

Epilogue

The Jesus Question Revisited

I dreamed that the gentiles crucified Mozart.

—Jacob Glatstein, 1946

The works considered in this book represent a sea change in Jewish intellectuals' attitudes toward Jesus since the end of the eighteenth century, as reclaiming the figure of Jesus of Nazareth played an important part in the process of modernization of Jewish culture and thought. The cross and the image of Jesus allowed Jewish intellectuals to renegotiate their relationship to Western culture by reclaiming and Judaizing some of its most important foundations. The range and fluidity of Christian imagery made it compelling to Jewish intellectuals, especially to modernist writers and artists, whose preoccupation with Christian motifs became a distinctive feature of Yiddish modernism in the early 1920s. Yet, this world of Yiddish modernism lived a tragically curtailed existence, flourishing primarily in the 1920s and 1930s, and the works considered in this book represent a particular cultural moment, which ultimately proved to be short-lived.

As fascism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, and, finally, the Holocaust and Stalinism brought an end to this cultural moment, and to East European Jewish society in general, there was a marked turn back to the Jewish collective and away from the cosmopolitan, universalist impulses that had infused the cultural avant-garde. This in turn led many Jews to question whether they could still claim Jesus as their own. As mentioned above, writers like Uri Tsvi Grinberg, Itzik Manger, and Hey Leyvik turned away from their embrace of Jesus in the face of the Nazi genocide, implying that the outburst of rage and violence unleashed against the Jews in Europe once again tainted the figure of Jesus with the stain of Jewish blood as in earlier times. While Sholem Asch and Marc Chagall provide two remarkable examples of Jewish artists who continued to depict Jesus as an iconic image of Jewish martyrdom during and after World War II, the opposite trend

of distancing Jews from Jesus became increasingly prevalent during those years.

In 1938, the same year that Chagall completed his *White Crucifixion*, the American Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein (Yankev Glatshsteyn) published his poetic rebuke and farewell to European civilization and culture: “A gute nakht, velt” (“Good Night, World”). Like Chagall in *White Crucifixion*, Glatstein was responding to the rising tide of fascism and anti-Semitism in Europe in the 1930s, but in a profoundly different way. His poem served as a bill of divorce, severing the relationship between the Jew and the European world that he had been living in for centuries. “A gute nakht, velt” proclaims the failure of the Enlightenment and modernity to make a home for Jews in Europe and advocates the return of the Jew to his hermetically sealed, insular culture, the medieval ghetto—an unknowingly ironic symbol of traditional Jewish culture given the Nazi ghettoization of European Jews that would take place in the subsequent war years):

Good night, wide world,
Big stinking world.
Not you but I slam the gate.
With a long gabardine,
With a fiery yellow patch,
With a proud stride,
Because I want to,
I’m going back to the ghetto.¹

As part of Glatstein’s symbolic retreat from European culture and society, he calls for a wholesale repudiation of all of the fruits of that culture, which modern Jews have enjoyed, from Marx to Wagner to Jesus.

Good night. I’ll make you, world, a gift of
All my liberators.
Take back your Jesus-Marxes, choke on their courage.
Croak over a drop of our Christianized blood.²

For Glatstein, the ideological and cultural alternatives presented to modern Jews—Marxism and Christianity, secularism and assimilation—had proven false; the reclamation of Jesus had to be abandoned.

Glatstein's stinging critique of European culture and society and of the Jews' failed attempt to assimilate into that society ("our Christianized blood") is not unprecedented, and shares many of the polemical sentiments found in the poems of Grinberg, Markish, Halpern, and Shneour that have been addressed above. Fundamentally, Glatstein's poem represents a modernist's disillusionment with Western European culture, as he confronts the jarring reality that this culture can no longer be his own, despite how much he previously embraced it. This helps explain the trend of Jewish modernists backing away from the figure of Jesus when they no longer felt that he could be fully extricated from European culture. Yet, this process was a complicated one, as most Jewish writers and artists were not willing to abandon Western culture altogether. Even in Glatstein's case, it was possible for him to incorporate Christian motifs from European culture while simultaneously attempting to disentangle the Jews from that culture.

In his 1946 poem "Mozart," written in the immediate aftermath of the war, Glatstein again attacks the barbarism of Europe, while subversively depicting the Jews as the exclusive and authentic bearers of European culture, as embodied by Mozart.

I dreamed that
 The gentiles crucified Mozart
 And buried him in a pauper's grave.
 But the Jews made him a man of God
 And blessed his memory.
 I, his apostle, ran all over the world,
 Converting everyone I met,
 And wherever I caught a Christian
 I made him a Mozartian.³

Writing against the backdrop of the Holocaust, Glatstein depicts a Europe in which the forces of evil—the Christian Gentiles—crucify that which represents the true beauty of European culture—Mozart—while the Jews act as the champions of this cultural heritage, responsible for its transmission after the Christians have turned against it. Throughout the poem Glatstein ironically uses Christian imagery as he juxtaposes the crucified Mozart and Jesus—secular European culture and Christianity—ultimately concluding: "How poor and stingy— / compared with Mozart's legacy— / is the Sermon on the Mount."⁴ Christianity

is morally bankrupt, and the Jews have become the apostles of the new religion of Mozart, the only praiseworthy legacy of European culture.

Despite his continued use of the crucifixion as a powerful symbol of persecution and martyrdom, Glatstein's denunciation of Christian Europe included seeing Jesus as on the side of the Christians, not the Jews. It is therefore not surprising that during the war Glatstein wrote many articles vociferously condemning the "Christian" writings of Sholem Asch, seeing him as a shameless and dangerous proselytizer.⁵ While the reclamation of Jesus had almost always contained an anti-Christian polemical component, before the Holocaust most Jewish writers and artists had wielded the Jewish Jesus as their ultimate weapon against Christian anti-Semitism. However, with the war and the genocide of European Jews, Jesus again became associated more with the persecutors for many Jewish writers, and especially for their audiences. As we saw in the debates surrounding Asch's *The Nazarene* discussed in chapter 4, many in the Yiddish intelligentsia defended Asch, and still conceived of Jesus as a legitimate subject of Jewish art, if not as a fully Jewish figure himself. Yet, except for Asch, there were very few who depicted Jesus as he did; the fascination had faded and the climate was no longer deemed appropriate.

To be sure, as Ziva Amishai-Maisels has shown, the crucifixion and other Christian motifs still appealed to many Jewish visual artists, who attempted to confront the horrors of the Holocaust in their work, yet except for Chagall, none boldly depicted Jesus as a thoroughly Jewish figure.⁶ The crucifixion might have been an appropriate visual symbol of Jewish suffering, but for many Jews—artists and audience alike—Jesus was now beyond the pale; his old status as the emblem of Christian anti-Semitism had resurfaced, and he was once again seen as *treyf*.

Philip Roth's short story "The Conversion of the Jews," which first appeared in 1958 in the *Paris Review*, exemplifies this new trend, especially for American Jews after the Holocaust. In Roth's story, the figure of Jesus serves Roth's troubled protagonist, the thirteen-year-old Ozzie Freedman, as a weapon in his battle against the hypocritical Jewish establishment. The rebellious Ozzie is able to vanquish his tyrannical rabbi by forcing him to profess his belief in Jesus Christ, while Ozzie rants on the synagogue rooftop, threatening to jump. Jesus is not presented as a Jewish martyr or prophet, or even a mythological archetype,

but as the arch-villain of Jewish history and the emblem of all that is other; he is a symbol of the dominant Gentile culture in America in which Jews like Ozzie Freedman were struggling to find a place.⁷

There were realms of Jewish culture, however, in which the reclamation of Jesus never really ceased, such as Jewish scholarship and theology. From Martin Buber to Geza Vermes and Samuel Sandmel, there have been Jewish thinkers, scholars, and rabbis who have continued to view Jesus in a positive light, as a Jew and a brother, whose teachings originate in the Judaism of his times, and who is still relevant to the contemporary Jew in some way or other.⁸ This scholarship tends to be less explicitly polemical against Christianity than the works of Geiger or Graetz in the nineteenth century, and is highly valued within both academic and liberal theological circles, Jewish and Christian. Since the 1970s there has been a marked increase in this renewed quest for the Jewish Jesus, and numerous Jewish scholars have attempted to demonstrate the inherent Jewishness of Jesus in their work.⁹ This Jewish scholarly interest in Jesus is not as widespread as it was in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, yet since the late 1990s, with the increase of Jewish-Christian dialogue, there is clearly a growing interest in the Jewish Jesus among Jews and Christians, scholars and laypeople alike.

However, at the same time, as the controversy surrounding the release of Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004 suggests, Jews still are afraid of Jesus, especially when Christians remind them that he is a key Christian figure. Unlike the modernist versions of the passion, in which the Jews are the Christ-like victims of a barbarous Christian world, the Christian passion play, as updated by Gibson, places Jesus outside of the Jewish camp and casts the Jews as Christ's persecutors. In a sense, the controversy over *The Passion of the Christ* is the latest manifestation of Jews' angst about Jesus and the role he plays in the public sphere, especially in the United States. After all, it is American Jews who are the most vociferous defenders of the separation of Church and state, because the day Jesus is hanging in American classrooms is the day that America is lost to Jews. Jews have always had to relate to Jesus, but if the Jewish intelligentsia of the early twentieth century wanted to reclaim him, the Jewish communal leadership of the twenty-first century wants him as far out of the public eye as possible.