

“Uri Zvi Before the Cross”:

The Figure of Jesus in the Poetry of Uri Zvi Greenberg

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In traditional Hebrew Jesus is commonly referenced either by the deliberately anonymous expression “*Oto ha-Ish*,” i.e., “That Man,” or by the name “*Yeshu*,” which is popularly interpreted as an acronym standing for “*Yimach Shmo ve-Zichro*,” “May his Name and Memory be obliterated.” But, in the course of the last two centuries, “That Man” whose name and memory had been traditionally banished was transformed into a brother by numerous Modern Hebrew writers. Already toward the end of the eighteenth century, Jesus was presented by Moses Mendelssohn as a kin of the Jews and Judaism, with regard both to his religious and national roots and to his teachings (134-5). In the course of the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, Jewish historians developed a distinction between the alleged historical figure of Jesus qua religious, nationalist Jew, and the Christian-theological Jesus who, as idolatrous and mythological archetype, fundamentally contravenes Jewish doctrine.¹ Similarly, and certainly in light of this motif in Jewish historiography, a parallel yet separate course modulated the perception and representation of Christ in Modern Hebrew literature. Although modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature was greatly influenced by historiographical research concerning Jesus, it developed unique methodological and disciplinary approaches that soften the traditional contradiction between Jesus and Judaism, and that express an ambivalent relationship with the figure of Jesus.

Modern Jewish historians and thinkers have offered various estimates of Jesus' contribution to the Judaism of his time, but they have generally concurred that it was not Jesus himself but his followers, particularly Paul, who split from Judaism and founded Christianity. This perspective permitted Jewish historiography to formulate a clear distinction between the "authentic" historical Jesus and the Jesus presented by institutional Christianity. In 1922, this distinction received a sharper articulation in Joseph Klausner's *Jesus from Nazareth*, the first historical account of Jesus' life to be written in Modern Hebrew and published in Palestine. This work is perhaps more significant for the great influence it exerted on Modern Hebrew literature than for the accuracy of its historical research. Klausner's representation of Jesus as a Jewish prophet and rebel who sought to bring about political and national redemption proved a powerful stimulus for Hebrew writers in the first half of the twentieth century.

Klausner's work was hardly the sole cause of Hebrew literature's preoccupation with Jesus in this period. As the literary scholar Noah Rosenblum has rightly argued, "the antithetical quality of the Jesus character and the ambivalent approach associated with it served as a stimulating subject for young [Jewish] poets who sought new paths in thought, style, technique, and expression" (277). It may be further argued, however, that the feature of modern Jewish historiography on Jesus which most appealed to Hebrew writers in this period was the distinction, adumbrated above, between the historical and the Christian Jesus. This distinction allowed literary ambivalence towards Jesus to attain clear expression in representations that focus on the duality of his character.

A profoundly ambivalent approach dominates the characterization of Jesus in the poetry of Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896-1981), one of the towering figures of modernist Yiddish and Hebrew poetry and letters. The son of an Orthodox Jewish family, Greenberg broke with religious orthodoxy in his youth but returned to traditional

Judaism in his later years. This article will examine the unique literary strategies employed by Greenberg to represent Jesus' duality. Jesus' spiritual and psychological journey rendered him a kind of kindred spirit for Greenberg and his literary circle, and corresponded to the expressionist tendency that they sought to render in their poetry. We may say that Jesus embodied the insurgent spirit that Greenberg's poetry seeks to express. His treatment merges elements of rejection and aversion, rooted in traditional Judaism, with a depiction of Jesus as a character of great charm and mystery who rebels against the social and religious conventions of his time. As we shall see, in Greenberg's work Klausner's basic distinction between the historical and Christian Jesus evolves into a much more complex and rich motif, which comprises a number of further sub-dichotomies.

This article is divided into three sections, each devoted to a particular aspect of this duality. The first section focuses on the different literary devices employed by Greenberg to express the tension between Jesus' human aspect, which is further linked to his Jewish character, and his godly aspect, which is connected to his idolatrous representation within the Christian church. The second section demonstrates how this tension becomes an actual division between two persona: the Christian Jesus is referenced by the Slavic name "Yezus" (or "Yezuniu")—while the "authentic" Jewish Jesus is called "Yeshu." The third section discusses the tensions between Greenberg's divergent representations of Jesus as Diaspora Jew and as Zionist pioneer, or even national Messiah.

1. "You have become Inanimate, Brother Jesus"

Jesus first appears in Greenberg's poetry during the First World War, in conjunction with his transition from an impressionistic style marked by internal, personal meditation towards an expressionism rooted in national and historical concerns. In these

early Yiddish poems, Jesus is presented as a suffering character whose affliction stems from his role as silent witness to humanity's pain. In this period Greenberg largely confines himself to expressions of intimacy and identification with Jesus, without any element of ambivalence or skepticism. Jesus' torment is treated as authentic; there is none of the imagined suffering that characterizes his depiction in the later poems. Here, for example, is an excerpt from the cycle of poems "Ergitz oyf felder" ("Somewhere in the Fields"):²

At sunset, with a deep silent pain—
 I come to you by way of a vision, which draws me to the eastern land
 And I see you, still on the palm-trunk
 Facing the sunset; still
 Dripping, forever, the source of God's heart...
 And when your sad eye is raised in pity
 To the blue eastern skies—and it floats
 Shimmering gold on the holy crown of thorns—
 I kneel before you
 Surrounded by your pain, the great pain!³

It is precisely the eternally suffering Jesus presented here who can provide solace for the poet's own torment. Jesus' pain—which is both physical and spiritual, caused both by his hanging on the "palm-trunk" and by his empathy for the afflicted who pass before his "sad eye"—surrounds the poet, creating a sense of mutual identification that functions as a kind of brotherhood. Like the poet, Jesus is a suffering witness to the horrors of the world. But the two have a further common element: both lift their eyes to the "eastern land"—an allusion to their shared longing for the Land of Israel. While this Jesus, with whom the narrator identifies, is thus represented as a universal character, his connection with the "blue eastern skies" of Israel is already apparent. As we will see below, Greenberg will several years later draw a clear distinction between a Jesus who is tied to the European landscape and a Jesus whose roots are in the "East."

It is worth noting the manner in which the poem constructs empathy for Jesus, who purposely functions as a simultaneously human and Divine character. On the one hand, Jesus' physicality and humanity are underscored by the physical pain he suffers as a result of being hung on the "palm-trunk." At the same time, his characterization as "the source of God's heart" alludes to his Divine qualities. Furthermore, Jesus' seemingly "human" pain is itself a reaction to the entire sweep of human suffering, which he watches from the sidelines, and in which he takes no part. This pain is presented hyperbolically, as an agony so deep that it exceeds the ordinary human capacity for suffering. Even the position in which the narrator places himself, kneeling before Jesus' suffering figure, alludes to his divinity, and indicates the speaker's recognition of this divinity.

This empathetic tone does not last long, however. In a poem that Greenberg published just three years later, we can already detect a certain cynical note with respect to Jesus' suffering. The cycle of poems that appeared in *Inter Arma*⁴ contains the first traces of ambivalence regarding the authenticity of Jesus' pain, if not outright skepticism about his divine attributes:

My head lacks only a crown of thorns,
 Then I'd be the great suffering God.
 I was commanded: fervent love and agony—
 And thousands of hearts will follow my command.
 My body lacks only a cross of pine
 Then I'd open my arms with love...

The narrator's voice merges with that of Jesus, who is ostensibly represented as an empathetic character who identifies with the suffering and afflicted. Yet in order to truly become "Jesus," the narrator must resort to the symbols by which his sufferings are represented in Christianity, such as the crown of thorns and the cross; only thus can the narrator/Jesus become "the great suffering god." Just as a Divine command is necessary

to fill “thousands of hearts” with love and pain, so Jesus/the narrator’s empathy for human suffering cannot be truly realized without the help of these symbols. Thus, although this poem appears to express a sympathetic identification with Jesus, it already hints at the ambivalence characteristic of Greenberg’s later relationship to his character. One can already sense that what distances Jesus from the role of “brother” and converts him into an “other” lies in his connection with the symbols of the institutional Christian faith.

In Greenberg’s poetry, Christian symbolism represents the inhuman element in Jesus’ character. In this poem, Jesus’ suffering, like his love, is contingent on symbols which represent his divinity among his Christian followers. This results in the neutralization of his human subjectivity, so that he is revealed to be a repository of empty symbols.

Over the course of Greenberg’s poetry, the tension between Jesus’ humanity and divinity becomes gradually exacerbated. While the narrator is bound to Jesus by the latter’s human element, he is repelled by the aspects of his character that are bound up in his divinity. In Greenberg’s early poems Jesus’ divinity is presented positively, and he appears as a suffering and comforting god. In his more mature works, these godly qualities increasingly acquire an idolatrous connotation, to the point that Jesus is entirely transformed into a vacant icon.

In order to neutralize Jesus’ humanity, Greenberg depicts him as stripped of clothing, employing a theme typical of Christian representations. But while Christian depictions of Jesus nonetheless cover his loins, Greenberg presents the Christian Jesus as entirely exposed, emphasizing the tension between his humanity and his appropriation by Christianity as a deity. Thus, in the poem “Mephistopheles,” Jesus’ nudity serves to isolate him from both the poet and the rest of mortal humanity:

See, eyes, see, in the very heart of that city
 Rises the pillar of the black cross—mighty in its height
 And upon it hangs a man—
 He is like me,
 The same image,
 Only naked, with his nakedness before the alien world
 I tremble—and I want to shout my lament
 But my voice is lower even than the street dogs,
 More than: “My God, why have You forsaken me...” I do not know —
 My God, why have You forsaken me, in the middle of the night!!⁵

“Mefista” (“Mephistopheles”), the lengthy poem from which this excerpt is taken, examines the meaning of human existence. The poem is considered by many to be Greenberg’s most significant contribution to Yiddish Modernism. Jesus appears in the poem as a man who has become an idol. The tension between his human and iconic elements is expressed by his public nudity, which in a sense serves to strip him of humanity. The black cross erected in the center of the city functions as a symbol of the Church, which is represented as responsible for Jesus’ suffering, because it exposes him in shame to the entire world. As noted, Greenberg draws attention to Jesus’ naked genitals, even though these are in fact covered in Christian portrayals. Jesus’ nudity symbolizes his abasement and his alienation from humanity (and perhaps from Judaism), an alienation for which the Church, which has disrobed him, is responsible. This is highly significant, for in Greenberg’s later poetry we will encounter a Jesus who has lost his humanizing shame and therefore his humanity itself. Jesus’ humiliation thus signals that he is here (still) human, an identification that he will gradually lose as he assimilates into the Christian world.

In this poem, Jesus is tormented by the Church’s representation of him, a representation that is clearly foreign to his “real” historical character. This trope evokes modern Jewish historiography, in which a clear distinction is made between the authentic and the Christian Jesus. Greenberg explores this theme by imaging Jesus’ own, authentic,

feelings towards his public portrayal by the Church. “Mephistopheles” expresses Greenberg’s rejection of the Church’s employment of the Jesus character, as deity rather than man; in this poem Jesus is forsaken not only by his God, but also by his followers, who transform him into a symbol and thereby nullify his humanity. Christ’s suffering is presented as caused not by the physical agony of the crucifixion but by organized Christianity’s misguided appropriation of that agony. Greenberg depicts Jesus as victimized by Christianity itself, which has ignored his human character and isolated him from his fellow men.

However, this representation is quickly subverted by subsequent poems in which Jesus appears to relish his new position as god, and to be complicit with the Christian Church in his own transformation into a symbol. This approach begins to appear in Greenberg’s poetry after his arrival in Warsaw in 1921, when he established himself as a young revolutionary poet and became affiliated with a group of young poets who called themselves the “Gang” (“*Khalyestre*”), which was to lead Yiddish poetry into its Modernist phase.⁶ In poems composed during this period, Greenberg depicts a Jesus who is unperturbed by his status as a god—who uses it, in fact, to avoid engaging with the suffering of mankind.

The tension between Jesus’ humanity and divinity is referenced in these poems by allusions to his “likeness and image”; the speaker identifies Jesus’ image as signifying a likeness between them, which arises from the resemblance between man and god. Here Jesus’ humanity is emphasized, but not at the expense of motifs suggesting his divinity. In the poem “*Velt b’arg araf*” (“A World Downward”), the speaker uses this type of formulation to persuade Jesus to descend from the cross: “You are a man made in our image: Descend! The world’s clock sounds: Thirteen o’clock!”⁷

The speaker calls upon Jesus, as one “created in our image” (that is, one who appears human), to make this humanity animate.⁸ Moreover, in poems from this period Greenberg appeals to Jesus’ humanity as the very element that confers upon him responsibility for his fellow men. Indeed, if Jesus is not entirely transcendent, it is incumbent upon him to join them, and to personally expose the fallacy that has set him apart from the rest of humanity. So long as he remains on the cross, Jesus cannot truly fight for justice, for he remains complicit in the injustices perpetrated in his name.

However, Greenberg’s empathy for Jesus’ suffering eventually dissolves into a protest against his hypocrisy and hollow sanctity. Thus, in “*Velt b’Arg araf,*” the poet and his friends are depicted ripping the halo from Jesus’ head, symbolically stripping him of his specious holiness, and leaving his naked body bleeding on its pillar. Here too, Jesus’ nudity acquires a negative dimension; stripped of his Christian symbols of divinity, Jesus is exposed as a mere human purporting to be a god. He is left only with his naked body and exposed wounds: “We will leave our unholy god-brother on the column” (“*Velt B’Arg Araf*”). Furthermore, not only is his divine sanctity revealed as an illusion, but his humanity disappoints as well. His blood is that of a “cold mortal,” and his humanity, instead of expressing sympathy with human suffering, turns out to be frozen and indifferent.

As in many of these poems, Greenberg calls Jesus “brother.” Here this term does not carry its ordinary connotation; in this nihilistic period, Greenberg uses the term “brother” scornfully, as a way of underscoring Jesus’ otherness. Thus in “*Velt B’Arg Araf,*” Jesus’ mortality, which originally identified him as the speaker(s) “brother,” ultimately reveals his alienation from them; unlike the speaker(s), Jesus does not wish to acknowledge his humanity. The poetic voice’s increasing sarcasm regarding Jesus’ fraternity emphasizes his representation as an empty idol, as one who has lost his human

nature and acquired a faked divinity. It is important to note that this cynicism towards Jesus parallels Greenberg's general cynicism during this period; at this point in his life, he doubts not only Jesus, but divinity itself.

Greenberg's construction of Jesus' double nature, then, does not only represent his own ambivalence towards this character, but reflects his conception of Jesus' own duality, which his poetry aims to bring into sharp relief. Jesus is mortal but refuses to recognize his own mortality; he agrees to remain posed as a god, allowing him to enjoy sanctification by, and dominion over, the world. But at the end of this poem Greenberg goes a step further. He expresses deep disappointment in Jesus, not only because the latter has forsaken his humanity, but also because of what he identifies as the cause of this abandonment: Jesus' detachment from his origins and national roots:

And the man on the cross answers: I cannot
 Step on the face of the earth...I don't know. It's dusk.
 I do not know the way that leads to Bethlehem...
 Two thousand years I haven't been in the Galilee...
 And it's been so long since I've prayed in the Temple...
 ("Velt B'Arg Araf").

Suddenly it becomes clear that Jesus is incapable of uniting with his human brothers, and thereby realizing his own humanity, because he is unable to remember his national origins. Here Greenberg's emphasis changes; Jesus is no longer a frivolous narcissus, but a despairing captive of the Christian Church longing for the sites in which he appeared as a Jew in the Land of Israel. Greenberg thus identifies the "authentic" Jewish Jesus with the Jesus of the New Testament, and distinguishes between him and the contemporary Jesus to whom the Christian Church has laid claim. This well-known distinction formulated by modern Jewish historiography is represented by Greenberg via various specific literary techniques. First, because it is Jesus himself who speaks here, expressing his own longing for his lost national roots, a clear distinction is forged

between the contemporary Jesus and the Jesus of the past. Second, allusions to the geographical sites in which the New Testament places Jesus emphasize the distance between that native Jesus and the Jesus who has been appropriated by the Christian Church and located in Europe; the metaphor of the “road to Bethlehem” illustrates the chasm that divides the authentic Jesus of the past from the artificial Jesus of the present.

The correlation between Jesus’ lost national identity and lost humanity becomes a dominant theme in Greenberg’s poetry in connection with his own awakening concern for the relationship between his national origins and his vocation as an expressionist poet. In the early 1920s Greenberg developed a concern for the destiny of the Jewish people, and began to explore this question in his expressionistic poetry, which had previously been detached from all nationalistic considerations and tended to focus on universal human experience. This shift in Greenberg’s use of the Jesus character receives what is perhaps its fullest expression in the poem *Uri Zvi farn Tzelem INRI* (“Uri Zvi Before the Cross INRI”).⁹ In this poem, which is typographically arranged in the shape of a cross, the poet gives a sort of personal confession, telling Jesus of his quest for personal and national consolation.

Why am I one of the convoy
Of the pained, not hanging
Next to you on a village pillar
At a crossroad, the sun drying me,
The night stretching itself over me, I am your brother,
Look at the bones of my body, my spinal cord:
In the light of the world, at dawn, I’m transparent. Shining torments. Day has
gone, night comes. By day, I am mute like you. [I can no longer carry
the heavy bronze on my head and eyes].
But at night the voice of the deep water pulls me down: to descend in it, over my head,
walls surround me. A three-story building and the dead streets of a city of churches. I am
wrapped up, brother Jesus, wrapped-up Jewish skin and bones (two thousand years after
you. Old!).
 (“Uri Zvi Before the Cross INRI”)

The poem begins by distinguishing Jesus from the narrator: one trudges along with the convoy while the other remains hanging on a rustic pillar, in a posture that permits him to gaze on suffering mankind from a distance. But the speaker's surprising wish to hang beside Jesus reveals the latter to be less afflicted than those in the convoy, while simultaneously suggesting that he sees Jesus as a source of comfort, a companion in suffering who can offer solace and kindness. The speaker who turns to Jesus as a "brother"—who wishes him to witness his affliction and feel his human pain—is represented as suffering in a manner that recalls Jesus' own torment in the New Testament. But the closeness that he feels for Jesus is revealed as purely fictitious, since they are separated by a city of churches. Jesus is surrounded, enclosed in captivity by the walls of the Christian church. Thus, despite the poem's intimate tone, which teasingly addresses Jesus as a beloved older brother, it becomes clear that Jesus has in fact lost his Jewish identity. Only some last persistent traces of Jewishness cling to him, possibly against his will:

---The world hangs itself for your sake- - and you- on the nights of everyone's pain, you cry, cry, a cry of a Jewish calamity.
 Do you remember, my brother, the holy village of Bethlehem? Do you remember meeting Miriam on a Galilean footpath [...]
 A white Jewish wrap on your body, with an azure belt on your loins. How, how can it be: You no longer remember. So many thousands of bells-bells ring. So many crazed voices lifted in prayer—and a bloody Latin INRI above your brain. But why do you still turn your glance as to the sky and wish to groan: My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?
 ("Uri Zvi Before the Cross INRI").

Greenberg here intertwines New Testament geography and imagery with distinctively Judaizing elements, emphasizing the Jewishness of the historical Jesus who was rooted in the Biblical Land of Israel. But the contemporary Jesus, who has been an object of mass worship for two thousand years, has long ago forgotten his national origins; he delights in the worship and admiration directed at him by the Christian world. The poem

employs rich and dense alliteration to actualize the contrast between Jesus' lost Jewish self and his identity as a Christian idol. The "cry of the Jewish calamity" is rent from Jesus' mouth almost absent-mindedly; he has forgotten his Jewishness and retains only a characteristically "Jewish" reaction to the sight of affliction, which also finds expression in his extended "sigh." But the prayers of the faithful and the sound of the ringing bells stupefy him, wiping out his memory, so that he can only call out in the plural voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?"—referring to himself, to the Jewish people, and to the loss of connection between them.¹⁰

You've become inanimate, brother Jesus. You've had two thousand years of tranquility on the cross. Around you, the world expires. But you've forgotten everything. Your frozen brain can't think: above your head a Star of David, above the star—hands in priestly blessing. Below, date, olive, and citron gardens. Your frozen eyes can't see: At your feet: a pile of Jewish heads. Torn prayer shawls. Stabbed Scrolls [...]
It is Golgotha, my brother, which you do not see. Golgotha is here: all around. Pilate lives,
and in Rome they recite Psalms in churches...
("Uri Zvi Before the Cross INRI")

Christian worship captivates Jesus, destroying his connection with his people and causing him to forget his national origins. He becomes a graven image lacking life and substance, unable to even associate the pogrom occurring before him with his own suffering people. He fails to see that the crucifixion has happened again and again, right before his eyes—except that the crucified are none other than the Jews, who are the real victims. Thus the crucifixion at Golgotha symbolizes the collective suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of its persecutors, while Jesus, who has become the god of the persecutors themselves, is now portrayed as severed from this collective, taking no part in its suffering. Jesus is unable to see Golgotha; that is to say, he is both unable to understand the calamity that has befallen him and to perceive that this calamity is bound up with the continual persecution of the Jews. Although the beginning of the poem

emphasizes the time that has elapsed since the Crucifixion, here place and time are reunited: the Crucifixion is contemporary, a symbol of the Jewish calamity that knows no temporal or spatial bounds.

Towards the end of the poem, Greenberg replaces this theme of Jesus as the archetypal victim who symbolizes Jewish suffering throughout history with a depiction of the Zionist pioneers (*halutzim*):

I would have brought you hot coals on a floor of fire: in an empty skull from a Jewish head. To warm your feet – the frozen – but a thought rises in me: I have slaughtered brothers. I have brothers in the Red Army gang. And I have brothers younger than them, who plant eucalyptus trees in the swamps of Hadera. Malaria eats them, the wailing of jackals.
 (“Uri Zvi Before the Cross INRI”).

After lamenting his slaughtered people, the narrator seeks resolution. His first option, to maintain faith in the values that Jesus represents for him, cannot be upheld in the face of his ethical and ideological obligations to his other brothers. Zionism, symbolized by his “younger brothers,” the *halutzim*, is now his preferred choice. Throughout “Uri Zvi Before the Cross INRI,” tension builds between Jesus’ figuration as “brother” and as “other.” In a kind of summation, Greenberg closes the poem by testing his fraternity with Jesus against his fraternity with his “other brothers.” These “brothers,” warriors, pioneers, and victims of pogroms are described as suffering great agony, which is contrasted with Jesus’ illusory pain, concentrated at his frozen feet. Thus, on the one hand, Jesus belongs in the company of those the speaker counts as brothers, in that his closeness to the speaker is measured in relation to theirs. On the other hand, the poet now directs his compassion towards their suffering and scorns Jesus’. Jesus becomes inanimate, a fixed and lifeless symbol, serene on the Cross.

In the context of Greenberg’s repeated emphasis on Jesus’ Jewish roots, his inanimateness and inability to feel others’ suffering are represented as disappointing:

years of Christian symbolism have wiped out the empathy and warmth that characterized his historical self. This deep disappointment in fact betrays the level of kinship that the speaker feels for Jesus. Not only does he choose Jesus as the addressee of this anguished monologue; the pain he expresses over Jesus' own devolution reflects the poet's deep psychic closeness with him.¹¹

Analysis of Greenberg's representations of Jesus is thus facilitated by an organizing schema that opposes his portrayal of Jesus as "brother" and as "other." In the poems discussed thus far, the central dichotomy around which these opposing depictions are clustered is that between Jesus' human and divine elements. The poet identifies with Jesus' humanity and deprecates his divinity, which he exposes as fundamentally idolatrous. This dichotomy is supported by symbolic tropes that serve to characterize Jesus' dual nature. When Jesus is described as human, his physical proximity and similarity to the speaker are underscored, while in his iconic character he appears distant (usually hanging on a high pillar) and alien. When Greenberg seeks to characterize Jesus as a Christian god, he emphasizes his nudity, which symbolizes his detachment from human civilization. Similarly, when he depicts Jesus as a man, his emotions (particularly his pain and empathy towards human suffering) are stressed, whereas as a Christian deity, Jesus is portrayed as frozen and without feeling.

This duality or ambivalence characterizes both Greenberg's representation of the poetic speaker's relationship to Jesus, and of the figure of Jesus himself. Each of these poems maintains an unresolved internal tension; Jesus remains fixed on the border between "brother" and "other."

2. "And Jesus was a Jew, with ear-locks and a beard!"

As we have seen, Greenberg's representations of Jesus as Christian god/idol employ Christian symbolism to express his alienation from human society and his transformation into a frozen, inanimate symbol. The predominant symbolic element in this context is the cross, which Greenberg uses to represent Jesus' physical and spiritual disconnection from human civilization. In "Uri Zvi Before the Cross INRI," the poem is shaped in the form of a cross, and it confronts the reader graphically much as it confronts the poem's narrator as he stands and pours out his heart to Jesus. Here Greenberg employs Christian iconography itself as an artistic element in his work, even while he charges it with responsibility for Jesus' inanimateness and lost humanity.

As a clear Christian symbol, the cross acquires a double meaning in Greenberg's poetry as he grows increasingly concerned with Jewish nationalism: on the one hand it symbolizes Jesus' Jewish suffering in the Christian world, and on the other it comes to signify Christian persecution of the Jews. This symbolic distinction is generally linked to an even deeper distinction between the Jewish *Yeshu* and the Christian *Yezus*, a trope that originates in Greenberg's Yiddish poem "In the Kingdom of the Cross" ("*In Malkhut fon Tselem*," 1923)¹², and is more thoroughly developed in his late volume of poems *Streets of the River* (1951), written in response to the Holocaust. In *Streets of the River*, the character of *Yeshu-Yezus* serves as a metonym for Christian-Jewish relations in Europe, in which *Yeshu* embodies the Jewish victim and *Yezus* the Christian oppressor.

Close analysis of *Streets of the River* must be preceded by examination of the earlier "*In Malchut Fon Tzelem*" ("In the Kingdom of the Cross"), in which Greenberg presents a prophetic vision of Jewish life in Europe under the shade of the Cross. This poem returns to the familiar theme of the distinction between the historical and the Christian Jesus; however, it connects this theme with the question of the fate of the Jewish people at the

hands of the representatives of the Christian Church, and compares Jesus' fate to that of European Jewry:¹³

Oh, it's true—true—true what my elders say:
 The dead one in the church is not our brother, but *Yezus*.
Bethlehem is a Latin name, not my fathers' village Beit Lehem.
 And *Maria Magdalena* is not Miriam of Migdal,
 With her blue woolen scarves and a jug of olive oil.
 ("In the Kingdom of the Cross")

The opposition that the speaker builds between the historical Jewish Jesus and his portrayal by the Church again serves to emphasize the chasm between Jesus as Christian symbol and Jesus as member of the Jewish people. Whereas "Uri Zvi Before the Cross INRI" mixed Latin and Hebrew names indiscriminately, in this poem a clear distinction is drawn between the authentic Jesus and his figurations by the Christian Church, which are exposed as impostors. The poem's narrator now reveals the "truth" about Jesus: "he is not our brother, but *Yezus*," a distinction that serves to differentiate the Latin and Hebrew names for places and characters in Jesus' life.¹⁴ In contrast to Greenberg's earlier poems, the contrast stressed here is not that between Jesus human and divine, but that between the living *Yeshu* and the dead *Yezus*. The epithet "dead one in the church" underscores Jesus' mortality and thus his humanity, but it also emphasizes anew his lack of vitality, recalling his frozen, inanimate character in the early poems. Against this clear portrayal of *Yezus* as the dead god of the Christians, the speaker highlights *Yeshu's* Jewish character (and note that Jesus here is the son – Ben – of Yosef and not the son of God):

I swear by the sun,
 The worship of those millions is a lie!
 Beit Lehem is a Jewish village!
 Ben Yosef is a Jewish son!
 ("In the Kingdom of the Cross")

In this poem, the cross no longer symbolizes Jesus' suffering alone, but that of European Jewry as a whole; when disaster befalls the Jewish people, Jesus' symbolic Christian incarnations are revealed as representing the Jews themselves, via a clear allusion to Jesus' Jewishness: "When the poison gas will enter the temples/ Suddenly the icons will cry out in Yiddish." At the moment of calamity, the duplicated figures of Jesus (that is, the icons) will appear as Jewish. The Christian symbols intended to commemorate Jesus' suffering are thus reappropriated by Judaism through the figure of the historical Jewish Jesus. At the same time, however, Greenberg resigns the cold and unfeeling god "Yezus" to Christianity. "Yezus" is the Jesus of the Church, embodied in Christian iconography and symbolism. Only the calamity of European Jewry causes the humanity of the Jewish Jesus to burst out of the icons, as it were, almost against their will.

The entire fabric of Christian symbolism—Eucharist, icons, the Holy Mother and her attendant cult, the crown of thorns and so on—all ultimately coalesce in Greenberg's poetry into the single central symbol of the cross, which from this point on embodies the menace of the Christian world: "the shade of my fear has been triangular here, these two thousand years" ("In the Kingdom of the Cross"). Thus, Jesus' cry from the cross reverberates in the cry of the tormented European Jew:

But many just go and go and go
By sea and by land, and a pillar follows them:
One of ours is bound to it by a rope,
Crying: My God, my God, in the void—the vacuum.
("In the Kingdom of the Cross")

While Jesus himself is not the central figure in "In the Kingdom of the Cross," the dominance of the cross itself suggests his latent presence, even when no direct connection is drawn to his character. Jesus' suffering is here metonymically personified by means of the cross, which has a dual role as a symbol both of the persecution of the Jews and of Jewish suffering itself, thus embodying the duality of the character of *Yeshu-Yezus*.

The distinction drawn in “In the Kingdom of the Cross” between the Jewish *Yeshu* and the Christian *Yezus*, between the cross as symbol of *Yeshu*’s suffering and of Christian oppression of the Jews, becomes a central theme in the book of poems *Streets of the River* (1951).¹⁵ This work appeared after a long period of silence and was Greenberg’s first poetic response to the Holocaust, in which he lost his entire family. In his investigation of Jewish responses to catastrophe, David Roskies suggests that Greenberg’s post-Holocaust poetry is no longer capable of imagining a Jewish Jesus (273).¹⁶ I would argue that *Streets of the River* does in fact contain a Jewish Jesus—who is, however, now entirely distinct from the Christian Jesus, and who is represented as having been murdered, along with his fellow Jews, by those who pray to that “other” Jesus.

Unlike Greenberg’s early poems, which distinguish the authentic figure of Jesus from his representation by the Christian world, the poems in *Streets of the River* no longer discuss the distance between symbol and reality, sign and referent. Instead, they point to an actual divergence in Jesus’ own character, illuminating a clear distinction between Jesus as he is understood by Christians and Jesus as the poet sees him. The Christian Jesus now appears under his Slavic name, *Yezus*, and he is no longer described by means of Christian iconography. In these poems, *Yezus* no longer appears as a bifurcated figure, but only as mediated through typical Christian tropes, which include evocations of Jesus in poses of praise or prayer following Christian oppression and murder of Jews.

He grabs his hands back from the Gentile’s—
 And it’s a miracle...that the Gentile didn’t pull them back
 And take him in reverse to the cross:
 “Yezunyu! This is a Zhid...now is the day of sacrifice!”¹⁷

The “reverse” Crucifixion represented here alludes both to the physical position in which the Christian wishes to hang the Jew, and to their role reversal; the Christian crucifies the Jew as a sort of symbolic revenge for the crucifixion of Jesus. As stated, Jesus himself

appears only as mediated through the tormentor's appeal ("Yezunyu"), although of course the act of crucifixion itself carries allusions to the suffering of the authentic Jesus.

Whereas the poetic "self" of Greenberg's early poems spoke his lament directly to Jesus, it is now the murderous Christian who turns to Jesus in supplication and praise, exulting in his abuse of the Jew. The intimate tone and affectionate expressions with which this figure addresses *Yezus* create a sense of affinity between them; and since *Yezus* himself never directly speaks in *Streets of the River*, he becomes restricted to the context in which he is invoked—that is, as addressee of the murderous Christians. *Yezus* thus becomes embodied in his murdering worshippers.

In "The Grave in the Forest," one of the most famous poems in *Streets of the River*, *Yezus* appears again as an outlet for celebration over the killing of Jews:

This is good...my God, Yezunyu, this is mine, it's Ivan's!
So I will arise and tell my wife and offspring:
Come, let's thank Christus, who does good for His Christians,
For this day we have hoped for has come...¹⁸

Ivan calls Jesus "Yezunyu" and "Christus," emphasizing the connection between the Christian appropriation of Jesus and Christian abuse of Jews. Further in the poem the theme of the crucifixion resurfaces, this time as a pretext for killing Jews:

Godinyu—Yezunyu! We have killed them all
And while we killed them, we told them all:
Why did you crucify "Our Savior"
There, in your Jewish city of Yerushalem?¹⁹

Here vengeance against the Jews is presented by the murderer to Jesus as a kind of just reckoning. The debate over Jesus' Jewish identity is presented in this poem in part through linguistic devices: the Gentile's "Elohunyu" – our God – and "Yezunyu" contrasts with the Hebrew name of the Jewish Jerusalem (Yerushalem).

As stated, in *Streets of the River* Jesus is almost always called *Yezus* (or by the diminutive “Yezunyu”) by his murderous supplicants. However, even when he does not name him directly, the narrator / poet expresses his own relationship to Jesus using traditional Jewish terminology:

Why did they rejoice so at this murder, the Gentiles,
 And were unashamed to come and look at this one on—the cross,
 Who like me was a son of the Hebrews and crucified for it
 By a Roman Gentile, who hates him - hates me!
 Why weren't they afraid, lest he smell, when the organ cried out,
 The smell of his blood—of our blood on
 their hard hands?²⁰

Greenberg's post-Holocaust poetry does contain a Jewish Jesus; but he has been transformed into a symbol of Jewish suffering at the hands of Christians throughout history. The Jewish speaker of this passage and Jesus are bound together by their national origins and by their fate, as indicated by the allusion to their common “blood,” which functions both literally and figuratively. In contrast to the Christian *Yezus*, the Jewish *Yeshu* of these poems appears as a real, concrete character; the details of his external appearance, and their import, is accorded special emphasis. Thus, in the poem “The Holy Song of the Face/Our Brothers, the Entire House of Israel,” Greenberg underscores Jesus' connection to Judaism by casting him in the mold of a traditional Jew: And Jesus was a Jew, with ear-locks and a beard! / He wore phylacteries and a proper prayer shawl! ²¹

In an earlier poem, Greenberg called Eastern European Jewry “My brothers, the Jews with ear-locks.”²² Here these external Jewish markers are used rhetorically as proof of Jesus' Jewish identity: his appearance substantiates his national origins, suggests that he is a practicing traditional Jew, and is central to the speaker's claim that Christianity is either unable or unwilling to understand the “true” Jesus.

obviously not the Christian *Yezus*, but rather the Jewish *Yeshu* as seen by Christians. The assumption of this Christian perspective enables Greenberg to distinguish anew between *Yeshu* and *Yezus*. When the Jewish *Yeshu* is represented from a *non*-Christian perspective, he appears as a suffering and merciful figure; when the poet views him through Christian eyes, however, the description that emerges depends not on the qualities of the historical Jesus, but rather on classic anti-Semitic markers.

This claim may be illustrated by reference to an earlier poem of Greenberg's that also emphasizes the similarity between the historical Jesus and the Jews of Europe:

I accuse His children among the nations of defaming my brother's image, with his
beard and ear-locks, who looks like my brothers
Who was born in Bethlehem;
Who spoke my Hebrew tongue and prayed to my God on Mount Moriah;
Whom Pilate handed over to the cross and who called out to my God from the cross
in Hebrew, and who died and was buried in my and his Jerusalem.²⁴

As is obvious, Jesus is described here directly from the poet's perspective, with marked emphasis on his connection to his national origins and to the Land of Israel. Like the Jesus of "God and His Gentiles," this Jesus resembles his Jewish brothers; here, however, the similarity is refracted not through the lens of anti-Semitism, but rather through a nationalist Jewish perspective that seeks to tie Jesus' suffering to that of the Jews, specifically by means of their historical-national similarities.

Surprisingly, in *Streets of the River*, Greenberg no longer employs the Christian iconography characteristic of his early poems to describe the Christian Jesus. This change seems to indicate a desire to diminish the role that the character of *Yeshu-Yezus* plays in his poetic representation. In *Streets of the River*, the Christian Jesus who appears as *Yezus* is not a central focus, in contrast to the Christian Jesus of the earlier poems, in whom the Jewish Jesus was still manifest. The speaker feels no closeness to the Christian God who is embodied in *Yezus*, and is thus untroubled by the fact that Christian symbolism has

caused Jesus to forget his humanity and national origins. Similarly, it is not surprising that this *Yezus* does not merit a direct description in these poems, for Greenberg essentially “needs” him only as a foil for the Jewish *Yeshu*.

In these poems, then, Greenberg crystallizes the distinction between Jesus as “brother” of the poet and the Jewish people, and Jesus as “other,” one who is embodied in the Christian God and who symbolizes Christian persecution of the Jews. The two are now entirely distinct; *ambivalence* towards the figure of Jesus has been replaced by the actual *partition* of his character. This division allows Greenberg to increase his empathy for the Jewish Jesus, and thus to emphasize his Jewish identity and ties to the Jewish people. Jesus’ connection to the Jews now extends beyond their common “humanity,” encompassing their shared history and destiny, external appearance, pain, and relation to the Land of Israel. This latter element, which becomes more central in Greenberg’s poetry written in the Land of Israel, will be the focus of the next section.

3. “With the Crown of David on his Holy Head”

Returning now to Greenberg’s earlier poetry, we may recall that Jesus appeared in the very early poems as a monistic, universal symbol of human suffering. Jesus’ connection to Judaism is first raised in relation to the question of Gentile persecution of the Jews. In this context, he is depicted as having gradually lost touch with his people and religion; his loss of humanity is accompanied by the loss of his Jewish characteristics. Accordingly, as in “Uri Zvi Before the Cross INRI,” it seems that the poet chooses to “leave” Jesus in Christianity’s warm embrace, transferring his sympathies to his younger brothers who “plant eucalyptus trees in the swamps of *Hedera*.” Drawing an analogy between the inanimate, hollow Jesus hanging on the pillar of the Cross in Christian Europe, and the young brothers, who despite being “eaten by malaria” nonetheless “have

a sea, they have mountains, and the *Kineret* is indeed - *Kineret*. Not the *Wisla*--" ("Uri Zvi in front of the Cross"), Greenberg recasts the *halutzim* (Zionist pioneers) in Jesus' role, both geographically and in terms of their national and historical importance.

The poet compares the Vistula (*Wisla*) River and the Sea of Galilee (*Kineret*) and reaches a foregone conclusion: the focus of his longing is the Galilee, where Jesus walked according to the New Testament, and where the narrator hopes to join his other brothers. But Jesus himself, despite his biographical connection with the Galilee, is left behind. Thus a clear distinction is made between the Jesus of the past, who is connected with the Land of Israel, and the contemporary Jesus: while the latter remains in Europe, serene, frozen, and inanimate, the restless poet goes out to wander—to seek his other “brothers” in the very places associated with the Jesus of the New Testament. Jesus, who once belonged to the East, is now left in the West, and the poet moves on in both time and space.

But surprisingly, as Greenberg comes increasingly to recognize that his departure from Christian Europe is imminent, his poetry expresses a new type of affinity for Jesus, which stems from the fact that like Jesus, he himself is different from these “other brothers”: he carries the experience of exile with him into the Land of Israel.

This tendency finds particularly interesting expression in the poem “Before Him” (“*Lefanav*,” from the cycle of poems “*Ba-ma’arav*”—“In the West”), in which the narrator, on the eve of departing for Palestine, lays out before Jesus his doubts about meeting the *halutzim*:

What shall I say in the Galilee, condemned brother, as I arrive and find
the shepherds of the Galilee, tanned and with a dream in their eyes,
if they see me clothed in European dress
and in my eyes no remnant of an eastern sunrise fire,
rather glimmering splinters of the sunset: dark blood,
from moment to moment the flashing of knives—and maybe
also that shadow of the Three-Ends on my body: the Cross—that is the torment.

("Before him...")²⁵

The shadow of the cross of Christian Europe, of the "Kingdom of the Cross," is cast over both Jesus and the poetic speaker, distinguishing them from those who live in the Holy Land. The latter are described as natives, and the narrator wonders how he will integrate into their community given his European appearance and manner.

Furthermore, this "European" attire alludes to the traditional dress of those "Jews of the earlocks and beard" that appear in many of Greenberg's poems from different periods, while the exile described here is experienced as a violent meeting between this Judaism and the Christianity that sheds fear over European Jewry. If it seems at first that the speaker's shame stems from Jesus' disgrace, it quickly transpires that it is his own diasporic appearance and experience that cause him to feel ashamed before the native shepherds. Thus, Jesus is here the object of the speaker's identification, onto whom he projects the feelings of strangeness and alienation evoked in him by these native Galileean figures.

In the New Testament, the shepherds are the first to hear the news of the Messiah's birth, and in their pastoral innocence welcome Jesus as he lies in the manger; in Luke 2:18-20, they are the first to announce his praise and make known the tidings of the redemption. Noah Rosenblum argues that "Greenberg maintains this pastoral theme when on his arrival in the Land of Israel the "shepherds of the Galilee; tanned and with a dream in their eyes"" are the first to inquire after Jesus and be interested in his fate" (Rosenblum 1966, 307). However, unlike the shepherds of the New Testament, these shepherds have already heard rumor of Jesus' abasement and oblivion. While the Nativity shepherds innocently believe that the newborn baby is the Messiah, Greenberg's shepherds question Jesus' Messianic status; they believe that they hold redemption in

their own hands. They greet the poet, who is for them a representative of afflicted European Jewry, with a question about Jesus and his abasement, alluding to the suffering of the Jews of Europe from a particular stance of pride. Thus, the fraternal link between Jesus and the narrator is here based on their shared role as “European Jews” who live in the shadow of the Cross.

That these shepherds, despite their innocence, already know of Jesus’ fate in the Christian world is perhaps not coincidental, but in fact due to the poems of Uri Zvi Greenberg himself, “Uri Zvi Before the Cross,” to whom they allude in the following lines:

And they will question me thus: of the exile of the world
 you certainly have much to tell—do tell,
 what is the lot of our brother Jesus condemned
 on several poles
 in the exile of the world;
 shall thousands of bells ring
 from thousands of towers
 for him, forgetfulness on his brain
 and he yet abandons his naked back to the winds
 to rain,
 to the sun
 and to the mouths of the people
 so that he may be kissed? - -
 (“Before him...”)²⁶

We will recall that “Uri Zvi Before the Cross INRI” portrays Jesus as having been lulled by the sound of church bells and Christian prayers into forgetting his Jewish past, so that over the years his divinity has atrophied. In this poem, the shepherds refer to this very description and inquire whether it is true. Here, the poet both emphasizes Jesus’ public humiliation—knowledge of his abasement has spread widely—and alludes to the wide dissemination of his own poetry, which has reached even the remote Galilee.

For the shepherds, Jesus’ shame embodies that of European Jewry. By describing Jesus through their eyes, Greenberg thus obliquely criticizes the attitude of the Jewish

establishment in Palestine (the *yishuv*) towards Diaspora Jewry. Once again, he uses Jesus as a symbol for the Jews of Europe and their suffering, this time as mediated through the perspective of the “shepherds of the Galilee.” From their vantage point, Jesus was once, like them, a Jew of the Land of Israel, but has now forgotten his origins. Jesus is distinct from European Jewry in that it is the worship and praise of European Christianity that have lured him into forfeiting his humanity and national identity—a description that recalls the poet’s own portrayal of Jesus in his earlier poems. However, there are also indications here of an analogy between Jesus’ gradual estrangement from his national origins and an identical process through which the Jews of Europe have apparently passed; both are presented as Jews who have forgotten their national origins and are captives in an alien land.

Moreover, the poem analogizes Jesus’ fate to that of European Jewry in the context of fear of Gentile oppression; thus, while describing what Jesus has witnessed in the naves of churches, the poetic speaker slips into first person plural, representing dread of Gentile persecution as an element shared by European Jewry and Jesus himself. This is more than sympathy for Jesus’ suffering and humiliation. Greenberg, who lived in the Diaspora, here actually internalizes Jesus’ humiliation. Jesus and the speaker see and hear the same sights and sounds, while the shepherds who call Jesus “our brother” are rooted in a distant and radically different universe of experience.

What will I say in the Galilee to the dreaming shepherds,
 in whose red blood runs the choicest gifts of heaven,
 how will I reveal your shame and pain
 in the exile of the world,
 as the bells ring
 and the skies bleed before your eyes
 and precious lamps are lit in the mosques
 and the joyful singing of organs make souls blue
 and the fear is white like the white nitre
 that reaches to our mouth in the exile of the world...
 how shall I see, as their foreheads wrinkle

with the passion of living misery in their eyes:
 ... "and he hangs like that
 on poles in the daytime,
 on stones at night
 and he has no savior?"
 ("Before him...")²⁷

The shepherds are depicted here as oblivious to the "white fear" that Gentiles inspire in the Diaspora Jew; they are astonished at Jesus' lack of rescuers, and speak with a kind of skeptical bravado that betrays their youthful naiveté and total ignorance of the reality in which European Jewry lives.

In his earlier works, Greenberg creates tension between representations of Jesus as a European Christian and as a Jew of the Land of Israel. Here, however, Jesus is figured as a European *Jew*, who stands in contrast to the coveted "authentic" Jewish shepherds. While Jesus may once have been akin to those "tanned" Galileean figures, he has forgotten his past and become kin to the European Jews who live under the rule of the "Kingdom of the Cross." While the speaker envies the shepherds, it is clear that he identifies with and feels greater emotional closeness towards Jesus, so much so that he again sees him as "brother." Jesus serves here as a Lacanian mirror of the poet's self, reflecting both his self-image and identification with the "old" Eastern European Jew and his desire to turn into his Other: the native Galileean Jesus of the New Testament. The geographical transition that accompanied Greenberg's linguistic switch from Yiddish to Hebrew also involved a transition in identity, and in that respect Jesus reflects both aspects of Greenberg's duality: his identification with the old, traditional Eastern European Jew, and his desire to become a Zionist pioneer or a "new Jew" who fulfills the dream of rebuilding the land.

This is why, for the first time, Greenberg here endows Jesus with his own voice. This speaking Jesus allows Greenberg to express both aspects of his torn identity, as he is

permitted to “repair” the impression that the poet has given of him in his early poetry. In the third section of “In the West,” in a poem titled “The Reply” (“*Ha-Ma’aneh*”), Jesus urges the narrator to travel to the Galilee and present him in a new light:

And my tormented brother answered me in his pain —
 (reddish twilight fell on me and on his tree,
 in the entrance to the mosque bells blazed.)
 —“Go, go to the Galilee,
 for your body is wrapped,
 and do not say:
 he hangs there
 dead
 on a tree.”
 (“The Reply”)²⁸

Using language that evokes God’s command to Abraham to leave his homeland and go to Canaan (“*Lekh lekha*,” Gen. 12:1), the “dead” Jesus implores the living poet to go to the Galilee and declare that he is yet destined to reclaim his life, humanity, and Judaism. The justification for this Divine command rests again on the distinction between the naked and “covered” body. By stressing that the poet (but not Jesus) has a ‘wrapped body’ (*guf atuf*) – an expression which ascribes to the poet both vitality and Jewishness (in that it evokes his envelopment in a prayer shawl) - Jesus seems to disclose his regret for being presently detached from Jewish life. Jesus casts the poet as a herald, who will come to the Land of Israel and announce Jesus’ reappearance.

In an unprecedented move, the poet thus “permits” Jesus to express his own wishes regarding his public representation. The “voice” granted to Jesus in this poem projects onto Jesus a critique of the poet’s own poetic representation of his character. This metamorphosis – from the mute Jesus of the early poetry to the contemporary speaking Jesus – reflects a change not in Greenberg’s conception of Jesus, but in his own method of reclaiming Jesus for the historical narrative of the Jewish people. This is why the Jesus of this poem is very assertive and active; instead of portraying him as inanimate and lifeless,

Greenberg seeks to emphasize the living aspects of his character, together with the elements that bind Jesus to the fate of the Jewish people:

He hangs in the midst of the world and looks out
to the end of all generations,
at the end of the world,
and his longing for the Land of Israel is great.
and he will return to the Land of Israel in the prayer shawl
that was on his shoulders as he went to be crucified.
He will arise at the time appointed for
the *redemption of the world*
at the end of all generations,
like the Menorah that ascends,
and the crown of the Son of David
on his holy head" - -
("The Reply")²⁹

Here the symbolic representations of Jesus' humanity unite with those that signify his Judaism, and even his Messianic status. Whereas in "Before Him," the shepherds describe Jesus as a naked corpse hanging on the cross, here Greenberg emphasizes the prayer shawl that conceals his nudity and serves to symbolize his Judaism. Thus hand in hand with Jesus' newfound vitality and ability to speak, he now expresses his connection to human civilization, and moreover to his own Jewishness.

Furthermore, Jesus' speech suggests that he is not content to be portrayed as a Jew only. In fact, he presents himself as a future Messiah: he will ascend to the Land of Israel at "the time appointed for the redemption of the world," "like the candelabrum that ascends" ("*ke-menorah ha-olah*," a symbol of national rebirth), with "the crown of the Son of David" on his head (embodying the Messianic status that he wishes to attribute to himself, and replacing the crown of thorns that symbolize his abasement). Thus, Jesus here authorizes the speaker to portray him as Messiah: his "Reply" appears in the guise of a prophetic revelation imparted to the poet, whose words now acquire prophetic power. Indeed, the concluding scene of the poem evokes a mystical revelation:

There was a pale moon, grace died on his face
 and the cross cast a shadow -- this is the ancient fear,
 this is the terror of generations,
 of the three tips.
 And then I saw my skull cut off at his feet.

“The Reply” may thus be seen as ending in a kind of prophetic vision of death, which again turns on the motif of the terror of the cross; somewhat paradoxically, it is the cross that here imbues Jesus with transcendental characteristics, figuring him as a living-dead performer of miracles.

Shalom Lindenbaum locates in this poem “a clear, lucid expression of the strengthening of national consciousness, achieved through the effacement of universal valences” (211). Lindenbaum demonstrates this argument by comparing the versions of the poem that appear in the two editions of “In the West”; the first was published in *Rimon*³⁰ while Greenberg was still in Berlin, while a revised version—which is used here—was published in Palestine some time later. The comparison reveals that Greenberg emended the poem to emphasize the nationalistic elements that tie Jesus to the Land of Israel. Thus, for example, the original poem does not feature the “Menorah that ascends” or the “crown of David,” and does not stress Jesus’ attachment to the Sea of Galilee. These emendations perhaps reflect the change in Greenberg’s own biographical and political circumstances upon his emigration to Palestine.

This cycle of poems (“In the West”) seems to present the poet as one who is appointed with the task of “rescuing” Jesus from his portrayal as “other” and representing him instead as a “brother,” in this case by articulating a clear connection between Jesus and the Zionist venture, which is embodied in Jesus’ appearance as Messiah. The last section of the poetry cycle “Earthly Jerusalem” (“*Yerushalayim shel*

mattah"), entitled "Proclamation: Leave!" (*Kruz: Tze!*), actualizes the metaphor of saving Jesus from the Church, and calls upon him to leave the monasteries:

...And now, my brother, go forth from the monasteries, for the appointed time has come. Go up *Meah Shearim*, and buy there a prayer shawl with golden price you will take from the coffer: Pay for having been their mouthpiece, payment for your nudity, So that you may wrap yourself and go to the Wall, to pray with Jews, if you are prepared for prayer. Or better still: Buy there shorts and blouse: the garments of a *Pioneer*, and ask in Hebrew: "Where is the road to the Valley of Jezreel – that is the earthly Jerusalem; – and they will tell you whither. ("Proclamation: Leave!")³¹

Here, Jesus is granted the wish he has articulated in "In the West": the summons "The appointed time has come"³² alludes to his Messianic role, and is linked with his deliverance from the monastery, i.e. from the Christian world. The speaker now proposes to clothe Jesus' naked body, symbolizing his return to civilization. The two types of garment that he offers him, the prayer shawl and the pioneer (*halutz*) garb, represent the ideological possibilities that will face him upon his arrival in Palestine. This metaphor of the garment permits Greenberg to insert the figure of Jesus into the nationalist Zionist conception of the pioneer achievement, imbuing it with Messianic overtones; Jesus' engagement in the Zionist project takes on the quality of a Messianic act in which the poet plays the part of a herald. But together with this mystical, Messianic description of Jesus' arrival in the Land of Israel, Greenberg maintains historical realism, representing Jesus as faced with options similar to those that confronted the many young Jews who arrived in Palestine during this period. Thus, Jesus can either join the old Jewish community in Jerusalem and become an observant Jew, or—and as the poet indicates, preferably—opt for the pioneer enterprise and learn to work the land in the Jezreel valley:

Go, and you will come to the Valley, and you will find brothers plowing the soil, unto them you will say:

“Shalom, my brothers!” and they will answer you:

“Shalom!”

[...]

And if you will labor, like brothers will they love you, and their bread will you eat in holiness.

(“Proclamation: Leave!”)³³

Jesus’ return to the Jewish community must be effected by means of his involvement in the settlement of Palestine, where he will work by day and learn Torah by night; in turn, his presence will impart a Messianic dimension to the Zionist venture. The motifs of bread, sanctity, and labor combine to paint an apocalyptic picture of the Messiah’s participation in the pioneer project. Alternatively, it may be that Jesus’ participation in the project will restore him to the days of his own Messianism. The Jezreel Valley here symbolizes the pioneer act of the settlement of the Land; it is the earthly Jerusalem, contrasted with—but, on the ideal plane, equal to—the expanses of the heavenly Jerusalem. The poet goes even further, and exhorts Jesus:

O, my brother, go forth from the monasteries, for the appointed time has come for the going forth, for the ends have already reached completion. It is proclaimed: *Descend!* - to all the hanged.

Day after day, hear you not the cleaving thunders from across the *streets of the mourners*, as they build the City for the third time?

(“Proclamation: Leave!”)³⁴

Jerusalem is the rebuilt “city,” but it is the pioneer undertaking that symbolizes its Messianic promise, which is thereby transmitted to the Jezreel Valley, the foremost geographic symbol of the pioneer venture. The tumult of city construction—metaphorically described in terms of stone and metal—will reach Jesus in his monastic prison, urging him to come join in the construction of the Third Temple. This poem thus represents Jesus as a Hebrew Messiah who has been immured or forgotten in monasteries

and churches. The poet himself is the one who has the power (poetic and rhetorical) to bridge time and space, between the Jesus of the past and current events, and to bring Jesus back to his people, this time as a real messiah, summoned for the sake of the Zionist project.

Finally, after representing Jesus as a Hebrew Messiah, in “Shortening the Way” (“*Kefitzat ha-derekh*”), the final poem in “Earthly Jerusalem,” Greenberg implicitly identifies the poet/speaker himself with the Messiah. The poem locates the poet as a link in the Messianic chain, identifying him as a new twentieth-century Messiah, attributing symbols associated with Jesus’ Messianism to the poet’s own character. Therefore, although Jesus himself is not the focus of the poem, he plays an important and meaningful role in it, for it is he who *inter alia* bestows the messianic mantle upon the poet.

The central symbol connecting Jesus to the Messianic narrator is the Last Supper, in which the Messiah’s flesh and blood are consumed:

O come to me, in whose abode is this celebration; I have set tables with my flesh-and-blood for you and for Jehova, on the land of the Slavs.
Bring all the Christs with you— no one is left to weigh the thirty pieces of silver!
 (“Miraculous short cut”)³⁵

The speaker here identifies himself as one of four Messiahs who appear at a feast. The Last Supper is invoked by means of allusions to Judas Iscariot’s betrayal, and to the ingestion of the Messiah’s flesh and blood. However, while Jesus himself is one of the four guests, it is not **his** flesh and blood that are consumed, but the speaker’s. The poet thus achieves a role reversal, in which it is Jesus who confers Messianic attributes on the poet, rather than fulfilling his own Messianic role. The other two Messiahs are Rabbi Nahman of Breslav and the prophet Jeremiah:

And I find Rabbi Nahman of Breslav wrapped in a prayer shawl. Jeremiah weeps
and Jesus the naked bleeds and bleeds.
Three precious guests stand over the box of my dead.

The three guests gathered to lament the fate of the persecuted Jewish people that has still not recognized its Messiah. The speaker / poet here plays the role of contemporary Messiah, whose Messianism, unlike that of his guests, is in a current state of actualization. Thus, not only does this poem present Jesus as one in a chain of Jewish Messiahs, but it again connects his fate with that of the Jewish people, and suggests that he is destined to suffer on account of his Jewishness. The motif of Jesus' nakedness recurs here – by contrast, Rabbi Nahman's shoulders are depicted as wrapped with a prayer shawl. But despite his nudity, Jesus is here represented as human; the term *medamdem-medamdem* ("bleeds and bleeds"), which plays on the words *dam* ("blood") and *dema* ("tears"), figures him as an eternal sufferer whose blood flows like tears, and expresses his human aspects, casting him in the role of a lamenting prophet, akin to Jeremiah.

Towards the end of the poem, Greenberg again makes use of the figure of Jesus in order to emphasize his desire for a human Messiah, a Messiah of flesh and blood:

O, there were several Messiahs, alas that I know it! There were several Messiahs,
whom the people surrendered to the kingdom. From the man who cried out to
God from the tree, until Shabbetai Zvi who rebelled only against them... and
agreed to become a slave to a Moslem emperor [...]
May the Messiah be a ragged Jew, who fled the Ukraine, who escaped Poland,
whose blood boils with rage, like the heart of Mount Perazim³⁶ [...]
Nay, I do not want a heavenly Messiah, whose body is fog, whose head made of
onyx and who does not know our torments and shame in his own *flesh and blood*.
Who does not know in *his own flesh and blood* hunger, and thirst, a small child's cry,
how a woman screams when the soldier touches her flesh!
("Miraculous short cut")³⁷

Flesh and blood are the essential characteristics of a corporeal, human, Messiah. Jesus and Shabbetai Zvi are both Messiahs of flesh and blood, but their Messianism remains unrecognized.³⁸ The poet therefore assumes the responsibility of completing the

redemptive process that Jesus and Shabbetai Zvi left unfinished, and takes upon himself the role of human Messiah.

The central opposition in Greenberg's early poems, between Jesus' divine and human aspects, is here transformed into a similar dichotomy centering on the Messiah. The speaker emphasizes that he does not want a "heavenly Messiah" but rather a Messiah "of flesh and blood." Greenberg thus retains his typical antithesis between human and inhuman, as well as his clear preference for the former; here, however, emphasis on the superiority of the human serves to enable the speaker to assume the role of human Messiah (at least in part because Jesus' appropriation as a deity by a foreign religion caused him to lose his humanity). Greenberg thus achieves a fascinating role reversal: the speaker/poet appears as a Messiah whose flesh and blood are consumed—a clear allusion to Jesus—while Jesus himself becomes a kind of rabbi or prophet in the company of Jeremiah and Rabbi Nahman of Breslav. The speaker, disappointed that none of the prophets who have arisen in the past have been accepted as Messiah, seeks to take this role upon himself; remarkably, however, his Messianic self-representation is dependent precisely on the figure of Jesus and on the symbols identified with him.

Greenberg's representation of Jesus has thus not only migrated from Europe to Palestine; it has also metamorphosed from a flesh-and-blood character to a transcendental figure whose appearance is bound up with the redemption of the Jewish people in the Holy Land. Jesus' relationship to the narrator/poet has also evolved significantly, as evidenced by the later poems analyzed in this section in which the two become embodied in each other. In the poetry that he composed after moving to Palestine, Greenberg's ambivalence towards Jesus is expressed through the very fact of his identification with Jesus as a "brother" in suffering. Like the speaker, Jesus is portrayed as a European Jew whose external appearance and formative experiences are the product of the European

Christian world. Greenberg's arrival in Palestine could well have led him to render Jesus as a native and authentic Jew, such as he idealizes in his earlier work; instead, he now embraces a representation of Jesus as a fellow European Jew, and identifies with him on account of their shared alienation from, and envy of, the Zionist pioneers. More than a "brother" to the speaker, Jesus now becomes a means to his own self-invention; by appropriating both Jesus' language and the symbols connected with his Messianism, he transforms himself into a human Messiah.

4. Conclusion

As I have shown, Greenberg's work characterizes the figure of Jesus in a profoundly ambivalent manner. One of the primary tensions in the figuration of Jesus in this poetry is that between the human and divine aspects of his character. This tension is embodied by different literary tropes, including the representation of Jesus' naked body as a symbol of his being "*artilai*," a word that Greenberg frequently invokes in relation to Jesus, and which has the dual connotation of "naked" and "angel," reflecting the duality inherent in his character. Jesus' garments, which evoke human culture, initially symbolize his humanity; later, this metaphor resurfaces in the guise of the prayer shawl that represents Jesus' return to Judaism and then the pioneer's garb that emphasizes the Zionist context of his character. The opposition between "human" and "inhuman" is also expressed in Greenberg's alternating representation of Jesus as a live person and as an inanimate symbol devoid of substance; along these two poles, Jesus is figured as both the speaker's human brother, and as the "other" embodied in the God of Christianity. The most extreme expression of this dichotomy appears in *Streets of the River*, in which Jesus' character is split into two different channels of representation, the Jewish *Yeshu* and the Christian *Yezus*. This tension between Jesus' human and divine representations reaches a

fascinating climax when Greenberg begins to invoke him to illustrate the Messianic dimensions of Zionism. Here both Jesus' human and transcendental aspects become necessary, for while the speaker-poet requires a flesh-and-blood Messiah, it is also precisely Jesus' supernatural attributes that permit his characterization as a truly Messianic figure.

Throughout his work, Greenberg expresses deep sympathy toward Jesus, the traditional "other" of his ancestors. In many of his poems he identifies with Jesus and attempts to demarcate a line of shared destiny between them. This common destiny is sometimes that of the Jewish people as a whole, and sometimes has a more particular meaning associated with the poet's own biography. The poet's complex fraternal feeling for Jesus includes elements of attraction and rejection, intimacy and distance, and reflects Greenberg's ambivalence towards this figure, who occupies such a central position in his poetry.

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¹ Cf. Susannah Heschel's fascinating book, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (particularly Chapters Five and Six).

² This group of poems was first published in the newspaper *Tagblatt*, and in 1915 was published under this title as a separate pamphlet.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Yiddish and Hebrew are mine. I would like to thank, Benjumin Harshav, Susannah Heschel, Avigdor Shenan, Oded Schechter, Oded Wolkstien, Tamar Wolf-Monzon, Ziva Ben-Porat and Yitzhak Melamed for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. Special thanks to Eve Krakowski for her great contribution to this paper.

⁴ *Amidst the Battles*, a collection of poet-soldier poems edited by Shemaryahu Imber. Vienna, May 1918.

⁵ *Mefista*, Second edition, Warsaw 1922.

⁶ Besides Greenberg, founding members of this group included Peretz Markish, Peretz Hirschbein, Max Arick, and others. Greenberg edited its literary journal, *Albatross*, which was published in 1922-23, first in Warsaw and then in Berlin, where he fled after the journal was closed down by the Polish authorities.

⁷ *Albatross*, v.1, Warsaw 1922. p.12.

⁸ It also alludes to the fact that Jesus is no different from all men, as all men are created in God's image (Genesis 1,27).

⁹ *Albatross*, v. 2, Warsaw 1922. pp.3-4.

¹⁰ This alliterative contrast is even more striking in the Yiddish original, where the proximity of the alliterative embodiment of this Jewish sigh (*krekhzen*) to Jesus' surprising call to his God emphasizes the simultaneous representation of Jesus' Christian and Jewish incarnations.

¹² *Albatross*, 3-4, Berlin, 1923.

¹³ The poems "In the Kingdom of the Cross" and "Uri Zvi Before the Cross INRI" may have influenced Marc Chagall in his work "White Crucifixion" (1938), where the crucified Jesus is presented with his nakedness covered with a prayer shawl. For a further discussion on the figure of

Jesus in Chagall's work, see: Harshav 68-69, Amishai-Maisels 68-94, Roskies 284-289 and Hoffman 206-251

¹⁴ The alien nature of the Latin names used in this poem is underscored by their appearance in Latin letters, which jump out at the reader from the Yiddish-Hebrew text.

¹⁵ Despite a gap of thirty years and the fact that the early poem was written in Yiddish and the later in Hebrew, I would like to argue that there is a strong link between them. We can find support for this claim in the fact that while working on *Streets of the River* Greenberg was planning to incorporate the early poem in the book. Because of the connection between the two poems, I am deviating from the chronological order that I have followed thus far, but will return to Greenberg's poetry of the 1920s and 1930s in the following section.

¹⁶ Matthew Hoffman goes even further, arguing that as a result of the Holocaust, the Jewish fascination with the figure of Jesus "faded [as] the climate was no longer deemed appropriate" (255). In fact, in works written *after* the Holocaust and the attainment of Israeli statehood – by Israeli writers such as Pinchas Sadeh, Nathan Zach, Yehuda Amichai, Dalia Rabikowicz, Yona Wallach, Meir Wieseltier, Yitzhak Laor, Yoel Hoffmann and Avot Yeshurun – Jesus' suffering is a dominant theme, while the traditional antagonism between Jesus and the Jews is strongly *suppressed*. The common assumption that there was no more room for a Jewish identification with the figure of Jesus after the Holocaust is therefore completely wrong (For further discussion, see Stahl, *TZELEM: Representations of Jesus in Twentieth Century Hebrew Literature*, Ch. 3).

¹⁷ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol.5, p.50.

¹⁸ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol.6, p.131.

¹⁹ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol.6, p.133.

²⁰ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol.5, p.136.

²¹ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol.5, p.172.

²² "Ahai Yehudei ha-peot" (1926), in *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol. I, p.97.

²³ Trans. by Robert Friend (with minor modifications). p.277-278.

²⁴ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol.3, p.86.

²⁵ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol.I, p.44-45. I would like to thank Melissa Weininger for her great contribution to the translation of this poem.

²⁶ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol.I, p.45-46.

²⁷ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol.I, p.45-46

²⁸ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol. I, p. 46.

²⁹ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol. I, p.46.

³⁰ *Rimon: Ma'asaf itti le-amanut u-le-sifrut*, Berlin. 1924, Vol. 6, p. 21.

³¹ Translated by Charles A. Cowen (with my own minor modifications).

³² *Ki ba mo'ed* - "You will arise and take pity on Zion, for it is time to be gracious to her; for the appointed time has come" (Psalms 102:14).

³³ Translated by Charles A. Cowen

³⁴ Translated by Charles A. Cowen (with minor modifications).

³⁵ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol.I p.71.

³⁶ Cf. Is. 28:21.

³⁷ *Kol Ktavav (Collected Works)*, Vol. I, p.71.

³⁸ Shabbetai Zvi appears in several of Greenberg's poems; it is interesting to trace Greenberg's depiction of him as fulfilling an important and necessary role in national salvation. In the course of his service in the Austro-Hungarian army during the First World War, Greenberg even chanced upon the town in which Shabbetai Zvi is buried and paid a visit to his grave (according to Yohanan Arnon's record of his conversation with Greenberg, 174).