people might be offended, the committee answered that it might be offensive to religious and secular viewers:

The play contains expressions of disgrace and dirty language toward God in general and Jesus and his mother Mary in particular. These expressions are offensive and may insult the feelings of those who believe in God and those who believe in Jesus and his holiness, and in the holiness of Mary, his mother. In addition, the play may offend the feelings of parents of fallen soldiers and we also think that it offends social and moral values and values of politeness and respect because of its profanity and nudity.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, the play contains some vulgar episodes, including a dialogue between Jesus and his mother in which he calls her a whore, which the court cites as an example of the play's offensive nature.<sup>35</sup> But it seems that what triggered the rejection of Keynan's play goes beyond the disrespectful utterances. The connection that Keynan made between the figure of Jesus and the Israeli ethos of war and death, and the fact that he dismissed both as empty symbols, was understood as mere provocation. The emblem of the fallen warrior was not new to Israelis in the 1970s, but as Yael Feldman shows in her book *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative* (2010), the main trope of this theme was Isaac's sacrifice. Feldman discusses the transformation of "future 'Isaacs'" from sacrificial victims to heroic self-immolating sacrifices on the altar of the *matria* (*moledet*, or the motherland).<sup>36</sup> In the case of Jesus, this shift was more complicated. Modern Hebrew writers such as Klausner, Kabak, Hazaz, and Greenberg implicitly transformed Jesus from his passivity on the cross into a symbol of the national hero. But in the later generation of writers, Jesus never gained the status of an Israeli soldier. It seems the fallen soldier role was solely Isaac's,

and perhaps the mere fact that Keynan broke this unwritten rule was partly what prompted the scandal over his play.<sup>37</sup> Jesus is not presented in Israeli literature as a fallen soldier, not even as a warrior; and when he is depicted as a victim in the later works, he is removed from the national context. Jesus' victimhood, in other words, was not embraced by Israeli writers as an emblem of the national narrative of sacrifice and martyrdom.<sup>38</sup>

### *An Ironic Look in the Mirror*

Keynan's play continues a long tradition of the ironic Jewish gaze, directed not at the figure of Jesus itself, but rather at the Jewish fascination with it. Alongside the Jewish preoccupation with this controversial figure was opposition to the enthusiasm it evoked. This opposition came not only from Orthodox Jewish circles, but also from a few Zionist intellectuals. One important example of the latter is the book *Herev la-Adonay ve-le-Yisrael* [A sword for the Lord and Israel] by writer and bibliographer Ephraim Deinard (1846–1930). It harshly criticizes Klausner's *Yeshu ha-Notsri* (see chapter 1) and his enchantment with Christianity, particularly with the figure of Jesus.<sup>39</sup>

But critical voices such as Deinard's did not prevail in the first decades of the twentieth century. The tendency was toward a familial embrace of this "lost brother." As we have seen throughout this book, despite the ambivalence toward Jesus—and perhaps thanks to it—modern Jewish writers were attracted to Jesus and made him an emblem in their works. This is why the few Jesus stories by Nobel laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon are so remarkable in their reflexive awareness, especially since two of them were written as early as the beginning of the 1920s. Indeed, as I have just shown, Jewish writers employed irony in their writings about Jesus already at the beginning of the century, but their irony was directed mostly toward Jesus himself and in many cases at his believers. Agnon was one of the first to introduce a reflexive-ironic look not at Jesus, but at his Jewish followers. Given this chronology, it may seem that a discussion of Agnon's work on Jesus should perhaps have found its place at the beginning of this book rather than in its last pages. However, only after we are familiar with the long trajectory of modern Jewish duality toward Jesus can we really appreciate the depth of Agnon's irony and self-awareness. Jesus is not a central figure in Agnon's work, yet the few of his stories that focus on Jesus reveal a critique of the writers who made his figure a pivotal symbol in theirs.

In his 1923 story "*Ma'agelei tzedek*" [Paths of righteousness], Agnon follows the adventures of a poor old Jew whose ancestors were wine merchants, while he was a mere vinegar maker.<sup>40</sup> This change of profession alludes to the

Hebrew idiom "*hometz ben yayin*" (vinegar, the offspring of wine), meaning a son who is greatly inferior to his father. The vinegar maker lived in poverty, loneliness, and desperation; his only hope and aim in life was to immigrate to the Land of Israel. To this end, he divides his earnings into two halves: one half supports his basic daily needs while the second half he naively deposits in a public charity box placed between the crossed hands of a statue of Jesus, believing this is the safest place for his money. When the time comes to make the trip to the Holy Land, he goes to the public charity box and attempts to break it open with a stone to take what he believes to be his own money. A group of priests happens to come along, and the old man is beaten and jailed. During his trial the judge asks him: "Do you admit that you were caught trying to break open the box?" The old man answers: "I wanted to open the box because of the money." The judge does not let him finish and pronounces: "The defendant has confessed his crime." The man looks up and, seeing the image of Jesus, says in his heart, "You are smiling at me [in mockery]!" Desperate, he bangs his chained arms on the table and is thereupon beaten and taken to his cell. Back in the jail cell, the door opens suddenly—a man enters, holding a stone charity box, and tells the old man, "Hold on to me and I will bring you to any place you want to go." The old man holds tight to "that man" (*oto ha-ish*), meaning Jesus, who smiles and says: "I will bring you to the Land of Israel." They flee in several stages: during the first flight, the smile leaves "that man's" face; during the second flight, the old man's hands freeze; during the third flight, the vinegar maker feels he is embracing a stone. Becoming discouraged, his arms go slack, and he falls onto the ground. That night, we are told, "a knock was heard on the door of a house of study in Jerusalem. Those inside came out to see a band of angels carrying a human being. He was buried that night, because burials are never delayed in Jerusalem."<sup>41</sup>

The late Agnon scholar Baruch Kurzweil argued that Agnon typically plays with his readers a game of hide-and-seek, "as if he wants the reader to fail by tempting him to leave the easy road to solving the riddle. . . . Then he leaves the reader to wonder." According to Kurzweil, "this technique of constant revealing and covering (*giluy ve-hastara*) is found in almost all of Agnon's stories, which he employs for religious and cultural critique."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, this story uses the format of a deceiving riddle to criticize the ways in which modern Jews are fascinated by, and attribute human and divine traits to, the figure of Jesus that they encounter only through its visual Christian representations.<sup>43</sup>

This story's focus is not the figure of Jesus but rather how the old man perceives this figure. The old vinegar maker here represents the current generation,

which, unlike previous generations, is tempted to put its trust in Jesus. Agnon depicts the old man as naïve, but also as an extremist devoted to only one wish—to immigrate to the Land of Israel. He cannot see the statue of Jesus for what it is; he does not notice its context—the church—but rather sees only the crossing of its hands, and in those hands he sees nothing but a safe place for his money. The old vinegar maker, in other words, symbolizes those who refuse to understand Jesus as part of Christianity and the Church, preferring not even to look at his whole figure, seeing him only as a savior instead.

This interpretive lapse provokes the old man's first ordeal, which leads him to prison. The next time he sees Jesus is in the courtroom, as a painting hanging on the wall. In both of these appearances, Jesus is not a real figure; he is Jesus as traditionally represented in the Christian world. But the third time that Jesus appears in the story he is a real man, or more precisely, "*ke-mar'eh ben adam*" (in a human image). The author refers to Jesus' humanness but dismisses his humanity at the same time, as a mere deception. The question of Jesus' humanity now becomes the main interpretative problem. Like Klausner, Kabak, Greenberg, and many others, the old vinegar maker wants very much to believe in Jesus' humanness, and at the same time sees that he could use Jesus' transcendental powers now, when he needs them. Agnon is careful not to call Jesus by name; instead, he uses the traditional Hebrew designation *oto ha-ish* (that man), emphasizing his rejection by the Jews and (as discussed above) his humanness at the same time. By using this Rabbinic term, he also associates his narrator with the Rabbinic tradition while criticizing those who broke from it.

Agnon mocks and criticizes the tendency of modern Jewish writers to trust and rely on Jesus' redemptive powers. Jewish writers' and historians' attempts since the middle of the nineteenth century to claim Jesus for Judaism and pull him out of the Church are presented in this story as mere naiveté. Agnon reminds his readers that, in the end, Jesus is just a statue made of stone, placed in the Christian Church. Jesus will not bring national redemption and will not help to bring the Jews to their promised land because he is a fiction, a stone image, a Christian idol.

Agnon's ironic depiction of the old man is directed at the current generation but is also a warning for generations to come. Indeed, Agnon could all but guess that decades later Israeli writers would long for Jesus as a representative of a desired culture. It seems, however, that the irony in this story serves to warn Agnon's contemporaries against desiring Jesus, while ignoring Christianity. One of the most essential elements in Klausner's and Greenberg's depictions of Jesus, which many Hebrew writers followed, was the

distinction between the historical Jewish Jesus and the Jesus of the Church. Agnon mocks this distinction in this story and depicts its implications ironically. The irony emerges from the apparent misperception of the figure of Jesus when removed from its wider context. While at the beginning of the story the reader feels superior to the old vinegar maker, knowing he was naïve to put his money in the church charity box, at the end of the story, the reader is not sure who brought the man to the Land of Israel or who Jesus is after all. In this way, Agnon directs his critique at his readers, making them question their own perception and understanding of Jesus and his metaphysical nature. Recall that irony reveals the expectations of the reader and, by extension, his or her social and cultural norms. The reader becomes aware of his or her own expectations, and may question his or her own cultural norms, which is exactly what Agnon forces the reader to do in this story. For Kierkegaard, the true ironist does not wish to be understood and therefore irony normally involves the possibility of misunderstanding.<sup>44</sup> In the case of Agnon, misunderstanding is the force that moves the story, from both the character's and the reader's perspective. The figure of Jesus is misunderstood and remains an illusionary figure when the story comes to its end.

The question of interpreting the Jewish Jesus also stands at the center of Agnon's story "*Nifla'ot shammash beit ha-midrash ha-yashan*" [The wonders of the caretaker of the old study hall] (1925).<sup>45</sup> At the beginning of the story we are told in a somewhat humorous tone that the old study hall's caretaker (shammash) is bothered at the end of the Sabbath because his yarmulke (skullcap) and tallit (prayer shawl) repeatedly fall off. In fright, he rushes outside and notices that the lights in the nearby church are on. He reports this to a policeman. A Christian official overhears the conversation and, together with the policeman, he goes to the illuminated church, where they see what they believe to be a Jew wearing a skullcap and prayer shawl and "a compassionate smile on his lips."<sup>46</sup> Believing him to be a robber, they beat him mercilessly. His prayer shawl and skullcap fall off and they realize that they are beating a statue of Jesus. The Christians try to blame the incident on the town's Jews, but it turns out that the church's sexton had robbed the church, and that to implicate the Jews, he had placed the skullcap and prayer shawl on the statue of Jesus. The sexton is beaten viciously, and the Christians then go to a bar to enjoy themselves. Jews also come to the bar to thank God for their rescue. The narrator mentions that from this time on, the skullcap and prayer shawl remained firmly on the head of the study hall's caretaker.<sup>47</sup>

This story uses an illusionary image of Jesus to depict stereotypes held by Jews and Christians toward each other. The figure of Jesus, or rather his statue, looks like a Jew; and as such, it brings out both Christian and Jewish perceptions of one another. For the Christians, this apparition parodies the fear of Jesus' Jewish aspects to the point that they would prefer he remain a statue than become a living being who is also a Jew. For Jews, it parodies both their view of Jesus as a Jew and their perception of the Christians' perception of this Jewish Jesus.

These conflicting images of Jesus serve to demonstrate the ways in which Christian and Jewish communities *imagine* each other. The Christians are horrified by the fact that their statue of Jesus might look like a Jew, because the Jew is their ultimate Other. The Jew who tells this story reveals aspects of Jewish self-perception when he describes the Judaized Jesus as having "a compassionate smile on his lips," a sympathetic characterization that suggests that this description comes from a Jewish perspective. At the same time, the Jewish narrator uses the image of Jesus to ridicule the Christian belief in a god who, from the Jewish perspective, is made of stone.

In this story, the ironic gaze at Jesus is more complicated than in the earlier story. Here, Jesus is not a savior or messiah. In this case, rather, we learn through the figure of Jesus of the ways that Jews imagine themselves and their Christian neighbors. Jesus serves as a symbolic mirror, reflecting the ways the two communities think of themselves and of one another. Again, using Jesus as a mirror would become a pivotal theme in modern Jewish literature, but here Agnon captures and criticizes this mirror's deceptive nature. In this story, more than in Agnon's earlier work, Christians have a crucial role, beyond the realms of Christianity or the Church. In a sense, Jesus stands here between the Jews and the Christians, designating the boundaries of the Jewish Self vis-à-vis its Christian neighbors.

Another example of Jesus' use as a reflecting mirror is found in Agnon's famous story "*Ha-adonit ve-ha-rokhel*" ["The Lady and the Peddler"] (1943).<sup>48</sup> Here, too, Agnon uses the image of Jesus as the ultimate designator of the boundaries of the Jewish Self.<sup>49</sup> This story depicts the relationship between a "certain Jewish peddler" named Joseph and a Christian woman named Helen. The Jewish peddler, who first finds shelter at the woman's home, ends up staying there and becoming her lover. The two live together happily, except that some of her behavior troubles him. In particular, it bothers him that she never eats, while at the same time she obsessively feeds him. When he finds out that she has been married several times before, and that all of her husbands were mysteriously murdered, the reader begins to suspect that something odd is going on. It

will take Joseph a few more pages to suspect that the lady has something to do with these deaths. Indeed, numerous hints suggest that she may have eaten her husbands. Ironically, a crucifix saves Joseph from the same fate.

When Joseph suspects his time to be eaten has come, he does not escape; rather, he seeks to recite the bedtime prayer of the *Shema*, while piously avoiding doing so in the presence of a Christian image: "Since there was a crucifix hanging on the wall, he got up and went outside to recite the *Shema*." There he promptly bumps into a "stone image" (of Jesus) that stood in the snow. Amazed at himself, Joseph shouts: "Father in heaven, how far away I have gone! If I don't return at once, I am lost."<sup>50</sup>

The story criticizes Jewish naiveté and attraction to Christianity. The image of Jesus functions as a mirror, reflecting the transgressed boundaries of Joseph's self. As a Jewish peddler, the figure of Joseph may allude to the figure of the Wandering Jew (also known as Ahasver). This mythical figure is based on a Medieval tale of a Jew who cursed Jesus and was doomed to forever wonder the earth.<sup>51</sup>

The figure of Jesus, or rather its representation, reminds Joseph of the foreignness of his current life. What saves him from being consumed by Christianity is the image of Jesus. It is Jesus' otherness that reminds the peddler how far he has strayed. In his role as "other," Jesus thus demarcates the boundaries of Jewish identity, especially in periods where this identity is under threat. This threat is both physical, due to acts of violence against Jews (note that the story was written in 1943), and spiritual, as embodied by the temptations of Christianity.

Here, too, we find the duality in the Jewish perception of Jesus. The night after Joseph first sees Helen crossing herself in front of "a stone image," he has a dream:

During the night Joseph awoke from his sleep in terror and screamed with all his might. It seemed to him that a knife had been thrust into his heart, and not into his heart but into that stone image, and not into the stone image, but into another image made of ice, the kind the Christians make on the river during their holidays.<sup>52</sup>

This dream reflects Jesus' dual role in Jewish self-perception. The Jewish dreamer sees himself as Jesus, and, as such, he appears both as a stone image—the god of his Christian wife—and as himself, the Jewish dreamer.<sup>53</sup> The confusion

in the dream between himself and the "stone image" can be interpreted as Jewish identification with the image of Jesus, which seems to be triggered by a threat to his being. Indeed, when Joseph finally realizes that he is at risk, what symbolizes his fear for his life and the loss of his Jewishness is the Jesus figure. This dream pushes Joseph to act for the first time: he moves out from the lady's bedroom into the barn—a symbolic act that marks the beginning of his possible return to Judaism.

"The Lady and the Peddler" is not a story about Jesus, but rather a story about the Jewish Self and what happens to it when it gives itself away for the sake of assimilating into the Christian world. Following the encounters with Jesus, the Jew realizes his own foreignness, which can be understood as similar to that of the Jewish Jesus in the Christian world. He also realizes the threat embodied in Christianity. The figure of Jesus symbolizes the otherness of this world; at the same time, for the Jewish man, it reflects his own Self.

Jesus and the cross function in Agnon's stories as the markers of Jewish self-identity. When Joseph sees the crucifix in the lady's house and when he later bumps into the statue of Jesus outside her home, he is finally reminded of his Jewishness. Interestingly, it is exactly these symbols of the cross and Jesus that Agnon's contemporary, the Yiddish poet Itzik Manger, misses in the works of the founders of modern Yiddish literature. In an essay appearing in his literary journal *Getseylte verter* [A few words] (1929), Manger argues that while the writers of his own generation include the figure of Jesus and the cross in their works, the classical Yiddish writers—Mendele Mokher Seforim, Sholem Aleichem, and Y.L. Peretz—ignored Jesus and any signs of Christianity and its symbolism. Manger accuses these founders of modern Yiddish literature of being blind to the figure of Jesus and to the cross. He wonders why the cross and the "man that hangs on it" are absent from these writers' otherwise very precise and realistic depictions of the landscape of Eastern European Jewry.<sup>54</sup> In Manger's view, Christianity and its symbolism are necessary for an accurate and realistic depiction of the reality of the East European Jewish experience. Meanwhile, Agnon finds in the attraction to Christianity an imminent threat to modern Judaism. In his view, it is a menacing temptation: modern Jews seem to be blind not to Christianity itself, but to its threat to their Jewishness.

For Manger, the cross functions as a symbol of universal suffering and despair, side by side with other symbols of suffering:

Never before has there been an intersection of so many symbols. Our generation wavers between Yes and No. Hamlet's tousled head floats through sleepless nights. Blood has pictured the agony of our generation and scattered crucifixes over all the roads of the world. Christ's head sobs symbolically in our dreams. Our wounds require consolation. The hand of the holy Saint Francis of Assisi presses upon our heart. Our blood is stormy with revolt. The burden of Prometheus flashes before our eyes. Our nerves yearn toward joy and ecstasy. The golden form of the holy Baal Shem Tov is drawn distinctly upon the horizons.<sup>55</sup>

The crucifixes—presented next to the Baal Shem Tov and Prometheus—are, in Manger's view, legitimate universal emblems of human agony. It seems as if these two different views reflect one of the most eminent tensions in the relationship between modern Jewish writers and thinkers and the figure of Jesus. For writers like Agnon and the founders of Yiddish literature whom Manger criticizes, the figure of Jesus represents the world of Christianity. In this world Jews have no place, just as Jesus and Christian symbols have no place in a Jewish landscape. This is why Mendele Mokher Seforim, Sholem Aleichem, and Y.L. Peretz do not integrate the image of Jesus into their works even if their protagonists routinely come across this figure. The Jews in Agnon's "The Wonders of the Caretaker of the Old Study Hall" see Jesus, but they believe him to be a Jew. In the case of "The Lady and the Peddler," Joseph sees Christianity but refuses to see the danger posed, similar to the way the old vinegar maker does not see Christianity and its symbols as they really are. For Agnon, Jesus marks where Judaism stops and Christianity begins. In Manger's case, there is no historical or religious reason not to embrace the cross as a symbol of suffering and to depict the Christian landscape as an integral part of the reality of everyday Jewish lives in Europe.<sup>56</sup> Agnon understood Christian symbolism as part of the European landscape, but he believed that it should function as a sign of warning for Jews who did not want Judaism to be devoured by the world of Christianity.

Interestingly, it is in Israel—where Jewish writers lived away from churches and crosses—that writers kept seeing the "man that hangs on the cross." As I have shown in chapter 3, many Israeli writers depict Jesus as a symbol of universal suffering, unknowingly following Manger's call for universalism in spite of the Holocaust. In Yiddish literature in the aftermath of the Holocaust, however, there was less tolerance for such universalism employing the figure of Jesus as its main trope. One interesting expression of this disillusionment is an ironic

poem written in 1946 by the American Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein (1896–1971). The poem, titled "Mozart," describes the poet's dream, in which Mozart is the crucified man whom the Jews make into their "man of God." In an ironic twist, the gentiles are the ones who crucify Mozart, while the Jews are those who elevate him and become his apostles. The poet himself becomes Mozart's follower and runs all over the world, declaring that "whenever I caught a Christian I made him a Mozartian."

How wonderful is the musical testament  
of this divine man!  
How nailed through with song  
his shining hands!  
In his great need  
all the fingers of this crucified  
singer were laughing.  
And in his most crying grief  
he loved his neighbor's ear  
more than himself.

How poor and stingy—  
Compared with Mozart's legacy—  
Is the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>57</sup>

The Sermon on the Mount, praised by modern Jewish writers as the place where Christianity and Judaism meet, is presented here as "poor and stingy compared with Mozart's legacy." But what is Mozart's legacy? In a sense, this poem can be read in two opposite ways. In one, Mozart is being embraced as the "Jewish Jesus," the crucified one whom a modern Jewish poet such as Glatstein can embrace. Mozart's music symbolizes here the real fulfillment of universalism, in the ability "to love his neighbor's ear more than himself." But this ode to Mozart can also be interpreted as an ironic expression directed at the modern Jewish admiration for European culture. Mozart is the symbol of this culture, and he is mocked, very much like the Sermon on the Mount and the crucifixion itself, as an empty symbol that Jews adore in their attempt to be part of a culture that treats them as outsiders. In the same way that the gentiles took the Jewish Jesus and made him their god, Glatstein depicts the Jews as choosing a Christian as their divine man. The poet's superficial praises create an ironic statement: "How wonderful is the musical testament of this divine man! How nailed through with song his shining hands!" Glatstein mocks

modern Jewish admiration for Western aesthetics, and he presents the Jewish enthusiasm for Mozart as analogous to the modern Jewish fervor for Jesus and Christianity. This interpretation reveals an uncommon element in modern Jewish writing. Many modern Jewish writers and thinkers considered Jesus' teaching, and in particular the Sermon on the Mount, as the place where Christianity and Judaism meet. However, Glatstein mocks Jesus' message, presenting it in terms opposing those in which Jews interpreted it. Instead of a generous call for unconditional love and an attempt to bridge these two peoples, Glatstein sees it as "poor and stingy," using the comparison to Mozart's legacy to depict Jesus' legacy as non-universal—one that does not reach out to his "neighbor's ear." This critical look is directed both at the content of the preaching and at the much-praised universal ethics and impressive aesthetic of the Sermon on the Mount.

Here, Glatstein criticizes Jewish attempts to become part of Western society by trying to create their own "man of God" in the image of Jesus. Considering the fact that the poem was written soon after the end of World War II, probably as a response to the Holocaust, the poem can be read as an ironic statement on the Jewish admiration for Western culture and aesthetics, a culture that ended up crucifying its own legacy with a spectacle of mass murder.

This Jewish awakening from its admiration of European culture and its aesthetic values was not at all a widespread response to the Holocaust. In Israel, as I have shown, this admiration had become even more prevalent as an attempt to escape from religious and parochial Jewish lives into what was perceived as Western and therefore "universal." The Jewish Jesus—or, perhaps, the Jesus that is not necessarily Jewish—remains a dominant symbol in contemporary Hebrew literature in spite of, and one might even argue because of, the Holocaust. This escape to the European Jesus might be seen as an attempt to escape from the Jewish Self that was murdered in the Holocaust, a Self that many Israeli writers tried to suppress. In this respect, the work of Yoel Hoffmann (see chapter 4) can be viewed as an attempt to return to this Self, especially in his "Book of Joseph," where he commemorates Jewish lives before the war.

### *Judeo-Christian Tradition on the Spit*

At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed the notion of "counter-history" and its application to *Toldot Yeshu*. One may wonder why this term is not applied to modern Jewish works about Jesus as well. In fact, it would be fair to say that most of the works I have dealt with do not offer an *alternative* to the

Christian story, but rather an incorporation of this story into the national Jewish narrative. Even the attempt to distinguish between the "real" Jesus and the Jesus of the Church is based on the Gospels' rendition of this "real" Jesus.

The modern Jewish choice to adopt Jesus as the prevalent symbol of suffering was an attempt to become "universal," though in fact it was an adoption of the very particular Christian outlook. The theme of the suffering son of God was borrowed from Christianity and adapted to the modern Jewish and Israeli narratives. The fact that this figure was the ultimate Other of traditional Judaism was sometimes the very reason for its incorporation into the modern Jewish texts.

Perhaps the best way to conclude this book is by discussing an Israeli play that criticizes and mocks the so-called "Judeo-Christian" tradition and, in a way, offers a type of "counter-history," including the ironic aspects we have seen in *Toldot Yeshu*. The play, written by one of Israel's most prominent dramatists and playwrights, the late Hanoch Levin (1943–1999), is called *The Sorrows of Job* (1981). It is, as one may assume from its name, a retelling of the story of the biblical Job. However, as we shall see, the play also retells the story of the crucifixion and ironically unifies the Old and the New Testament figures of Job and Jesus.

*The Sorrows of Job* deals with questions such as God's existence and divine justice, but, typical of Levin, it uses these themes to expose the weaknesses of human nature. What matters to Levin is not the question of God's existence or the question of a just God—which famously stands at the center of the biblical story—but rather the ways that mankind deals with these questions. In a clear break from the original story, the play omits the biblical introduction that reveals the reason for Job's agony: an argument between God and Satan, in which Satan claims that Job's virtue is actually untested. If God were to destroy Job's life, Satan argues, Job would curse God. God then gives Satan permission to test Job's righteousness by agonizing him (Job 1:1–2:7). The play starts with a description of Job's wealth and happiness and, like the biblical story, presents the losses that Job suffers. But by omitting the divine wager, Job's torments receive no explanation. Job loses everything, including his beloved children and his entire fortune, and finds himself sick with boils. His friends come along, trying to convince him not to curse God. Job asks time and again why God destroyed his life, and each of his friends gives an answer that represents a theological tradition that explains divine justice and the nature of God.

Yet in an ironic break from the biblical story, the friends who have taken pains to convince Job that he should not curse God, take the opposite stand



in the next act when they themselves are threatened with torture. This follows an additional important break from the biblical narrative: Levin introduces his readers and characters to yet another sorrow that Job is doomed to suffer, but this time it is inflicted on him not by God or Satan but by his fellow man. A group of Roman soldiers enters the stage and demands that Job and his friends proclaim that their God does not exist and that the emperor of Rome is the one and only God. When Job does not respond to their demand, his friends try to blame it on his sorrow, which has caused him to lose his sanity. Then the Roman officer presents the first clear analogy between Job and Jesus:

Anyway, when is madness an excuse? That nut in the next village who claims to be the son of God already has twelve disciples. So? Are they nuts too? Should the imperial army sit on its ass and leave the world alone because it's a nuthouse?<sup>58</sup>

This clear allusion to the historical Jesus places the play in the Second-Temple era and presents both Jesus and Job as the great symbols of the question of man's unjust suffering. But, in fact, Levin does more than that. He uses the figure of Jesus to offer another answer to the question of God's nature. In this respect, this allusion to Jesus points to a different view in the philosophical-theological debate: the Christian view. The Jesus figure serves as another answer to the question of God's existence, but like the answers of the friends, and the one of the Roman soldiers (that God is actually the Emperor), it is also ridiculed and depicted as a human fantasy. In order to represent this analogy between Job and Jesus, Levin adds to his play an additional torture in the form of an "improved" crucifixion—those who refuse to say that the Emperor is God will have "a spit stuck up their rear."<sup>59</sup> The friends soon announce that God is the Emperor, but Job says nothing and therefore is placed on the spit. This clear allusion to the crucifixion ridicules the New Testament story, using a detailed description of the physical pain experienced in that not-so-holy part of the body.<sup>60</sup> The "crucifixion" scene is presented here as a mere farce:

OFFICER: That man's whole being  
Is now concentrated in his ass.  
All family ties, instincts,  
Feelings, loyalties, and opinions  
Are all mixed up in a shapeless mass—  
A heavy fog and the awful pain in his ass

Flickers like the beam from a lighthouse. . . .

JOB: Oh My bowels! My bowels! Oh, god! My bowels, my bowels! Oh god, my bowels.<sup>61</sup>

The officer's reference to Job as "that man" alludes to the Talmudic designation of Jesus that can be understood as stressing his humanness. With the analogy established, what is happening to Job amounts to a crucifixion. Only the analogy reveals what the New Testament does not tell us about the crucifixion. Inspired, I believe, by *Toldot Yeshu's* depiction of Jesus being crucified on a cabbage stalk, Levin uses a method similar to that of the medieval text. He takes the image of the suffering martyr and reveals the unheroic aspects of his suffering. In fact, the most human elements of the physical pain and agony are depicted in a way that degrades and humiliates the suffering Job/Jesus. The tragic hero of both stories lacks the sympathy of the author, as well as of the other characters in the play. Job/Jesus is depicted by Levin as a child calling to his father/God:

Papa, they raise me up to you on an iron pole.  
On poles and crosses and spears and pyres they raise us,  
Our arms stretched out to our father.  
I'm riding up to my Papa, on a knife.  
How dreadful is the trip but how great the grace,  
How sweet the response and the end of the journey—  
To look my Papa in the face.<sup>62</sup>

The analogy between Jesus and Job reduces God, Job, and Jesus to the level of ordinary human beings. Jesus, the Son of God, symbol of human divinity, is portrayed as a fearful child calling to his dad, who is also no longer a divine figure.

The friends' reaction to Job's suffering alludes to the depictions of the suffering Jesus:

See how he's looking at me. His tormented eyes stare at me  
with the boldness of someone you owe something to. [. . .]  
So take those pleas out of your eye!  
I told you: you are you and I am—I!  
You hear? You are you and I am—I!  
You are you and I am—I!  
Shut your eyes! Or lift them to the sky,



Villain! Look for your papa in the sky,  
 Shout to the sky and cry to the sky,  
 Go weep in the bosom of your god that is here on earth—  
 O horrors—you lost your drawers!<sup>63</sup>

The figure on the spit that just minutes ago was a fellow man, a friend of the speaker, becomes a threat because of its suffering. These words echo the Jewish perceptions of Jesus, whose torments give him the status of a martyr. His martyrdom becomes his power, and the crowd that watches him suffer becomes wary of its subordination to his authority as a martyr. Typical of Levin, the play exposes human weakness at its core. The friends who look at the suffering Job/Jesus do not really see his pain, but immediately worry about what this pain means to them. The Christian dogma of the suffering Son of Man is ridiculed here by the fact that instead of clearing and purifying man's guilt, it actually provokes it.

Job, who in the beginning of his ordeal asks to be separated from the bosom of the Lord, is now talking to his Lord. In fact, when his friends are about to leave him, he cries out the words of Jesus, but with an ironic twist:

Don't leave me alone with god!  
 My friends, don't leave me  
 Alone with god!<sup>64</sup>

Echoing Jesus' cry to God on the cross, this appeal to his friends not to leave (that is, forsake) him with God shifts the focus back to God himself. The friends who are about to leave, and who have just shown their inability to help, are still better than the god Job refuses to curse. The god that let him suffer so much, the one who is also his own father, is now more threatening than his fellow men.

Levin, however, is not as naïve as his protagonist. Soon he shows his Job/Jesus and his readers that man is in fact crueler than God—the suffering of Job will feed some people metaphorically and literally. A ringmaster enters the stage and cuts a deal with the officer to use the suffering man as an entertainer. Not only that, but in the very last scene “the most beggarly beggar of all beggars” enters and says:

Just like I said: A little patience  
 And somebody finally pukes. Yes,  
 There's a god in the sky  
 Tra-la-la, tra-la-lie.<sup>65</sup>

The question of God's just ways, and how a just man can suffer, is raised time and again by the protagonists in the play, but Levin uses the allusion to the crucifixion to deem this question irrelevant. In the end, man's joy and suffering are at the hands of his fellow man. In response to the question “What is a man?” Levin brings the words of the solemn clown, paraphrasing Pontius Pilate's *ecce homo* regarding Jesus (John 19:5):

For what is a man? *Here's a man for you:*  
 Now he cries “my sons, my sons,” now he shouts “my ass, my ass”  
 At night roasted doves in his mouth, at dawn a poker up his behind.  
 Then he sang, now he weeps, soon he'll be mute.<sup>66</sup>

*The Sorrows of Job* connects two themes discussed in this chapter: mocking the suffering Jesus and criticizing the Judeo-Christian understanding of his suffering. Levin makes the connection between Jesus and Job in order to show the similarities between the two religions. He criticizes their attempts to give human pain a religious meaning and to explain human suffering as the result of a divine plan. One of the primary literary means that Levin uses is irony, which is created by his break from both the Old and the New Testament stories. Modern Judeo-Christian attempts to ask “universal” questions (“What is evil?” “Why do the righteous suffer?”) are mocked as Job is executed neither for humanity's sake, nor for the sake of God, but simply to affirm brutal power and cruelty.

### Conclusions

As we have seen throughout the book, modern Hebrew (and Yiddish) writers removed the figure of Jesus from its Christian context to serve as a designator of the modern Jewish Self. This Self, which modern Hebrew writers were eager to re-shape and appropriate, was found in the very figure who in traditional Judaism served as the ultimate Other. In this Other, the writers found what was missing in their old Jewish Self. That, as we have seen, had to be a Jesus different from both the Christian figure and the old Jewish perception of it. This dichotomous and sometimes even oxymoronic Jesus is depicted by different generations of modern Jewish writers as a reflection of a still-fractured selfhood.

In this book I have traced Jesus' footsteps in modern Jewish literature: from Beth-Lehem of Judah, to the monasteries and churches of Europe, back to the Land of Israel, where Jesus was transformed into a Jewish pioneer, only

to be relocated in Europe again by contemporary Israeli writers, and then to reappear in Tel Aviv. This journey offers an alternative historiography of modern Jewish literature, as it follows the path of the twentieth-century Jewish Self, both geographically and culturally. Jesus serves in this historiography as the ultimate Other—whom, for a century, many Jewish writers have struggled to bring back home and transform into a brother.

## Notes

### INTRODUCTION

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine. Yair Zakovitch's poem has been translated with his permission.
2. Theodore Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 7–8.
3. This motto was borrowed from Y.L. Gordon's 1863 poem "Hakitsa ami" [Wake up, my nation]. See: Y.L. Gordon, *Shirey higayon, meshalim, shirey alila* [Lyrics, fables, and epics] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1963), 3.
4. Mendelssohn voiced this position in a philosophical debate with Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801) during 1770–1771. Mendelssohn did not initiate the debate but was cornered by Lavater, a Christian theologian who was determined to find out the Jewish philosopher's opinion on Christianity.
5. Isaak Markus Jost, *Geschichte des Judentums und seiner Sekten* [History of Judaism and its sects] (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1857–1859), 3:401–2.
6. Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 132.
7. *Ibid.*, 158–60.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Fragments*, ed. Charles H. Talbert, trans. Ralph S. Fraser (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 1–43.
10. Simon Dubnow, *Divrey yemey am olam* [The history of the Jewish people] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1966), 160.
11. Dubnow in this regard is a rather unusual case. He was born and raised in Eastern Europe and was active there until he moved to Berlin, where he published *Divrey yemey am olam*.
12. Noah Rosenblum, "Ha-anti-tetiyut ha-te'ologit-historit she-ba-Natsrut be-shirat Uri Zvi Greenberg" [The theological-historical antinomistic dimensions of Christianity in the poetry of Uri Zvi Greenberg], *Prakim* 4 (1966): 276.
13. See chapter 1.

לראו א טרע-וועג אינערשעקציע: די ווערט אבער פֿעסאך אַל קוקבײַט], *דאָרײַט יע-מענראַר ha-sifrut* 10 (1996); Michael Gluzman, "Pesach al kukhim," *Teoriya u-bikoret* (1999): 1–12.

"Ruach ba-arbe" was published in *Haaretz* on September 26, 1952.

On Yeshurun's marginality in the modern Hebrew canon, see Michael Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). On Yeshurun's poetic style, see Yochai Oppenheimer, *Tenu li ledaber kemo she-ani: Shirat Avot Yeshurun* [Let me speak as I am: the poetry of Avot Yeshurun] (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, 1997).

David Weinfeld, "Kama milim al Avot Yeshurun ve-al shir ehad shelo" [A few words on Avot Yeshurun and on one poem of his], *Siman kriah* 3–4 (1974): 350–53.

Avot Yeshurun, *Kol shirav* [The complete poems] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, 1995), 1:214.

In an interview with his daughter, Halit Yeshurun, Avot Yeshurun said that his mother blamed the family's troubles on the fact that they lived next to a church, and in the apartment of a Polish coffin maker (*Hadarim* 3 [1982]: 92–109).

Ida Zurit notes in her biography of Yeshurun that "Yehiel's separation from his family and city is an abundant theme, almost an obsession, throughout all of Avot Yeshurun's poetry. It is possible to connect all of the sections which deal with the separation from his earlier poems to his later ones without adding any interpretation—and obtain the entirety of the separation story, in all of its details and nuances." See *Shirat ha-pere ha-atsil—biografiya shel ha-meshorer Avot Yeshurun* [The poetry of the wild savage: biography of the poet Avot Yeshurun] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, 1995), 40.

Yeshurun started writing this poem in 1932 while working as a farmer in the village of Magdi'el. In 1983 he wrote in his book *Homograph*: "Magdi'el is Magdalene." See *Kol shirav*, 3:268.

Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, 1:11. The word rendered as "disaster" [ason] may also mean, in Ashkenazi accent, a female donkey. See Benyamin Harshav and Halit Yeshurun, in their notes to Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, 1:283.

Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, 1:13.

Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, 4:87. "XVII–XVIII" means the 17th–18th centuries, probably a reference to the years that the church was built.

On this characteristic in Yeshurun's poetry, see, for example, Menachem Perry in an interview with Halit Yeshurun (Avot Yeshurun's daughter, who is also a literary editor and translator): "The border line between the personal biography and his poetry is completely blurred. The poems are written in him twenty-four hours a day, the external elements that he encounters in his daily life go through his melting pot, and are mixed in his biographical, personal experience" (Zurit, *Shirat ha-pere ha-atsil*, 40). On the connection between Yeshurun's poetry and his biography, see Lilach Lachman's important article "Mi ya'ase et avodat ha-zikhronot?" [Who will perform the labor of memory?], *Haaretz*, March 3, 1995.

15. Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, 4:190.

16. On this topic, see Oded Wolkstein, "Kibalti et mikhtavkhem" [I received your letter], *Hadarim* 12 (1996): 70–77.

17. Yeshurun described this process in an interview:

And I walked on the sidewalk on Shabazi Street, hearing the voice of the sidewalk of Krasnystaw, my father and mother, the water-mill in the village, and the steam-mill in the city, and my grandfather and the Jews, and the cloth and the precious things, and the *Haynt* and the *Moment* [two Yiddish daily newspapers]—all this beyond the human world [Yeshurun here cuts *olam* (world) in the middle: *ol-am*, which then also means "the yoke of the people"] that walks in Shabazi Street.

("Kit'ey shurot al shira" [Excerpts of lines on poetry], *Siman kriah* 3–4 [1974]: 348–49)

18. Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, 4:149–50.

19. That is, *ben ha-kir* perhaps alludes to Jeremiah 31:20 (in some English editions, verse 19), where God refers to the people of Israel as a beloved son who has sinned: *Ha-ven yakkir li?* In modern Hebrew, the term *ben yakkir* is used as an ironic reference to a son who is not devoted to his parents—perhaps following the biblical phrase, which might have an ironic meaning as well.

20. Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, 4:142.

21. *Ibid.*, 280.

22. *Ibid.*, 230.

23. Yeshurun is known for his special practice of often omitting the end-of-the word vowel letter. Here he takes a step further, omitting a consonant. More on this unique style, see: Oppenheimer, *Tenu li ledaber kemo she-ani*.

24. From the poem "Mi Yiten?" [Who will give?] in Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, 3:269.

25. Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, 2:89–90.

26. Yonatan Ratosh expressed these views in a radio interview that appeared in print under the title "The Myth and Reality" in *Haaretz*, April 27, 1973.

27. From a draft as quoted in the notes to the published poem by Halit Yeshurun and Benyamin Harshav in Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, vol. 2, without page numbers.

28. Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, vol. 4, without page numbers.

29. *Ibid.*, 243.

30. *Ibid.*, 244.

31. *Ibid.*, 249.

32. Apart from in his first poem, "The Ballad of Mary Magdalene and Her White Son."

33. Leah Goldberg, *Shirim* [Poems] (Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Po'alim, 1986), 3:14.

#### EPILOGUE

1. See Douglass C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969), 23–29.

2. Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 186.

3. Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 11–12.
4. See Gary Handwerk, *Irony and Ethics in Narrative: From Schlegel to Lacan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 15.
5. Culler, *Flaubert*, 190.
6. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 13.
7. Culler, *Flaubert*, 191.
8. Samuel Krauss (*Das Leben Jesu nach Jüdische quellen*) published the first systematic research on *Toldot Yeshu* and dated it to the fifth century. William Horbury in his PhD thesis “A Critical Examination of the *Toledoth Jesue*” (Cambridge, 1971) argued that it is most likely closer to the third century.
9. Ora Limor, *Bein Yehudim le-Notsrim: ha-dimuy ha-menugad* [Between Jews and Christians: the counter image] (Tel Aviv: Ha-universita Ha-petuha, 1993), 4:403.
10. See, for example, Limor, *Bein Yehudim le-Notsrim*; David Biale, “Counter-History and Jewish Polemics Against Christianity: The *Sefer Toldot Yeshu* and the *Sefer Zerubavel*,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 130–45.
11. Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 36, 39.
12. *Ibid.*, 39–40. In this context, David Biale argues that “this scandalous text, although seeming to fulfill the criteria for a counter-historical polemic, might better be read as a satirical folktale that works by substitutions rather than inversions. Although clearly intended to satirize Christian origins, *Sefer Toldot Yeshu* will emerge as far from a systematic negative inversion of the Gospels into a counter-history” (“Counter-History,” 132–33). Ora Limor uses the term “counter-history” to discuss the composition’s goals and motivations. She suggests that *Toldot Yeshu* depicts a “counter image” of Jesus. The text, according to Limor, does so without denying the historical facts as they appear in the New Testament while giving them a new meaning based on a counter and even inverted interpretation (*Bein Yehudim le-Notsrim*, 387).
13. *Toldot Yeshu* in *Orzar vikuhim* [A treasury of polemics and disputations], ed. J.D. Eisenstein (New York, 1928), 230–31.
14. This is, for example, how the talmudic figure Rabbi Meir understands the verse: “To what is this matter similar? To two twin brothers who resided in the same city. One was appointed king; the other became a robber. The king ordered that his brother who had become a robber be hanged, but then everyone who saw the robber hanged said, ‘The King is hanged!’ Thus, the king ordered that they take his body down” (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 46b). For further reading, see: Yair Lorberbaum, *Tselem Elohim* [In God’s image] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2004).
15. Limor, *Bein Yehudim le-Notsrim*, 407.
16. See my discussion in chapter 2.
17. Itzik Manger, *Lid un Balade* [Poems and ballads] (Tel Aviv: I.L. Peretz Publishing House, 1976), 44–45; *The World According to Itzik: Selected Poetry and Prose*, trans. Leonard Wolf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 73–74. I have modified the translation.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Matthew Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 161–73.
20. See above, chapter 1, note 68.
21. Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 171. See also above, chapter 1, note 66.
22. H. Leyvik, *Ale verk* [The complete works] (New York: Posy-Shoulson Press, 1940), 32.
23. Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi*, 162.
24. Describing the men as sleeping with their “feet pointing toward the window,” Leyvik implies that the men may be dead, alluding to the traditional custom to lay the dead with their feet pointing toward the door (*di fees oyfgezuygen*). Leyvik plays with this image, substituting “window” for “door.”
25. About a decade later, Itzik Manger would mock Greenberg and his “gang” (*Khabyastre*) for their “hysterical confusion of images.” See “*Ershter briev tsu X.Y.*” [First letter to X.Y.], *Getseylte verter* 1 (August 1929): 2. See also Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi*, 118n, 273.
26. Leyvik, *Ale verk*, 152.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Manger, *Shtern oyf’n dakh: lid un balade* [Stars of the roof: poems and ballads] (Bukarest: Farlag “Sholem Aleichem,” 1929), 15–16.
29. *Haverim mesaprim al Jimmie* [Friends remember Jimmie] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hame’uhad, 1952).
30. Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*, trans. Haim Watzman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 129, 260.
31. Amos Keynan, *Haverim mesaprim al Yeshu* [Friends remember Jesus] (Tel Aviv: Proza, 1978), 7.
32. *Ibid.*, 8.
33. *Ibid.*, 11.
34. Israeli Supreme Court opinion 351/72, “Amos Keynan versus the Committee for Cinema and Drama.”
35. In 2009 the Tel Aviv University School of Drama performed the play on stage again. Interestingly, a performance to be hosted by the Arabic-Jewish theater in Jaffa was cancelled due to a major Christian protest. The protesters claimed that the content of the play was offensive.
36. Yael S. Feldman, *Glory and Agony: Isaac’s Sacrifice and National Narrative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 6.
37. Keynan also deals briefly with Jesus and his death in his later book *Shoshanat Yericho: Erets Yisrael—sviva, zebut, tarbut* [Jericho’s rose: the Land of Israel: surroundings, identity, and culture] (Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 1998). Jesus is depicted through the eyes of one of the thieves who were hanged next to him. The thief describes Jesus as one of those strange people hanging around the temple and mentions having noticed him when he died. Then, in an interesting, perhaps ironic, twist, the thief mentions that he himself did not die but was set free and then picked up by a few women who “covered me in shrouds and put me on a

- stretcher and took me to a small house outside the wall. When I recovered I joined Jesus' followers. I was blessed to live a long life, and when I died I went to Heaven where the Lord welcomed me and protected me; and this is where I am forever" (104).
38. In this respect, a comparison with Israeli visual art could reveal interesting differences. As Amitai Mendelsohn shows in his article "Jesus of the Sabra Thorns: The Figure of Jesus in Israeli Art," in *Jesus among the Jews*, ed. Neta Stahl (London: Routledge, 2012, 203–15), in a few contemporary works Jesus is depicted as an Israeli soldier and as a national sacrifice.
  39. Ephraim Deinard, *Herev la-Adonay u-le-Yisrael: neged ha-sefer "Yeshu ha-Notsri ve-torato"* (St. Louis: Moinester, 1923).
  40. S.Y. Agnon, *Elu ve-elu* [These and those] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1959), 383–85.
  41. *Ibid.*, 385.
  42. Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurey S.Y. Agnon* [Essays on the stories of S.Y. Agnon] (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1970), 40. See also Gershon Shaked, *Omanut ha-sipur shel S.Y. Agnon* [S.Y. Agnon's art of storytelling] (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Hapo'alim, 1973), 89–136.
  43. Gershom Scholem, the prominent Kabbalah scholar and Agnon's close friend, told Dan Miron in an interview that in 1960 Agnon was attacked by an Ultra-Orthodox Jew who accused him of admiring Christianity, basing his accusations on this story. Agnon, who became very disturbed and apparently angry, replied that the story was misunderstood and that it is in fact a harsh allegory on the failed diplomacy of Zionism that trusted empty British promises to help: "When you try to reach the Holy Land on the basis of these kind of promises, you lose your life." But Scholem stressed that "it was clear to all of us that it was not the case, and that he made this up. After all, when he wrote the story, he did not think about the British Mandate" (Avinoam Barhsai, *Shay Agnon ba-bikoret ha-Ivrit—sikumim ve-ha'arakhot al yet-sirato* [Agnon in Hebrew criticism: evaluations of his work] (Tel-Aviv: The Open University, 1991) 1:290). Agnon scholar Arnold Band offers two interpretations of the story: according to the first, it criticizes secular Zionism for its confidence in the "good intentions of the gentiles"; and according to the second, it criticizes Jews who think that the Church will bring redemption (Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968], 104). Nachum Waldman offered a similar interpretation, arguing that Agnon's story is a warning against Jewish enthusiasm for Jesus and misunderstanding of Christian Anti-Semitism (Waldman, "Glimpses of Yiddish and Hebrew Literature," 231).
  44. Culler, *Flaubert*, 185.
  45. Agnon, *Elu ve-elu*, 375–78.
  46. *Ibid.*, 376.
  47. *Ibid.*, 378.
  48. Agnon, *Samukh ve-nire'* [Adjacent and seen] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1966), 92–102.

49. On the allegorical meaning of this story and its Christian symbolism see: Dan Laor, *Shay Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2008) and Arnold Band, *Studies in Modern Jewish Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 332–335.
50. Agnon, "The Lady and the Peddler," in *Modern Hebrew Literature*, trans. Robert Alter (New York: Berman House, 1975), 208–9.
51. For more about the myth of the Wandering Jew, see: Eduard Konig, *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend*, ed. Galit Hazan Rokem and Alan Dundes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
52. Agnon, "The Lady and the Peddler," 207.
53. According to Arnold Band, the killing of Christ ends with the dream that evokes "the Christ as a Jew" theme (Band, *Studies*, 334).
54. Manger, "Driter briv tsu X.Y." [Third letter to X.Y.], in *Getsylte verter* 1, no. 4 (1929): 1.
55. Manger, "Ershter Briv tsu X.Y." [First letter to X.Y.], in *The World According to Itzik*, 226–27.
56. On Christian symbolism in Manger's works, see Janet Hadda, "Christian Imagery and Dramatic Impulse in the Poetry of Itzik Manger," *Michigan Germanic Studies* 3 (1977): 3.
57. Jacob Glatstein, "Mozart," trans. Ruth Whitman, in *Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 45.
58. Hanoah Levin, *The Sorrows of Job*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993), 32–33.
59. *Ibid.*, 28.
60. In the performed play (directed by Levin), the actor who played Job was placed naked on the spit. This nakedness provoked a scandal that reached the Israeli parliament. The Deputy Minister of Education, Miriam Tasa Glazer, argued that the state should not sponsor a play in which "a man hanged naked for twenty minutes while his entire genitalia wobbled."
61. Levin, *The Sorrows of Job*, 34. I have made minor modifications to the translation.
62. *Ibid.*, 35.
63. *Ibid.*, 35–36.
64. *Ibid.*, 36.
65. *Ibid.*, 43.
66. *Ibid.*, 40. With my own minor modifications.