**The Larger Framework: Jesus and Judas at the Service of Jewish Thought**

According to Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard,“one will get a deep insight into the state of Christianity in every age by seeing how it interprets Judas.”[[1]](#endnote-1)TocontextualizeKierkegaard’s statement in terms of modern Jewish thought, it appears that the interpretations of Judas’s role in the Passion Narrative are evidence of how Judaism perceives both its relationship to Christianity and to shifts in its self-definition—as a religion and as an ethnic, national, and political collectivity.

The attitude—be it explicit or implicit—toward Judas Iscariot in modern Jewish thought is inseparable from its attitude toward Jesus. In most cases, the attitude toward these figures has a substantive and direct link with issues of Jewish identity, sovereignty, and power—vis-à-vis the non-Jewish ‟other” and in the framework of internal Jewish discourse. Among thinkers of the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment movement), the figure of Jesus expressed the dual tension between emancipatory universal aspirations and particularistic exceptionalism. The manner in which Maskilim (Enlightenment Jews) related to the character of Jesus in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries symbolized a significant departure from the polemical and negative manner in which Jesus had traditionally been portrayed in Jewish culture.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The Maskilim strived to integrate the figure of Jesus within the Jewish heritage and to ease the historical tension between Jews and Christians for the benefit of a vision of tolerance and a shared civil space.[[3]](#endnote-3) By emphasizing the humanistic morals of Jesus as neutral and universal, the Maskilim aspired to necessitate principles of pluralism and tolerance.[[4]](#endnote-4) This attempt was accompanied by the aspiration to demonstrate that the final separation of Christianity from Judaism begins with Paul, and is not reflected in the teachings of (Jewish) Jesus himself.[[5]](#endnote-5) Unsurprisingly, this new sympathy toward Jesus left obscure the issue of Jewish responsibility for his arrest and death and focused mainly on the principles common to both Christianity and Judaism.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In the context of Zionist discourse, Jesus’s messianism—and later the story of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal as well—was re-appropriated to serve a particular national project: the establishment of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. As a national movement, Zionism constructed an “invented tradition”[[7]](#endnote-7) by providing a renewed and appropriating interpretation of different historical and mythic figures, who now functioned, in the context of the Zionist narrative, as parts of a historical, national Jewish succession. Jesus was identified in the Zionist discourse with ancient, indigenous, and potent Hebraism, and was recast in the form of the mythic Hebrew pioneer, who sacrifices his body to build a national homeland and renews his affinity with the Land of Israel through the redeeming act of toiling the earth.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Historian and literary scholar Joseph Klausner (1874-1958) was recognized as having a crucial impact on making Jesus a focus of fascination for Hebrew intellectuals and artists. In his monographic historical study, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life,* *Times, and Teachings*,[[9]](#endnote-9) Klausner not only imagined Jesus as a deep-rooted Jew with an unmediated affinity with the Land of Israel, but also provided a contemporary political and national interpretation of Jesus’s life and teachings that echoed the political changes when the book was written: the transformation of Jewish culture into a national and sovereign culture in the Land of Israel. The fundamental premise of Klausner’s main argument is that Judaism, which constitutes “a national worldview, with a religious-moral platform,” is an indestructible complex of religious and national principles. Thus, Klausner laid the groundwork for the perception of Zionism as a project aimed at facilitating the creation of a sovereign paradigm that functions as a political theology founded on edicts determined by means of particular religious and national characteristics (and not on the national-liberal model in the form of a “civic nation”).[[10]](#endnote-10)

In a departure from the Maskilic universalistic inclinations, Klausner returns to the particular and exclusive, arguing that there is no place in Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel for universal edicts and moral doctrines fashioned after Jesus.[[11]](#endnote-11) Klausner rejects the placated appeal to Christianity via universalism, claiming that this universalism is just what deprived the Jewish people in the Roman Empire of the possibility to express and realize its national needs.

There is no mention of Judas Iscariot in Klausner’s proposed historical account. However, by way of his depiction of Jesus as an observant Jew motivated by political, rather than theological, considerations to choose a different path than the “chosen people,” he laid the groundwork for Hebrew writers who sought to grant Judas Iscariot a place in their work.

Like the Maskilim of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, modern Hebrew writers and artists writing over the last three centuries felt a strong, if sometimes ambivalent, attraction to the figure of Jesus.[[12]](#endnote-12) The character of Jesus became especially relevant in light of the engagement by modern Hebrew literature with the messianic impulse that accompanied the Zionist project and the rebirth of the Jewish nation in Palestine.[[13]](#endnote-13) As Neta Stahl shows in her comprehensive study of the representation of Jesus in modern Hebrew literature, while many authors who wrote prior to the establishment of the State of Israel used the figure of Jesus in order to advance messianic political views, representations of Jesus among those who wrote after the establishment of the state are characterized by depoliticization and neutralization of the messianic ‘sting’ associated with his character. In their writings, Jesus’ suffering and torment become a platform for universalistic engagement with the question of human suffering and the torment of the creative artist.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The uniqueness of Mossinsohn’s novel, then, lies in its renewed politicization of Jesus and its placement of Judas Iscariot at the center.[[15]](#endnote-15) The novel’s presentation of a direct narrative connection between messianism and aspirations for political sovereignty and militarism encourages an alternative reading of the story of betrayal in the gospels, as a critique of the place of messianism in the political and public agenda of the State of Israel.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Mossinsohn casts both Jesus and Judas as characters who are identified with the same national faction and as comrades in the sovereign undertaking, even if they represented as having different views and *modi operandi*. Mossinsohn portrays Judas not as a traitor, but rather as a militant and patriotic Jew who finds himself betrayed by the very same sovereign mechanism he served as a loyal emissary. Jesus’s fervor to be crucified as a way to incite Jewish uprising, and his willingness to give his life to spark a national struggle, are portrayed in the novel as an oscillation between unfounded national zealotry and political messianism based on a distorted perception of reality. Eventually, both Judas and Jesus are depicted as tragic marionettes subjected to a system of political and religious considerations driven by indefatigable motivation to create the image of saint for the masses. Both of them pay with their own lives for the aspiration to turn sainthood and messianic vision into integral parts of the national collective’s political agenda.

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 512. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In Rabbinic texts, such as the Babylonian Talmud, as well as in medieval Jewish sources, Jesus is mostly represented from a polemical and negative point of view. For more information, see: Ora Limor, “The Jewish Anti-Christian Polemic Through the Generations.” *Pe’amim* 75 (1998): 94-96. [In Hebrew]; Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Mati Silver, “A Jewish View of Jesus: Steven Weiss, Yosef Klausner, and the Discussion on Jesus the Jew between Two World Wars.” *Zion: Quarterly for Studies in Israeli History* (2005): 31-62. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This, for example, is how Moses Mendelssohn, in his famous correspondence with Catholic priest Johann Kasper Lavater, explains why he does not object to conversion out of contempt for Christianity, but precisely due to his acceptance of Jesus’s instruction that ordered Jews to stay loyal to their faith. See: Zvi Sadan, *Flesh of Our Flesh: Jesus of Nazareth in Zionist Thought* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2008), 18-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. As Susannah Heschel has shown, many thinkers in the Jewish Enlightenment movement of the nineteenth century were characterized by a non-apologetic attempt to Judaize the figure of Jesus and present early Christianity as a deviation from his positions. This approach is identified primarily with the thinker and historian Abraham Geiger (1810-1874). Geiger was the first to subject Christian texts to historical analysis from a Jewish perspective, and he argued that Jesus preached Pharisaic Judaism, in a more liberal and democratic form than the Judaism of his day. Heschel sees in Geiger’s scholarship an attempt to rebel against Christian intellectual hegemony by means of an alternative Jewish historiography that does not adopt the hegemonic Christian perspective. See: Susannah Heschel. Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus (University of Chicago Press, 1998) 2-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This runs counter to the direct engagement with the figure of Judas Iscariot against the backdrop of negative and polemical representations of Jesus in Jewish culture in earlier historical periods. A primary example is *Toldot Yeshu* (‟The Life Story of Jesus”), a Jewish text from the Middle Ages that testifies to the deterioration of Jewish-Christian relations. This text presents a sympathetic treatment of Judas Iscariot. While Jesus is depicted in this book as a negative, grotesque character, and is accused of deception and corrupt morals, Judas Iscariot is described as a heroic figure—an alter-ego of a militant Jew who is willing to sacrifice his life to preserve the Jewish faith and its practices. Judas Iscariot embarks on a determined journey in pursuit of Jesus in order to prove him a false messiah. Thus, he fulfills an important role in the framework of the collective Jewish imagination of a vengeful and violent redemption and functions as a key character in the construction of an active Jewish myth of heroism and power. In one of the versions of the book a story is presented that describes how Judas Iscariot leads a pogrom against Christians in Jerusalem. Judas is depicted not only as the savior of Judaism, but also as the redeemer of Jews, who transforms his people from passive and weak victim to a powerful, militant collective. For elaboration, see: Ora Limor and Israel Jacob Yuval, “Judas Iscariot: Revealer of the Hidden Truth.” W P. Schafer, Y. Deutsch, & M. Meerson (eds.), *Toledot Yeshu* (“The Life Story of Jesus”) *Revisited* (ss. 197–220) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 206. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. As Eric Hobsbawm claims, nations are not based on ancient traditions, but on invented traditions (constructed as ancient) designed to create social and communal cohesion among the civilians of the nation-state. These traditions are not authentic and spontaneous, but rather a manifestation of social and cultural engineering process aimed at instilling a sense of continuous historical existence and the legitimization of the nation-state’s existence in the present. Eric Hobsbawm. “Introduction: Inventing Traditions.” *The Invention of Tradition*. Editors: Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See in this context the collection “Kihiliyatainu,” published under Meir Yaari’s initiative and guidance, which contains numerous references to Jesus and his apostles as a role model for the growing group of HaShomer Hatzair settlers in Bitania Illit in 1921-1922. Muki Tsur (Ed.) *Kehilateinu*: *Pioneers’ Thoughts, Deliberations, and Desires* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1987). [In Hebrew] [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teachings* (Jerusalem: Schtiebel, 1922). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 440. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 443. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. This attraction, as Neta Stahl demonstrates, led to repeated attempts to blur the traditional dichotomy between Jesus and Judaism (or Jews). In Stahl’s view, in order to understand the manner in which modern Hebrew literary writers engaged with Jesus, one must employ the category of “brother” as an indeterminate, intermediary status between the “self” and the “other” – the familiar and the foreign. Neta Stahl, *Tzelem Yehudi: Representations of Jesus in Twentieth Century Hebrew Literature* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008). [In Hebrew]   [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Hannan Hever, Bishvi ha'utupia [Captives of Utopia] (Kiryat Sde Boker, 1995). [In Hebrew] [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Stahl, 2008, 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Primary examples of Hebrew literary works that ascribe significant importance to the character of Judas Iscariot and attempt to offer a counter-narrative of Judas’s betrayal are Nathan Agmon Bistritzky’s plays *Judas Iscariot* (1930) and *Jesus of Nazareth* (1941) and Amos Oz’s *Judas* (2014). An important literary text from the corpus of modern Jewish literature that grants a significant place to the figure of Judas Iscariot is the novel *Der man fun natseres* (1939; translated into English as *The Nazarene*), by Shalom Asch (1880-1957), a Polish-born Yiddish writer who later lived and wrote in the United States. Like Mossinsohn, Asch describes how Judas conspired with Jesus to bring about the “betrayal” and enable the spread of the Christian message among the masses. The story of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal is framed in a narrative that transpires in 1930s Poland, in which Pan Viadomsky, a Polish orientalist with anti-Semitic inclinations, hires the services of a young Jewish student, Joseph Arimathea, to help him translate the “Lost Gospel according to Judas Iscariot.” Viadomsky believes that this gospel will provide proof for the blood libels and justify his prejudices against Jews. Text from the lost gospel, quoted at length in the novel from Judas Iscariot himself, clarifies the true nature of his “betrayal” of Jesus. Judas Iscariot’s non-traitorous nature is revealed in the novel – but in addition, the modern characters in the framing story emerge as incarnations of the key characters in the narrative of the gospel: Viadomsky is none other than Cornelius, the Roman centurion who assisted in Jesus’ execution; while Joseph is John, Jesus’ faithful devotee and one of his apostles. Like Mossinsohn, Asch exonerates Judas Iscariot of the charge of betrayal, presenting him as a full believer in the messianic status of his master who thus gave him over to the Romans in an attempt to resolve a political crisis. Unlike Asch’s Judas Iscariot, who is cleared of guilt, Viadonsky-Cornelius takes full responsibility for his decisive role in the act of crucifixion. While Mossinsohn presents an alternative narrative of betrayal in order to offer an internal Jewish critique of political messianism in Israel, Asch, who wrote his novel during the period of the Third Reich and rising anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany, attempts to exonerate Judaism and the Jews of guilt and exhibit their intimate connection to Christianity and Christians. By presenting Judas Iscariot’s innocence and portraying a collaboration between a Jew and an anti-Semite, Asch expresses his view that Christianity and Judaism are sister religions whose origins lie in the Jewish sphere of ideas, and that there is a tight connection between a Christian dogmatism which distorts Jesus’ message and modern anti-Semitic attitudes. For more on the views of Shalom Asch and their manifestation in this novel, see: Morgentaler, Goldie. ‟The Foreskin of the Heart: Ecumenism in Sholem Asch’s Christian Trilogy.” *Prooftexts* (1988): 219-244 . [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Like the argument proffered by Hannan Hever in his discussion of Amos Oz’s novel *Judas*, Mossinsohn’s novel offers an alternative version of the story of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal, criticizing the messianic worldview that lies at the foundation of Israeli sovereignty. Hever argues that the character of the traitor in Oz’s novel symbolizes those who opposed the establishment of the State of Israel as a Jewish state founded on political theology, and that the traitors are thus actually the most loyal friends of the state and its sole moral voice. See: Hannan Hever, “Betrayal and Revenge in Amos Oz’s *Judas*,” *Interventions* 20 (2018), 367-388. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)