

the same destabilization of Christianity that his Christian colleagues had long attempted of Judaism in their claims that it was a superseded and desiccated religion.

Yet as postcolonial theory pointed out, the mimicry of the subaltern rhetoric of the dominant. The and the peril is the dissolutio "Celluloid Savivors and Jesus in the Gospels" by Adele Reinhartz. The world's Faiths. Gregory A. Barker, ed., (N.Y.: Orbis, 2005). Jesus was a liberating Christianity were simply a counter. As the originator of a tradition in which Jews suffering in the Holocaust, came to be expressed t Christian symbols and, in some cases, rendered dependent up m. Even in Geiger's work on early Judaism, Jesus still remained a central point of reference.

At the same time, Geiger's challenge to Christian scholarship, that it recognize Jesus' Jewishness, led to some remarkable developments. In resisting Geiger's conclusions about the Jewishness of Jesus, some German Protestants preferred an Aryan Jesus, and during the Third Reich they identified Hitler's treatment of the Jews with Jesus' own goals.

Chagall's indictment of Christianity as the crucifier of Jews was literally paralleled by those Protestant theologians in Nazi Germany who identified Hitler's murder of the Jews with the goals of the Aryan Jesus. What Geiger claimed is that it is not the Jew who desires Christianity, but the Christian who requires a myth of Jewish desire in order to legitimate Christianity. Yet Geiger's own scholarship awakened a Jewish desire for Jesus the Jew, and that desire, inchoate in his own work, eventually came to be a dominant mode of expressing modern Jewish identity.

Chapter 18

Celluloid Savivors and the Gospels

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Susannah Heschel's article documents Jews' changing perceptions of Jesus from the rabbinic period to our own era. Central to this history is the emphasis on Jesus' Jewish identity and the conviction that Jesus must be understood not over against Judaism but within a Jewish context.¹ Heschel concludes her analysis by commenting that the Jewish desire for Jesus the Jew, inchoate in the work of Geiger and others, eventually came to be a dominant mode of expressing modern Jewish identity. Everyday experience affirms Heschel's conclusion. Engage any group of Jews in a conversation about Christianity, and it will soon become clear that Jews identify both with and against Jesus; for some, the defining element of their identity is precisely their nonbelief in Jesus.

Heschel's article highlights the fact that Jewish responses to Jesus through the ages, whether scholarly or popular, have focused almost entirely on Jesus as a historical personage about whom a set of theological beliefs developed over time. Her discussion has forced me to recognize, not for the first time, how different my own approach to

1. In this regard, Jewish responses anticipate the current mainstream approach within New Testament studies, which is precisely to situate Jesus within the context of first-century Judaism in Galilee and Judea. See, for example, Séan Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus, and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, SCM Classics (London: SCM, 2001); idem, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); and idem, *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

Jesus is from the responses that she documents and from those that I encounter within the Jewish worlds I traverse.

Let me be clear. I agree completely that Jesus was a Jew and not a Christian, and that he must be understood fully within the context of the other evidence that we have of first-century Judaism in the Galilee and Judea. I also agree with Heschel's contention that Jewish readings of Jesus often, perhaps even always, had and continue to have polemical and political subtexts. Nevertheless, I must confess that Jesus' Jewishness, fundamental as it is to *any* understanding of Jesus, has had almost no impact on my own response to Jesus. The reason for this anomaly is simple: the Jesus whom I have been pondering since my graduate student days is neither the Jesus of history nor the Jesus of theology, but rather the Jesus of the New Testament Gospels and, more recently, the Jesus of popular culture. If Jewish historians and philosophers feel affinity with, and even desire, Jesus the Jew, I find myself longing for Jesus the human being as I regularly read the texts and watch the films in which he is portrayed in such detail. To engage with Jesus' humanity is not perforce to deny his divinity — though as a Jew I do not believe Jesus to be divine or to have an exclusive relationship with God. Rather, to relate to Jesus as a human being is to perceive him as a mature, reflective, and multifaceted individual who challenges our preconceived notions and stereotypes.

A Flat Character?

Whether in scripture or in culture, however, a genuine, human Jesus is difficult to find. According to the Gospels, Jesus is both human and divine, born of Mary, a Galilean Jewish woman (Matt. 1–2; Luke 2). There is no doubt as to Jesus' own Jewish identity. According to Luke, he was circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21); all four Gospels portray him as engaged with Jewish practice and with the Jewish festivals (e.g., John 2; 5; 6; 10; 12). But the Gospel writers are much more interested in his divine identity as the Son of God than in his human characteristics, including his ethnicity. In the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus heals the sick (Mark 2:1–12 and parallels), exorcises demons (Mark 5:1–20 and parallels), and raises the dead (5:21–24, 35–43, and parallels). In the Gospel of John, Jesus does signs and wonders (e.g., John 2:1–11; 4–6), expounds at length about his identity as the Son of Man

and the Son of God (John 5; 7; 13–17), and, as in the synoptics, raises the dead (John 11).

Jesus is not entirely lacking in humanity. He expresses anger at Peter for protesting his future death (Mark 8:33); he does, however, dread the terrible death that awaits him (Mark 14:34–36); he is said to love Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany (John 11:5) and the mysterious disciple who appears suddenly in John 13 and reclines in his bosom (13:23). Jesus even weeps at the grave of his dead friend Lazarus (John 11:35). But on the whole he is a “flat” character.² He does not develop over time, he does not change in response to events, and he keeps himself aloof from even his closest companions.

In reading the Gospels, one searches in vain for the rough-and-tumble narrative world of the Hebrew Bible, with its vibrant, epic characters, like the faithful patriarch Abraham, who walks with God and yet passes his wife off as his sister — twice — to ingratiate himself to a foreign ruler (Gen. 12:10–20; 20:1–18); or like the hot-tempered and stammering leader Moses, who tries unsuccessfully to avoid the task that God has in mind for him (Exod. 3:11–4:17); or like the imperious judge Deborah, who exults at Jael's execution of the enemy (Judg. 4–5); or like the unscrupulous King David, who seduces and impregnates Bathsheba, has her husband killed (2 Sam. 11), and mourns his rebellious son Absalom with raw grief (2 Sam. 18:33). By allowing us to see their humanity, including their grievous errors and flaws, the biblical storyteller brings us readers closer to these remarkable characters, allowing us to empathize, and also to recognize our own humanity in theirs.

Where is there a similar place for us in the story of a perfect human being who is simultaneously son of God and messiah? The Gospels would place us readers in the footsteps of the ancient human beings who witnessed Jesus' marvelous deeds, heard his words and so believed. Yet in the absence of a truly compelling Jesus, I find myself in the position of the unbelieving Jews who are not moved to belief despite the fact that they have seen and heard Jesus' deeds and words. Being a Jew myself, of course, makes such identification that much easier.

2. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1941), 23 and passim. First published in 1927.

Celluloid Saviors and Scripture

The Jesus of culture, particularly those depictions of Jesus that appear in the movies, does not fare any better than the Jesus of scripture. Celluloid Saviors too are flat characters. While movies vary considerably in the degree to which they represent Jesus as a Jew, almost all of them flatten out his humanity to the point where it is almost not recognizable. Jesus on the silver screen is usually solemn, slow of speech and movement, and physically isolated from the people around him. Mel Gibson's Jesus, whose physical suffering is portrayed so graphically in *The Passion of the Christ*, is only the most recent example of the "flat" Savior. Though the film's flashbacks to Jesus' youth and ministry attempt to point to the fullness of his divine/human identity, the *Passion* quite literally reduces Jesus to a pulp. One notable exception to this trend is the Jesus of the recent film *The Gospel of John* (2003).³ This Jesus laughs, slaps his companions on the back, and looks people straight in the eye. He eats, drinks, thinks, and sweats. Altogether, he is much more personable than his counterparts in biblical epics such as *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *Jesus of Nazareth*. Yet in portraying Jesus in this way, *The Gospel of John* in fact strays from its biblical source, for the Johannine Jesus is never portrayed as laughing, smiling, or being convivial with his companions except perhaps, and by implication only, at the wedding at Cana (2:1–11).

Indeed, the most human, nuanced, and complex Jesuses on the silver screen are those appearing in films that are least concerned with fidelity to their scriptural sources. These include the tormented Jesus of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* and the engaging and mysterious Jesus of *Jesus of Montreal*. Neither places particular emphasis on Jesus' Jewishness, but his humanity shines through. These films bring Jesus to life by attempting to get behind the flat descriptions of scripture and into the consciousness of a

3. *The Gospel of John*, directed by Philip Saville, premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2003. The film is intended as a cinematic version of the Fourth Gospel, utilizing every word of the Good News Bible translation. It is thus constrained by the text in the way that few other Jesus movies are. Unlike most other films of this genre, however, it does not equate fidelity to scripture with fidelity to history. The film opens with a scrolling text that makes explicit the filmmakers' understanding that the Gospel of John is not a straightforward, literal, historical account of Jesus' life, mission, and death.

person who feels that he has been chosen for or perhaps born to a mission that is different from the usual expectations in his culture.

Of course, my idiosyncratic approach to Jesus does not at all constitute a critique of Heschel's analysis. Rather, it amplifies Heschel's work by drawing attention to the literary and cultural representations of Jesus that also perhaps have an impact on Jewish responses to or constructions of Jesus' historical and theological dimensions. The Jesus of scripture and of popular culture, like the Jesus of history and theology, has been drawn into the polemics and the politics of many of Jesus' interpreters, readers, and consumers. He is used for evangelistic purposes, to support or occasionally to undermine Christian complacency, and to legitimate or to criticize the human institutions that have arisen in Jesus' name.⁴ Most interesting to me, however, is the way in which Jesus is used in the tussle for self-identification of early Christian communities. Indeed, the New Testament may be seen as the first Jewish response to Jesus, predating the rabbinic response by several centuries. While the specific claims that the Jews like Paul, Matthew, and John made with regard to Jesus' messianic identity are inimical to many Jews, they too were a function of their understanding of Jesus in his Jewish context, just as the responses of Mendelssohn, Geiger, and others were so many years later. The notion that Jesus is the Messiah is grounded in early Jewish speculation about the end of days, legitimated by specific readings of the Jewish scriptures, and given political meaning by reference to the Roman domination of the Jewish people in the first century of the common era.

The Jesus figures of scripture and of popular culture therefore are the bookends of Susannah Heschel's fine article, in the sense that they provide a suitable prologue and epilogue to her discussion. No doubt future chapters will continue to be written, as long as Jesus continues to be a force in our history, thought, and culture, and as long as Jews continue to wrestle with his meaning for Judaism and for humankind.

4. The film used most frequently for evangelism is John Heyman's 1979 film *Jesus*; by contrast, Denys Arcand's 1989 film, *Jesus of Montreal*, is a sharp critique of the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec.