The Appropriation of the Rejected Messiah: Jesus and the New Testament in Israeli Art, Literature, and Historiography

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In February 2020, I prepared the talk on Jesus of Nazareth and the New Testament in Israeli Art, Literature, and Historiography. When I had told colleagues about the topic of my presentation, they were astonished. Unaware of the central presence of Jesus in Israeli culture, my assertion that Israeli thinkers, writers, and artists have paid much attention to Jesus and the New Testament surprised them. Why, and in what manners, has Jesus appeared in Israeli imagination and scholarship? What have been the national agendas that stood behind the attention they have given to Jesus? What were the more personal motives of writers, artists, and historians that brought them to relate so strongly to Jesus? This article wishes to explore the Israeli Jesus, who has been very different from the Jesus of *Toldot Yeshu*. This time it is a Jewish Israeli Jesus, who identifies with and reflects the land, the landscape, and the people. The Israeli Jesus fits aspirations and values of Zionist and post-Zionist Hebrew speaking Israelis, before and after the birth of Israel in 1948.

Reuven Rubin: A National Painter and a Jewish Jesus

Jesus appears in Palestinian Jewish Hebrew culture for the first time during the Third *Aliya*, the Jewish immigration to Palestine in the immediate years following World War I and the British takeover of Palestine. The British called the country Palestine- Eretz Israel. Hebrew speaking Palestinian Jews often called themselves *Eretzisraelim*, a self-designation that preceded *Israelim*, Israelis. The mostly modernist secular Hebrew culture that developed in the country had its early beginnings before WWI, but became predominant during the British mandate period. Artists, historians, and writers who contributed to the creation of a Hebrew speaking Zionist culture in Palestine, saw a need to make sense of Jesus of Nazareth, reinterpret his legacy, recreate his meaning, and embrace him into the new Jewish Hebraic environment.

Reuven Rubin (1893-1974), grew up in Romania, moved to Palestine in 1912 to study art in Bezalel, a newly founded Hebrew Zionist school of arts and crafts in Ottoman Jerusalem. He later moved to Paris to study at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. He was not alone. Paris was the preferred destination of Palestinian Jewish, *Eretz-Israeli* art students and a number of Rubin’s colleagues studied there and formed their artistic styles there. Robin moved back to Romania during WWI and the neo-Byzantine artistic style that developed in that country influenced his work.

Rubin settled permanently in Palestine in 1923. He quickly became a central figure in the local art scene, turning in 1930 into the head of the Painters and Sculptors Association, and receiving numerous prizes and recognitions. His paintings, which depicted sites in the Land of Israel, as well as people of the land and their spirituality, became canonical and Tel Aviv holds a special museum depicting his paintings. Rubin’s strong stand within the Hebrew Zionist community became evident in 1948, when the newly formed Israeli government appointed him to serve as its first ambassador in Romania. Israeli ambassadors have occasionally engaged in painting, however painters rarely, if ever, became ambassadors. Rubin’s acquaintance with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Communist Romania was one reason for the appointment. Still, it was obvious that the government trusted an acclaimed painter of the country’s landscapes to represent its interests and values. He was part of the cultural elite, laboring for the nation’s cause.

It is therefore significant that in the 1920s Rubin wished to bring Jesus of Nazareth, the most famous person associated with the land, and its spirituality, back to the landscape and the people. In that respect, Rubin’s painting, *the Encounter: Jesus and the Jew,* is striking in its depiction of Jesus [See picture, no. 3, in the PowerPoint slide show]. In *the Encounter*, Jesus has come down from heaven, with pierced hands and dressed in a white garb, signifying his righteousness. He is sitting on a public bench, where another person is sitting, an elderly man, dressed in a traditional Jewish coat, with white hair and bird, his body bending over, symbolizing the suffering and persecution of Jews throughout the centuries. Jesus is sitting, reflecting, perhaps observing and absorbing the pain his neighbor radiates. The background and scenery is that of Palestine. Did Jesus come down from heaven for the Jews, his people, to learn about and witness their precarious reality? Was he unaware of it for long centuries when he was gone from the earth? Is the painting intended to ask why Jesus is not demonstrating sympathy, embracing the suffering Jew, perhaps interceding on the Jews’ behalf?

Rubin provides an answer in another painting of his from that period, which deals with the theme of Christianity and the Jews (Slide no. 4 in the Slideshow).

In *Jesus and the Last Apostle*, Rubin depicts Jesus and the Orthodox Romanian priest, writer, and public intellectual Gala Galaction (1879-1961). Galaction came out in the early 1920s in defense of the Jews and their place in Romanian society. Post-World War I Romania annexed territories that before WWI were part of the Hapsburg Empire, including Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transylvania. Hundreds of thousands of Jews lived in those areas, many of them among the Hungarian and German populations of the territories and spoke Hungarian and German rather than Romanian. Many also spoke *Yiddish,* the traditional language of the Jews in Eastern Europe. The Jews of the annexed territories begun a rapid process of acculturating into Romanian culture. However, Romanian nationalists were hostile towards the Jewish population, especially of the newly annexed provinces, openly advocating anti-Semitic agendas. The painting came in the wake of a *cause celebre*, involving incitement and riots against Jews and a murder of a Jewish high school student, which ended with the acquittal of the killer. A left wing theologian and anti-fascist, Galaction militated against bigotry and called upon the Romanian people to accept the Jews. Rubin saw him as a righteous person, “the last apostle.” The Zionist Jewish painter also appreciated Galaction’s support of Zionism and the fledgling Jewish Hebrew community in Palestine.

In the painting, we see Jesus again, in this case, coming down from the Cross, his hands pierced. In line with traditional Christian depictions of Jesus on the Cross, Jesus’ upper body is naked, exposing a thin meek body that gives evidence to the suffering he underwent, and, by extension, to that of the Jewish people. In that respect, the painting is very different from *the Encounter*. This time, Jesus represents the Jewish people and Gala Galaction is holding his hand, comforting him, offering sympathy and encouragement. Rubin portrayed Jews in the Land of Israel as strong and healthy, but Jesus represented for him diaspora Jews throughout the centuries, weak and in need of support.

Rubin’s interest in the landscape, people, and spirituality of the Holy Land did not divorce him from the realities of Romania, its intellectual and artistic life, and its attitudes towards the Jews. This was not surprising. The *Yeshuv*, the Jewish community of Palestine at the time, was composed mostly of immigrants. Many came from Eastern Europe, where they encountered Orthodox or Catholic Christianity in different varieties. They formed their initial impressions of Christianity in the Old Country, but amended their understanding of Jesus and events from the New Testament following their encounter with the Land of Israel.

Joseph Klausner: A Zionist Scholar Searches for the Jewish Jesus

Reintroducing Jesus as an exemplary Jew united many Zionist Palestinian intellectuals and writers. One such scholar and writer was Joseph Klausner (1874-1958), who wished to transform the Jewish understanding of Jesus and open a new page in Jewish Christian relations. Growing up in Lithuania, Klausner studied in Germany, and settled in Odessa, Russia, a center of Hebrew literature before WWI. He reached Palestine in 1919 on Ruslan, a ship and a journey that became mythological, something of an Israeli Mayflower, which brought to Palestine about a thousand immigrants who would make their mark on the emerging *Yishuv*. A founder of the Hebrew University and its department of Hebrew Literature, Klausner was an influential, albeit controversial, intellectual in Palestine of the time. His motto, which he inscribed above the entrance to his home, was “Judaism and Universalism,” commitment to universal values and knowledge while maintaining a proud Jewish identity and promotion of Jewish culture and learning. In the 1930s, Klausner joined the nationalist camp under the leadership of Vladimir Jabotinsky. After the birth of Israel in 1948, the Herut political party, which gave rise to the Likud, promoted Klausner’s candidacy for the presidency of Israel, but he did not receive the majority of the votes.

Klausner wrote extensively about modern Hebrew literature, as well as took interest in the history of Second Temple Judaism and the early beginnings of Christianity, a topic on which he wrote a number of books. *Jesus of Nazareth* is probably the better known among his publications. It is an extraordinary tract, an homage to Jesus and the messages of the New Testament from the pen of a nationalist Hebrew Zionist. Klausner was aware of the work of nineteenth century German, English, and American Jewish scholars, who wrote about Jesus, viewing him as a Jewish religious leader of his time. Klausner’s presentation of Jesus was somewhat different. It was part of a larger agenda of a national Hebrew revival. The Palestinian Jewish writer wished to see Jewish reconciliation with Christianity, as part of the building of a new Hebrew commonwealth in Palestine. Openness to Jesus, the founder of Christianity and its major symbol, meant respect for Jesus’ followers. In his writings, Klausner follows closely the narrative of the New Testament, accepting the narrators’ descriptions as valid, a choice that some scholars would consider as not fully critical or historical. Still, Klausner engages with Jesus as a Jew. Jesus is not a God, but rather a great national and Jewish religious figure. "In all of these, Jesus is the most Jewish of Jews, more Jewish than Simeon ben Shetach. More Jewish even than Hillel…” (page 373). Yet, he warns that “nothing is more dangerous to national Judaism than this exaggerated Judaism.” (page 374) The most important agenda for Klausner at this time was the building of a nation. Jesus was a great teacher, but following his messages would not work in Palestine at this particular moment.

The translation of the book into English tells us a great deal about its nature. The translator was Herbert Danby (1889-1953), an Anglican curate who settled in Jerusalem. Not an ordinary clergyman, Danby came to Palestine, after the British conquest, to work at St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem as a liaison to the Jewish community. Danby was different than most members of the Anglican hierarchy in Jerusalem, who with a few exceptions, did not favor the Zionist cause. Danby, who took interest in the new Hebrew culture, was an early proponent of what would turn into a movement of reconciliation and Christian recognition of the legitimacy of Jewish existence alongside the church. He made a name for himself as translator of the Mishnah into English, a translation that has become canonical. Danby’s willingness to undertake the translation of the book, and his rendering Klausner’s writing so successfully points to his agreement with and cooperation in a mutual project- the promotion of a new attitude on the part of Jews towards Christianity.

Whatever criticism historians of the Hebrew University have directed towards Klausner’s understanding of Jesus, the Hebrew readership applauded the book and tens of thousands of Israelis have read it throughout the years. For many of them it was the only encounter with the narratives of the New Testament. While Klausner concentrated on a textual-historical study of Jesus, the novelists Nathan Bistritsky Agmon and Aaron Kabak depicted Jesus in literary fictional narratives.

*In the Narrow Path*: Jesus the Galilean and his Friend Judas

Nathan Bistritzky Agmon was the first novelist to publish, in 1924, a Hebrew Palestinian novel on Jesus. A Socialist Zionist and founder of HaShomer Hatzair movement, Bistritsky Agmon came to Palestine in the Third *Aliyah,* and settled in one of its first collective settlement, Bitanya. Unlike other literary works of Agmon, his novel on Jesus was not very influential and disappeared into oblivion. Within a few years, another novel, *In the Narrow Path* overshadowed it completely. Aaron Abraham Kabak (1880-1944), was born in Lithuania and studied at the University of Bern. He came to Palestine in the early 1920s, and taught literature at the Hebrew Gimnasia in Jerusalem while pursuing his work as a novelist. Kabak became a respected canonical writer at the heart of the Palestinian-Hebrew culture, publishing novels on Palestinian Jewish themes, including the Sephardic community in the country. Confronting illness, Kabak took a vow in 1935 to become an observant Jew and begun writing about religious experiences, choosing Jesus and his disciples as his theme. For him, Jesus was a Palestinian religious figure, someone that nowadays we would call ‘a guru’. He relates to Jesus with huge respect and affection, as a keen and charismatic religious leader who walked the paths of the land.

In one incident, Kabak followed, perhaps unwittingly, traditional Jewish views of Jesus, referring to rumors about Jesus' birth, which did not take the claim of a virgin birth very seriously. Kabak tried to offer a ‘logical’ interpretation that would be more acceptable to Jews. (page 60) Otherwise, he draws a positive benevolent Jesus, presents his family members as decent and loving and portrays the followers in humane sympathetic terms. The novel depicts Jesus as an innocent, sensitive caring and spiritually radiating personality. He is a healer of bodies and souls, offering people love, guidance, and support. People gather to him, both well-to-do and the down-and-out, those who have issues and need support, and those who search for meaning and answers. Jesus is no charlatan and does not invent answers to impress those coming to him with questions. Instead, he offers encouragement, tries to empower his disciples and offers hope. "You, Judah, the entire Earth was created only for you,” he tells his disciple. (Page 358) This might remind us of the finishing line in Rudyard Kipling’s poem *If*, except that Jesus’ message is not conditional. The idea is that God is there for all humans and has created the world for everyone.

Kabak spends much time on building the characters of Mary and Jacob, the mother and brother of Jesus. Likewise, he devotes long paragraphs to Martha and Mary Magdalene and their interaction with Jesus. Perhaps more significantly, he pays much attention to Judah, presenting him as a tormented young man, and pointing to the righteousness of Jesus and his benevolence in his encounter with Judah. *In the Narrow Path*, is the first time that a Hebrew novel confronts Judah of the New Testament. As the writer Amos Oz has pointed out, Jews are often reluctant to confront the story of Judah.

The land of Israel looms large in the novel and serves as Jesus’ territory, where he walks, and interacts with people as well as observes the country and its fruits. A time-honored son of the country, Jesus represents its lore and memories. The book was well-received, and was read by tens of thousands of Israelis throughout long decades. One reason that so many Israelis related positively to the book was that Kabak presented Jesus as a genuine spiritual teacher, but did not overstep Jewish boundaries and did not relate to Jesus as divine, or as possessing superhuman abilities.

Jesus and the Israeli Landscape

Authors, like Kabak, and painters like Rubin, who came from Eastern or Central Europe, adopted, appropriated and absorbed Palestine, the Land of Israel, which served as their new country and focus of their creativity. Choosing different styles, methods and interpretations, they related extensively to the scenery and people of the land, and for a number of them Jesus was an important part of the land, its scenery and history.

An architect by training, Leopold Krakauer (1890-1954) came from Vienna in 1924 and settled in Jerusalem, designing buildings, drawing, and painting. Like Rubin, his art became canonical, exhibited in Israeli museums and featured in albums and art collections. Many of Krakauer’s paintings and drawings focus on the Jerusalem hills, its lights, curves, colors and flora. One of his more striking drawings is that of Jesus on the cross (Slide no. 8, in the slideshow). Unlike most artists throughout the ages, Jesus is not crucified on a traditional cross. Instead, Jesus is crucified on a living and breathing olive tree. In fact, Jesus and the olive tree are one. Jesus grows out of and is part of the tree. Krakauer lived in Rehavia, just above Emek Hamatzlevah, the Valley of the Cross, where Georgian monks built, in the eleventh century, the Monastery of the Cross to commemorate the place from which, according to local tradition, the tree for the wood of the cross was taken. The Valley of the Cross was, in Krakauer’s time, an open park, with olive trees, and Kraukauer thus depicted Jesus as a permanent feature of the Jerusalem scenery. Krakauer drew the picture before WWII, Israeli literature and art has gone through significant changes during and following World War II, when the *Yishuv*, the Jewish community in Palestine learned about the horrors of the Holocaust.

Jesus and the Holocaust

Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896-1981), a nationalist Hebrew poet wrote an epic poem, *Rehovot HaNahar*, The River’s Streets, giving voice to his pain and anger over the brutality mitigated on the Jews. He included Jesus in his poetic narrative and musing.

Born in Galicia and serving as a soldier in the Austrian army in WWI, Greenberg immigrated to Palestine in 1923. Initially a socialist, he moved to identify with the Zionist Right wing, which was in the minority in the *Yishuv* for long decades. Following the riots of 1929, he became a founder and leader of *Brit HaBirionim*, named after the zealous rebels of the Jewish war against the Romans in 66-73 of the Common Era.

*Rehovot HaNahar* is a bitter poem. Greenberg mourns the demise of his people and blames Christians and the Christian faith for the horror. Christian lore, art, and leadership created an antagonistic attitude towards the Jews in Christian European societies that stirred harassments and massacres. Ultimately, it resulted in the horrors of the Holocaust. Greenberg, however, absolves Jesus. Jesus is one thing; those claiming to be his believers another. Jesus was innocent, not so Christians. He wonders about the reason for their brutality.

"Why were they so eager, so happy, to commit this murder, the non-Jews, and were not ashamed to look at Him on the Cross?" Greenberg asks (page 146). Jesus would have never ordered or condoned attacks on Jews. In the poem, Jesus is asserting "who, like me, was a son of the Hebrews, who was crucified because of that by a Roman antagonist, by Roman hate” (page 146). Greenberg speaks again and wonders: “How come they were not afraid while playing the organ that He [Jesus] would smell his blood/ our blood, which they have poured on their tough hands?" (page 146). Greenberg presents the pouring of Jewish blood as equivalent to the pouring of Jesus’s blood. In the midst of murder and agony, the poet declared the affinity and innocence of Jesus, who suffered and ‘poured his blood’ with the victims of the Holocaust.

Greenberg accusation against Christians attacking Jews is that they “poured blood on the altar,” desecrating their Jewish Messiah. They were not really followers of Jesus, but worshipers of stone and wood idols. Following the murder of Jews, “there was a celebration for the children of Gog and Magog…and young ladies rejoicing with young men while carrying the Galilean God which they produced from marble, or from wood. “ (page 147). Greenberg distances Jesus from murderous Christians and states his opinion that hostile Christians worship an idol of their own making, not Jesus, the Son of the Hebrews. Jesus belongs to the Jews, not to murderous Christians. In accordance with the understanding that Jesus represents the Jews, Jesus appears in the poem in the first person. This feature would become more common among Israeli writers and artists as their work would become more individualistic.

David Flusser and the Jerusalem School of New Testament Studies

Israeli scholars continued to study the New Testament and early Christianity, making them accessible to Israeli audiences. One outstanding scholar was David Flusser (1917-2000). Born into a liberal Czech Jewish family, Flusser became a Zionist and an observant Jew, while maintaining his commitment to humanism, in the model set by Tomas Masaryk, the founding president of Czechoslovakia. Studying and then teaching at the Hebrew University, Flusser became, in the 1950s, an expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls and the origins of Christianity.

Together with his friend, Robert Lindsey, the head of the Southern Baptist network in Israel, Flusser came out with a set of new ideas that served as the basis of the Jerusalem school of New Testament research. Lindsey, Flusser and their disciples concluded that Luke was the primary gospel that inspired Matthew and Marcus, alongside a lost manuscript Q. Like a number of Jewish scholars, Flusser saw huge resemblance between Jesus’ ideas and messages and those of the early Mishnaic scholars. Since Jesus’ activity took place a few generations before the Mishnah came out, he believed that the New Testament narratives, if constructed carefully, could shed an additional light on Second Temple Judaism, in the generation before the destruction. Flusser believed that by taking a comparative philological study of the synoptic gospels and removing the editorial layers, one could decipher the original teachings of Jesus.

Flusser declared himself an admirer of Jesus, without embracing the supernatural elements in Jesus’ teaching or viewing him as divine. Likewise, he cherished John the Baptist and named his younger son Yohanan. He took to Jesus’ pacifism and altruism, which he interpreted as coming from a point of strength and not of weakness. Flusser was a popular lecturer and writer in Israel and, at the same time, attracted numerous Christian students, many of them evangelicals and Adventists. By the 1950s-1960s, both Christians and Jews were more open to learn about Second Temple Judaism and the origins of Christianity. Israelis were now willing to look upon Jesus as a positive and inspiring Jew and listen to the ideas of an appreciative Jewish scholar.

The Artist as Jesus

Appreciation for and self-identification of artists and writers with Jesus is evident in the paintings of Moshe Castel (1909-1991). A Sephardic Jew, whose ancestors arrived in Palestine from Spain in the late 15th century, Castel paradoxically, found his Sephardic group in the minority, while members of the new Zionist immigrations, most of them from Eastern and Central Europe, took the lead in Jewish society and culture. The sense of being unjustly marginalized and underappreciated would accompany Castel all his life and would inform his art.

Like Rubin, he first studied in Bezalel and then moved to Paris to pursue his artistic training there. Castel was interested in religious themes, and gave expression in his art to mystical, Kabbalistic and supernatural themes. Settling back in Palestine and building a family, Castel faced, in addition to discrimination by the Ashkenazi artistic establishment, personal tragedies. He first lost his wife to cancer, and then, in a pre-antibiotic era, his three-year-old son died as well. Seeing himself as suffering unjustly, he came to identify with Jesus, the icon of martyrdom in Christian tradition and now in Israeli culture as well. Since Jesus was a native of the Land of Israel and the establishment disapproved of him, Castel might have further identified with him. In 1948, Castel paints Jesus on the cross in what seems like a classical depiction of Jesus. A closer look shows Jesus to be the painter Castel. The inscription, instead of reading "Jesus, King of the Jews," reads “Castel.” (Slide number 12).

Individualistic identifications with Jesus would persist after the birth of Israel as Israeli artists and writers would shift their focus from national goals to personal ones.

A Countercultural Israeli Jesus

In 1959, the Israeli writer Pinchas Sadeh (1929-1994) published a sensational book *HaHayim KeMashal*, Life as a Proverb, which ran against the official ideological and collectivist agenda of Israeli society. Writers and critics reacted angrily to the countercultural autobiography of Sadeh, viewing it as perverse. It was a revolutionary publication, the first manifestation of the equivalent of Beat culture in Israel. Sadeh relates to Jesus extensively in his book. At first glance, this is surprising. What is Jesus doing in a bohemian, rebellious book that celebrates individualism and personal freedom?

Sadeh grew up in Tel Aviv, fought in the War of 1948, served as a commander in the Israeli army, and became a kibbutz member. He wrote *Life as a Parable* after he left the kibbutz, divorced his wife, and refused to serve any longer in the Israeli military reserves. *Life as a Parable* promotes individualism, personal choices and the right of people to follow their hearts and minds, even if they do not conform to the expectations and needs of the Zionist collective. It was perhaps the first post-Zionist novel. It opposed conventional norms, not from the perspective of a political agenda different of that of the ruling political parties, but rather from a point of view of a writer who retired from Zionist social and political life and would not even read or listen to the daily news. The Tel Aviv bohemian environment started in the 1920s, but its members were mostly dedicated to the Zionist call as was evident from their biographies and oeuvres, including those of Rubin or Greenberg. Sadeh represented a new, post-1948 generation that began rebelling against the collective Zionist, nationalist or socialist agenda and ideology, which some have come to view as suffocating and restricting. Instead, he took interest in spirituality, including, and in that period in his life especially, in Jesus and the New Testament.

The book recounts Sadeh’s life in a kibbutz in the Galilee, where as a shepherd the author walked in Jesus’ land, and read the New Testament. He took to a number of characters in the New Testament, celebrating Jesus not as God, but as an eternal pure human being. He recounts Jesus' miracles and accepts them as valid.

In a picture Sadeh painted, for chapter 12 in the book, Jesus is on the cross, naked. (Slide number 17) In the picture, Jews are surrounding Jesus. Among them are normative, mainstream modern Jews, traditional Jews, and freethinking, lovemaking Jews as well. There is also a naked woman. Perhaps paradoxically, that is the place where Jesus comes into Sadeh’s vision of an individualistic, free life.

Sadeh’s message was that one was free to pick-and-choose, live and celebrate as one saw fit. He promoted sexual freedom, literary freedom, and spiritual freedom. Like Kabak in 1937, he conveyed another message. He disagreed with Israeli secular culture that was devoid of spirituality and in his opinion empty. Sadeh’s advocacy of freedom coupled with a quest for spirituality brought him to embrace the New Testament, its narratives and its major persons. The author became an iconic figure for the growing rebellious youth that began, in the 1960s and 1970s, to embrace Western values of freedom and individuality. One could find his book in bookshelves of secular Israelis who took interest in novels and poetry. Sadeh was not the only Israeli writer to appropriate Jesus in order to promote countercultural values.

In *the Last Supper Before Going Out to Battle,* the photographer Adi Nes places Israeli soldiers in a New Testament scene that has served, throughout the centuries, as inspiration to many artists (Slide number 26). The carefully constructed picture makes use of the last supper of Jesus and his disciples to depict loneliness and alienation, alongside friendships and interactions, among the young men serving in the military. The artist literally drafts Jesus, the teacher and the suffering servant, and his disciples in order to point to the ambivalent atmosphere of military life. Like Jesus, the soldiers would soon confront injury and death, sacrificing themselves, at least potentially, for the sake of redeeming the nation.

Nes grew up in Kiryat Gat, a ‘development town’ in the south of Israel, inhabited mostly by families of immigrants from Asian and North African countries. In his photography, he focuses on young men, who represent Israeli ethnic and geographical periphery, especially during their service in the IDF. Nes is openly gay and his art contends with manhood and its meaning in Israeli military culture. In the picture under discussion, most soldiers are in conversations and seem to have friends or to connect to each other. The person sitting in the middle, who should be the central figure, is all on his own, abandoned. Is he Jesus? Is he about to die?

There is one person, standing, who is looking at his direction. Is he standing there reflecting? Or, is he Judah who is about to betray his friend? Adi Nes is today the most acclaimed artistic photographer in Israel, and he teaches photography at Bezalel Art Academy in Israel, Bezalel. His usage of the Last Supper tells us a great deal about the current position of Jesus and the New Testament in Israeli lore and imagery.

Conclusions

Each Israeli writer, artist, and scholar presented Jesus somewhat differently, at the same time that they shared common features and trends. The early among them appropriated Jesus as part of their attempt at nation building, and their wish to take part in constructing a secular Jewish Hebrew speaking culture. In the mid twentieth century, more individualistic aims entered the picture. Relating positively to Jesus in an ideological Jewish Hebrew society meant openness to the larger world, a quest for freedom, and the right to choose one’s spiritual and historical heroes.

Some Israeli artists and writers identified with Jesus. Yehuda Amichai, one of Israel’s most read poets, wrote, "I am Jesus. And we're going to have the same fate. And Jesus is peace." Quite often, we observe the artistic and literary community as pushing the boundaries of societal structures and cultural norms. In this case, they have given voice to new attitudes towards Jesus, episodes from the New Testament, and Christian symbols. In fact, they have turned such imageries into part of Israeli culture. When a large crowd of Israelis gathered to mourn Itzhak Rabin, who was murdered in November 1995, they started the memorial with *Agnus Dei*. The musical piece came to compare Rabin to Jesus, and present the killed prime minister as sacrificed for the cause of peace. By the 1990s, a number of Israeli artists have come to use Jesus as a political symbol, signifying persecuted minorities, including Palestinian Arabs, and promotion of ethnic reconciliation and justice to all.

At the same time that Israeli artists and writers embraced Jesus and turned him into a national symbol, they mostly stopped short of accepting his divinity, utilizing other means to express their openness towards, or identification with Jesus, whom they have now come to see as a great human and exemplary Jew.