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SHOLEM ASCH AND THE SHIFT IN HIS REPUTATION: THE NAZARENE AS CULPRIT OR VICTIM?

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sholem Asch (1880-1957) was one of the greatest Yiddish novelists, dramatists, and short-story writers. He was the first Yiddish writer to gain an international reputation. The focus of my study is on this reputation; it rose and plummeted within Asch's own lifetime for quite unusual reasons unrelated to either the esteem in which his works were held or to his talents and creativity. Asch reached his apex of popularity between the two world wars when he was, without question, the most widely read Yiddish author in America and abroad. In 1939, however, Sholem Asch published The Nazarene. At that time it appeared only in English translation, for Ab Cahan refused to print the novel in the Forverts, in spite of the fact that Asch had been the most distinguished and respected contributor to that Yiddish-American daily for over three decades. The two-volume Yiddish edition, Der man fun Notseres, could not find a publisher until 1943. While the novel was extremely successful among the English-reading audience (it made the bestseller lists, won critical acclaim, and was offered by leading book clubs), The Nazarene was greeted with rage and hatred--even physical attacks and death threats--from Asch's

formerly devoted Yiddish fans. Within a few years, Sholem Asch's reputation among Jews shifted dramatically to such an extent that it has not yet fully recovered.

In this thesis I will explore possible reasons for this sensational change; I will look at The Nazarene from a literary point of view; and I will conclude whether or not the publication of this novel warranted the decline of Sholem Asch's reputation in the Yiddish world.

Although it has been common to group The Nazarene, The Apostle, and Mary, and to call this trio a trilogy, they are three disjointed, separate works, none of which is a sequel to the other. They are related only by the fact that all three are sympathetic to Christianity, each to an increasing degree, and all were bestsellers. The Apostle brought in the greatest sales for Asch, remaining on the bestseller lists for both 1943 and 1944. Mary was third on the annual list for 1949 (Hackett 167, 169, 181). Neither of the last two works has ever been published in Yiddish. Because The Nazarene was really the first of Asch's novels that led to the plunge in his reputation among his Yiddish readers, and because it is so much superior to either The Apostle or Mary from a literary point of view, I shall confine my analysis to the first of the three novels.

Goldie Morgentaler recently grouped the three novels for discussion, but this was for the specific purpose of tracing Asch's religious message, as her subtitle indicates: "Ecumenism in Sholem Asch's Christian Trilogy" (1988). Many other critics similarly treat The Nazarene as though it were a semi-religious tract. While this may have some truth for The Apostle and Mary, it is less applicable to The Nazarene, which, if it does encourage an ecumenical reform, does not overtly preach it, as Morgentaler indicates. Her analysis is useful, but the bulk of the hostile criticism by Yiddish writers against Asch centers on the religious message that Asch is supposed to have preached in his fiction. The most damaging of these attacks came from the editor of the Forverts, Ab Cahan, in Sholem Ashes nayer veg (1941; Asch's new way), and from Chaim Lieberman, also of the Forverts, whose vitriolic, hysterical book, Sholem Ash un kristntum: an entfer oyf zayne misyonerishe verk (1950; The Christianity of Sholem Asch, 1953) aroused many Orthodox Jews to attempt to excommunicate the writer and even to physically attack him. These publications accused Asch of attempting to proselytize unsuspecting Jews to Christianity, of currying favor with the Gentiles, of betraying the Jewish people, and even of being unimaginative. One Yiddish critic who gave an honest

appraisal of Asch, although a mostly negative one, was Y. Rapoport, some of whose articles are collected in Sholem Ashes literarishe nitskhoynes un mapoles (1953; Asch's literary victories and defeats).

Asch did have a few Yiddish defenders when the Nazarene was published. His former secretary Shloyme Rosenberg supported the novelist at every opportunity. His Sholem Ash fun der noent (1958; Asch up close) is a sensitive and intelligent study. Asch's secretary in Israel, I. Paner, also published interesting memoirs dealing with his affection for and experiences with the famous writer, Sholem Ash in zayn letster heym (1958; Asch in his last home). Asch's most important champion in the Yiddish world was Shmuel Niger, who devoted over 150 articles in various newspapers and journals as well as 212 pages of a study of storywriters and novelists, Dertseylers un romanistn (1946), to this writer. In 1960 Niger, after decades of thinking and writing about Asch, published his definitive Sholem Ash: zayn lebn, zayne verk (Asch's life and works). In a measured discussion of The Nazarene, Niger points out a few flaws--problems with Yeshua's character, some problems with Asch's Yiddish--but on the whole the article praises Asch's inspiration and his astonishing skill in portraying antiquity. The book, says Niger, is "unequaled" by any of Asch's other works; it is the

author's "highest achievement" (294).

Assessments of The Nazarene in English-language publications have almost always been favorable, although Irving Howe thought that "the Yiddish literary public had steadily overrated Asch's work" (1976; World 450). But most writers agree with Ben Siegel, who concludes in The Controversial Sholem Asch (1976), the only full-length study of the writer in English, that Asch was "much-maligned and undervalued in life" (231). Eli Katz, in a review of Siegel's book entitled "The Legacy of Sholem Asch" (1980), highlights Asch's career, which played such a significant role in Yiddish letters. Charles Madison has a valuable chapter summarizing Asch's life and works in his Yiddish Literature (1968), as do Sol Liptzin in The Flowering of Yiddish Literature (1963), Sh[muel] Niger in the Encyclopedia Judaica (1971), and Emanuel Goldsmith in Jewish Book Annual 1979-80. Joseph C. Landis has a fine introduction to God of Vengeance, which he translated and edited in his The Great Jewish Plays (1966). Nathan Asch contributed an extremely interesting article, "My Father and I," describing his relationship with his famous father, to Commentary in 1965.

My own study is the first to deal primarily with the issue of the novelist's reputation, a reputation which had reached its highest peak in the Yiddish world

just before it sank with the publication of The Nazarene. Ironically, this was the same novel that launched Asch's enormous popularity in the English world. I have ferreted out both Yiddish and English studies, renowned and obscure, in order to present the fullest image possible. Siegel's book, although an invaluable source, deals very little with the literature in Yiddish. Asch ought not to be treated as an author in translation; he is a Yiddish author whose works have been translated, some more felicitously than others. An examination of Asch's reputation necessarily demands at least equal employment of Yiddish sources.

Sholem Asch

Sholem Asch was born in Kutno, Poland, where he received a traditional Hasidic Yeshiva education. Asch's world expanded at the age of 17 when he discovered Moses Mendelssohn's German translation of the psalms written with Hebrew letters. He taught himself German, and then enthusiastically started to study Russian and Polish as well. In 1900 Asch's literary career commenced when he travelled to Warsaw to show Y.L. Peretz a story written in Hebrew. Peretz encouraged him to write in Yiddish. Within a few years, Peretz recognized Asch as being his most talented

disciple. A dedicated and devoted mentor, Peretz would, on occasion, criticize the young, gifted writer, but he would just as quickly come to his defense. It was he, incidentally, who freed the young Asch from military service (Siegel 18), gave him financial assistance when it was sorely needed, and introduced him to Matl Shapiro, daughter of a Polish-Jewish Hebrew teacher and poet; in 1901 she became Madame Mathilde Asch, his wife.

Unlike other Yiddish writers, who suffered and struggled so much for recognition, Asch achieved fame rather quickly. Dos shtetl [the village], published serially in the Petersburg Fraynd in 1904, established his reputation as an original, lyrical storywriter. Asch was the first Yiddish writer to portray Jewish life in warm and loving tones.

In the same year he additionally started his fruitful career as a dramatist with Mitn shtrom [with the stream], which brought him further acclaim. Got fun nekome (1907; God of Vengeance) brought Asch world-wide notoriety. In this drama, Yankl Shapshovitsh, operator of the brothel one floor beneath the home he shares with his wife and teenage daughter Rivkele, buys a holy Torah scroll for his apartment, simplistically hoping it will keep his daughter pure. By the play's end, alas, Rivkele is involved in a lesbian relationship with one of the prostitutes, and Shapshovitsh, hysterical and

broken-hearted, laments God's vengeance. Even the usually supportive Peretz had told Asch to burn this play; but Asch went ahead with it, and enjoyed seeing it produced in Russian in St. Petersburg and in German by Max Reinhardt in his famous Berlin theater. This drama, recognized by many as being symbolic as well as naturalistic, stimulated countless literary and philosophical discussions. Asch soon found his works translated into dozens of languages. As late as 1923, after a Sunday matinee performance in English at the Apollo Theatre on 42nd Street, the Society for the Suppression of Vice lodged a formal complaint against the obscenity of the play. Producer Henry Weinberger and 11 cast members were arrested; Weinberger and actor Rudolf Schildkraut even spent the night in jail. After a bitter court battle, each was fined $200 (Siegel 81). Asch continued to become very famous.

This was the start of a pattern that would accompany Asch throughout his long and productive career. He would, often enough, be at odds with his Yiddish audience on matters of taste and propriety, as when, in 1908, he wrote an article in the Polish Courier Warshavsky, an antisemitic daily, in which he publicly agreed with a father who refused to have his dead son circumcised so that the child could be accorded Jewish burial. Asch spoke of the "barbarity" of circumcision,

traditionally regarded as the most sacred covenant between Jews and God. He also published a brochure in Yiddish on the same subject. Many Yiddish writers, such as Dovid Frishman, sharply protested (Niger, "Der man" 273). But Asch would always remain provocative, following the dictates of his own conscience.

He became a regular contributor to both the Warsaw Haynt and the New York Forverts. He went on a lecture tour with Peretz following the Czernowitz Conference in 1908, in which Yiddish was established as a viable Jewish language. He additionally travelled to Palestine and the United States. By 1913 Asch had published more than a dozen significant works, including Reb Shloyme nogid [wealthy Reb Shloyme], a charming, romantic idyll. Although he and his family would continue to divide their time among many homes in many countries, Asch settled in the United States in 1914, and became a citizen in 1920. Ab Cahan, always eager to increase his paper's circulation, already had Asch in his employ as a featured writer.

Motke ganiv (1916; Motke the Thief, 1935) was a phenomenal popular success for both Asch and the Forverts, in which it was serialized in 1914. The first half of the novel describes the life of young Motke, an abused child brought up in harsh poverty. It realistically captures the injustices and misery of the

poor in Warsaw. The second half deals with Motke's incredible transformation from selfish creature of the underworld to a romantic and selfless hero. The novel, containing vivid, well-written descriptions as well as melodrama, could, and did, appeal to almost everyone. It was additionally made into a play which was staged successfully in Europe as well as New York. Onkl Mozes (Uncle Moses, 1918) which depicts a shtetl transplanted to a sweatshop in America, was also extremely successful in newspaper serialization, novel, drama, and even film.

Asch's style almost always includes vivid realism concommitant with romanticism, and even some melodrama. Melodrama is usually employed as a derogatory term, but Robert Heilman's study treats melodrama as a literary genre, and he suggests that the "loose general term can be transformed into a precise instrument for making critical distinctions" (76). When I apply the term to Sholem Asch's writings, I mean rather a literary form that appeals to its audience by venturing into sensationalism and what Rahill calls "high-voltage emotionalism" (xv). In Asch's case, melodrama is not frivolously employed, but used to reach the audience emotionally. There are no thrills or shocks, but, rather, an extension of, a deepening of, sentiment. Of course his numerous piteous scenes and the like helped to win him enormous popularity as a mass-circulation

writer.

In 1920, Asch's works were collected in 12 volumes. Four years later, his Gezamlte verk [collected works] were published in 18 volumes. To date, more than 55 of Asch's works in Yiddish have appeared in book form. The fine trilogy Farn mabl: Peyterburg (1927), Varshe (1930), and Moskve (1931), translated into English under the title of Three Cities (1933), were the first of Asch's novels to become bestsellers in English translation.

Although this prolific writer experimented with different motifs, Asch had two themes which haunted him throughout his life: faith pushed to its ultimate extreme, resulting in martyrdom, and messianism. An early play, Shabse Tsvi (1908), explores the failed aspirations of the seventeenth-century Turkish Jew who was convinced he was the long-awaited Messiah. Kidish haShem (1919; Sanctification of the Name, 1926) is an historical novel celebrating Jewish faith and martyrdom in the face of the bloody Chmnelnitzki massacres in Poland and Ukraine in the mid-seventeenth century. In both Toyt urteyl (1924; death sentence) and Khayim Leyderers tsurik-kumen (1927; Lederer's return), Asch emphasizes his characters' search for faith. In Di kishufmakherin fun Kastilyen (1926; the witch of Castile), a beautiful Jewish girl dies in the Spanish

Inquisition for her faith. Der tilim Yid (abridged Eng. version, Salvation, 1934) is a stronger, more consistently controlled historical novel idealizing the moral beauty and pure faith of the protagonist, Rebbe Yekhiel. It is the most beloved of all Asch's works. The writer's most exalted character, however, is Rabbi Yeshua ben Joseph of The Nazarene, a novel which embraces both of the themes that interested Asch most profoundly. This work was followed by two more Christological novels, The Apostle: A Novel Based on the Life of Saint Paul (1943) and Mary (1949), neither of which ever found a Yiddish publisher, and thus appeared only in translation.

Other of Asch's important mature works include Baym opgrunt (1937; at the precipice), dealing with Germany during the inflation between the wars; Dos gezang fun tol (Song of the Valley, 1938), celebrating the establishment of a kibbutz in Palestine; Ist river (East River, 1946), a rich novel of immigrant life in New York; Der Brenendiker dorn [burning bush] (1946), a collection of Holocaust stories; Moyshe (Moses, 1951); and Der novi (The Prophet, 1955), dealing with Deutero-Isaiah. In all of his works, Asch blends realistic detail with romantic idealism.

In 1956 Asch, hounded by Yiddish circles which denounced him as a "missionary" secretly employed by the

Church and worse, moved to Bat-Yam, a suburb of Tel-Aviv. But even there Orthodox groups threatened him. At his last public appearance, however, in 1957, in Israel, Asch did receive a warmhearted and thunderous ovation from the crowd. He died while writing a novel about Abraham and Sarah on July 10, 1957, during a visit to his daughter Ruth Shaffer in London.

His three other children were Moses, founder of the prestigious Folkways collection which is now a part of the Smithsonian Museum; John, a botanist; and Nathan, author of The Road: In Search of America, The Office, Love in Chartres, Pay Day, The Valley, and other works. Hemingway, although usually jealous of other writers, had enthusiastically promoted Nathan Asch's reputation when he published a couple of his stories in Ford's transatlantic review in 1924 while Ford was away. Nevertheless, Hemingway referred to Nathan as a "kike" (Lynn 236). He even knocked the unmuscular Asch unconscious in a fistfight, after which, Asch reports, Hemingway "broke into my room drunk and in tears and told me he could never forgive himself and that I had more [talent] than anybody" (qtd. by Lynn 295). A different, "rearranged version of this episode resurfaced a year later in Hemingway's account in The Sun Also Rises" in the quarrel between Jake Barnes and Cohn (295). Robert Cohn, although largely based on

Harold Loeb, is drawn from Nathan Asch as well. (Oddly enough, when Nathan introduced his father to Hemingway, the two "hit it off well" [Siegel 101]).

Sholem Asch's home in Bat-Yam was converted to the Shalom Asch Museum. Much of his own library, including rare Yiddish manuscripts and some originals of his own works, is housed in the Sholem Asch collection at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

Although Asch was a celebrated and popular writer in Yiddish as well as in translation, and although his later novels were all national bestsellers, he regarded his profession very seriously and thought of himself as a literary artist. Each of his many stories, dramas, and novels was original, not formulaic. He approached the most important themes and topics--of war and peace, of martyrdom and salvation, of inhumanity and transcendence--with an intense earnestness as well as an inner idealism. He tirelessly researched his subjects.

Popularity does not necessarily imply insignificant, poor writing. Asch was certainly aware of the *shund* [literary trash] being published in Yiddish and other newspapers; his talents never descended to this. Instead, they soared to embrace the most lofty themes. He wrote quickly and passionately, then he threw out a great deal of what he had composed, and

revised countless more times. As a devotee of world literature, Asch surely must have feared the horror expressed by Georg Lukacs of "sinking to the level of mere entertainment literature" (71). The theorist, also writing between the World Wars, formalized literary abhorrence of the entertainment novel which "has all the outward features of the novel but which, in essence, is bound to nothing and based on nothing, i.e. is entirely meaningless" (73).

Asch, on the contrary, considered his writing to have a high purpose. Maurice Samuel often validates the fact that Asch was a craftsman with "ingrained standards," and would have been unable to write a potboiler even had he wanted to do so (274). Sholem Asch, he reports, "had a massive conception of himself as an artist, and developed a deep grievance as year after year went by without bringing him the Nobel Prize" (275). Nathan Asch reminisces that his father "thought of himself . . . as a teller of tales, a poet, what is called in German a *Dichter*" (60).

Asch wrote popular bestsellers. He was not a stylist; he was not concerned with problems of aesthetics and careful wordage, as were other, more modernist writers. He also employed more than a touch of melodrama in his works. Yet it is important to note that he was not a lowbrow, nor even a middlebrow,

writer. There has always been a mix of serious and lighter works on the bestseller lists; highly regarded authors may also be lucky enough to achieve popular and/or financial success. According to Lang, "Marquand, Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis, Mailer, Sholem Asch, and Hemingway are among the 'serious' bestselling authors of 1945-50" (22). Asch was a deeply committed, engaging, and serious writer.

Asch's Reputation Before The Nazarene

It is difficult to properly appreciate the enormous contribution that Sholem Asch made to Yiddish literature. Mendele Mokher-Sforim, Sholem-Aleichem, and Y.L. Peretz had brought their genius to founding and developing a national literature from a language that had been dismissed as "jargon," a language that, though rich and subtle and full of folk wisdom, was nevertheless not considered respectable enough for aesthetic literature. Sholem Asch benefitted from the legacy left by the three classical Yiddish masters, yet his works were completely original in tone and substance. Dos shtetl (1904), for example, was the first positive, romanticized portrayal of village life. Whereas other Yiddish writers, continuing a trend started by those influenced by the *Haskalah* [enlightenment], pointed out only flaws and poverty,

Asch's descriptions transcended the sick and the miserable and the starving. Asch's idealism and optimism never abated throughout his long, creative career. This attitude, at its best, led to fresh and refreshing insights into relationships and ways of life. At its worst, it degenerated into maudlin sentimentality. Early in his career, Asch's buoyancy charmed readers and critics alike who were weary of reading about the backwardness and misery of Eastern Europe Jewish life. With Asch, explains Niger in an early essay,

> There isn't a trace of the pictures of poverty any more, of the pictures that Peretz still painted, of the pictures whose shadows the second great Yiddish writer of the times, Sholem-Aleichem, couldn't drive away, even with his humor. Asch drove away the shadows. . . . (Ash 58)

In delightful tales such as Reb Shloyme nogid [wealthy Reb Shloyme], Asch wrote lovingly of the kindness and morality of both his protagonist, a wealthy widower, and his new, young wife. The poor are present at the Sabbath meal, but they are treated with great dignity and humanity. This was startlingly new for Yiddish readers, who were used to seeing only negative descriptions of Jewish life.

> Not a single thing in Jewish life pleased the Yiddish writer at that time, as though everything should be crippled and corrupt. No publicist, no fiction writer, no poet found a single whole limb in the body of the Jewish

> folk. One could find only crooked backs and crooked heads. . . . The body and the soul of the Jewish people looked dangerously ill. And wherever there was a person who could hold a pen in his hand, he became a doctor. . . . (Niger, Ash, 58-59)

It was Sholem Asch who first portrayed the Jewish people as not only whole and well, but also ethical and sentimental. His readers, as could be expected, were delighted. They could hardly wait for the newest Asch installments in the press.

He was also the first Yiddish writer to look at nature and describe its beauty. Before Asch, virtually every sky in Yiddish literature was enveloped in a prayer-shawl at night. Asch, however, was able to see beyond the stereotypes and to portray what he saw. It has been said that Asch's works read better in translation than in the original. This is true on occasion, yet even a translator as skilled and as finely-tuned to both English and Yiddish as Maurice Samuel can not capture the real lyricism of Asch's poetical odes to nature in his stories and novels.

Sholem Asch, a wide reader and an inveterate traveller, also brought his cosmopolitanism to the narrow confines of Yiddish literature. His Kidush haShem (1919), dealing with the Chmnelnitzky massacres, was one of the earliest historical novels in modern Jewish literature. He was not only a writer of the

shtetl, he expanded his sights and works to European cities, such as Warsaw, Petersburg, Moscow; to America's lower East Side; to Palestine; and even to different ages in history, such as the Russian Revolution, the pogroms, the Napoleonic Wars, the Chmelnitzky massacres, the Spanish Inquisition, to the eras of Jesus and Paul, of Moses, of Deutero-Isaiah. His imagination could not be confined to one period or to one place. As a result, he expedited the transformation of the entire face of Yiddish literature from parochialism to internationalism.

He was, furthermore, unbelievably prolific. He wrote with a quill, the point of which had to be pared down constantly and dipped in ink, for he could never get used to the new-fangled fountain pen--but he wrote with an intense fury. He composed hundreds of stories and scores of novels, almost all of which appeared in the two most popular Yiddish dailies (popular partly because of his contributions), the Warsaw Haynt and the New York Forverts. At least 19 of his novels have been translated into English; many of them were additionally published in German, Hebrew, and other languages. His more than 20 dramas, most of which were written in the early part of his career before he became a novelist, contained themes that extended far beyond the usual range of Yiddish literature.

A partial list of plays written by Asch and staged by Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre in New York attests to the writer's popularity: Motke ganev (1922; Motke the thief), which simultaneously led to Paul Muni's rise to stardom, Der toyter mentsh (1922; the dead person), A shnirl perl (1925; a strand of pearls), Rebbe Dokter Zilber (1926; Rabbi Doctor Silver), Kidush haShem (1928; sanctification of the Name), The Miracle Worker (1930), Uncle Moses, (1926, 1930), Chaim Lederer (1932), Farn mabl (1938; Three Cities), and Tilim Yid (1939; Salvation). According to David Lifson, the dramatic version of Three Cities that Asch wrote "supplied the Yiddish Art Theatre with one of its most outstanding successes. . ." (90). Schwartz presented spectacular productions, complete with music often composed by the gifted Sholem Secunda, and choreography. Kidush haShem, for example, had 42 speaking roles, mass scenes with 50 supernumeraries, elaborate sets, music, dance, and a 56 page program. It too was "one of the greatest successes in the Yiddish theater" (Turkov-Grudberg 164). The Folksbine Theater in New York also featured plays by Asch, as did the Vilna Troupe, theaters in Warsaw, St. Petersburg, Berlin, Vienna, at least one playhouse in Buenos-Aires, and others. Asch's dramas played among works by Chekhov, Gorky, and Ibsen. God of Vengeance was produced in many languages

throughout Austria, Poland, Holland, Norway, Sweden, Italy, and New York. In Berlin, Gott der Rache was a "colossal success," and was regarded as the equal of plays by Schiller and Lessing (Paner 10). The popularity of the play in Yiddish was not just a result of its sensational subject matter, in which a Jew manages the brothel one floor beneath him, while keeping a holy Torah scroll in his own dwelling. The more sophisticated theater-goers realized that Asch was condemning hypocrisy. Got fun nekome, states Rapoport, "doesn't deal with the upper and lower floors of just one Jew named Yankl Shapshovitsh, but about a figure who represents the upper and lower floor which is found in each one of us. . . " (15-16).

The Yiddish audience was both a more demanding and a more appreciative audience than that of other small linguistic groups, for the Jews have always been an extremely literate people. Asch's writings, with his interesting plots, many of them historical, his realistic descriptions, his poetic raptures, as well as his sentimentality and melodramatic endings, appealed to a very wide proportion of the already large Yiddish readership. The additional translation of Asch's works into many languages made him a further source of pride to his own people, for he was the first Yiddish author to win international recognition.

When Three Cities, translated by Willa and Edwin Muir, Kafka's translators, was published in English, it became a bestseller in America and Britain. Reviewers compared it to Tolstoy's War and Peace. It is a "monumental study by one of the finest living writers," wrote one reviewer. Another called it "one of the most meaningful works of all times," adding that "the book is universal, like Job is universal" (qtd. by Rapoport 61). Isidor Schneider, reviewing the trilogy in The Nation, said "it is continuously striking and interesting. Some of its scenes are, in fact, passages of major writing. . . " (450). The English PEN Club honored Asch with a celebration in London. The reviewer of the London Times Literary Supplement raved that the story is "told with great skill and dramatic power and with fine humanity" (769).

The volumes span the critical epoch of 1905-20 in Eastern Europe. The first section, set in Petersburg between 1905-14, centers on luxury-loving upperclass Jews and Russian aristocrats. The second section, set in Warsaw, is teeming with harrassed and hungry Jews, subversive radicals, Zionists, Polish patriots, and revolutionary idealists. Asch is at his best in rendering the plight of the victim, the dehumanization of starvation, the horrors of the weaving mill. The concluding portion takes place in Moscow, during and

after the October Revolution. There are no winners in the political struggles; there are only immoral, chaotic cruelties perpetrated by various groups on each other. The October Revolution, a seeming victory in the land, turns into more bloodshed as misery prevails. Louis Kronenberger, on the front page of the New York Times Book Review, avowed that "Sholem Asch emerges as a great deal more than the finest of living Yiddish writers, he becomes a genuinely significant novelist for the whole world" (31). Three Cities was translated into six languages.

On his 50th birthday Asch was congratulated by Einstein and Chaim Weitzman. Among Yiddish writers, he was elected honorary president of the Yiddish PEN Club in 1932. In Poland he was presented with the Polonia Restituta decoration in 1933. By 1936 the author was esteemed enough to be listed by Ludwig Lewisohn in the New York Times as one of the "World's Ten Greatest Living Jews," among others such as Einstein, Freud, Henri Bergson, and Martin Buber. The following year, he received an honorary Doctor of Hebrew Letters degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in both 1933 and again in 1943.

In the 1930s, Asch was unquestionably the single most important and popular Yiddish writer, acclaimed by

both Jewish and gentile audiences, in America and abroad. Der tilim Yid (1935; Salvation), deliberately written to emphasize the moral beauty of Jewish faith, became the novel most Jews embraced in those years of oppression and impending Holocaust. "Jewish commentators were grateful to Asch for reminding them of their rich, durable heritage," notes Siegel. "They greeted Salvation as a major achievement and hailed Asch as the most gifted literary defender of Jewish life" (109-110).

Yet although Asch was the most beloved figure in Yiddish literature, and partially because of it, there was always an undercurrent of conflict surrounding his life and works that would erupt into open hostility from time to time. At first there was the controversy surrounding the production of God of Vengeance. Many observant Jews were extremely offended by what they considered to be Asch's sacrilegious use of the holy Torah. Others were scandalized by the appearance of prostitutes and lesbians. Shortly thereafter, Asch antagonized a large number of his people once more with his pronouncement of the "barbarity" of the circumcision ritual. Asch's attitude did cause a measure of pain to his devoted readers. These matters were never entirely forgotten, and they were repeatedly brought up against Asch over the years. Many Jews were sharply critical of

what they considered to be his obsequious behavior towards gentiles. Peretz publicly came to Asch's defense, and asserted that "If one wishes to stop the mouth of an artist with dirty rags, we must declare: 'Dirty people, hands off!'" (qtd. by Madison 227).

Another major controversial issue in which Asch became embroiled was his acceptance of the *Polonia Restituta* medal from the Polish government, headed by Pilsudski, in 1933. Asch was pleased to be recognized for his portrayal of the "Polish landscape," and he considered the award to be entirely literary, unassociated with politics. After he accepted it, unfortunately, the official antisemitic stance in Poland became increasingly blatant. In America and England there was great bitterness towards Asch for keeping the award. Asch had gotten quite a reputation for being a vain egotist.

While many Yiddish readers were genuinely outraged by these somewhat scandalous incidents, others seized them as opportunities for expressing personal venom. Asch was talented, rich, famous--all the ingredients that provoke envy among the less talented, the struggling, the unknown. "Excuses to attack Sholem Asch had never been scarce," Rosenberg remarks. "Every little thing was pounced upon. . ." (220). He absent-mindedly confused acquaintances, even friends; his

enemies reported he did this purposefully to show "his mind was busy with more important matters" (Turkov-Grudberg 46). Legends of selfishness and egotism abounded about the great author, some truthful, others ridiculously exaggerated.

There was also a constant barrage of criticism about his professionalism. On April 23, 1937, Asch wrote an article entitled "Aropgeredt fun harts" [getting it off my chest] for the Haynt, in which he defended himself against three main areas of criticism. Firstly, he addressed himself to Dovid Pinski's claim that he had insulted the Yiddish language in Israel. "It is a bold-faced lie!" answered Asch, who stated that he loves both Yiddish and Hebrew. Secondly, he rebutted the charges that his own translated works did not acknowledge their Yiddish origin. Asch responded that it was well-known that he was a Yiddish writer; translations of Galsworthy and Wells didn't say they derived from English. On the other hand, he had objected when the French edition of Three Cities stated it was translated from German; yet it was translated from the German translation. Furthermore, Asch countered, an American publisher refused to print the name "Sholem"; he then took his work to Putnam's, where his successes paved the way for other Yiddish writers. Thirdly, Asch dealt with the continual criticism that

his use of the Yiddish language was full of grammatical and stylistic errors. This was his natural Yiddish, responded Asch, not scholarly and not stiff.

In the article, Asch protested against what Rosenberg termed the "net of lies in order to make him unattractive and isolate him from readers" (225). Evidently the carping continued, for in the June 12, 1937 issue of the Tog, Niger, who had once suggested in print that Asch be more careful with his writing, voiced his anger at the on-going complaints, avowing that "the attacks on Asch are already too wild, too irresponsible. . ." (qtd. by Rosenberg 221). The hostility of the Yiddish PEN Club had aggravated Asch for years, even though he was honorary chairman. "I won't go to these meetings anymore," he had told his secretary in 1933. "I won't allow myself to be talked into it anymore. Why should I represent the Yiddish writers, when many of them don't trust me?" (Rosenberg 280). Cahan was continuously annoying him to write another Motke ganev. By 1933 his books were no longer being printed in Germany, and he hadn't received his German royalties for years. Europe was darkening.

In 1938, Sholem Asch was still at the zenith of his popularity among the Yiddish public. But there were other writers all-too eager to search for an excuse to shoot him down. They found this opportunity with The

Nazarene.

The Reception of The Nazarene

The publication of Sholem Asch's The Nazarene in 1939 marked a turning point in the Yiddish author's reputation. Although Asch had been a very popular literary figure for years, this new novel enabled him to reach an even higher plane of fame and success among his non-Yiddish audience. At the same time, it led to unprecedented anger and attacks from his former Yiddish readers.

The Nazarene, ably translated into English by Maurice Samuel, was offered by several leading book clubs, and it became a bestseller. It was ninth in national sales of fiction works in 1939, and fifth in 1940 (Hackett 159, 161). 250,000 copies were sold the first year of publication; and about 2,000,000 people read Asch's new novel in translation within its first two years in circulation (Siegel 152, 142).
Yale University requested the holograph copy for what would become an extensive Aschiana collection. Furthermore, reviews in the English-language journals and papers were full of praise.

John Cournos, writing in the Atlantic Monthly, called The Nazarene "a superb achievement." He compared the novel to Papini's Life, which he felt "is thin" in

comparison. Asch, he explained, "has taken an infinite amount of trouble to build up an historical background against which the figure of Jesus may move authentically, with that sense of reality which we should expect of fiction as of life." The reviewer found Asch's creation of a Gospel according to Judas Iscariot to be "a brilliant device" for solving many problems traditionally presented by the enigmatic Judas; Asch's explanation "is as plausible as it is ingenious." Cournos additionally praised the humanity of the novel.

> Touchingly human are the portraits of the women, particularly of Jesus' mother and of Mary Magdalen. Indeed, considering the transcendental nature of the theme, the sheer humanness of Mr. Asch's novel is admirable, and by humanness I mean that quality in the novelist's work which not merely translates an historical epoch into living drama but also endows the leading roles with an everydayness that impresses with detail.

Cournos clearly sees Yeshua as "first and foremost a Jew, a 'Rabbi' with the traditional sidelocks of the devout Jew. . . . But superimposed on this Jewishness is a superhumanness. . . ."

Robert Littell, writing in his "Outstanding Novels" column in the Yale Review, found himself "impressed, enlightened, and often very much excited" by The Nazarene. He was particularly taken by the first part of the novel, with its "remarkable" picture of the city of Jerusalem and its people, so "sharply etched and

described," especially the aristocracy of the priesthood, "the spawning poverty of the lower city, the luxury, the dirt, the lawlessness, the fury of fanaticism."

In a lengthy review appearing on page 3 of the New York Times Book Review, Peter Munro Jack agreed that Sholem Asch's newest novel was definitely an "important book" (30). The life of Christ, he wrote, is "the greatest story in the Christian world, and he [Asch] deals with it greatly and humbly, careful and exact to the last detail." When Asch describes Jesus's entry into Jerusalem, "I could swear that no better historical scene has been done than in these pages," Jack proclaimed (3). Like Cournos, he especially praised Asch's analysis of Judas's motives in betraying Jesus to the Romans, the way the novelist described him as attempting to force a crisis. He also singled out for especial merit Asch's "portrait of the Magdalene in her beauty and ugliness, neither sentimentalized nor idealized, and a piece of realism that is a measure of the worth of the book." Another portrait Jack found extremely touching was "the devoted picture of Mary the mother of Jesus" (30). The reviewer concluded of The Nazarene, that in "subject, length and amplitude, it is a great novel. . . . [I]n its large and noble conception and in its exact and amazingly interesting

detail it is a superb achievement in the modern novel" (30). Clifton Fadiman, in a review appearing in the New Yorker, was in agreement; he judged The Nazarene to be not only an "extraordinary" book, but "a universal work of art" (92).

In his comprehensive review in the Saturday Review of Literature, Ernest Sutherland Bates praised The Nazarene as a "masterpiece." He referred to Asch as "a great writer" who has produced a dazzling novel:

> Over and above the richness of the historical background presented--involving years of research and, what is more important, years of meditation upon it--over and above the vividness of the narrative and the intense reality of the characters, rises a surrounding atmosphere pregnant with semi-philosophical, semi-mystical meanings.

Bates marvelled at Asch's skill in treating different points of view:

> The constant shifts back and forth between past and present are so well managed that one eventually fails to mark them and lives, like the characters, in a time that includes both. This larger time-world is made up of a complicated series of perspectives, and perspectives within perspectives; the perspective of the modern anti-semite, Pan Viadomsky, and within it, as part of it, the perspective of the fascist-minded Roman ciliarch Cornelius; the perspective of Judah Ish-Kiriot, who in his fragmentary gospel includes a narrative by Miriam, the mother of Yeshua; thus giving us her perspective also; and finally the perspective of the Polish narrator, including that of Jochanan the disciple of Nicodemon which includes that of the other disciple, Rufus.

The reviewer responded to "a hundred points of interest"

in Asch's "interlocking narratives, its complex psychologies. . . ." Bates concluded his article with a comment on Yeshua's "essential Jewishness," which he felt was somewhat overdone.

The irony is striking: English-writing reviewers (Cournos, Bates) stressed the Jewishness of the Nazarene, while the Yiddish publishers would not print the novel because it was supposedly too Christian. Alfred Kazin, reviewing the book in the New Republic, was even more emphatic about the Jewishness of the novel. Noting that the Forverts did not publish The Nazarene, Kazin asserted that "Nothing, as it happens, could be more characteristically Yiddish" than the "Gospel according to *Chaver* Sholem." The novel, he wrote, "is a very warm and often moving portrait of Yeshua ben Joseph, the forlorn and strangely gifted Rabbi of Nazareth. . . ." Kazin pointed out that Yeshua read the Torah, and his "greatest moment came not on The Mount, but in the little synagogue of Nazareth where Miriam, the carpenter Joseph's widow, sat with the women in the balcony and beamed on her son" (375). Kazin summed up his admiration for The Nazarene by speaking of its "intensity":

> It is this sense of redisdovery, of an emotion frankly and almost exaltedly patriotic, that gives the novel its intensity. But it is an intensity without gush; if Asch claims Yeshua for the Jews, it is in a spirit totally without recrimination or frenzied

> affection. Something of the domestic sadness of the Christ epic is in it, the sense of the immemorial Jewish loneliness throughout history. Yeshua here takes his place in the Hebraic martyrology, a Jew betrayed by Judah Ish-Kiriot, and not the first Jew to perish on the cross.

Another distinguished New York Jewish Intellectual, Philip Rahv, editor of the Partisan Review, similarly lauded The Nazarene and appreciated what he felt was Asch's purpose, "to restore Jesus to the Jewish tradition, but in such a way as not to dispossess the Christians." He commended Asch for transcending the "ancestral bitterness which has divided mankind." The Galilean, continued the reviewer, was studied "psychologically as well as socially and politically." His death was depicted "in all its grand and tragic determination, as the fatal issue of the interaction between his own seminal desire for martyrdom and the punitive, imperious temper of the alien overlords." In sum, Rahv found Asch's recreation of the Jewish world of that era to be "brilliant, convincing, and unprecedented in its range."

A very happy surprise to Asch and his publisher Putnam's was the warmth with which the novel was greeted by religious Christian journals. Asch himself related that when The Nazarene was first advertised in Publisher's Weekly, Earl Balch of Putnam's received "hundreds and hundreds of letters from Christian

booksellers and brokers: what in the hell has a Jew to write the life of Jesus and you are publishing it?" (Statement side 3). Yet when this community of reviewers read the work, they found the novel worthy of the subject. Karl M. Chworowsky in the Christian Century, for example, asserted The Nazarene "will make a place for itself among the immortal stories of mankind, for it is a great novel by a great author on a great theme" (179). W.L. Caswell of Churchman, contending that "It is a book which every Christian will wish to read," specifically stated that "There are no biographies of Christ which bring so vividly to life the figure of Jesus, his friends, his enemies, and which more completely and in such wealth of detail picture the life, the customs, and the religious ideas of the time" (19).

The excellent reception of the novel among the community of English readers is well-documented. Reception theorists, notably Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, emphasize the importance of the reception as well as the production of a literary work. The theory, in general, redirects critical attention from author and text to the reader/audience, concentrating on effect and response. It is the reader, the recipient of the text at a particular historical juncture, who creates it and provides the ultimate source of meaning.

Jane P. Tompkins, similarly, speaks of a "cataclysmic shift in the locus of meaning" that has evolved over the past few years in literary criticism ("Reader" 225). The intention of the writer cannot be the final arbiter of a work's meaning. "It is not the originator's attitude toward the work but the perceiver's which is fundamental," Mukarovsky sums up (qtd. by Holub 34).

Jauss's theory, discussed in Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, involves the process of production and reception. "Literature and art only obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the producing subject, but also through the consuming subject--through the interaction of author and public" (15). He speaks of the "horizon of expectations" experienced by the reader, which, he believes, can be measured by audience reaction and critical judgement. Jauss feels that literature should be evaluated against these horizons which are formed by everyday experiences.

Like Jauss, Iser focuses on the relationship between text and reader rather than the author and text. In "Indeterminancy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," he speaks of the reader's "wandering viewpoint" and he questions under what conditions a text, with its "indeterminancy," has meaning for a reader. Meanings, using Iser's definition, are "the

product of a complex interaction between text and reader, and not qualities that are hidden in the text and traced solely by that traditional kind of interpretation." Since each individual reader "generates the meaning of a text, then it follows that these meanings will always appear individualistic" (5). In another essay in Prospecting, "Interaction between Text and Reader," Iser stresses the blanks and gaps of a text which are interpreted by the readers. In "Toward a Literary Anthropology," Iser joylessly concludes that "fictionality is only an instrument that channels the necessary flow of fantasy into an everyday world" (273).

The reputation of Asch's Nazarene among his Yiddish audience is far more complicated than Reception Theory can highlight. The displacement of the text from the center of literary study, the focus on the interaction between text and reader, Jauss's grasp of the text as becoming rather than as a fixed entity, Iser's explanation of the process between textual structure and reader ideation, may serve as a useful handle for some works. But the main problem for The Nazarene is that there was **no text** for the Yiddish reader--not until 1943. While Fish contends that a critic's interpretation should make "the text disappear" (183), there still must be a document to interpret. This was not the case for Asch's Yiddish audience. Asch had been

the most distinguished contributor for both the Warsaw Haynt and the New York Forverts; virtually all of his writings had been published in these two large dailies. The editor of the Haynt, however, sorrowfully informed Asch in 1938 that he could not risk the danger of printing Der man fun Notseres because the anti-semitic Polish censor would undoubtedly suppress the newspaper for blasphemously daring to suggest Jesus had been Jewish. Concommitantly and ironically, Ab Cahan of the Forverts, in a more dictatorial manner, refused to serialize this novel in his American paper for the opposite reason that the work was too Christian in attitude and outlook.

The novel, published in English in 1939, comprises 698 densely printed pages. How many Yiddish readers, used to reading daily installments of Asch in Yiddish in the Forverts, could, realistically, have turned to such a lengthy novel in English and completed it? Only a small number could have done so. Thus there was no real interaction between text and reader to analyze, for many of those condemning The Nazarene had not read it. Instead of Asch in the Forverts there were Ab Cahan and Chaim Lieberman in the Forverts condemning Asch. The important problems to be noted, then, are the use of Asch's regular medium for anti-Asch campaigns, and the lack of a text until 1943, a year far worse in Jewish

history than even 1939.

The novel's reception in the Yiddish world was further complicated by the fact that Asch's erstwhile Yiddish fans had been bombarded for four years with stories, concocted mainly by Cahan and his employee Herman (Chaim) Lieberman, of Asch's "missionary work" (as Lieberman termed The Nazarene), with fantasies about Asch's deliberately misleading innocent Jewish children to embrace Christianity, with wild tales about Asch's own apostasy. Maurice Samuel complains about this "malicious invention": because Asch's portrait of Jesus was "warmly sympathetic, he was widely and stupidly accused of seeking to convert Jews to Christianity, from which it followed that he was himself a secret convert, a sort of undercover agent for the Church" (274). Those Jews who were unable to read the lengthy novel in English knew with certainty, nonetheless, that The Nazarene was an evil, dangerous work. A comparable contemporary attitude can be found in the condemnation of Salman Rushdie by an entire people, in this case the Muslim fundamentalists, who, similarly, never read his novel, yet nevertheless know it to be immoral and, of course, satanic.

By the time a Yiddish text did appear years later, the "horizon of expectation" in the mind of the Yiddish reader, or, in this case, the non-reader, became as

impermeable as an opaque wall. Not the faintest ray of light emerging from the novel itself could filter through the prejudiced, pre-formed opinions of the consumer. Damaging comments were shouted about, but they had virtually no connection to the text. Niger was repulsed by the non-literary, even anti-literary, substance of the abuse. "In the heat and in the dust of this very peripheral and often subjective and political polemic," he complained, "the artistry of the work was either not considered, or it was quickly dispensed with, waved away to the side, so that the critics would be able to jump more quickly into the supposedly religious debate about the 'harmfulness' of the Man fun Notseres and its propensity towards conversion" ("Man" 276).

It is impossible to ascertain how many Yiddish readers had a real confrontation with the text, and how many formed their hostile feelings without ever having read the novel at all. Clearly, the reception by English readers was the antithesis of the reception by Asch's former Yiddish fans. The English-reading public was as disposed to over-praising the novel as the Yiddish public was to condemning it. The fact that there were two diametrically opposed receptions of the novel is significant, but not very surprising. After all, the English-reading audience had no problems in reading about a sympathetic Jesus; the bestseller lists

reported the popularity of many religious novels in the 1930s-1950s. (See Chapter 7 for examples.) The Yiddish audience, on the other hand, had to overcome many negative associations with Christianity; for more than a thousand years Jews had been libelled, tortured, and killed for being Christ-killers, nonbelievers, stiff-necked, and users of Christian blood for making *matzos*. Lieberman, in his hysteria, manipulated this paranoia. "Parents clutch their children to their bosoms for fear they will be influenced by you," he putatively addressed Asch. "We're as scared of you as of a kidnapper, scared that you will lead them to conversion. . . " (181).

Examining The Nazarene from the point of view of the audience is far from a new and original concept. The scandals and controversy, the physical attacks and even death threats made on Sholem Asch by his once-adoring Yiddish readers, his false reputation as a missionary, and even the resounding slap he publicly gave Lieberman in Itche Biderman's book store on Second Avenue, are better known than the substance of the novel supposedly instigating the hostility. Fish is opposed to "the assumption that there *is* a sense that is embedded or encoded in the text" (172). All the essays in Reader-Response Criticism, edited by Tompkins, attempt to invalidate any notions of interpretative objectivity. Yet there must be at least general

agreement over what is being evaluated; there must be some objectivity in the text generating a critical consensus about value or meaning. Undermining close reading and explication of the text makes the work all the more likely to surround itself with concealing layers of associations, gossip, second-hand accounts, rumors, and even lies, until the work itself is as confusingly unrecognizable as a palimpsest.

The precise reception of the text of The Nazarene to the Yiddish audience cannot be determined. Those few critics who actually read the novel without purposefully looking for scandals to create and magnify, were, like Kazin and Rahv, inclined to see it as profoundly Jewish. Even Y. Rapoport, a critic who had never liked Asch's works, affirmed, after perusing the novel, that "every objective critic must conclude that the Liebermans and Ab Cahans are absolutely not correct in their attacks against Asch" (88). Shmuel Niger, the most important Yiddish critic of the day, also read The Nazarene very carefully, and found that not only the protagonist but the novel itself is "deeply Jewish" (Dertseylers 511).

Those Yiddish readers in America who read the text with an open mind, however, were necessarily few in number. The Yiddish audience's reactions to The Nazarene, in general, were not responses to the text, but responses to the title of the novel, which was taken

as a direct provocation. The Yiddish audience was instigated in this by Ab Cahan and Lieberman, authors of the two most incendiary works against the novelist, which accused him of being a "missionary." (These publications are discussed more fully in Chapter 3.) Obviously, the subject of Jesus conjured up many negative *gestaltn* and enraged many of Asch's Yiddish readers. The theme of Christianity and Jesus in Yiddish literature shall be explored in more depth in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 2: THE THEME OF CHRISTIANITY IN YIDDISH LITERATURE

Because so much viciousness was directed towards Sholem Asch by his Yiddish audience when he published The Nazarene, it is important to investigate just how much of an iconoclast he actually was in pursuing and developing the subject of Jesus of Nazareth. The results of such a study prove that Asch was neither the first nor the only Yiddish writer to immerse himself in Christian themes. Many Jewish writers who wished to extend the narrow confines of Jewish parochialism and become more cosmopolitan found the subject of Christianity, if not attractive, at least tantalizing. The Nazarene, furthermore, was certainly not the first work in which Asch wrote sympathetically about Christianity, for the similarities between Judaism and its offshoot religion had interested him for more than 30 years. Jesus, too, had long captured his imagination.

Jesus in the Yiddish World

In Tilim Yid, Sholem Asch writes of young Yekhiel's fear of being struck blind because he had dared to look at a crucifix. By the first decade of the twentieth century, however, this taboo was being broken by the

more worldly Jewish intelligentsia. Jesus came to be regarded by the avant-garde as the universal archetype of suffering; poets and artists found the pitiable figure to be emblematic of the human condition. Others found in Jesus a Jewish symbol of transcendance and greatness. Still other young aesthetes found the symbols of Christianity to be inspiring.

Lamed Shapiro's story "The Cross" first appeared in 1909. Shapiro, always attracted to the darker side of man, to violence and horror, treated the crucifix as an emblem of hateful irony: a bloody cross is etched into the forehead of the victim of a pogrom "to save his Yid soul from Hell" (123). The Jew, left with the ugly scar on his brow, becomes a murderer. In another story published the same year, "The Children," Shapiro employs an epigraph derived from Matthew 17: "Whoever is as small as a child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (131). This sketch, while praising childhood, has a thoughtful conclusion that may refer to Jesus: "'Be like children!' Whoever said that suffered much at the hands of adults" (133). Although Shapiro employed the crucifix as a symbol of terror, it is important to note that he freely used Christian motifs. Between World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution other Yiddish writers such as Peretz Markish, Israel Rabon, and Itzik Manger also experimented with Christian

symbols.

In 1915 H. Leyvik published "Yezus" [Jesus], in which Jesus appears lonely and abandoned. In a corner, "webbed up in spiderwebs / Jesus hangs on a cross, his mouth crooked and his eyes shut" (32). Three years later Leyvik produced a longer, quite startling poem, "Er" [he], in which the Christian deity is personified even more. Jesus, who says his father is God, is still disgusted by the memory of his lustful mother's passionate kisses, given to him "as though she were my fiancee" (152). He hates her and wishes to kill her during the bloody pogrom taking place:

> The world is now filled with pogroms,
> With slaughter and with death-commandments--
> Why should I be an exception?
> Why should I not enact
> This death-commandment like everyone?-- (156)

The poet admittedly sympathized with Jesus. "The Nazarene himself, as a man of suffering, attracted me," he explains. "I saw in him simply the prisoner. . . " (qtd. by Madison 360). Howe and Greenberg asserted that "like Dostoevsky he [Leivick] sees the Crucifixion as the common lot" (Yidd. Poetry 37).

Poet Moyshe-Leyb Halpern published In New York in 1919. In Part 5 of the ten-part narrative poem "In a Foreign World," the Jewish boy comes to understand that Jesus is a symbol of persecution, an emblem of Jewish suffering, not the frightening figure he had been in the

shtetl.

> Now I know that the dead man on all the crosses
> Is my kindred spirit, is our son.
>
> He gave his blood as a sacrifice for his great love,
> As his pure heart's flame desired it. (51; ll. 37-40)

Halpern comes to empathize with Jesus:

> My life becomes heavy, as if it bore
> A deep, thousand-year-old sorrow. . .
>
> It seems now I hang on a cross. . .
> On my head lies a crown. . . a crown of thorns. . .
> From my hands and feet blood drips. . . and around the cross,
> My tormentors strike up a desolate dance. (53; ll. 59-63)

In "A Night," from the same volume, the poet deals with Jesus the Messiah who is mocked, crucified, and misinterpreted (135-51; ll. 113-252).

The next decade marked a period of formal modernist manifestoes in Yiddish literature. Journals such as In zikh, Shtrom, Khalyastre, and Albatros, published between 1920-24, contained proclamations announcing a break from traditionalism, nationalism, and social responsibility. Instead, an emphasis was placed on secularization, skepticism, and aestheticism. Uri Tsvi Grinberg [Greenberg], scion of renowned Hasidic rabbis, edited and contributed to Albatros. His first manifesto, "Proklamirung," published in the first issue

of Albatros (1922), employs modernist imagery, apocalyptic visions, and "the cross-motif that had become established as a modern expression of the traditional Jewish apocalyptic symbolism of destruction and exile as the emblem of the cyclical course of Jewish history" (Alt 58). He announces twice that his generation is standing at "the Saharan crucifix-way: Eldorado - Nirvana" (Grinberg 422, 423). Behind the backs of his contemporaries are "black crucifix-posts" (422). Both his Hebrew and early Yiddish poems contain numerous references to Christianity, in all of which Jesus is embraced as a suffering, fellow Jew. "Greenberg's Jesus," declares Waldman, "is the embodiment of compassion and unmerited human suffering and is the ideal Jew" (232). In "Golgotha" the narrator identifies with Jesus. In "Uri-tsvi farn tseylem" [in front of the crucifix] (1923), the text is typographically set in the form of a cross. The narrator screams at Jesus, whom he calls "brother"; but Jesus can no longer see with his "coagulated eyes," nor can he think with his "coagulated mind" (431,433).

Visual artists in the Yiddish world similarly made use of the archetype newly available to them. Avram Kampf cites depictions of Jesus by Jewish artists as early as Mark Antokolsky's carving, Christ Before his Judges in 1874, in which Jesus wears a skullcap; Mauricy

Gottlieb's painting Christ in the Temple (1879), in which Jesus is wrapped in a prayer shawl; Max Liebermann's Christ in the Temple (1879); and Samuel Hirszenberg's 1904 portrayal of the head of Jesus as a rabbi (203). To the Martyrs of Kishinev was drawn by Ephraim Moses Lilien, a disciple of Aubrey Beardsley, in 1903. It was prepared for Maxim Gorky's Sbornik [miscellany], and shows not only a bearded Jew in a prayer shawl but also Christian imagery of angels' wings, the suggestion of a halo above the martyr's head, and thorns (Roskies 280).

Marc Chagall presented the most memorable Jewish crucifixion scenes. He had painted Holy Family, Madonna with Child, and The Raising of Lazarus in 1911. The following year he completed his first major work dealing with the crucifixion. At first entitled Dedicated to Christ, the painting was renamed Golgotha and then again Calvary by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where it is hanging at present. Under the crucifix are a bearded Jew and Mary, both sumptuously attired. Christ is seen as a child, whereas in Holy Family, for instance, he has a beard. Franz Meyer sees special significance in this: "The symbol of the cross derives from that of the Tree of Life in which is linked, as an emblem of the primordial female force, the image of the Son of God" (173). It seems to me that

Chagall was stressing Jesus to be a universal figure of suffering, for the child wears no skullcap nor anything else denoting Jewishness. Inspiring more terror are the series of crucifixions Chagall painted in reaction to Nazism. Among these scenes, which, according to Sidney Alexander, Chagall was to paint "increasingly and obsessively" (311), are White Crucifixion (1938), Martyr (1940), Descent from the Cross (1941), and Yellow Crucifixion (1943). In this group Jesus is definitely Jewish; he is bearded, wears a prayer shawl for a loincloth while hanging from the cross, and sometimes even phylacteries on his forehead. Over his head is the inscription, both in Hebrew and Latin, traditionally found on crucifixes: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Surrounding the cross are scenes of intense suffering: Nazi brownshirts are storming the synagogue sanctuary, a Jew is carrying a Torah, a seven-branched menorah lies on the ground. The village is in flames and the patriarchs are weeping. Jesus does nothing.

In New York, Chagall finished painting more crucifixion scenes begun earlier in Gordes: Yellow Christ, Persecution, and Crucifixion and Candles. In The Crucified (1944), he depicts three Jews, not Jesus, hanging from crosses. "For Chagall," writes Crespelle,

> Christ became a symbol of man alone, of man whose heart was filled with love, even as he was the victim of all the evil of this

> world. He came to identify himself with Christ and wrote, 'Like Christ, I, too, am crucified, nailed to my easel!' (214)

This Yiddish-speaking artist, who had been born and raised in the small shtetl of Vitebsk, often declared that he considered Jesus to be one of the great Jewish prophets (Alexander 477).

Hebrew writers dealing with Christianity also made a strong impact on the Yiddish-speaking world in Europe, Russia, and the United States. Chaim Brenner, for example, caused a sensation when he published an article in Palestine's Hapoel hatsair in which he stated that "the gospels rank higher than the Old Testament" (qtd. by Rapoport 86). Samuel Joseph Agnon, on the other hand, wrote a novel and a story in which Jesus, although playing a central role, is not compassionate. In Makhaglei Tsedek (1928) [Paths of Righteousness], Jesus turns to stone, and in "The Wonders of the Shamash in the Old Bet-Midrash" (1925), Jesus remains a stone statue. In the story, however, when the statue dons a skullcap and prayer-shawl, it is persecuted by antisemites. Hebrew dramatist Nathan Bistritsky-Agmon composed Judas Iscariot in 1930, which he later revised in 1951, retitling the play Jesus of Nazareth. Here Jesus is politically confused and anxious. Judas loves him and tries to dissuade his hero from entering

Jerusalem, for he fears the crucifixion. When Jesus refuses to turn back, Judas betrays him to the Romans and then hangs himself. Another well-known Hebrew writer, A[aron] A[braham] Kabak, published a novel focusing on a Jewish, very empathetic Jesus, Bamishkhol hatsar (1937) [The Narrow Path, 1968]. Waldman comments that Kabak "goes further in the adoration of Jesus than the other writers" (234).

The highly esteemed Jewish historian Joseph Klausner, who had helped establish the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and was Professor of Hebrew Literature there, published his erudite Jesus of Nazareth in 1922. This was the first scholarly study by a Jew writing in modern Hebrew of the life, times, and teachings of Jesus. Klausner too regarded Jesus as being entirely Jewish, pointing out "that Jesus was rooted in Judaism, that he personally adhered to Jewish law, and that he never advocated its abrogation" (King 95). From Jesus to Paul was published seventeen years later, in 1939. The historian's main thesis in this volume is that Paul unwittingly became the founder of the Church; his fusion of Judaism and Hellenism led to a new faith.

It was inadvertently due to Klausner that the Warsaw Haynt, which always published Asch's work, could not accept The Nazarene. This is because some chapters of Jesus had appeared in the Polish Opinya, a daily also

published by the Haynt; Klausner's point of view aggravated the Polish Catholic Church, and the paper was punished by being suspended. The editor of the Haynt would not risk the same fate.

It is quite unlikely that anyone as cosmopolitan as Sholem Asch would be unfamiliar with the above-named works. Asch's secretaries Shlomo Rosenberg and Yitskhok Paner repeatedly testify about his voluminous reading. As for the visual arts, Asch was a passionate collector. The walls of his tiny home in Bat-Yam were adorned with paintings by Levitan, Marc Chagall, Mauricy Gottlieb, Pisarro, Kisling, and Delacroix; the larger portion of his collection had been left with his daughter Ruth in London. The Asches and the Chagalls, as a matter of fact, had a very long-standing friendship dating from at least the 1920s. The artist had even painted La Rose Blanche featuring Mathilda Asch's Sabbath candelabrum which was adorned with white roses. The families visited each other until about 1952, when Chagall began having "big problems with his new wife. . ." (See Briv letters 125, 146, 151, 155, 223). Asch and the artist remained friends. There is a photograph of both men with poet Avrom Sutzkever taken in 1956 in Tel-Aviv (reproduced in Turkov-Grundberg, opp. p. 152).

When Sholem Asch published The Nazarene in 1939, the novel's subject matter ought not to have been deemed

so scandalous by Jews in either Europe or America, for many writers and artists had at least dabbled with Christian motifs. Ab Cahan himself had been a groundbreaker in 1912 when he had sent travel descriptions to the Forverts from Vienna and Cracow, complete with appreciative and detailed depictions of the Polish cities' famous churches; Catholic houses of worship had been previously shunned by traditional Jews for centuries (Bleter, vol. 5, 118-19, 128).

Important rabbis in the American Reform movement had been talking publicly about a Jewish Jesus for a number of years. Since members of this Jewish group were, for the most part, German-American Jews, they had no doubt been influenced by German liberal Protestant scholarship whose goal was to establish the true image of historical Jesus which it held to have been "distorted by the Church, Catholic and Protestant" (Waldman 224). Julius Wellhausen, for example, a noted biblical scholar in Germany, stated that "Jesus was not a Christian: he was a Jew. He did not preach a new faith but taught men to do the will of God" (qtd. by Waldman 224). Similarly, Reform Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, in the late nineteenth century, declared that "Jesus of Nazareth was not the founder of Christianity. He was a Pharisaic scribe and a Jewish patriot. . . ." (qtd. by Waldman 224). In 1920 Rabbi H.G. Enelow spoke and wrote

about the spiritual significance of Jesus, "the most fascinating figure in history. In him is combined what is best and most mysterious and most enchanting in Israel. . . . The Jew cannot help glorying in what Jesus thus has meant to the world" (qtd. by Waldman 224). More dramatically, in January, 1925, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise had proclaimed from his rented pulpit in Carnegie Hall that "Jesus was human. Jesus was a Jew. Jesus was not a Christian" (qtd. by Siegel 143).

Sholem Asch, thus, was far from being the only or even the original boundary crosser within the Yiddish intelligentsia. I have not mentioned other non-Yiddish iconoclastic nonfiction works, works written by such Jews as Bergson, Buber, or Freud, that do not deal directly with Jesus, but, nevertheless, startled and angered many readers. In Moses and Monotheism, for example, Freud informed his readers "that the man Moses, the liberator and lawgiver of the Jewish people, was not a Jew, but an Egyptian" (16). He went further, announcing that "the Mosaic religion was probably an Egyptian one," and that the Jewish God "was certainly a volcano-god" (31, 39). Sholem Asch was certainly among many personages who broke through traditional themes, who was interested in Jesus and sympathetic towards what the deity represented. Asch, furthermore, was not the only artist to portray the Nazarene as an ideal Jew.

Asch developed the Jesus motif for more than 30 years; his employment of this thematic material is discussed in the following section.

Christianity as a Theme in Sholem Asch's Works Before *The Nazarene*

Sholem Asch had always been interested in original Christianity and the roots it commonly shared with traditional Judaism. This subject was one he explored throughout his career. In his childhood, Asch had been influenced by his father's benevolence towards Jews and Gentiles alike. "In the neighborhood in which I was born, legends are still circulating about my father's great love for people and about his charitable deeds. He would literally divide his last bite of bread with his neighbors, not differentiating between Jews and Christians." From his father's "attitudes towards our poor Christian neighbors, for whom he provided employment, I learned early in childhood to not feel any difference between Jews and Christians" (qtd. in Niger, *Ash* 45). Most of Asch's writings reflect this theme.

In "Dos shtetl" (1904), for instance, the charmingly sentimental tale that won the author recognition as an important writer, Asch counterpoises the quiet of the Jewish Sabbath with the pleasant ringing sound of the church bells; all villagers go to their respective

houses of worship. "The tones of the cantor's 'Lekha dodi' [come my beloved; a prayer celebrating the coming of the Sabbath] are heard in the street and the church bells accompany him. The sounds mix and become one quiet prayer to one God" (93-94).

A similar theme is employed in his early travel reminiscences, Palestine-rayze (1907), written during the author's first trip to Palestine. He laments over the fact that the Jew and the Russian, although travelling on the same ship from the same land and having the same destination, "turned to *two* Gods. . . . Each prays separately in his own corner of the ship and chants the same psalms, which originally had been accompanied by one harp, and they recite the same verses. . ." (215). This was a reality Asch hoped would change, for he wanted to reconcile the two faiths. In his fiction works, he is able to accomplish such feats of blending and dissolving differences.

The author did this quite boldly in "In a karneval nakht" (1909; on a carnival night). A letter sent from Finland, in which Asch asks his wife to take "Carnival in Rome" back from Y.L. Peretz, indicates that the story was written by 1907 (letter 8 of Briv, 14). It describes an annual carnival in sixteenth century Rome, which featured the merry spectacle of eight Jews being chased and beaten. One time, however, "the Jew from the

city of Nazarene in Galil comes down from his cross. . ." (238). He bitterly complains to the Messiah (who is still waiting to appear), that "my words of peace they twisted to war, my words of forgiveness they reversed to revenge" (240). Jesus joins the elderly Jewish martyrs whose forced marathon provides entertainment for the Romans. Ironically, he becomes one of the victims. Mary similarly sobs to Rachel that "in my child's name they killed my children. . . . My children did this in my child's name" (245). It is clear that Asch believed, even in those early years of his creativity, that although Christianity might be misconstrued even by its followers, Jesus and Mary themselves are Jewish and holy.

Rachel, it should be noted, is a very important figure in Jewish traditional folklore. She is regarded as one of the four biblical Matriarchs. Unlike Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah, however, Rachel was not buried in the family sepulcher of Machpelah, but was interred in Bethlehem, where she had died giving birth to Benjamin. Jacob set a monument upon her grave. Her tomb is still a favorite place of pilgrimage, especially by Jewish women who are having difficulty conceiving. The book of Jeremiah describes her as crying for her children who were taken away in captivity to Babylon. "A voice is heard in Ramah,/ Lamentation, and bitter weeping,/

Rachel weeping for her children," relates the prophet (31:15). In Yiddish she is always referred to as "mame Rokhl" [mother Rachel]. Asch's description of Mary's close interaction with Rachel is another deliberate blending of the two faiths. He would continue to position Mary or Jesus with the Jewish matriarchs, especially Rachel. In A shnirl perl [strand of pearls], produced by Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre in 1925, the Prologue to the tragedy consists of a meeting attended by Jesus, the Messiah, and Rachel at the Titus Gate in Rome. Yet a full quarter of a century later, Asch would be bitterly reprimanded for shocking his audience with the suggestion of a kinship between Rachel and the mother of Jesus in Mary.

"In a karneval nakht" is too fantastic to be satisfying. Asch, of course, was attempting here and in so many other works to disassociate Jesus from the millenia of persecutions against Jews committed in his name; from the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms, the subjugations, the terrors perpetrated by Christians against the Jewish "infidels" in the name of their lord. Lamed Shapiro's violent story "The Cross" appeared in that same year. Although obviously at odds in their interpretations of the symbol of the crucifix, since Shapiro saw it as an emblem of horror while Asch sympathized with the martyred Jew the crucifix

represented to him, the fact that both master storytellers felt compelled to delve into this subject matter is indicative of the spirit of the times, which was one of experimentation and loosening of traditional bonds. That Asch was not alone in his ideological endeavor to free Jesus from the constraints of modern Christianity was demonstrated in the previous section.

The New Testament, Asch often asserted, influenced him as much as the Old Testament. "Eretz Yisroel" (1910; Palestine) was composed on the way to Bethlehem. Here Asch tells the tale of a young girl who is driven by a supernatural strength to find her way to Bethlehem where her child will be born. There is no doubt about the holiness of the event. Angels accompany the girl; Rachel, dressed in white shrouds, ascends from the grave to bless her. Also present are King David's mother, Samuel the Prophet, who "comes into the city with a pitcher of oil and a shofar and searches for God's messiah," Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel, all the prophets, Moses, King David, and angels (10). The girl is ready to present her "gift to the world"; a stillness envelops the earth "over the dry lands and over the seas" (11). Both mother and child are unnamed in this story, which is short and idyllic enough to avoid the cloying sentimentality Asch displayed decades later in his voluminous novel Mary (1949), the climax of his

glorification of the mother of Jesus.

Jews and Christians are brought together again in "Reb Shloyme nogid" (1913; wealthy Reb Shloyme), an enchanting tale celebrating the beauty and morality of the protagonist's life. When a bloody feud breaks out during the annual Fair, Reb Shloyme and a Christian unite the two peoples. They celebrate by toasting each other, putting their arms around each other, and asserting that one God rules all peoples. "'There is only one God in the world!'" say the Jews. And both Jews and Gentiles "clap each others' hands for peace so often and so heartily that their hands become swollen" (63). This ending is a product of Asch's sentimental fantasy, a dream he never abandoned, that Jews and Christians can resolve their religious and cultural differences.

Di yorshim (1913; heirs), a long-winded drama, is important in that it encapsulates so many themes later developed by Asch. Primarily, the play deals with the importance of faith, whether it be Jewish, Catholic, or revolutionary fervor. The argument revolves around Yustina, a Jewish young lady about to fulfill her ardent desire to convert to Catholicism and marry her fiance, a Polish nobleman. Her wealthy parents, although not happy about the match, nevertheless pride themselves in their modern attitude of tolerance and believe that love

is more important than religion. Yustina's grandfather, however, is devastated. He loudly prays from the Jewish prayerbook, hoping to protect the atheistic home of his son, much as Shapshevitsh had hoped to protect the sanctity of his dwelling by installing a holy Torah. Yustina, however, reads the New Testament at the same time. (Later, in Tilim Yid, Asch would, on a grander scale, juxtapose the priest's and rabbi's prayers.) The point is that there is but one universal God. Different ways of praying "don't make a difference, they all go to one God," Yustina's papa, Herr Mayzner, explains to his own father. "[W]e're all people, and we all pray to one God, whether we're Jews or Christians" (16). Yustina, in her devotion to the faith she is ready to take on, rapturously describes the procession of Jesus into Jerusalem to her nanny. (Asch would later expand this in The Nazarene, as he would Yustina's feeling that she had been an eyewitness, and the concept of Jesus being Jewish.) Complications, however, ensue, and Yustina, to her "fanatic" grandfather's delight, renounces both her wedding and the conversion. She does not, however, become an old-fashioned, practicing Jew. To her, religion is a fence preventing love between people; it "stands in the way" (103). She evidently chooses the unnamed faith "of the future," socialism, as she walks out on her heavily sobbing parents, accusing them,

though they loved her deeply, of bringing her up without spirituality. The play is quite engaging. It is, of course, a tear-jerker, but many of Asch's ideas about bringing down fences between religions are clearly articulated here.

The following year he completed Unzer gloybn [our faith], a drama in which love triumphs over religious prejudices and traditions. Here Asch most certainly demonstrates that he is not only a romanticizer of shtetl life. The Jewish household from which Esterke runs off with her Christian lover is crass and overly-concerned with business and money. When the girl tells her family she doesn't want to marry the scholarly, Hasidic bridgeroom her father Lazer "bought" for her, she is beaten black and blue with a belt. Esterke's brother Pinkhus, who did most of the beating, wants the match for purely selfish reasons: he is trying to impress and marry Leyele, who is as snobbish and pretentious as the rest of her family. The engagement ceremony in Act 1 of the play is conducted like a noisy business deal. The groom's father is constantly demanding more money and more gifts. The two matchmakers scream and argue. Lazer shouts and threatens to throw them all out. In the midst of this tumult, the Christian neighbor comes in, quietly takes Lazer aside, and tells him his son Antek is in love with

Esterke and wishes to marry her. Lazer is incensed.

While the girl's mother, in Act 2, is instructing her daughter that she must be obedient to her new husband because women are sinful creatures, Antek, rather, speaks of a loving God. "God is good," he tells his beloved (48). The Jewish wedding takes place in spite of the girl's tears. During the celebration, two groups of musicians, one Jewish and the other Polish, play simultaneously. Haggling over money continues. Meanwhile, Antek and the bride steal away. Esterke will spend two weeks in a convent preparing for conversion. The play melodramatically concludes a year later, when Esterke is in childbirth. Antek pleads with his Jewish in-laws to reconcile with their daughter, whom they had regarded as dead, in accordance with Jewish tradition. After much weeping and soul-searching, however, the mother goes to her daughter's aid.

A more intense example of Asch's early infatuation with the theme of shared principles between Christianity and Judaism is his intriguing and thoughtful story "Der oyrekh" [visitor]. When the visitor, as mysterious as any stranger depicted by Twain or Hawthorne, would hear tales about drunken gentiles preying upon Jews, robbing and beating them, he'd remark, "It's no wonder; they lost their faith, the gentiles" (205). On the other hand, when he would hear the church bells ring on

Sundays and see the Christians attending church, he'd be content, go to synagogue, and pray "with great enthusiasm" (205). Then he'd declare that "Everyone serves God in his own way" (205). One week, however, the bell-ringing was ignored; the Christians went instead to the tavern to drink. The visitor, aghast and frightened, predicted that "a great calamity will happen. The gentiles have lost their faith" (206). He cried and prayed, "Father, Father, have mercy on the peoples on earth, and don't turn your countenance away from them" (206). But, as he feared, the Jews were no longer safe. The visitor converts to Catholicism; there is a church ceremony as well as the customary pompous parade to flaunt the conversion of the Jew. In time, the convert becomes a renowned bishop who draws crowds to his sermons. Cross in hand, he "preaches to the gentiles about their faith, about Jesus and about the cross" (208). His congregants become religious and simultaneously good to the Jews. They even say, "Everyone has his God. We--ours, they--theirs" (207). For years there is harmony. One night, however, on the eve of Yom-Kipur, the Day of Repentance, the Bishop-visitor rushes into the synagogue and cries out the *Shema* prayer: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One," and dies. The Rabbi rules that the visitor is still Jewish, and he is accorded burial in the Jewish

cemetery. Asch, in this story, one of his best, has clearly demonstrated his belief that true Christianity can be a positive force. He also indicates that Judaism and Christianity are two convergent ways of serving the one God.

"Mentshn un geter" [people and Gods] features two widows: a Jew, Golde, and a Christian, Antonye, who, symbolically, share the same dwelling. Friday night, in her corner of the room, Golde lights candles and welcomes the Sabbath. Antonye, "seeing how the Jewess prays to her God, bows before the 'holy picture' and begins to pray to her God" (23). Antonye joins Golde in a fish repast. The women speak of their sons, who, together, had emigrated to America, and from whom they had not heard in some time. Their friendship is fraught with minor squabbling, particularly when each celebrates a holiday not recognized by the other, but they are fast friends nonetheless. They invoke divine help for their children. "And they forget a minute, which God, whether it is He of the Sabbath candles, or the other in the [painting hanging in the] shadowy corner, and they fall asleep with God's name on their lips and with faith in their hearts. . ." (24-25). This short tale, though not a major piece of writing, is significant in that it so clearly represents Asch's ideal that people should transcend their own parochial limitations to form the

greater bonds of humanity.

Asch repeatedly, deliberately, and blatantly mixed the two religions. Maranen (1919; Marranos) is a one-act play dealing with Jews who, because of the terrors of the Inquisition, have become Christianized. They flee Lisbon and arrive in safer Germany with no conception of Judaism. A bewildered Dona [sic] Mary bewilderdly asks the Rabbi why Jews have no paintings or representations of God. "No blood pours out of his wounds? No bright crown of thorns shines from his martyred head. . . . For whom shall I fall on my knees?" (30). Her confusion is unresolved.

Kidush haShem (1919; Sanctification of the Name), is one of Sholem Asch's most popular and critically acclaimed novels. *Kidush haShem* is a central concept in Judaism. While the term originally referred to the acceptance of martyrdom in preference to forced conversion during the Crusades, it later was extended to include avoidance of any actions likely to bring disgrace upon the Jewish faith. This is the author's first historical romance, and an extremely interesting one. It takes place during that terrible period beginning in 1648, when hordes of followers of Bogdan Chmielnicki, Ukrainian Cossack leader of a peasant uprising against Polish rule, ruthlessly slaughtered as many as 500,000 Jews and destroyed hundreds of their

towns and villages (Bacon 136). Asch skillfully interweaves the story with historical facts based on Chronicles (Gzeyres tof-hey and tof-tet [Evil Decrees]), legends, and his own characteristic romanticism. In the novel, Asch explores different levels of martyrdom, from that of the Jews rounded up in Nemirov who die while singing psalms and praising God, to that of the beautiful young wife Dvoyre, who, miraculously, does not allow herself to be defiled by the Cossacks.

The very nature of the tale invites comparison between Christians and Jews. Asch by no means feels that the Polish and Ukrainian Christians, who consciously kill and ravage in the name of Christ, are on the same moral level as the Torah-loving Jews. The Jews are definitely portrayed as being on a much higher ethical level than their surrounding enemies, who at best are drunkards living only for the pleasure of the moment. On the other hand, however, there is the thread of uncorrupted Christianity running through this work, as in so many of Asch's pieces. In Kidush haShem we see this most clearly through the character of the gentile woman Marusha, devoted servant of Mendel's household. Marusha sees to it that young Shloymele says the proper prayers before eating; she is an extremely watchful guardian of the Jewish laws. More fantastically, when the Jews are forced to flee for their lives to the

fortress town of Nemirov and must hide in the cemetery, Marusha finds them. "What do you think," she asks the astonished family, "I'd leave my bosses, and myself go romp with the Cossacks? If we must die, let's die together. With whomever I ate my piece of bread, with them will I live and die" (129). Marusha is even prepared to give up her life to protect the young couple Shloyme and Dvoyre: "I'll take my two children and protect them with my body and say: 'Brothers [Cossacks], kill me, let my children live. Even though they're of another faith, they're still my children'" (129).

Although Marusha is quite the stereotypical, devoted servant depicted by Pushkin and others, Asch also uses her to make the point that truly religious Christians are good people. While the Orthodox priests are pompously parading behind the flags painted with pictures of Jesus, at the same time they're sending the "Christ-killers" to their deaths, Marusha is lamenting the fact that loss of real faith has infected the Cossacks. "The brothers from the steppes have become wild and have forgotten God; bad times have come. The Cossacks have forgotten God--run away, run away" (130). Marusha does all within her power to protect Dvoyre from the Cossacks and Tatars. She dresses her up like an old Cossack woman and hides with her in the tall grass, but the girl is spotted nevertheless. Strangely, the Jew

manages to save her own honor (though losing her life) by appearing to be holy. Her husband and in-laws were already aware of her other-worldly appearance. To the Cossack Yerem, however, Dvoyre's character inspires awe and fear. He believes he has seen her picture in Church, and he cries for mercy. "Peasants, I recognized her," he screams. "She came down from the holy picture. This is God!" (188). Asch evidently indicates that true holiness crosses religious boundaries. Of course, Dvoyre is not really what she appears to be to Yerem; she happily accepts the gun shots she tricked the Cossack into firing at her.

In 1928 Kidush haShem was dramatized; the play, written by Asch, was a great success in both Warsaw and New York. The theme of dying for one's faith was a haunting one for Asch. The way in which the writer would later present the Jesus legend in The Nazarene would be the ultimate example of *kidush haShem*. In that novel, too, Asch would contrast modern, corrupt Christianity with true faith, although he would no longer employ such an unrealistically altruistic character as Marusha.

The interplay between a holy portrait and the reality which it symbolizes, touched upon in Kidush haShem, serves as the major theme of Di kishuf-makherin fun Kastilyen (1921; witch of Castile). When Pastila, a

Venetian painter living in sixteenth-century Rome, sees the Jewish Yefta, he is "filled with religious devotion" (8). He decides to furtively use her as a model for his portrait of Mary. Yefta, forced to live in the Jewish ghetto and suffer the whims of the controlling Catholics during the age of the Inquisition, has not the slightest notion that the painting The Mother of Love, hanging in The Holy Heart cathedral, is her likeness. When the girl is actually spotted in the ghetto, during the flood brought on by order of the Pope, she strikes fear in the crowd gathered to joyously celebrate the drowning of the Jews. Both plebeians and church officials surmise that the Jews have probably acquired Jesus's mother through magic and are holding her captive. None of the Jewish leaders, tortured in the cellars of the Vatican, admits to the crime. In order to determine for sure whether or not the girl is the real divinity of the holy picture, they burn her at the stake.

This historical novelette, which won much well-deserved critical acclaim, is heavily ironic. The Jews are innocent; the Catholics are ignorant, blood-thirsty, sadistic. They worship the portrait, and burn the model. Asch is not here suggesting a merger between Judaism and Christianity; but he does, of course, mourn the needless and meaningless suffering, the horrors of the Inquisition, the blindness of the Pope and his

followers to the truth that the artist Pastila acknowledged--that the real Mary was Jewish (ch. 2).

These early works, some written thirty years before The Nazarene, demonstrate Asch's deep artistic commitment to his religious/ethical inclinations. They underscore his goals and ambitions which only intensified through his years of creativity. In 1928, in Der mizbeyakh [sacrificial altar], the author's third book of impressions of Palestine, Sholem Asch clearly announces his veneration of Jesus and early Christianity. He admits to being a "'religious' atheist" (187), by which he means that he is a Jew, albeit not a practicing and devout one. As such, and as a sensitive artist, he shows an appreciation of not only Jewish synagogues and holy sites, but also of Christian churches and holy areas, and particularly of those places which are concretely connected to Jesus. "The correct and true Torah which [Jesus] preached, and which gave the world the face it has now, is a radiation of Jewish genius, of Jewish heart and of Jewish *Weltanschauung*" (212-13). Asch continues his reverential attitude: "In Christianity's triumph over the idolatrous world we see the triumph of Jewish genius, of Jewish morality--of Jewish truth." Every sign indicating facts of Jesus's existence "is dear to us, no matter how unfamiliar--we bow down our heads with

honor before it" (213). Quite openly, the author confesses "that in Jerusalem I've become thoroughly infected with the Jesus legend. (I hope my Orthodox readers won't stone me for this)" (214). A decade later, when Asch completed an entire novel based exactly on what he here so clearly, so unambiguously decared--that he was "infected" with thoughts of Jesus, that Jesus preached the "true Torah," that Jesus represents the "triumph" of Judaism--his Orthodox readers did stone him.

In 1929-31 the author published his three-volume trilogy Farn mabl [Before the flood]. When translated into English under the title of Three Cities in 1933, Asch became as well-known in America as he already was in Europe. The work describes Jewish life during the first two tumultuous decades of the twentieth century in St. Petersburg, Warsaw, and Moscow. The leading character, Zachary Mirkin, is brought up as a completely assimilated Russian; he even celebrates the Russian Orthodox holidays and attends church on occasion. He learns the shocking and unwelcome news of his Jewish identity only through the honesty of his Christian nanny, Maria Ivanovna. Young Zachary is incredulous that his servant won't allow him to celebrate Christmas, which, he explains, "is everybody's holiday. Christ was born to redeem the world" (95). The boy's father

preaches an abstract religion: "only to learn, to be an honest person, to love everyone, to harm no one, to follow your true path and strive to be useful--that is our religion--the religion of all people, both Christians and Jews" (Peyterburg 102).

One of the kindest and most effective persons in volume one of the trilogy, Peyterburg [Petersburg], is the madame of a brothel who allows alien Jews, those without permission to reside in the czar's city, to secretly be housed in her apartments. She charges neither for rent nor for the kosher food she provides. This Madam Krasnetsova practices both Judaism and Christianity. In her bedroom hangs an icon as well as a painting of Jerusalem. "And in order not to make the Gods jealous, every time Dvoyre-Leye poured fresh oil into the icon's lamp, she made a nice donation to the charity box, which, when it became full, she would bring to the trustee of the synagogue herself" (169).

Three Cities, with all its historical drama and vivid depiction of the senseless horror and misery caused by political blunders and blindness, is rivalled perhaps only by Dr. Zhivago, although Pastèrnak does not concern himself with the special pogroms on Jews and their use as scapegoats, as does Asch. While the trilogy can in no way be conceived as an exploration of Christianity, it is, however, an examination of the

ideals of religion, which, in their ultimately corrupted form, lead to self-righteousness and mercilessness in pursuing a road to salvation, whether it be an after-life or the perfect communistic state. "Every dogma, every church has created its own morality, and that is just the great danger," Mirkin reflects in Moscow. "But I belive that there is only one morality for all humanity and all ages--to speak the truth and love your fellow-men. There is no other morality" (807).

The father of Mirkin's one-time fiancée, who had denied his own background all his life in order to rise to the top of his legal profession in the aristocratic Czarist regimes, is put to death for affirming his Jewishness in the post-revolutionary Russia; his figure had "an uncanny resemblance to the Man whose image Misha had so often seen, the Christ led to his death by Roman soldiers" (865). Asch condemns all forms of fanaticism--Jewish fanaticism, which he criticizes in Warsaw, Christian fanaticism, or political fanaticism--as he advocates and idealizes blending and compromise.

There are many more examples of Asch's fascination with a syncretism of Judaism and Christianity. Most significantly, Asch's Der tilim Yid (1932-33; psalm Jew; abridged Eng. version, Salvation, 1943), which was and still is lauded by most Yiddish critics as the author's masterpiece, has many qualities in common with The

Nazarene. I discuss Tilim Yid at some length for two reasons: (1) The novel is usually regarded by most Yiddish readers as Asch's best, most important work; indeed, it is probably the most beloved of all Yiddish novels. (2) I wish to heavily stress the fact that Asch's controversial themes regarding a Judaic-Christian reconciliation--themes found so shocking and objectionable just a few years later in The Nazarene--are strongly present in this same adored Tilim Yid. Published during the time when Nazism was flourishing, when hatred towards the Jews was reaching an intensity of incredible proportions, Tilim Yid was lovingly grasped by Yiddish readers as an embodiment of the ethical and spiritual possibilities of traditional Jewish life. The novel, both grand in scope as well as rich in specific detail, in the best tradition of Sholem Asch, focuses on the life of Yekhiel, who, despite countless hardships, and despite the lack of a yeshiva education, becomes a saintly Hasidic rebbe whose simple and pure love of God overrides all the tragedies he witnesses. Jewish life in Poland, portrayed right after the Napoleonic Wars, is vividly presented in both shtetl and city. There is a wealth of accumulated anthropological detail; folklorists such as Sh. Ansky, author of The Dybbuk (1920), had already achieved a wide popularity by collecting and dramatizing such

ethnographical data.

Asch is never simplistically onesided in his works. In Tilim Yid, he writes not only of the spiritual beauty of Jewish lawful morality; he also harrowingly decries the imperfections of that traditional way of life. From the very beginning of the novel, Asch delineates the harsh injustices perpetrated upon women, children, and the mentally ill by strict adherence to Judaic law. Starkly stated, the Hasidic community stresses learning and study, not compassion. Yekhiel's mother Rivke works herself to death, leaving behind young children, while her husband is paying court to his Rebbe in another town. The Rebbe himself is exemplary in that he has no interest whatsoever in this world; bringing the Messiah and preparing for the life to come are the only significant goals. The immense suffering of the wives and children of his disciples is of absolutely no concern to him (Pt. 1, ch. 13).

Yekhiel, in spite of his strict upbringing, ascends over his fellow Jews, if not in learning, then most certainly in compassion. His God is not the God who would let his innocent mother burn in Hell because she unwillingly suffered Yekhiel's help in the market when he ought to have been in school. His God, rather, is a God of goodness and forgiveness. "Mother, you won't burn and roast in Hell. God is good," he assures her

(26). Upon hearing these contrary words, Yekhiel's father immediately grabs the boy and beats him with his belt. But the child is recalcitrant; he feels the laws are too harsh, and that God is kind. When the fanatic "Frume kupke" continues to torment Rivke with visions of damnation, Yekhiel comforts his sobbing mother, even stroking her tear-ridden cheeks, though he knows it's a great sin to touch a woman; he feels "God is forgiving" (50).

His father tells Yekhiel he is "loaded with sins, riddled through with holes like a sieve" (58). One of his numerous sins is his worry about the Gentiles and their admittance into Heaven. He wishes to "save" them, and even risks his life and the lives of the Jews in the community by telling the Christians, during their holy Green Thursday, that they still have time to convert to Judaism. Luckily, he escapes with only minor wounds.

As Yekhiel grows, so does his compassion. Unlike the strict followers of the law, Yekhiel obeys his heart. He feels pain and sympathy for the whole world, not only for his fellow Jews. When he cries over a sick Christian woman, he is laughed at and derisively called "Gentile Rebbe" (83). Yekhiel becomes the first person to befriend the poor fool, and he even eats rotten bread with him (87). His love and pity for all of God's creations continually expand. Through time, he becomes

the adored new Rebbe of a small town--but only for the unlearned. The scholars have no use for this Jew who passionately recites Psalms together with his needy congregants instead of eruditely delving through the texts, searching for signs of the Messiah and other higher matters.

One tragic event pierces the serenity of Yekhiel's complete devotion to God. A repentant and reformed horse thief prepares for the wedding of his only child, Reyzl, named in memory of the Rebbe's saintly wife who had died in childbirth. On the eve of the wedding, Reyzl elopes with the handsome Catholic Stefan, who brings the girl to a church in preparation for conversion to his faith. A huge processional is joyously planned by the Christians. Numerous bishops and priests, peasants, and nobles will march together through the streets of the Jewish village. Reyzl will be in front, just behind a huge cross. Because of his great pity for the girl's parents, who would rather their child die than undergo the humiliating public conversion process, and then be lost to them forever anyway, Yekhiel fasts and prays and his congregation fasts and prays. A miracle occurs: Reyzl accidentally falls to her death from the church tower. The Catholics bury her in their cemetery; but a couple of unscrupulous Jewish characters, wishing to erase their own sins,

enact the good but dangerous deed of stealing the corpse, performing the proper Jewish burial rites, and placing the body in the Jewish grounds.

This event was hailed by Asch's avid Yiddish readers as a great victory for the Jews. And so it was: the Church failed to "save the soul" it so desperately wanted. Reyzl remained Jewish. As usual with Sholem Asch's works, however, Der tilim Yid is more than a reaffirmation of Judaism, for the novel also suggests the benefits of merging both Christianity and Judaism.

The priest attempting to bring about Reyzl's conversion is not himself an enemy of the Jewish people. On the contrary, he is as good to them as Yekhiel is to the Christians. "He had sympathy for the poor Jews, and he helped them whenever he could." In addition, he had a specific group of Jews on whom he always kept a watchful eye: Yankl who transported people over the Vistula on his raft, Isaac the beggar, and Khane the widow. The priest knew who was needy,

> so from time to time he'd give a sack of potatoes to help one through the winter, or a half wagonload of wood which he got from one of the nobles. . . . Also sometimes medicine for a sick person, which he would deliver himself. He defended Jews whenever they were ill spoken of; he considered it his Catholic duty. Many times in church he'd preach to his Christians about understanding, about "Christian patience," about "love towards your enemy," whenever there'd be a disturbance against the Jews (416).

Reyzl feels close to him.

> Being near the big, mighty priest made her feel not only protected and secure in the rightness of the step she was taking, but she also felt a personal inclination towards him, a bond, a childish dependence, almost like to the rebbe (423).

Asch makes stronger parallels between the two holy men. Each feels that he is working for God against the forces of Satan--but ironically they strive towards opposite ends in Reyzl's case. In a chapter entitled "The Night" (Pt. 4, ch. 7), Asch compares the rebbe and the priest. Neither one can sleep during that night before the conversion is to take place. The rebbe broken-heartedly recites psalms and stops short with a shriek. "He saw Satan, who was standing in his way, about to undo his work, the Satan who led the girl away from the right path with his power of sinfulness" (438). The priest was also afraid he would lose Reyzl's soul, because "Satan had entered her heart" and she was no longer joyous and eager to convert (439). The rebbe cries to God to protect the little lamb about to go astray; the priest begs Jesus to take the little bird under the protective wings of Christianity. "And also, like the Rebbe Yekhiel, he prayed for the erring soul, and with the power of his faith he recited the same verses of Psalms as the Rebbe Yekhiel. . . " (441).

It is also important to keep in mind that Reyzl did not deliberately commit suicide to save herself from conversion; hers was not an act of sanctification. Rather, she envisioned a happy ending for herself, with both Jews and Catholics celebrating together. She looks in the sky and sees

> the angels, Jesus, the Holy Mother. . . . And quiet! She really sees them in one group. All soar in the milky haze, Jews and Christians together, the rebbe with the priest. See, there stands Stefan with her parents, and he laughs to her. Also the rebbe, the priest, all laugh and smile at her, all are so good to her, all are happy with her. . . . With a joyous cry, she stretches out her arms and also wants to fly to them, to be together with everybody (446).

Instead, the girl falls to the ground, and dies. Reyzl, then, does not return to Judaism with a contrite heart; she would, rather, live in harmony with Catholics and Jews.

While the accident helps the characters avoid the problem of reconciliation, the tragedy pierced Yekhiel's conscience, and, for a while, even his faith. The problem of the need for different religions was one that had disturbed him since childhood. He suffered "terrible thoughts" after Reyzl's death (pt.4, ch.9), such as the notion that Christians too were made in God's image, and he questioned why the prayer "that all should make one alliance, to do your [God's] will with all our hearts" had never been realized. "The eternal

question over the division of humanity tortured his soul" (460). Worse, he felt that the dead girl was useless to God, since she could no longer praise the creator. Most certainly, the rebbe did not regard Reyzl's demise as a victory. Because the Catholics felt cheated out of their celebration, they killed a couple of innocent Jews; and the rest of the community was afraid to venture out of doors for fear of further reprisals. Yekhiel feels only guilty despair over what happened. "God in heaven! What have I done?" he sobs bitterly (464).

After some time, Yekhiel's trust in his beloved God is restored; but he dies shortly afterwards. Contrary to the popular opinion of his readers, Asch appears to suggest that Reyzl's death, although seemingly a victory for the Jews, was actually a sad, needless, pointless occurrence; nobody really won.

Tilim Yid is completely worthy of the praise bestowed upon it by readers and critics. Nevertheless, certain portions of the historical novel, which I have highlighted in order to emphasize my point regarding Christian thematic matter, were either ignored or misread. Apparently without exception, after publication of Tilim Yid, Asch was hailed by both critics and readers alike as the "most gifted literary defender of Jewish life" (Siegel 110). Shmuel Niger

praised the novel as Asch's best work. Herman Lieberman, the same Forward writer who would later villify Asch for writing The Nazarene, at this time castigated Niger for daring to suggest Tilim Yid might benefit by more careful attention to style and diction. He defended the novel vigorously.

Asch himself was involved in fostering the wholesome image of the book as an idealization of Jewish life. In the October 5, 1932 issue of The Forward Asch declares:

> Just as the Ukrainian pogroms and massacres of 1918-19 gave me the desire to create such a work as Kidush haShem about Chmelnicki's times. . . , so are there now tragic occurrences in our life around us, which urged me to write this new work. Attacks have lately been made, the vilest attacks, by German pseudo-scientists and supposed culture, not only on the living Jew, but also on the Jewish spirit, on Jewish morality and ethics. This led me to strive to write and describe a *kidush haShem* of not only the living Jew, but the *kidush haShem* of the Jewish concept, of the Jewish spirit. I present the Jewish spirit, Jewish ethics, not through nice legends, as does, for example, the German-Jewish writer Martin Buber, but through the complete Jewish way of life in its everyday environment, which is always replete with Jewish morality, the inner spiritual world of Judaism. . . . (qtd. by Niger, Ash 213-14)

It was this idealization of Judaism's refined moral code and emphasis on goodness based on spirituality, as exemplified by Rebi Yekhiel, on which Asch's Yiddish audience focused. Critic Shmuel Niger,

for example, in his discussion entitled "Der tilim Yid," emphasizes Asch's mastery in portraying "the beautiful morality that used to be in our lives" before modernity corrupted it (Ash 214). Yekhiel does emerge from baseness and he does make all holier by his presence because of his complete faith. But what about the baseness Asch also describes?

The similarities between the quiet, unassuming, uneducated, God-loving Yekhiel, and Asch's later Yeshua the Nazarene, are obvious. Both avow faith over ritual; both stress compassion over pedantry; both identify with the poor and the downtrodden. Shmuel Niger, always Asch's most perceptive, most understanding critic, one who had followed the novelist's works from their very beginnings at the turn of the century, feels that The Nazarene is a direct continuation of Der tilim Yid. "This very Tilim Yid is none other than an introduction to The Nazarene; The Nazarene is, before anything else, the sequel to, the perfection, and the crowning of Tilim Yid." The critic vehemently asserts that the book about Jesus

> is a natural link in the chain of his creation. . . . The state of mind, the aims, and the spirit of this very book are the further developments and the much stronger expression of the same state of mind, aims, and spirit which fill all his previous works and especially--the sum of all this--Der tilim Yid (Ash 279).

On the other hand, Jacob Glatstein, a more emotional critic, feels that "It is idiotic to say that Asch's Tilim Yid led him to Jesus. The hand of the Jew who wrote Tilim Yid ought not to be able to write a Jesus-work. From Tilim Yid to The Nazarene," he emphasizes, "lies a whole Jewish abyss of fright and fear of churchbells" (157).

But Asch does not seem to have had this "fright and fear of churchbells." If he ever did, it was an abyss over which he leaped quite early in his literary career. Indeed, Asch's consistency of theme and subject matter in many of his stories, novels, plays, reminiscences, etc., is obvious. He was always interested in reuniting the two faiths that had diverged almost two thousand years ago. This kind of universalism, according to Cynthia Ozick, "is of course a Jewish impulse," for Judaism "emphasizes that the God of Israel is also the God of mankind-in-general" ("Toward New Yiddish" 155).

It seems then rather surprising that devoted readers of Sholem Asch, readers who avidly consumed his serializations and stories in The Forward and The Haynt, who saw his plays and bought his books, could be so scandalized by his publication of The Nazarene. As late as 1976, Ben Siegel, in his The Controversial Sholem Asch, hailed Tilim Yid as "an extended eulogy to a lost Hasidic world" (7). And Sol Liptzin, in his Flowering

of Yiddish Literature (1963), claimed that Asch in Tilim Yid

> attained the highest triumph of his idealizations of historic Jewish life and was hailed as the gifted defender of the Jewish way of life. . . .
>
> All the greater was the shock experienced by Jewish readers when Asch in 1939 at the height of Hitler's triumphs published in English the first of his Christological novels The Nazarene. . . . (186)

The "shock" Liptzin mentions was unwarranted, undeserved. Sholem Asch did not, after so many years of prolific literary activity, suddenly explode into new subject matter. As Niger sarcastically put it in 1950 in an article written for Fraye arbeter shtime,

> Those who, about ten years ago, felt all of a sudden that Asch is a stranger to us, that there is no nor should there be a place for him in Yiddish Literature, ought to beg forgiveness for having honored and rewarded him in the course of his first forty years of creativity. In the course of those four decades, when he held such an esteemed position in our literary world, he was following virtually the same path that he is on now. Now he goes more quickly, more audaciously, but it's the same path as before (Ash 349-50).

The Jesus legend and Christianity, and especially the possibility of a fusion between Christianity and Judaism, were subjects which had always fascinated Sholem Asch.

* * * * *

Was there, however, a certain pattern or emphasis, a point of view, an opinion, that made Asch's treatment of Jesus more unpalatable to fellow Jews than the treatment accorded him by the other Yiddish writers and artists? It would be neat, for example, to proclaim that the others used Jesus in a more aesthetic or symbolic way and they therefore did not cross their parochial boundaries in such an irreversible manner as Asch. It would be expedient to assert that Asch was more reverential towards Jesus in his tone than the others, of which he was often accused. Yet imposing these kinds of differences between Asch and any of the assorted Yiddish writers and artists of his day, who dealt with the Nazarene on a smaller scale, is more forced than genuine. Essentially, the major distinction was that Asch, who boldly undertook to write a very large novel about Jesus, became more rich and famous, while the others continued to struggle. Asch's projection of Jesus as a Jewish martyr was not opposed to Leivick's or Halpern's or Grinberg's or Chagall's view of Jesus.

On the other hand, Asch's book was extraordinarily ill-timed. What would have been acceptable a decade earlier became, in 1939, abhorrent. Ab Cahan, according to Shloyme Rosenberg, Itche Goldberg, and others, had been on the lookout for an opportunity to publicly

attack Asch. He took advantage of the moment when The Nazarene was published, and promptly and whole-heartedly launched what Siegel terms "the war against Sholem Asch" (140). The relationship between Cahan and Asch is discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3: ABRAHAM CAHAN AND SHOLEM ASCH

Abraham Cahan (1860-1951) was the founder, editor, and dictatorial ruler of the Yiddish Forverts for almost fifty years. There has been a trend among English-writing critics to glorify this almost legendary figure, to praise his long-running editorship of the formerly largest foreign-language daily in the world, and to laud his own works written in English. This is a view, however, that is both sentimental and simplistic. It is common knowledge among Yiddishists, for example, that Cahan had no regard for Yiddish except as a tool for Americanizing immigrants. He inserted as many English words and phrases as possible in his paper, with the objective of displacing Yiddish altogether. Yiddish, he often stated publicly, was just a key that should be discarded once the door was open (I. Goldberg). English biographies and books dealing with Cahan have an almost roseate view of a character who had been regarded as no less than vicious by Yiddish intellectuals of his generation. One scholar, for example, claims that Cahan's Forverts "published the work of Sholem Aleichem, Sholem Asch (in the midst of great controversy occasioned by Asch's apparent apostasy), I.J. Singer, and his better-known younger brother Isaac Bashevis

Singer" (Chametzky 22). Cahan did not print Sholem Aleichem's works; he did not publish Asch "in the midst of great controversy"; in fact, he helped create "the "great controversy"; and he demanded steamy, trashy novels of I.B. Singer in order to increase circulation of his paper. B.Z. Goldberg, in a scathing Yiddish article written directly after the editor's death, negates the entire Cahan mythos which Cahan himself propagated. He could never have enough "publicity, honor, and sadistic leadership," claims the journalist who had known Cahan for many years. "Ab. Cahan built a Forverts government so that he could be a king. And there he ruled with more autocracy than the Czar in Russia" (4). A definitive study of Ab Cahan needs to be made.

Sholem Asch's Editor, Abraham Cahan

Abraham Cahan knew how to appeal to the widest popular audience with his daily paper, The Forverts. He instituted, for example, the renowned "Bintl-briv" (bundle of letters) in which broken-hearted and troubled immigrants sought advice for their problems. For the first few years Cahan, afterwards others, assumed a Miss Lonelyhearts position and carefully answered the letters. The feature was "indescribably popular," recalls Cahan in his autobiography, Bleter fun mayn

lebn. "Whole packs of letters would arrive" (vol. 4, 476). Countless mothers miraculously found their long-lost children through the column so many times it became "practically common" (479). Cahan recalls scandalous discoveries of married couples, who, to their horror, learned they were really brother and sister. Such sensational, melodramatic tales helped establish the feature as the best-loved in America. But the true bases of the success of the "Bintl-Briv," Cahan reminisces, were "the quiet tragedies of the human soul" (481).

He continued to publish articles that were aimed at the not-so-enlightened masses, such as advice on using a handkerchief, eating with forks and knives, or how to deal with ungrateful children. More often than not, these "features" were regarded with disdain by their insulted readers. Cahan demanded yellow journalism and sensationalism. This was, after all, the age of William Randolph Hearst, whose notorious distortions, reinventions, and outright inventions were fed to the readers of his own newspapers. His reporters kept finding "atrocities," such as unjustly imprisoned American citizens and sexually abused maidens in Cuba. "[N]one of the stories proved out later," Richard Schickel remarks (30). Hearst even celebrated an entire war, and he drummed up additional hatred towards the

Spanish when the Maine was mysteriously blown up in Havana. Against the standards of his contemporaries Hearst and Pulitzer, Cahan was a real newspaperman. His Forverts, in comparison to the other really scandalous (and popular) papers of the day, was more respectable and civilized.

Most definitely, the Forverts was not the first and certainly not the only American-Yiddish daily to present poetry and other literary genres within its pages, as Cahan often claimed. Nevertheless, he did offer good, steady employment to some of the best American and Polish-Yiddish writers, including Morris Winchevsky, Morris Rosenfeld, Zalman Libin, Leon Kobrin, Abraham Liessin; and later Avrom Reisen, Sholem Asch, Zalman Schneour, Jonah Rosenfeld, I.J. Singer, and I. Bashevis Singer. Cahan was extremely proud of the high quality of literature he printed. He himself contributed translations of Tolstoy and Chekhov, complete with critical explanations, "with the special purpose of giving the reader an example of the best literature" (Bleter, vol. 5, 35-36). Gifted journalists were sought out too, such as Hillel Rogoff, who serialized an American history; Ben Zion Hoffman (Tsivion), who contributed sharp feuilletons; and B. Kovner, author of the popular "Yente Telebende" series about a domineering wife. By employing both intelligence and ruthlessness,

Ab Cahan enabled his Forverts to enjoy a readership of 250,000 daily (Stein viii). It became the most widely read Yiddish newspaper in the world, and the most widely read foreign-language newspaper in the United States (Madison 289, 146).

Cahan was an enormously influential and forceful figure in New York. During the years of massive Jewish immigration, he served as an advisor in problems of Americanization, labor disputes, politics, literary criticism, and theater. "It was commonly acknowledged," Cahan boasts in his autobiography, "that the Forverts could make or break a play" (vol. 5, 34). And under his direction, The Forverts "became such a political power in New York that it was able to break Tammany's hold on the lower East Side and send the first socialist, Meyer London, to Congress" (Hindus 20).

Cahan ran the paper like a "virtual dictator" (Howe, World 525). He insisted all contributors use simple vocabulary and a direct style. He set all policies. "Under his editorship," explains Howe, "the Forverts would always have a monolithic narrowness, with even its inner variations of level and tone a function of his will" (525). The editor violated the sensibilities of many in order to get exactly what he wished. He regularly told his staff what to write, and he was accustomed to getting his way without question.

Almost every Yiddish intellectual has criticized Ab Cahan's tyrannical rule, although no Forverts member was permitted to do so. Sensitive poet Morris Rosenfeld called Cahan a "journalistic charlatan;" he was promptly dismissed with the statement that his "writing was not adequate in quality and quantity" (qtd. by Madison 158). Story-writer Leon Kobrin attacked the editor's fierce vanity: "The more admiration he got, the more his sickly appetite grew," he complained (qtd. by Howe, World 529). Chaim Zhitlovsky, the Yiddish philospher, declared that "Cahan has made the Forverts into a savage paper with the mind of a small child and the lusts of a grown scoundrel" (qtd. by Howe, World 529). Poet Hinde Zaretsky reported that Cahan crippled the literary career of Yente Serdatzky by forcing her to leave the Forverts: "Who would publish a writer whom Cahan had thrown out?" (qtd. by Zucker, 78). Lamed Shapiro, Yoysef Opatoshu, and other distinguished Yiddish writers also had major feuds with the editor.

He quarrelled for years with playwright Jacob Gordin. Characteristically, Cahan had been the first to herald his dramas in 1891, after which he felt it necessary to criticize them. In 1895 Cahan had even felt provoked enough to leap up from his seat during a performance of Gordin's The Russian Jew in America, and cry out in Russian, "That's a lie!" (qtd. by Sanders

315). In a Sunday review of The Purity of Family Life in 1904, a satire dealing with hypocritical Orthodox Jews who secretely violate Jewish laws, Cahan denounced, as he had been doing for the past year, the Orthodox Tageblatt; and then he continued to condemn Gordin's play as unoriginal, unrealistic, and uninteresting. He and Gordin continued to dispute heatedly for years. Although Cahan boasts in his autobiography that he never resorted to personal insults against Gordin, who evidently was not as courteous in this regard, he used his newspaper to print a series of attacks on the dramatist's works; they appeared two or three times a week for a period of several weeks. In them, Cahan inveighed against Gordin's language, characters, and plots. "The characters are not characters and their speeches are not speeches," he reported. He wrote of Sappho, which had been praised as Tolstoyan by other critics, as "blind fabrication, without a spore of reality. . . . It's not art, but pretentious trash" (vol. 4, 521-22). Gordin's characters, furthermore, are like "clay," and the plays themselves are "lower than criticism" on the literary scale (524).

The editor's insulting behavior towards the talented story writer Jonah Rosenfeld was equally well known. Solomon Rosenberg, Asch's secretary as well as an author and translator in his own right, was shocked

one day to overhear Cahan berating Rosenfeld about his writing; he "thus made this poor soul pitifully wretched; all the while, a certain colleague, whose name I will not disclose, stood by, agreeing with everything the dictatorial editor said. . ." (Rosenberg 139-140). Cahan frequently rejected Rosenfeld's work but kept him under contract so he could not go elsewhere; he demeaned the gifted author to such an extent that even temperate Shmuel Niger responded with an excoriation of Cahan in the 1928 issue of Feder, a little magazine.

The editor also disliked Sholem Aleichem. When the genial "father of Yiddish Literature" was living in New York, physically ill, without means of support, and, according to Asch, even hungry, a delegation of writers presented his difficult situation to Cahan and pleaded with him to print Sholem Aleichem's works. "Let him come to me and show me what he has," was Cahan's imperious reply (qtd. by Paner 139).

In Volume 4 of his autobiography, Bleter fun mayn lebn, Cahan devotes an entire chapter to his "opponents." While managing to present his own views as being absolutely correct, politically, morally, and literarily, he lists his bitter enemies, such as Louis Miller of the Varhayt, the Morgn Zhurnal, Jacob Gordin, and an entire "opposition against me" in the Forward Association. In a meeting taking place March 4, 1906,

this opposing faction, consisting, according to Cahan, mainly of members of the Socialist Party and the Workmen's Circle, blasted the editor's policies, light articles, and "watery" journalism. "Every verbal expression against my policy was greeted with thundering applause," he notes drily (516). Yet he emerged from this bombardment as self-righteous as ever, and with even more power.

Cahan was an ardent socialist. He had risked his life in Russia during the reign of Nicholas II for agreeing with what were, at the time, dangerous ideas, and he narrowly escaped capture by illegally crossing the border and emigrating to the United States. During his early years in America, Cahan continued to be an uncompromising Socialist, with principles assuming more importance for him than people. Playwright and short-story writer Leon Kobrin recalls the first speech he ever heard Cahan deliver. During the summer of 1892, shirtmakers were on strike in Philadelphia. Hundreds of the strikers were crowded into the German Labor Lyceum to hear the famed New Yorker speak. Organizers attempted to trick scabs into coming, but they only succeeded in capturing a few very young girls, who, cowering with fear, were ushered onstage. Cahan, remembers the author, never smiled. Unforgettably, he pointed to one of the girls and screamed with contempt,

"A face! See this face! A better-looking one would already be dead and buried for the worms!" (278). He continued to yell and stamp his feet, demanding to know why "instead of ripping out the boss's big belly together with his guts and intestines, they were, instead, being scabs against their own brothers and sisters" (279). His screams escalated over the crying, trembling girls. "Such girls," he raged, "ought to be whipped and flogged, and their flesh should be torn out piece by piece, stripe by stripe; skin them so that no one else would be a scab for bloodsuckers!" (280). Looking back, Kobrin remarks that a speech like this could have been given only by Cahan, for he evidently displayed the notorious personality, even at that time, of the later Ab Cahan (281). "Not even his most ardent admirers cared to suggest that Cahan was a likeable man," states Irving Howe (World 526).

As for religion, although brought up as a traditional Jew, Cahan had declared himself to be a complete Atheist by his early teens. "Clearly, there were no mysteries. There was no God!" he reported in his autobiography. He wrote of the intellectual liberation brought about by this concept, and he had no hesitations about attempting to persuade others, including friends and Yeshiva students, in this direction. "I proclaimed my atheistic ideas to all," he

asserted (Education 89).

This aggressive editor, who insisted on catering to the masses, was himself a talented, careful writer in English, which he had diligently learned as an immigrant in his twenties. (His Yiddish works, in contrast, display no distinctive merits.) He had worked under Lincoln Steffens and Hutchins and Norman Hapgood on the Commercial Advertiser, interviewing personalities such as Theodore Roosevelt, as well as writing essays and reviews. "With an acute and penetrating feeling for history," asserts Moses Rischin, "this sentient literary journalist probed American ethnic and cultural consciousness as no one before him" (xix).

His own fiction was consciously and deliberately realistic. As early as 1889, he had published a lengthy article entitled "Realism" in the Workmen's Advocate. "My interest in the subject stemmed from my concern with realism in the field of belles lettres," he explains in his autobiography.

> I had diligently read the works of William Dean Howells and Henry James, both of whom were considered realists. I had also reread the major works of Tolstoy. . . .
>
> My interest in realism was further stimulated by the exhibit of the famous war paintings by the Russian artist Vereshchagin. The critics praised his talent but condemned his paintings. They insisted that the purpose of art is to afford pleasure. Vereshchagin's paintings were pictures of pain. . . .
>
> The critics annoyed me. . . . I did much reading about art, including Spencer's

> treatment of this subject. Gradually I arrived at the conclusion that the power of realistic art arises from the pleasure we derive from recognizing the truth as it is mirrored by art (Education 404-05).

Cahan constantly preached on the need for "sincerity, realism, purpose, and unity" in his art (qtd. by Rischin xxii). He especially praised the great Russian realists--Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. In fact, while writing for the Commercial Advertiser, edited by Lincoln Steffens, Cahan was the first to introduce Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, and other important Russian writers to the United States; he translated their best stories, wrote critical reviews, and held lectures about them. Hamlin Garland, Israel Zangwill, William Dean Howells, and Emile Zola were other realistic writers whose virtues Cahan often stressed. Some of his stories and journalistic pieces written between 1897-1902 have recently been brought together in Grandma Never Lived in America (1985); in them, one can appreciate Ab Cahan's carefully wrought reports, stories, and critical articles. "Like Howells," says Rischin, Ab Cahan "was obsessed in his literary criticism with the fidelity of literature to life, for realism, of course, was central to their conception of truth" (xl).

His first story in English, "A Providential Match"

(1895), was praised by William Dean Howells. Cahan included it in The Imported Bridgegroom and other Stories of the New York Ghetto (1898). His Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto is a riveting study of the incompatible lifestyles between the newest immigrants and those who had already become somewhat Americanized. Yekl, who has spent three years as the flirtatious and dashing Jake in Boston and New York, at last sends for his wife Gitl and their son Yossele when his father dies in Russia. Jake proudly speaks broken English; he has discarded all religious restrictions; he has led a rather exciting life. Gitl, however, is the same unworldly, devout, and unstylish woman she had always been in their Russian shtetl. Jake's "heart had sunk at the sight of his wife's uncouth and un-American appearance. She was slovenly dressed in a brown jacket and skirt of grotesque cut, and her hair was concealed under a voluminous wig of a pitch-black hue" (34). Gitl was as astounded to see her now beardless husband desecrate the Sabbath as Jake was to look at "this bonnetless, wigged, dowdyish little greenhorn by his side!" (36). Under the influence of his "lade" friend Mamie who quickly maneuvers her way to becoming his fiancee, Jake divorces Gitl and the old way of life she represents. Yekl is an excellent, sparely-written novelette; its realistic dialogue, consisting of phrases

of badly-spoken English, accentuates the theme of the difficulties inherent in acculturation. It is probably Ab Cahan's best work. Joan Micklin Silver ably directed the film version under the title of Hester Street in 1974.

When Howells read the manuscript of this short novel, he thought it was wonderful. Nevertheless, despite his wholehearted recommendation, Cahan found it very difficult to publish in English. Nelson, the editor at Harper's, for example, said that "life on the Jewish East Side won't interest the American reader" (Cahan, Bleter, vol. 4, 38). Another editor, a woman, explained to Cahan that readers enjoyed novels about richly bedecked ladies and gentlemen falling in love on a golf course. What interest could they possibly have in a Jewish immigrant who finds his wife to be dull and unattractive? (Bleter, vol. 4, 38). And at McClure's, editor Phillips also returned the manuscript, stressing once more that a novel whose characters are Jews will not be read (Bleter, vol. 4, 39). Desperate to see his work in print, Cahan translated it into Yiddish, and had it brought out serially in the Arbayter tsaytung under his original title of Yankl der Yanki, and using the pseudonym Socius. In Yiddish the novel was "immediately successful" (Bleter, vol. 4, 43).

Howells finally persuaded Appleton to accept the

book; it appeared, with the more subdued title Howells suggested, in July, 1896. In general, the volume was favorably received. The Sunday New York Times reviewer, on July 12, praised Cahan's honest and colorful portrayals, done without political propagandizing, of the Jewish East Side. The New York Sun asserted that Cahan's portraits were less narrow and stereotypical, and far more lively, than were those of Charles Dudley Warner in The Golden House or Stephen Crane in George's Mother. The Chicago Record lauded the novel for its realism, its presentation of red-blooded men and women, complete with their faults. American Hebrew, on the other hand, utterly disliked the work. (Summaries of reviews in Bleter, vol. 4, 56-61).

William Dean Howells, however, published a front-page, entire page, rave review in the Sunday New York World of July 26, 1896. Howells hailed Cahan, along with Stephen Crane, as a 'New Star of Realism' for rendering 'the Truest Pictures of East Side Life'" (Rischin xxi). But Cahan, explained Howells, appeals more to the imagination than Crane. He acclaimed Cahan as an author "'who will do honor to American letters'" (qtd. by Higham ix). This article was widely reprinted in many cities. "All of a sudden I became known in American Literature," recalls Cahan (vol. 4, 59). He was subsequently interviewed and photographed and found

himself described in scores of syndicated newspapers. "Overnight, Cahan was famous in the English-speaking world, which no Yiddish writer before him had ever succeeded in penetrating" (Hindus 19). He was invited to fashionable literary gatherings, and was even guest of honor, along with Stephen Crane and Hamlin Garland, at the Lanthorn Literary Club in New York; the three authors were regarded as the finest representatives of literary realism in America. Nevertheless, Yekl did not sell.

The White Terror and the Red (1905) is the only novel in any language dealing with the plot leading to the assassination of Czar Alexander II, and with the ensuing anti-Jewish pogroms sanctioned by the revolutionaries. "Almost all of his contemporary critics praised his realistic portrayal of revolutionary Russia," asserts Chametzky (120).

The Rise of David Levinsky first appeared as four stories in McClure's in 1913; it was published as a novel in 1917, and received mixed reviews. Howells was worred about it being "so sensual in facts" (qtd. by Chametzky 151). Today it is regarded as a minor masterpiece in realism. Jules Chametzky even considers it "a major American work, indebted to but transcending Howells' The Rise of Silas Lapham, and with a central character as significant and interesting as any of

Dreiser's towering creations" (128). David Levinsky is an immigrant who works himself up, becomes a millionare, but finds his life to be spiritually empty and unsatisfying. It was Cahan's last English publication. After Levinsky, the editor devoted the rest of his literary energies solely to Yiddish and to the Forverts.

Ab Cahan and Sholem Asch

Ab Cahan had sought out the young Sholem Asch, encouraged him, and printed several of his stories, not only in the Forverts, but also in his Tsaytgayst, a weekly, more literary supplement geared towards the intellectual reader. The first issue appeared on September 1, 1905, and contained Asch's story "Dina." The second issue carried "Di mayse mit der sheyner Mari" [the story of pretty Mary], which later became the basis for his God of Vengeance. The Tsaytgayst soon boasted a circulation of 28,000, and published "all the best Yiddish writers in the whole world," according to Hillel Rogoff, including Reisen, Hillquit, Yehoash, Feygenboym, Zhitlovsky, and Cahan's own translations of Chekhov and Karl Marx. (qtd. by Cahan in Bleter, vol. 4, 510). Asch had many stories published in this literary enterprise before it collapsed financially.

Cahan further helped establish Asch's reputation in America by advising the author to demand a fee of $2000,

plus $10 per performance, from Boris Tomashevsky, the famous actor and pioneer of Yiddish theater in New York (letter 23 Briv 26). Sholem Asch himself was a "hot commodity" for Cahan (Kellman), and every novel or travel impression of his would readily be serialized in the Forverts. Motke the Thief and Uncle Moses alone created an enormous following among the paper's quarter-million readers. Asch received an excellent salary of $75 each week. After serialization, his books were published in Yiddish, German, and other languages. Furthermore, almost all were dramatized on the stage.

Cahan staunchly defended Asch when God of Vengeance was condemned for being obscene and untraditional. Itzkhak Paner reminisces about "the storm let loose by the premiere in New York." Heated debates were carried on by assorted newspapers, journals, organizations, even unions. "The Orthodox thundered against the author; their newspapers called for a boycott of the play and for physical prevention of the performance; they demanded the author be excommunicated. . ." (8). At one of the performances, rotten eggs were actually thrown onto the stage. It was Abraham Cahan and his Forverts, however, who supported, ironically enough, Asch's right to freedom of subject, and he "attacked eloquently and vociferously, as only he could, those wishing to kill the play" (Siegel 40). If God of Vengeance "played for

dozens of years with great success, it was primarily thanks to the greatly influential American-Yiddish newspaper. . . the Forverts and its mighty editor Ab Cahan," confirms Paner. Cahan boldly and unabashedly denounced the hypocritically pious who "want to choke the truth," kill "free artistic speech," and eliminate "free creative thought. . ." (8).

When the play was published in 1918, Ab Cahan wrote the glowing preface. All Asch's works, stated Cahan

> are alive with a spirit of poetic realism, with a stronger leaning toward the poetic than toward reality, perhaps, but always throbbing with dramatic force and beauty. . . . The clash between Yankl's revolting career and his paternal idealism, and the catastrophe to which it inevitably leads, form one of the strongest and most fascinating situations known to the modern drama (v).

Critical endorsement by the editor of the most widely circulated Yiddish daily was not to be taken lightly.

Without warning, however, Cahan halted the serialization of Asch's Kidush haShem, also in 1918, after the third installment. Cahan told the novelist it would be better to write another Motke the Thief, and not bother with such a tall tale ["*bobe-mayse*"]. Evidently, Asch's historical romance dealing with Bogdan Chmelnicki and his Cossacks' massacre of Jews in the seventeenth century did not appeal to the editor. The newspaper's general manager, Borukh Vladek Charney,

however, with the assistance of others, organized a campaign of "Letters from readers," demanding the unconditional continuation of Kidush haShem. Ab Cahan, although extremely stubborn, was no fool. He would not risk the loss of his Forverts readers; after a few days, printing of Asch's novel resumed (Paner 138-39). Although Asch was clearly the winner in this struggle, there is no question that the incident contributed more than a little to the hostility and later bitterness between them. Cahan never forgave Asch his great popularity; and Asch never forgave Cahan's denigration of his novel.

Cahan's venomous attitude towards Asch deepened. He was an envious person, and he had indeed good reason to be jealous of the young, popular Yiddish writer. Asch's dramas and stories had brought him immediate world-wide fame; his works, from almost the time he began writing, had been translated into many languages. Cahan, on the other hand, though he painstakingly crafted his fiction in the more viable English, which he had assiduously learned and studied upon arriving in America in his early twenties, never achieved the recognition "he so avidly coveted" (Rischin xvii). Instead, he faced "resistance from publishers and outraged protests from many Americanized Jews who felt their own respectability threatened" (Higham ix). Yekl,

for example, in spite of its excellence as well as Howells's avid promotion, sold poorly and was soon forgotten. His stories had been much admired by a few discriminating critics, but they never generated anything close to the popular or commercial responses that Sholem Asch had always had.

Cahan's The Rise of David Levinsky, also written and published in English, was, again, greatly respected by the avant-garde when it appeared, first in McClure's Magazine and later in book-form (1917). Yet the value of Cahan's novel, in spite of its precise language and careful construction, its psychological and original insight into the immigrant experience, was not fully recognized by the popular audience.

Asch, on the other hand, published a novel with a surprisingly similar theme, Uncle Moses, just a year later. Moses Melnik comes to America, becomes fantastically wealthy, but finds his life to be devoid of meaning and beauty. Both Levinsky and Uncle Moses are bosses in a sweatshop consisting entirely of people transported from their hometowns in the Old Country; both protagonists come to realize their lives are essentially banal, lacking tradition and spirituality, lonely. Rontsh writes that Moses, as well as Chayim Lederer from a later Asch novel, personifies "the life of the immigrant who worked his way up, who realizes the

dream of becoming rich, but in essence posesses nothing. He is not happier than the pauper" (79). Both Asch and Cahan present a drab picture of a generation of immigrants, both exploiters and exploited, who truthfully belonged in neither Europe nor America. Characteristically, Asch's novel ends melodramatically, with the young Masha Uncle Moses had "purchased" from her impoverished parents, telling her much older husband, who by now has lost control of his business, that he is not the father of their child. The book concludes with a pitiful picture of the old man desperately searching for his wife and the child he wishes to believe is his. Moses's life has come to a pathetic state; he weeps copiously and wanders aimlessly, hoping to find the only people he has ever loved. At the very conclusion of the book, the tragic figure finds "a grave waiting for him," as does I.B. Singer's Gimpel years later.

The Rise of David Levinsky has none of this bathos--and none of the passion. Although an equally unhappy figure, Levinsky neither sheds a tear nor does he cause any to be shed over him. "No, I am not happy," he says plainly (526). Chametzky speaks of the "stifled language" employed by the narrator (139). Even his mother's death is drily recounted. Cahan evidently wished to point out that his protagonist's English was

his second language, that he wasn't a completely acculturated American after all. In spite of his commendable literary intentions and results, Cahan's novel was bound to appeal to fewer readers than the far more emotional Uncle Moses. Asch's novel, unlike Cahan's, became yet another extremely popular success. It was additionally spectacularly dramatized by Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater in 1926.

Following the play, Yiddish Talking Pictures produced a film version of it in 1930, codirected by Sidney Goldin and Aubrey Scotto, and starring Maurice Schwartz. "No previous Yiddish talkie had nearly so much prestige," declares J. Hoberman in his definitive study of Yiddish film, Bridge of Light. "If Schwartz was America's foremost Yiddish artiste, Asch was the nation's most popular 'serious' Yiddish writer" (161-62). The theme, furthermore, lent itself to the national mood during the Depression. Disillusionment with America's harsh capitalistic system, complete with its fourteen-hour workday and cramped tenement life, set the tone of the movie. Union leaders persuade wary workers to organize against their paternalistic bosses, severing forever the old, comfortable ties formed in their shtetl and so unnaturally transposed to the factory. Moses's nephew Sam calls in thugs to break the strike, but the old man collapses, sickened by the use

of force he witnesses. The movie concludes as melodramatically as the novel, but with a more powerful, contemporary twist: Moses comes back to his old shop to ask one of his former employees to sing the melody his father used to love, but the tune is drowned out by the clamor of the sewing machines.

A decade later, Uncle Moses was dramatized once again, this time under the direction of Jacob Rothbaum for the Yiddish Folksbiene Theater. It is easy to speculate that Sholem Asch's good fortune with novel, drama, and film in Uncle Moses galled the surly editor, Ab Cahan. Perhaps he also believed that Asch was indebted to him for the theme of this successful work.

Asch, furthermore, was also temperamental and difficult to deal with. He had no regard for his American editor's opinions. Years before The Nazarene, writes Asch's secretary Solomon Rosenberg, Asch

> spoke bitterly about him [Cahan], as though about a loathsome dictator, who demanded that he, Sholem Asch, should be subservient to him. Cahan was clearly jealous of his world-wide notoriety. More than once he told Asch what he should write. True, Asch isn't such an easy-going person who would obey an Ab Cahan who once told him that Kidush haShem is trash. . . And Asch really never asked any advice of Cahan and didn't listen to him. So the hatred for Asch, on the part of the editor of the Forverts, grew. . . (Rosenberg 139).

Rosenberg sarcastically writes of the fact that "for a long time, no great love existed between Sholem Asch and

Ab Cahan" (233-34). The imperious editor demanded more and more of the novelist, more than he could produce. Asch wrote Cahan:

> I believe with all my heart that I fulfill my duties to the Forverts according to my conscience and opportunities. And I wish once again to expressively declare, something I've already discussed with you many times, that I cannot take upon myself the responsibility of composing a story every week. . . . The only obligation that I can take upon myself is to give the Forverts everything my pen produces; sometimes there's more, sometimes less--the way it's been until now. (Briv 9)

The relationship between the editor and Asch remained cordial for a while. In 1935, the New York Art Troupe arranged an evening in Asch's honor in gratitude for his contribution to Yiddish drama. Ab Cahan was among those praising him.

Nevertheless, the vain, jealous, and tyrannical editor became more and more enraged by his independent and enormously popular writer. Upon receiving the opening chapters of The Nazarene in March, 1938, Cahan sent Asch a letter in which he told his employee to "destroy what he had completed and write no more of this Jesus story" (Siegel 126-27). Cahan felt that the novel was too "Christian." He was "infuriated" by the work (Sanders 447). Rosenberg reports that Cahan complained the chapters were "Christian, almost proseletyzing" (234). It is interesting to note that in Sholem ash's

nayer veg [Asch's new way], Cahan lied and denied having known that the novel, which he rejected, had anything to do with Jesus: "With the exception of the first chapters, where Jesus is not yet mentioned, he never sent us the manuscript; we didn't have an inkling about the true character of the work" (96).

In any case, Asch obviously didn't heed the "literary dictator" for he completed the novel (qtd. by Paner 138). The Nazarene became another bestseller, making Cahan once again jealous of its acceptance and appreciation in the non-Jewish world. Using his prestige and power as editor of the Forverts, Ab Cahan "led the attack on Asch, encouraging others, like Lieberman, to do the same" (Siegel 143). Cahan devoted two years to his campaign of vilification against Asch and The Nazarene. He wrote the defamatory Sholem Ash's nayer veg [Asch's new way]; and he continued to vent his rage against Asch in issue after issue of the Forverts.

The Forverts Versus Sholem Asch

The two most important Forverts attacks on Sholem Asch's The Nazarene were (a) Ab Cahan's Sholem ash's nayer veg [Asch's new way], and (b) Chaim Lieberman's Sholem ash un kristntum: an entfer oyf zayne misyonerishe shriftn [Asch and Christianity: an answer to his missionary writings].

(a) Cahan's power and tyrannical temperament had not diminished with his age. Although eighty at the time The Nazarene was published in English, Cahan was still in full control of the Forverts. I.B. Singer was strongly encouraged to write trashy romances, and he did so, although usually under a pseudonym. Sholem Asch, however, refused to follow Cahan's order to abandon The Nazarene, and he published it in English, translated by Maurice Samuel. Cahan responded with a serious, sometimes venomously sarcastic, publication entitled Sholem ash's nayer veg [Asch's new way]. The explanation of his title provides a key to Cahan's approach to the bestselling novel:

> True Judaism is, according to Sholem Asch's opinion, Jesusism. The real Jewish spirit is, according to his feelings now, the Jesus spirit. And this is the central thought . . . of his new way. (56)

Cahan is careful enough to evade charges of hypocrisy against his own professed atheism. "I am absolutely not religious," he proclaims. But Christianity, he continues, "is strange to us Jews and will remain strange. It can't be otherwise" (4).

Cahan systematically denigrates The Nazarene by criticizing its sources, the opinions expressed by the fictional characters, its "hidden purpose," its irresponsible portrayals, and its tone. The editor is

outraged by Asch's employment of the New Testament as the main source for the historical novel. "Jews don't accept it," Cahan declares. "But Sholem Asch does accept it" (9). Cahan also disclaims Asch's avowal, published in the Forverts, that his characters' opinions are not necessaily his own. "One can't always abandon the question of who is responsible for such opinions, because this is a book full of religious feelings, opinions, convictions; not just a story," Cahan announces (50). He says Asch has a "hidden purpose" which must be extricated from the novel (50). Asch's characters, furthermore, are irresponsibly portrayed, according to the editor. This, however, is a problem of the genre. To what extent is the author of an historical novel responsible for the "truth"? Again, Cahan's main argument here is that Asch relies too heavily, almost entirely, on a religious Christian text. In doing so, the novelist presents inaccuracies, some more offensive than others. "Probably Asch is under the impression that a belletrist is not asked such questions," Cahan complains, "that a belletrist is allowed to think up whatever his heart desires" (38). Cahan also condemns Asch's tone. In describing Jesus's miracles, Cahan reports, Asch employs " a tone of belief and adoration, without the slightest sign of doubt in the reality of every particular" (17).

There is one more important issue that should be highlighted. Asch repeatedly avowed, in the Forverts and other articles such as "The Guilty Ones" in the Atlantic Monthly, that he attempted to assuage antisemitism by demonstrating that the Jews were not guilty in Jesus's death. This argument, Cahan maintains, is pretentious, irrelevant, and "not worth a sniff of tobacco" because modern Hitlerism cares nothing about these legends (29). In sum, Cahan finds Asch's point of view to be more comical than a vaudeville show (29).

Cahan's treatise against Asch and The Nazarene is largely based on the premise that the novel is not a novel but rather a pro-Christian, anti-Jewish, proselytizing work. His articles were credible to the Yiddish audience, which was already beset with fierce antisemitism in America and knowledge of the Holocaust overseas. Even Jews who had been completely secularized a decade earlier became, in those miserable years, more traditionally Jewish. That Cahan knew his audience, and was able to manipulate it, is of course without question.

(b) Chaim (Herman) Lieberman was a Forverts writer who had previously denounced Shmuel Niger for daring to suggest that Asch's writing could benefit from more attention to stylistic detail. But since then Lieberman

had undergone a religious awakening, and he became an Orthodox Jew [a *baal-tshuve*]. Encouraged by his employer Ab Cahan, Lieberman responded to The Nazarene with accusations against Asch's "sin" of attempting to proselytize young Jews to Christianity in works disguised as novels. The Nazarene, he states in his extensive Sholem Ash un kristntum: an entfer oyf zayne misyonerishe shriftn [Asch and Christianity: an answer to his missionary writings; 1950], is "a deadly sin against the Jewish people" (12). Like Cahan, Lieberman berates Asch for relying so heavily on the Gospels. Both journalists confuse, deliberately or not, literary characters with their author; Cahan and Lieberman call the Jewish scholar in the novel "Asch." Lieberman, however, unlike Cahan, is shrill and hysterical. The Nazarene, he rages, "is a terrible book, it is a sinful book, it is a lawless book against Jews which Asch wrote and then flooded America with. . . . He is an arsonist of the Holy Temple" (79).

Lieberman is more methodical when dealing with The Apostle and Mary. He is, however, always angry and appalled at Asch's sympathetic depictions of Jesus, Paul, and Mary. The purpose of his book was to belittle Asch's reputation, to demonstrate that he was unscholarly, unwholesome, and even dangerous for Jews. The work was hurtful and damaging to Asch. Rumors

spread that the famous novelist was a convert as well as a missionary. Lieberman was not above organizing angry rallies and demonstrations against the novelist, both in America and Israel, which often turned threatening and violent. His volume was translated into English in 1953 under the title, The Christianity of Sholem Asch: An Appraisal from the Jewish Viewpoint.

* * * *

Not only did Ab Cahan refuse to print Asch's works, he persuaded other Yiddish publications to boycott the famous author as well. Only the Communist Frayhayt, edited by Paul Novick, was amenable to Sholem Asch. Asch, having no other Yiddish outlet, grudgingly agreed to bring his writing there, even though he had been a staunch anticommunist for years. No Forverts contributor had the courage to defy the contentious Ab Cahan and defend Sholem Asch. Even Isaac Bashevis Singer, by then an established writer in his mid-thirties, agreed with his editor that Jesus as a literary subject ought not to be tolerated, and he printed scathing articles, under the pseudonym of Yitskhok Varshavsky, denouncing the world-famous Yiddish author. Nobody on Ab Cahan's Forverts would justify Sholem Asch's right to explore whatever subject matter he felt compelled to investigate.

1939 and the years immediately following,

unfortunately, were not years of leisure for world Jewry in which debates about literary freedom could flourish. The Nazarene appeared during the Holocaust. The poor timing of the publication is discussed in the following chapter, as well as other reasons for the bad reception of the novel by its Yiddish audience.

CHAPTER 4: REASONS FOR THE BAD RECEPTION OF THE NAZARENE BY THE YIDDISH AUDIENCE

Abraham Cahan and Chaim Lieberman were unrelentingly brutal in their attacks on Sholem Asch. Cahan's own reputation as a sadist and dictator was forgotten or ignored for the moment, as the collective rage of Yiddish New York was catapulted onto Asch and his latest novel, The Nazarene. Why was all this wrath unloosed on the Jewish people's best-loved, most popular writer? I offer five explanations in addition to the Cahan campaign: (1) Asch's nonfiction, which was clearly offensive to Jewish sensibilites; (2) envy of Asch; (3) Asch's history of antagonizing Jewish readers; (4) Asch's arrogance and other dislikeable characteristics; and, most importantly, (5) bad timing of the publication of The Nazarene. This last explanation will be discussed in a separate chapter, 5.

Asch's Nonfiction

After publication of The Nazarene in 1939, Sholem Asch's reputation in the Yiddish world, and especially in New York, was, for the most part, no longer based on the interest or quality of his fiction, but rather on his attitudes towards Jesus. Asch himself furthered his

own immersion in the quagmire of religious and cultural differences by offering both solicited and unsolicited explanations, answers, defenses, and proposals regarding a "bridge" between Judaism and Christianity in numerous publications and interviews. While The Nazarene itself can be appreciated as Asch's highest literary achievement, as it is by Shmuel Niger, for example, the Yiddish reader had to cope with the assault, sensationalist in quality, of Asch's schemes for unifying the two seemingly opposite faiths, and with the barrage of criticism directed against him by Yiddish journalists and literati. Needless to say, the fact that Asch's sympathetic consideration of Christianity occurred during the Holocaust and the years immediately following the revelations of its evil enormity, made the novelist's boundary-crossing viewpoint all the more unpalatable to the Jewish audience.

Although a full analysis of Asch's proposals for world peace based on the grounds of merging religions is beyond the interests of this dissertation, it is important to understand the substance of Asch's later arguments and opinions which either do not exist in his famous novel, or are so well integrated into the text that they do not arouse hostility. (Later novels The Apostle and Mary suffer from such obvious, non-integrated approaches to Christianity.) To summarize,

then, Asch's stance, he feels that Christianity and Judaism have a great deal in common, and their differences are not irreconcilable. Asch pleads for one church, for unity between Christianity and Judaism, or for a "bridge" between the two faiths. These feelings are clearly articulated in "The Guilty Ones," appearing in The Atlantic Monthly (Dec. 1940) in which he exonerates the Jews of Jesus's death, in an interview in the Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger (Dec. 29, 1939), and especially in the more serious What I Believe (entitled My Personal Faith in England). This book, translated by Maurice Samuel, caused a furor when it appeared in 1941. But like Asch's fiction works, which long displayed thematic interests that culminated, not began with, The Nazarene, this volume was the development of an essay published in 1931, "In vos ikh gloyb." It appeared at the same time in German translation as "Woran ich Glaube" shortly before the Nazis publicly burned all of Asch's works.

In What I Believe (1941), Asch lauds Jesus as worthy of being a great Prophet, Rabbi, and redeemer. Had Jesus, he writes,

> lived in the time of the first Temple, or in the Baylonian interlude, or even in the early days of the Return, when the people was still in the condition to accept prophets, [he] would undoubtedly have been placed in their ranks. His life would have been an inspiration, like that of Elisha or Jeremiah, and his death would have been sanctified like

> that of the Ten Martyrs of Hadrian. In his own day, when the people was no longer in the condition to accept prophets, he would have been included among the Rabbis. His sayings, his parables and his doctrine would have been among the pearls of the Ethics of the Fathers; his prayer would have been included in our psalter; his life would have been crowned with the crown of the martyrs in the pages of the Agadah. We have lost a Prophet. We miss, even to our own day, the golden page of the sayings of Jesus; that, however, was the price we paid in order that the Jewish genius might give the world a redeemer who brought it under the authority of God. (114)

Because Jesus brought the gentiles "nearer to their father in heaven. . . we bow our heads before him as we do before every one of our Prophets" (116).

Asch's regard of Jesus is quite antithetical to that of traditional Jewry. Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, in Judaism and Christianity, complains that

> in recent years there have been direct and indirect appeals by Jewish literati, ranging from Sholem Asch, the erstwhile Yiddish novelist and now the most zealous propagator of Christian ideas, . . . to reclaim Jesus as a faithful son of the Jewish people and their religion. The argument advanced is that although Judaism may not be able to recognize the Christian claims of Messianic potency and Divine perfection for Jesus, still it could and should accept him as a prophet, a teacher, or as a great rabbi, at least. (126)

Weiss-Rosmarin demonstrates that although Christians and Jews can and should live peacefully together, Jesus can never be an important figure in Judaism because, simply, he abrogated Jewish law and proposed the abrogation of

it.

> Our examination of Jesus' attitude to Judaism, its Law and its way of life has shown that he can qualify neither as a prophet, nor as a rabbi and teacher in the Jewish sense. In all important respects Jesus placed himself in opposition to the faith into which he was born. It is therefore idle and futile to make room for him in Judaism which he himself rejected in theory and practice. (151)

Again, without entering into a real theological debate, it is important to realize the extent of Asch's boundary-crossing. Yet although Asch praises Jesus over and again, he never admits to his apotheosis. This area of Jesus as God becomes a bit hazy in Mary, in which the novelist describes the miraculous virgin birth, but he always stops well short in his nonfiction works of adopting the Christian deity as his own.

The Yiddish audience, as could be expected, was not joyous about Asch's declarations on either the importance of Jesus to their lives or the moral necessity of merging religions. "Despite all the walls of hatred and the river of blood between them, the two forces crossed and recrossed," Asch explains. "For they sought the same ends, just as they were drawn from one source, from a God in heaven and a prophetic faith" (149). Much less compatible with Jewish sympathies in 1941 was Asch's statement that Jews and Christians alike "are all guilty in the calamity which has befallen upon

us" because people have not lived according to ethical ideals (190). Asch appears to regard Christians and Jews as both perpetrators and victims of moral crimes that were being punished by God. This line of logic is not only ridiculously naive, it is unjust and cruel to the innocent victims. The more Asch attempted to explain himself, the deeper he sank into the morass of misunderstanding and the abyss separating himself form his Yiddish audience. The Christian, he emphasizes, "is a son of Israel equally with me. His faith has made him a son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (196). Asch, at the time of the volume's publication, was living in the United States. Was he so oblivious to world events as not to realize how pitifully alone suffering Jewry was at that time? On the contrary, he regarded himself as a sort of people's prophet, urging peace at every opportunity, whether appropriate or not. His idealism, although extinguished in Europe, nevertheless fluorished in

> America, young and powerful, blossoming in the virginity of faith, which must become the leading spirit among the nations. It is America, the land which has taken me in, among so many other homeless ones, as a child of her own, which I would like to see as a "light to the gentiles," leading the world back out of the night into the authority of the one and only God. (201)

Jacob Glatstein, never a fan of Asch's, treated the

novelist's ideas with heavy sarcasm, and called What I Believe a collection of "boring articles." More specifically, he complained it was "a bad book, an unnecessary book" (Prost 156). Ab Cahan, although he repeatedly labelled himself an atheist, thundered that Asch, "As a writer who's prominently connected with the Yiddish world," ought to keep his ideas to himself (Ashes veg 95). Cahan censured Asch's "bridge" as part of his program of placation to the Christians which "consists throughout of giving the prince gifts" (76). The editor especially condemned Asch for accepting the New Testament "as a holy book in which he believes exactly the way he believes in the Hebrew Bible" (84). In fact, Cahan's "blood boils" when he reads Asch's theories. He admitted that Asch had talent as a novelist, "but as a thinker he's very helpless. . . . It's a pity he doesn't stick to his vocation" (83).

Had Sholem Asch done precisely this, that is, stick to fiction, he certainly would not have provoked his audience as much as he did with his outspoken and sometimes tasteless comments about Jesus and about how Christians and Jews were really one people. In 1941, these ideas were of course deeply painful and were disdainfully regarded as bizarre by the Yiddish audience. Alas for Sholem Asch, it seems that not only Ab Cahan and his powerful New York enclave conspired

against him, but he also helped in the downfall of his own reputation by crossing his cultural boundaries with ecumenical suggestions of reform and unification too blatantly and unwisely proclaimed during the Jews' worst period in history.

Envy of Asch by Other Writers

By the 1930s, the proflific Sholem Asch had become world famous and wealthy. The tall, handsome figure, whose works were known even in Japan (Choseed 13), had been showered with honors since his early twenties. But he had also been the target of considerable envy by other less fortunate writers for many years. Asch was well aware of this situation. Referring to his literary opponents, he told Paner that "their struggle against me is personal; the main reason is simply hatred and envy, envy" (qtd. by Paner, 48).

Dovid Pinski, for example, used to quip that he awakened a few hours earlier each day in order to have more time for hating Sholem Asch (Rosenberg 338). Pinski was older than Asch, more educated, more knowledgeable in Russian and German language and literature, and had a solid reputation as a dramatist in Yiddish literary circles before World War I. He was in Berlin attempting to get his plays produced, when another Yiddish writer, a young man from a small Polish

shtetl, took European theater by storm. "A great measure of the bad blood which Dovid Pinski carried against Sholem Asch stemmed from those times," explains Turkov-Grudberg (147).

Shloyme Rosenberg is angrier in his denunciation of the way other Yiddish writers so willingly joined Cahan in his campaign against Asch:

> All the attacks on Sholem Asch, starting from his young years, are a result of envy-hatred; and there was good reason to be envious of him. Asch had great luck in his life:
>
> First of all he was born with God-blessed talent. . . . He captured the heart and soul of the entire Jewish people. . . . He was accepted with love by the literati of other peoples and languages.
>
> He was famous by the time he reached his twenties. . . .
>
> When he was not more than 26, his Meshiyakhs tsaytn [Messiah's times] (later also his God of Vengeance) was produced in the best theaters. In St. Petersburg (Leningrad), in Berlin, also in Poland, and where else not? . . .
>
> This created bad blood, and the envious began to hate Asch and wait for opportunities to assault him. . . . Every time he took a false step they covered him with indescribable hatred and envy; there was the circumcision scandal, another time there was God of Vengeance, and now The Nazarene has come. (280-81)

Maurice Samuel, "the too well-known translator of Sholem Asch," as he ironically called himself (274), affirms that envious Yiddish writers falsely attributed Asch's success to the translations.

> As the sales of his books soared, one after another, into the hundreds of thousands, the rumor got about that he owed everything to my genius as editor-translator. There was no

> truth in it, but the rumormongers were nearly all Yiddish writers with their own standards of evaluation and modes of reasoning. Some of them might admit that Asch was not at all bad as compared with themselves, but he wasn't *that* good. . . . (272)

Samuel defends the integrity of Asch's craftsmanship, and categorically denies the "malicious invention" of Asch's apostasy as well as the "silly" charge that the novelist wrote the Christological novels solely for money are categorically denied (274).

Asch, the foremost Yiddish writer in the world, was not a member of any of the cliques of Yiddish literati that would gather in either Poland or New York or elsewhere. Those who would meet at their literary union on Tlomatzka 13, Warsaw, while revering Asch on the one hand, nevertheless had time (since they were virtually unemployed) to gossip about or invent tales about the prosperous and lucky Asch. It was said, for example, that whenever he would drop in on the writers' association, he would imperiously insist that someone there shine his boots, which had been dirtied on the way over (Berliner). Rosenberg attests to the characteristically brusque, unfriendly manner in which Asch would greet, or rather not greet, the other writers. In New York, similarly, Asch was not a part of the camaraderie of Yiddish writers and actors who, after a long day's toil in the sweatshops, would gather in the

evenings over tea in the Cafe Royale and have literary discussions. Eliezer Greenberg, in his "Ballade of 2nd Avenue & 12th Street," writes of the regular gathering of Moyshe Leyb, Dr. Ginzburg, Zisha Landau, Yoysef Opatoshu, Heymovitch, Avrom Reisin, Herman Gold and others who would meet eagerly for heated discussions "night after night, / about the secret of the word, base of the poem" (35). Sholem Asch was always immersed in whatever he happened to be writing at the time. He had no time or desire for these frequent literary discussions which were so important to the others. Asch remained apart and alone from any group. Other writers, having no luxurious homes in Nice or Stamford or Staten Island or anywhere, for that matter, who, although talented and dedicated, remained on the margins of the literary and economic world, could easily envy the internationally acclaimed, rich, and aloof Sholem Asch.

Asch's History of Antagonizing Yiddish Readers

Famous people who express opinions are bound to draw enemies upon themselves. This is why twentieth-century politicians make an art of never actually saying anything. Sholem Asch, however, was no politician. He overstepped the boundaries of tolerance of his Yiddish audience on quite a few occasions.

God of Vengeance brought Asch world-wide recognition

as well as condemnation by many members of the Yiddish audience, who were enraged by both the dramatist's employment of the holy Torah scroll, his unholy characters, and the ending of the drama, in which young Rivkele is seduced by Manke, one of the prostitutes. The play, asserts Joseph C. Landis in the introduction to his translation of the drama, "is an indictment of the moral schizophrenia of a free-for-all world, which cherishes the illusion that it can maintain morality in its personal and human relations while it abides by the morality of the marketplace in its business relations" (71). While many theatergoers, Ab Cahan among them, did appreciate God of Vengeance as being a great and original Yiddish drama, others splattered rotten eggs on the stage, prompting several Yiddish publications to advocate the "excommunication" of playwright Sholem Asch from the fold of Judaism (Siegel 40).

There was also the circumcision controversy. Asch impoliticly agreed, in print, in an antisemitic Polish daily, with the father of a dead baby boy who complained that the child's circumcision before burial was "barbarous." As a public figure, Asch drew unwarranted attention to what is traditionally regarded as an extremely Jewish principle and unquestionable law. Orthodox Jews never forgot and never forgave Asch this breach of tradition. Those wishing to damage Asch's

reputation and call him a "convert" remembered this youthful indiscretion.

More serious was the aggravating Polish medal. In late 1932 or early 1933, Asch had been informed by Marshal Pilsudski's semi or completely fascist government that he was entitled to the *Polonia Restituta* [restored Poland] medal. Asch, working on Tilim Yid in Nice at the time, was pleased to accept the award. Shloyme Rosenberg, Asch's secretary, however, was disappointed with the novelist's "childish" desire for the gold medal. Rosenberg himself, as the translator of The Peasants, a national epic which brought its Polish author Wladyslaw Stanislaw Reymont the Nobel Prize in 1924, had already been offered the literary medallion, but he immediately "turned down the doubtful honor" before it became an issue (127). Because he had been told that acceptance of the prize would be somewhat indicative of his support of the government, "I realized what it smelled of, so I stood up and quite politely told the poet that I thanked him for his good opinion of my translation of Peasants, but I had a habit of not believing in medals. . ." (129). When it was afterwards offered Asch, Rosenberg was keenly disappointed that "the great Yiddish writer didn't have the necessary courage and values" to similarly refuse the idea of the award when it was first discussed with him (126). The

official reason for the presentation was Asch's beautiful descriptions of the Polish landscape; Rosenberg pointed out that the entire issue was actually an anticommunist political ploy, and the prize itself was derisively called *Polonia Prostituta* in private.

Once Asch agreed to accept it, however, it would have been dangerous for him to change his mind and refuse the medal, had he been so inclined. Even Rosenberg warned his employer about this: three million Jews in Poland would undoubtedly be punished by such a public insult to the government. So Asch, accompanied by his secretary, happily went to the Polish consulate, and there, without any ceremony of any sort, was given the boxed medallion, inscribed with the words *Polonia Restituta*, by an honorary diplomat who could not speak a word of Polish. "Sholem Asch took it, said thank you, and we went out onto the muddy street that was as fitting to Nice as the Polish medal was to Sholem Asch" (130).

The New York chapter of the Yiddish PEN club was scandalized. Dovid Pinski, president of the center, sent Asch a sharp letter telling him in no uncertain terms to return the medal directly to Jozef Pilsudski. Pinski "was never a good friend of Sholem Asch. . . so here he found a good opportunity" to trouble the honorary chairman of the entire Yiddish PEN club

(Rosenberg 131). Rosenberg sincerely felt that Pinski's advice was irresponsible: "They have it good," he complained to Asch. "They live in free America and they simply don't understand the catastrophe that could affect Polish Jewry if you would listen to them and send back the medal!" (131) The Warsaw chapter of the Yiddish PEN club, headed by Aaron Zeitlin, vehemently agreed that the medal could not be returned without greatly jeopardizing the lives of the Jews in Poland, of which they themselves were a part. "The whole Polish press would turn as wild as crazed dogs, and then the government itself would step in!" (Rosenberg 132). So Asch kept his Polish medal, and even wore it proudly on holidays. The left-winged Artef theater group in New York responded by producing the satirical one-act play, Sholem Gets A Medal, coauthored by Cherner and Chaver Paver. Turkov-Grudberg reported that in London, too, hatred against Asch raged in the extreme at the time. The two Yiddish dailies in London, as well as the English Jewish Chronicle, criticized the famous writer for both accepting the medal and for not returning it. When Turkov-Grudberg dared to express his opinion that no matter what, the award was still an honor for Yiddish literature, he was verbally abused, and the arguments against him became "hooligan-like" (51).

Without a doubt, Asch's history of antagonizing his

Yiddish audience and his reputation for being insensitive to his readers, greatly hurt him when Cahan led the attack in 1939.

Asch's Arrogance and Other Dislikeable Characteristics

Rosenberg took pains to present Asch as being naive in social and political matters. Yet there was also a certain amount of arrogance, an attitude of self-importance, that antagonized many. As Madison puts it, "Asch was egotistical, impulsive, inconsiderate, and avid for praise" (243). He loved to surround himself with luxury, and was oblivious to the needs and sensitivities of others. There are many anecdotes about Asch on this theme: he would, for example, consume great quantities of fruit without offering a single one to his hungry companions. Rosenberg recorded how he himself paid for a bag of pears out of his own meager funds because Asch asked him to do so, only to watch the novelist devour them all. Poet Meylekh Ravitsh related a similar story about Asch and cherries. Another talented poet, Itzik Manger, almost on the verge of starvation in London, was extremely pleased to be invited to visit Asch in his posh suite at the Devonshire Hotel. Although Manger could not take his eyes off the brandy, always plentiful in Asch's bar, he was dismissed after a very short while, without being

offered so much as a single drink. Asch would make a generous loan to his always penurious but faithful secretary Shloyme Rosenberg, only to demand it back the same day. Once he astonished Rosenberg by showing him that his pockets, like his employee's, were empty. Asch neglected to mention, Rosenberg drily recounted, that he and his wife had just returned from the Italian Riviera where they had been honored guests of Gerhart Hauptmann, that he was living "in a royal villa with a huge garden, and that the next day his pockets would again be full" (266).

Nathan Asch best described his father's extravagant lifestyle, as well as his inability to realize that others can be in genuine need. He and his wife were living in Saratoga, barely managing financially. "I was having an extremely hard time getting along. I sold stories, but only rarely," he related.

> My father would break into our teeming poverty with a bang. Though he was visiting with us, it did not suit him to descend to our standard of living, but like an oriental potentate he brought his rich surroundings with him. Now when I went shopping, I had large bills in my pocket and did not bother to ask about prices but chose for quality instead. . . .

If Mathilde would also visit, the couple would stay "at one of the elaborate boarding houses in Saratoga that were fast becoming like luxurious European pensions, crowded with rich German-Jewish refugees continuing the

European custom of a yearly cure."

Sholem Asch, reported his son,

> was so overwhelming, he so much took for granted that the world turned only around him, that I accepted it or played along with it. He was always friendly and relaxed at those times and even concerned about me in my penurious state. Once he said to me, 'If I were in your place, I wouldn't accept it. I'd raise such a scandal!' I never stopped wondering what he meant by that. Raise a scandal with whom? With myself for not writing more salable stories? With the publishers and magazines for not buying them? With him for daring to flaunt his riches, his ease before me?

Nathan always had to worry about money by the end of his father's stay.

> This practice had started when he came to visit in Paris while I was writing my first book and more or less starving. While he was there, he had me living like himself for the duration of the visit: fine food and liquor, taxis everywhere, suites of rooms at hotels: "What do you need?" he would ask me. . . . When the visit ended, he would kiss me tearfully, and go off; if I didn't press him, he wouldn't leave me a sou. Whenever the day of his departure from Saratoga approached, I would tell myself that he surely realized we had been living much beyond our means, that as a writer he could certainly conceive of such things, that to allay my anxiety he would surely bring up the subject very soon. . . . Finally, in desperation, I would ask him, sometimes, having postponed it to the very last moment. Immediately, a look of annoyance and weariness would come over his face. He would always, in the end, leave me a small sum, but with it he always left a mood of unpleasantness, making me regret that I had asked him; I should have done anything rather than that--though the electric bill had not been paid, and the service would be cut off; though C. and I would have no supper that night. (61)

Sholem and Mathilde Asch had precious homes, period furniture, costly possessions, fabulous art collections; they were dressed in the latest Parisian fashions; they stayed in the most luxurious accomodations during their extensive travels. The sensitivity to misery Asch displayed so acutely in his fiction seemed to be missing from his life. After the Asches promised Nathan a house in California, Mathilde, on the telephone, told her son that she and his father had bought another Rembrandt painting with the funds they had put away for him. They did eventually send him money, but it was a smaller amount than promised.

These East European Yiddish-speaking elitists behaved like rich, irresponsible characters in a Fitzgerald novel--and fellow Jews, while proudly basking in the glory that Asch brought upon Yiddish literature, at the same time deeply envied and even disliked him. Asch, furthermore, as even Nathan indicated, expected to be the center of attention. Moshe Nadir recalled a literary evening in which "Sholem Asch has gotten a terrible toothache from all the praise given to Reisen, and he too must leave" (qtd. by Howe, World 428).

Equally annoying was his fawning over people with titles and wealth. Rosenberg related several instances in which Asch would rush over to a renowned person, leaving his mortified companion behind. This

fascination with titles led him to accept the troublesome Polish medal. He could never understand why he wasn't awarded a Nobel Prize, even though there were more than a few whispers indicating that Nazis had infiltrated the committees.

Asch was also accused of currying to the gentiles. David Roskies finds him guilty of this "program of conciliation." In the first decade of the twentieth century, asserts Roskies, Asch was alone among Yiddish writers who

> enjoyed the support of non-Jewish Polish, Russian and German audiences. In return, he told them what they wanted to hear--that Jewish-Gentile antagonism was a thing of the past and that enlightened Jews now recognized the essential humanity of the dominant Christian culture.

Speaking of Asch's story "In A Carnival Night," Roskies contends that "the pattern of subtly currying favor with the Gentiles had just begun" (265). This is a simplistic statement, but it carries some truth. Asch, however, differentiated between modern Christian culture and early Christianity. All of his works dealing with this thematic material point to his belief that modern Christianity is a corruption of the originally Jewish religion. In story after story, novel after novel, Asch presents his case that Jesus and Mary are Jewish characters, with Jewish ethics and traditions.

Perversion of this conception led to horrible attrocities on the part of the church. Asch writes, in both fiction and nonfiction, of the tragedies of the Inquisition and of other cruel massacres perpetrated by Christians who had gone far astray from their parent religion, too far astray. This is the main message of "In A Carnival Night"; Mary weeps to see how distanced the Catholics have become from the teachings of her son Jesus: they commit crimes in her son's name. To Jesus, says Asch here and elsewhere, this would have been anathema.

The entire issue of Jewish writers in a gentile society is psychologically and historically extremely complicated; if Asch indeed did endeavor to be successful in the world outside his Yiddish one, he ought not to be so lightly condemned. Cynthia Ozick discusses the problem in "Toward A New Yiddish." Speaking as a Jew, she admits that "Diaspora flattery is our pustule, culture-envy our infection. Not only do we flatter Gentiles, we crave the flattery of Gentiles. Often in America we receive it" (171).

Obviously, the morassful subject of Sholem Asch trying to please non-Jews at the expense of Jews was infinitely muddied by the publication of The Nazarene in 1939. Because of Ab Cahan's vicious campaign against the writer, because Asch had been greatly envied by

other less successful writers, because he already had a history of antagonizing his Yiddish readers, and because he had long been regarded as arrogant and insensitive, the bad timing of the publication of his novel about Jesus served as a golden opportunity to vilify the Yiddish language's greatest novelist as no other writer had ever been vilified before. The ill-timing of The Nazarene is discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: The Nazarene As A Victim of Bad-timing

Among the different explanations I am proposing regarding the sharp plunge in Sholem Asch's reputation among the Yiddish-reading public, the theory that his Christological novels were ill-timed is the most irrefutable and, conversely, the most difficult to prove. By cursorily discussing the dominant mood of Jews from the 1930s to the mid-forties, however, and by presenting other, more "acceptable" Yiddish literary reactions to that apocalyptic time, and comparing them to Asch's reactions, I aim to provide a better understanding of the shock and outrage that greeted publication of The Nazarene in 1939.

Jews in the 1930s and Through 1945

Even in the safety of New York, a huge ocean away from the catastrophe unfolding before their relatives on the European continent, Jews could feel the gripping claws of antisemitism attempting to throttle them too. There was, in those years, an increasing movement back to the fold of traditional Judaism, a reactionary return away from the secularization and freethinking movements of the previous few decades. Thus formerly atheistic journalists such as Chaim Lieberman joined a growing number of Jews who reverted to strict, Orthodox Judaism

with the fire and passion found only in recent converts. There was also a decline in the Jewish secular school movement which had, until the thirties, been steadily on the rise. Itche Goldberg, a leader of Jewish secularism, testifies to the fact that the number of these schools dwindled as more and more parents opted for a religious education for their children. The fact was that American Jews were not only prisoners of the Depression; they were also enshackled by the evergrowing horror and awareness of the Nuremberg Laws, Kristallnacht, and far, far worse overseas. In addition, there was American antisemitism, which, although insignificant in comparison to Nazism, was nevertheless very difficult and extremely unpleasant to the Jewish community; worse yet, it made prodding by Jews of government officials to attempt to rescue their European coreligionists all the more ineffective. The thirties thus saw a large return to Jewish identity and tradition for those who had earlier gone astray, for only in bonding together did they find strength to face the abyss ahead.

More "Acceptable" Yiddish Responses

As bitter reality made Jews bond together, Yiddish art and literature similarly became more nationalistic. With very few exceptions, Jesus was no longer regarded

as either Jewish or sympathetic. Although Marc Chagall continued using the crucifix as an archetype, he began, in 1938, to employ it as an emblem of helplessness, or even, as Roskies feels, an "icon of Jewish catastrophe" (284). In White Crucifixion (1938), for example, Jesus witnesses a burning synagogue, weeping patriarchs, a Torah scroll in flames, and other pictures of destruction, but he is powerless and does not come down from his cross.

Among poets, Jacob Glatstein expressed Jewish anger and frustration best. "Along with most of his literary colleagues," writes Joseph C. Landis, Glatstein

> was pouring his wrath and contempt upon the false promises of the West that had fostered a dazzling dream of modern culture, which he and his comrades had lovingly adopted and shaped to their own needs and that was now betraying that dream with a horror whose dimensions were more terrible than anyone yet suspected. ("Yiddish Dreams" 158)

In "Good night, World" (1938), Glatstein repudiates western culture entirely in order to return to the traditional Jewish world. Because his poem so effectively and sharply expresses the dominant feelings of the times, it deserves to be quoted at length:

> Good night, wide world,
> big stinking world.
> Not you but I slam shut the gate.
> With a long gabardine,
> with a fiery yellow patch,
> with a proud stride,
> because I want to,
> I'm going back to the ghetto.

Wipe away, stamp out every vestige of
conversion.
I roll around in your garbage--
praise, praise, praise--
hunchbacked Jewish life.
Damn your dirty culture, world.
I wallow in your dust
even though it's forsaken,
sad Jewish life.

German pig, cutthroat Pole,
Rumania, thief, land of drunkards and
gluttons.
Weak-kneed democracy, with your cold
sympathy-compresses.
Good night, electrified arrogant world.
Back to my kerosene, candle shadows,
eternal October, tiny stars,
to my crooked streets, humped lanterns,
my sacred pages, my Bible,
my Gemorra, to my backbreaking
studies, to the bright Yiddish prayerbook,
to law, profundity, duty, justice,--
world, I walk gladly towards quiet ghetto
light.

Good night. I'll make you, world, a gift of
all my liberators.
Take back your Jesus-Marxes, choke on their
courage.
Croak over a drop of our christianized blood.
For I have hope, even if He is delaying,
day by day my expectation rises. (59-60)

After the Holocaust, Glatstein, understandably enough, continued to express his rage. In "Mozart" he ironically presents the great Austrian composer's crucifixion. He concludes:

How poor and stingy--
Compared with Mozart's legacy--
is the Sermon on the Mount. (67)

Several volumes of his verse, including Memorial Poems [gedenklider] and Radiant Jews [shtralndike yidn], are

responses to the Nazi genocide and world indifference. The poems are caustic, bitter, and blasphemous.

H. Leivick, another major Yiddish poet, also commenced his attack against Nazism and the world which permitted it in the late 1930s. Whereas in his early poetry Leivick wrote sympathetically about Jesus, in the opening poem in the series "Hitler-nekht motivn" [Hitler-nights themes], published in 1937, he writes that "the sun hangs crucified on a swastika" (Vol. 1, 575). The same archetype of suffering is thus employed, but both the victim and the instrument of torture are different. The set of 20 poems are intense and vivid reactions to the horrors of Nazism. In "Yidn forn kin Dakhow" [Jews go to Dachau], for example, he uses short, snappy lines to ironically emphasize the bitter tragedy of Jews being sent to Dachau (the only concentration camp in existence at that time):

> Music plays,
> The whip lashes--
> Jews go
> To Dachau. (577)

In other poems in this series he curses Hitler and God. In a different series of eight poems published three years later, "lider vegn der geler late" [poems about the yellow patch], Leivick expresses more pain. He despairingly cries that

> Every day delivers full cups of poison--
> Gruesome news about death and destruction.--
> My dream about being good as a lamb,

About poems with quieted, hushed lines,
Turns to nothing. (645)

In another poem he imagines his wife, sons, and himself wearing the yellow patch, a thought that "eats my heart like a worm" (639). Leivick had always been somewhat obsessed with the theme of suffering; in his poetry of the late 1930s and after, these feelings found an all-too appropriate occasion for expression.

His drama Who's Who (1938) deals with the victim of a pogrom who attempts, in vain, to escape his Jewishness. And after the Holocaust, Leivick poured out a stream of anguish and guilt, for not having been a victim, in such poems as "In Treblinke bin ikh nit geven" [I wasn't in Treblinka] (1945): "In Treblinka I never was, nor in Maedaneck, but I stand at their entrance, on their door step. . . . I stand and wait, great world, on your command: 'Jew head, into the gas chamber!'" (qtd. by Madison 372). In "The Ballad of the Wilderness" Leivick writes of the 3000-year trek Jews have made from Egypt to Treblinka. In another series of poems, "In the Garret the Roof Complains," the poet cries that "our people are being murdered, and the world ignores it, and the whole world remains dumb to the pain of our outcries" (qtd. by Madison 373).

A study of the poems found in the November 1938 issue of Yidishe kultur, a literary monthly published in

New York, reveals a similar emphasis on anger towards the indifference of the world regarding the persecution of European Jewry as well as rage towards God himself. Kadye Molodovsky, in "Shir hamayles" [a psalm], uses heavy irony and blasphemously complains of the One Above who is "eternal, like the noise of a pogrom" (16). In "Toyevoye" [chaos], she cries that "a people is departing in blood," but everyone is still attending to routine daily affairs (17). Another woman, Malke Li, laments that "in my city flames are burning once again" (20).

Other Yiddish poets eulogized their destroyed culture. Eliezer Greenberg painfully recalls his past in Gedenkshaft [memorabilia]. In "Ikh hob a heym gehat" [I had a home], memories of his home and friends bring "a cry" which "chokes me" (103). In "Ikh hob dorkhgelebt" [I lived through it], Greenberg says he survived Terezin and Treblinka by a "miracle," but in his sleepless nights, "Then voices of innocent millions gassed / Wail to me at the head of my bed with a sharp lamenting cry" (103). The concluding stanza of "Kh'bin nisht keyn prints, ikh bin nisht Hamlet" (I'm not a prince, I am not Hamlet) aptly denotes Greenberg's anger and feelings of impotent helplessness:

> I am not a prince.
> I am not Hamlet.
> I am not a hero of a drama.
> I am only a Yiddish poet

Who writes family poems
About sisters, brothers,
About parents,
Friends of childhood
Killed and gassed
Without the choice of "To be or not to be?"
(112)

The handful of literary survivors from the death factories in Europe, such as Chaim Grade, Abraham Sutzkever, and a young Elie Wiesel, eulogized their lost worlds and bore testimony to the Nazi genocide. Grade was a distinguished poet from Vilna who had escaped to Russia during the war. In one of his stunning volumes of verse, Shayn fun farloshene shtern: lider un poemen [1950; shine of extinguished stars], he writes of Jewish towns in Poland, of Auschwitz, and of the survivors who must bear their anguished memories. In "Mit a tseylem in ponim" [with a cross on the face], the narrator gently speaks to a shadow who has "fearfully put a cross on your countenance, as on a window pane during pogroms" to disguise his Jewishness (98). The crucifix in this poem is a lucky charm, a gift, which Jews do not possess. He has "engraved" a cross in his skin, "ready to become a traitor / So that your son will thank you for your treason later" (100). The speaker continues with sympathy, knowing that "in the church you go to the cross to comfort yourself, / You search for salvation from a god who wasn't saved" (101). The trembling victim attempting to deny his identity by turning to

Christian symbols is like a pitiful, beleagured man who has "wandered into a blind ur-forest, where he strays for days and weeks" (101). Grade, unlike Asch, implies that there are irreconcilable differences between Christians who find the crucifix holy, and the Jews, who do not. This author began to write prose after he came to America. "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner," recently filmed as The Quarrel, is a philosophical dialogue between two survivors: one who became even more strict in adhering to Jewish law, and the other, a writer, who became more committed to secularism. The first persona is filled with more hatred towards man; the second, who speaks "for all Jewish writers," asserts that "our love for Jews has become deeper and more sensitive" since the Holocaust (605). Grade tackled these problems of the modern Jew, the Jew traumatized by the second World War. Asch, for the most part, continued to deal with the world before Nazism.

Avrom Sutzkever, another great talent who today is editor of the Goldene kayt, was a partisan fighter during the Holocaust years. One of his volumes of verse, Lider fun yam hamoves [poems from the sea of death], contains poems based on the author's experiences in the Vilna ghetto, the forest, and his homeless wanderings. An unforgettable poem, among many of his unforgettable poems, is "Ikh lig in an orn" [I lie in a

coffin], composed in the ghetto in 1941. Here Sutzkever describes how he escaped being sent to a concentration camp by hiding in a coffin. He longs for his sister, whom he conjures up in his mind. Yet in spite of all the terror, even while in the wooden box, his poetic voice transcends all and "still sings" (17).

Elie Wiesel's well-known autobiography Night, based on his childhood in Auschwitz, is a slim, existentialist version of his original, more descriptive Yiddish publication, Ven di velt hot geshvign [when the world was silent] (1956). This version, four times longer than the work first published in French as La nuit, concludes with a message to fight the antisemites wishing to consign the Holocaust to oblivion.

Most Yiddish writers, whether they were survivors or whether they were fortunate enough only to have suffered in empathy from a distant America, were consumed with a need to pour out their wrath and sorrow. There was, additionally, a phenomenal rise in the number of *Yizker* [remembrance] books printed, which total nearly 1000 to date, and are still appearing. These are a realization of the need to eulogize the lost world of the shtetl.

Another trend of Yiddish writers after the catastrophe was the attempt to reinvent themselves and their works. Thus, as Roskies points out, Isaiah

Spiegel systematically rewrote his ghetto stories in order to idealize the victims. More significantly, the use of Jesus as a symbol of universal suffering became, once again, tabu in Yiddish literature. Avrom Sutzkever excluded from his canon "all the prewar paeans to the Lithuanian peasantry and the single ghetto poem that depicted Jesus in a positive, Jewish light" (Roskies 252). Itzik Manger, too, expunged any previous positive references to Gentiles or Jesus.

Uri Zvi Grinberg, who had so boldly dealt with Jesus years before, did not allow any of his prewar poetry to be published (until the late 1970s). His post-Holocaust poetry, unlike some of his earlier experimental poems, displays absolutely no sympathy for the Christian deity. In "Undzere oysyes gliyen" [our letters glow], Grinberg bitterly asserts that if, by some great sympathy of the natural universe, the slaughtered Jews would reappear, the Slavs would unhappily complain to "O, good Mary! O, beloved dear Jesus! / O, dear Hitler swastika-hero!" The cursed Jews, they would bewail, have come out of their graves, "O Jesus / crucified by their ancient brothers" (527). Grinberg bemoans the fact that "the dead millions," whether traditional Jews with beards and sidelocks, or modern ones, with shaved faces and uncovered heads, no longer frequent the markets, as they still do in the

towns and cities of the "Yiddish epics . . . by Sholem-Aleichem and Asch" (529). There is no longer any room in Grinberg's world for a Jewish Jesus, whom he now calls by the derogatory name of "Yosl Pandre" (533). The poet wanted to be known for his lamentations, not for his early flirtations with Christian motifs.

Asch's Reactions

In 1938 Asch published Dos gezang fun tol (Song of the valley), a novel celebrating the 70 pioneers who established a kibbutz in the sands and infested swamps of Palestine amidst infinite hardships. In that year, too, Jacob Glatstein's "Good Night, World" was written. And so was The Nazarene. While other Yiddish artists were angrily denouncing Western civilization, including Christianity, Asch was still praising Jesus and exploring a common ground between the two faiths, an ideal he had always had, and which was clearly expressed even in his earliest fiction and drama. Many fans pressured him to write a Holocaust novel, but this was "a chore he found unbearable" (Siegel 177). His reluctance is quite understandable. How indeed could a Yiddish writer transform the most bloody, cataclysmic event of all times into a novel? Even today, a half-century later, survivors such as Elie Wiesel condemn such literary attempts as "trivializing" the tragedy.

Nevertheless, Asch did publish a volume of thirteen short stories written during the war years, Brenendiker dorn (1946; burning bush), in which he dealt thematically with the Holocaust. In one story, "A kind firt dem veg" [a child leads the way], 93 young girls in an orphanage, aged 12-18, commit suicide in a Polish ghetto in order to avoid defilement by the Nazis. Unfortunately, Asch regressed from tragedy to sentimentality midway, as he so often did, by providing the innocent girls with a kind of poison which was not only painless, it induced happy visions. Thus, all met their ends peacefully and in dignity, having sanctified God's name. In their wonderful dreamlike states, they envisioned their dead mothers, who came to greet them. The director of the institution, who saw to it that the girls remained pious to the end, had the joy of seeing the Divine Presence.

Another story, "Yidishe oygn" [Jewish eyes], is a fine contribution to Holocaust literature. Asch describes a female barracks in Buchenwald concentration camp. His emphasis is on the fact that the women inmates were mothers, but childless mothers, for their sons and daughters were stolen from them and brutally killed, often in their presence, by the Nazis. The women, furthermore, were forbidden, under punishment of death, to mourn or to display any emotion. Asch here

shows his great ability to empathize with his characters, to depict pain and suffering. There is a vivid description of Gertruda, a pitiless and cruel camp official, who slept on mats of Jewish hair, had lampshades made of Jewish skin, and wore earrings set with the eyes of a little five year-old Jewish girl. But even here, Asch cannot bear to have the story end in complete horror. In yet another sentimental ending, he describes little Mirele, whose eyes were gouged out in order to enhance Gertruda's jewelry, playing happily in heaven, under the loving care of Mother Rachel. Worse yet, he has a dead G.I. from the Bronx deliver the eyes back to her. Mirele's eyes were then "set in God's throne, and there they sparkle with a clear light for all the Jewish children whose eyes were extinguished" (269). Although this ending mars an otherwise excellent story, "Yidishe oygn" remains a haunting tragedy.

But even in Brenendiker dorn Asch could not let go of his fixation on Jesus, for he included a fantasy in this collection, "Kristus in geto" [Christ in the ghetto], in which Jesus is a hero. In this story, which, typically for Asch, starts out realistically, Nazis drive terrified Jews into a church in Poland and order them to clean it out and remove everything, including the figure of Jesus hanging on the crucifix. The Rabbi refuses and is summarily shot. Jesus then frees himself

from his cross, dons the Rabbi's clothes, including his prayer shawl, and effects cries of brotherhood from the formerly anti-semitic Polish Catholics: "The Jews are our brothers in affliction," they shout. "We're in the hands of one Messiah!" (245). Again, the forced happy ending, so historically inaccurate, ruins the true pathos of the horrors perpetrated on the Jews.

Only a very few of Asch's most devoted readers applauded this story as a condemnation of modern Christianity. Rosenberg, for example, saw it as "a spit in the face of the Christian world" (345), and Entin praised the "wonderful allegory about Jesus" and its poetic qualities of rhythm, color, and line (qtd. by Rosenberg 345). Most readers, however, seemed to share Rapoport's denunciation of the tale as being "artistically false, revolting, a desecration, and ludicrous from both an artistic and ideological point of view" (109-10). "Kristus in geto," as could be expected, further enraged Ab Cahan. That Asch knew he was playing Russian roulette with his readers is well documented. In a letter written in 1943, the author relates how aggravated he was upon hearing from Perlman, his manuscript copier in New York, that "Kristus in geto" is "too Christian and that Jews won't read it, which I know myself. But you know, however, my nature" (letter 112 Briv 115). The story is indeed fantastic

and offensive, not so much because it adulates Jesus, but because it is historically so false. The majority of Poles, as has been all too well documented, took pleasure in the torment of the Jews. Righteous Gentiles numbered a pitifully tiny few. Asch wrote a wishful fairy tale in a situation when wishes, for Jews, did not come true.

Asch continued to increase his attempts, quite naive though offered with love, to reconcile Christianity and Judaism. The Nazarene was followed by The Apostle (1943) and Mary (1950). East River, a novel celebrating a Jewish-Catholic intermarriage in New York's lower East Side, was published in 1946. The Yiddish public was not thrilled when Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer gave Asch a downpayment of $150,000 for screen rights to this book; for although it is a wonderful novel containing the finest and richest description of immigrant life in New York's great melting-pot period, it also concludes, romantically, with an unlikely religious merger, as the Orthodox Jewish grandfather holds his Catholic grandson on his lap, and allows his Christian daughter-in-law to prepare the Passover seder meal. Asch's East River won the Anisfield-Wolf Award for its treatment of "racial relations" (Siegel 177).

Because Asch was unable or just stubbornly refused to let go of the Jesus motif during the Jews' worst

period in history, because he did not realize that his Christological novels were ill-timed, he became the target of a multitude of excoriations. Hayim Greenberg denounced Asch for having "a lack of decency toward your own people!" (qtd. by Howe, World 450). Jacob Glatstein caustically remarked that Asch's works were less spiritually appropriate to the times than "a slap is an answer to 'Have a good Sabbath'" (qtd. by Rosenberg 296). Even Shmuel Niger, who faithfully stood by Asch throughout his long career, responded with pain to One Destiny. In "An Open Letter to Sholem Asch" dated October 9, 1945, Niger questioned if this was the right time for Christians and Jews to embrace: "Is it, friend Asch, the appropriate time?" (Ash 401). He continued: "What I want to ask you, Asch, is--do you think that Jews are now psychologically in such a situation that we have nothing else on our minds other than to sing religious songs of praise to the world?" (402).

Asch continues to be reprimanded for his ill-timing. Irving Howe decries his lack of "moral tact" (World 450). Sol Liptzin explains that Asch's Jewish admirers "felt betrayed in their hour of utmost need by his apparent apostasy" (Flowering 186). Liptzin is more specific in his History of Yiddish Literature:

> He genuinely believed that by enriching the accepted Jewish tradition with the hitherto unacceptable teachings of Rabbi Yeshua he would be helping his people and accomplishing

> a deed of great historic value. Then anti-Semitism would disappear and true brotherhood would reign between Jews and their neighbors. Unfortunately, his trilogy was ill-timed and his cosmopolitan religious ideas were drowned in the tears of Auschwitz and Treblinka. (153-54)

Any lingering hopes regarding a brotherhood between Christians and Jews were most certainly smashed for most Jews by the Kielce pogrom in 1946, when Poles, angered by the return of the pitifully few Jewish Holocaust survivors, murdered them. But Sholem Asch, however, tenaciously held onto his dreams.

Why Did Asch Persevere with his Christian Themes?

Why did Sholem Asch, who loved his people so much, who did so much relief work for European Jewry, why did he publish The Nazarene in 1939, at the time of the Holocaust?

Asch at first attempted to defend his choice of subject by appealing to the artistic ideal of being overtaken by a theme (my muse made me do it). In the Yidisher kemfer of Nov. 14, 1941, Asch declared:

> I've explained it and I'll explain it again, that I have no other ambition than a purely artistic one. I'm not a religious reformer. . . . I don't search for my inspirations, but they find me. . . .
>
> I feel absolutely no guilt towards anyone for following my artistic inspirations, even if they seduce me towards fields in which, until now, Jews have not usually gone. (qtd. by Rosenberg 341-42)

Later on, Asch additionally defended himself by directly contradicting his original answer, stating that he deliberately chose the subject of Jesus with the express purpose of creating a new brotherhood between Christian and Jew. In a lecture given at Columbia University in 1952, Asch expressed both points of view. "I wrote these books, you know why?" he asked his audience, "because I wanted to write; I must write; I had to write; and no court could have forbidden me to write!' (Statement side 2). A short while later, Asch returned to this question.

> I have been asked many times, why did you select such a time when the Jewish people were persecuted, in the time when they killed Jews you have been sitting and writing these books? Anathema! There are two reasons. . . . First thing, God didn't send me down to this earth in another time; He sent me down in this time. I'm living in this time. (side 3)

He then proceeded to expand his theory on the necessity of forging a Christian-Jewish merger. "Because of Hitler," he asserted, "I wrote these books in this time." The Germans hated the Pollacks "1000 times worse than they hated the Jews." But they didn't dare to exterminate the Poles, he explained, for the whole Christian world would have risen up "like one man to stop Hitler. . . ." The Jews, unfortunately, "have no allies." To help resolve this problem, "I wanted to show Jew and Christian alike, the kinship, the

relationship, the brotherhood. . ." (side 3). All this, of course, was announced years after the publication of not only The Nazarene, but also The Apostle and Mary. Within The Nazarene itself, an imaginative novel, there is no such overt ecumenical message as he (as well as his enemies) later claimed.

It is far more likely that Asch, in The Nazarene, was simply anachronistic in his choice of subject. It would probably have been accepted, if not applauded by, his Yiddish audience only a decade earlier. He had, after all, been interested in Jesus for decades. The Nazarene was not a product of the 1930s so much as the fruition of work begun much earlier in his career, when writing about Jesus was admired by the avant-garde. But by 1939, the mood of the Yiddish readers, as well as their literary preferences and tastes, had drastically changed in response to the historical reality. Sholem Asch's themes did not change. Nathan Asch implied that his father may have subconsciously insulated himself from the horrors taking place in Europe because it was too painful:

> It must have been about this time that, in terrible prescience of the coming catastrophe, he began leaving the Jewish world, the world that was moving toward extinction, and withdrawing himself into the past, into that queer moment in Western history two thousand years ago when the Jews had split; and he started accounting for the split, explaining it from the Jewish point of view, began to retell the Christ story as it appeared to

> those whom, though they were of good will, Christ was leaving. I don't consider myself competent--neither learned enough, nor even interested enough--to speak out on this. I am trying to suggest only that he saved himself much misery when he stopped writing about the Jews of Poland just before they were wiped out completely, as he retreated from the present into a past that one cannot be sure even existed actually, but which is imperishable, ineradicable for that very reason. (60)

It is plain that Sholem Asch grossly underestimated the hatred that a novel could generate. It is easy to understand how the most popular writer of a people, one with an international reputation, could misjudge the angry hostility that a work of fiction is capable of arousing. Asch was used to being a controversial figure, for he had been involved in scandalous incidents a number of times (for example, his early article on the barbarity of circumsion; his iconoclastic play, God of Vengeance; his acceptance of a medal from the Polish antisemitic government under Pilsudski; various talks in Israel construed as being anti-Yiddish). But regardless of the criticism hurled at him for over thirty years, Asch nevertheless always reemerged from the battlefield unwounded. When Cahan sent Asch the infamous note demanding that he stop writing his novel, Asch's secretary Rosenberg felt that it "was just a monumental caprice of a dictatorial editor and it would quickly pass over" (236). Who could

have predicted the enormity of Cahan's vengeance and the hateful, unflagging persecutions organized by Asch's one-time devoted disciple, Chaim Lieberman? Because of his stature, Asch obviously underrated the opposition that would greet The Nazarene by his erstwhile Yiddish readers.

There was, evidently, some obtuseness as well as insensitivity on Asch's part in not realizing that his sympathetic portrayal of the Christian deity was coming out during the most horrendous, cataclysmic time for his fellow Jews. On the one hand, his rigid adherence to heroizing Jesus, at a time when Jews were cruelly suffering in the Christian world, was tasteless. On the other hand, the ability to insulate oneself from the tumult of the outside world has always been one of the ideals of art. Nevertheless, because Sholem Asch was so out of step with the times, he became an easy target for derision and vilification. The phenomenal success of Maurice Samuel's English translation of The Nazarene made Asch's Yiddish audience more bitter. The sum of all this led to the unexpectedly drastic plummet in Sholem Asch's standing in the Jewish world.

Chapter 6: THE NAZARENE

The Nazarene is a fully imagined, historical novel centering on the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth. The story is set in a framework of contemporary antisemitic Poland in the 1930s, a background which sharply contrasts with the events of the previous 2000 years, when Jews and Christians were one ethical religious group at odds with the surrounding immoral heathens of other nations. There are three putatively eye-witness accounts of the legend. The first is from Pan [gentleman] Viadomsky, who claims to have been the Roman Ciliarch of Jerusalem in a previous incarnation. The second comes from a newly discovered fifth gospel written by Judas Iscariot. The third is related by a young Jewish scholar who is spurred on to remember his own past life as Jochanan, a student of the ancient Pharisaic Rabbi Nicodemon.

In this chapter I deal with The Nazarene not as a religious tract, as some would have it, but rather as a work of imagination. After discussing both the early drafts and the published texts, I shall compare The Nazarene to other fictionalized biographies of Jesus. Examining Asch's novel in this light will illumine the fact that the novel in and of itself is neither scandalous nor shocking. It has, rather, the

contradictory qualities of being a fascinating product of its time, while simultaneously having been notoriously ill-timed for its Yiddish audience.

The Early Drafts

According to Sholem Asch's secretary-editor Shloyme Rosenberg, Asch's ambitious novel dealing with that enormously important age in western civilization, the era of Jesus of Nazareth, was originally entitled The Man Who Was There [*der man vos iz geven derbay*]. The protagonist of the novel was to be the contemporary Polish antisemite, Pan Viadomsky, an aged quasi-intellectual, quasi-charlatan who had, on numerous occasions, been involved in the forging of ancient documents. In his previous life some 2000 years earlier, this embittered character had been none other than the Roman Ciliarch Cornelius, stationed in the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem. Cornelius was the self-serving official responsible for the capture and torture of Jesus, as well as for his crucifixion. As Pontius Pilate's adjutant, he "was there," at one of the most significant scenes in history.

The background for this story, so rife with possibilities, was ancient Jerusalem, where Jews were in continuous conflict with their despised Roman rulers. In harmony with the original plan of the

novel, which would feature Cornelius-Viadomsky, Asch provided a large introductory chapter in his manuscript dealing with the transmigration of souls. The Man Who Was There contained incidents taken from real life that could best be explained by a belief in incarnation. One example meant to document this theory was that of an old Polish shoemaker living in Asch's hometown of Kutne. This man appeared to be completely normal in all respects. His speech was relevant, even interesting. He was a good father and a faithful husband. He had, however, one "weakness": every time he would hear Russian soldiers marching to the rhythm of a band, he would drop everything and run over to them. Head up, stick in hand, this shoemaker would stand in front of the military unit, issue orders, and proudly march like a general at the side of his soldiers. The Russian officers were used to him, and they smilingly allowed him to march to his heart's content. The narrator of the novel explains that the impoverished shoemaker had "probably" been a general in the Polish army in a previous life (Rosenberg 231).

Asch had also included a more startling and pertinent example of a person's former existence. This was an incident he himself had witnessed in Tel-Aviv, 1936; the British had forbidden anyone to speak or write of it. During a series of speeches, a young man

jumped onto the stage and proclaimed himself to be Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator of Judea. Needless to say, he was quickly whisked away by the police in attendance. The narrator in the novel, however, explained once again that the young man, like the shoemaker, had had a previous life which he hadn't totally forgotten; in this case the person had really been Pontius Pilate almost two millenia ago (Rosenberg 232-33).

It is unfortunate that Rosenberg could not recall the other examples provided by Asch in his original Chapter 1, because I found Asch's handwriting extremely difficult to decipher in the surviving manuscript. It is clear, however, that within his first nine pages of tiny script crammed onto blank, unlined papers, were other such incidents of people showing evidence of a previous incarnation. In another instance, I believe Asch describes an artist who loved to paint wild animals. One day, he tried to bite, or he succeeded in biting, his own wife. This was an indication that the artist himself might once have been a wild beast who ate people (ms. v.1, 2).

It is important to note how Asch describes the man in Tel-Aviv who jumped onto the stage: "the exhibitor is an example of a person who talked himself into believing that he is a Roman legionnaire and lived in

the time of Jesus Christ" (ms. v.1, 2). Asch clearly uses the name *Yezus Kraytz*. The hero of his novel, on the other hand, is named Yeshua.

Asch deleted his quite fantastic and lengthy discussion of transmigration of souls in both the Yiddish and English published texts. He kept instead, only the evocative, elegant opening paragraph:

> Not the power to remember, but its very opposite, the power to forget, is a necessary condition of our existence. If the lore of the transmigration of souls is a true one, than these, between their exchange of bodies, must pass through the sea of forgetfulness. According to the Jewish view we make the transition under the overlordship of the Angel of Forgetfulness. But it sometimes happens that the Angel of Forgetfulness himself forgets to remove from our memories the records of the former world; and then our senses are haunted by fragmentary recollections of another life. They drift like torn clouds above the hills and valleys of the mind, and weave themselves into the incidents of our current existence. They assert themselves, clothed with reality, in the form of nightmares which visit our beds. Then the effect is exactly the same as when, listening to a concert broadcast through the air, we suddenly hear a strange voice break in, carried from afar on another ether-wave and charged with another melody. (3)

At this point, Asch introduces Pan Viadomsky. In the manuscript, he doesn't introduce the Pole until Chapter 2, which he entitled "Of Pan Viadomsky--Becomes the Roman Official Cornelius" (v.1, 10). The Yiddish published text, by the way, retains such chapter headings in Vol. 1 (Parts One and Two); the English

edition has only numerals. A fuller comparison of the Yiddish and English texts is found in the section immediately following.

Asch began writing The Man Who Was There in the winter of 1936, directly after completing The Song of the Valley [Dos gezang fun tol]. He discontinued work in the spring of 1937, when he left Nice for America in order to join in the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the Forverts. He resumed writing his novel in Nice in the autumn. By spring of 1938, Asch had completed the first two parts of his text. Because he needed surgery, and was unable to go to his Viennese doctors due to the *Anschluss*, he and his wife Madje returned to America. Meanwhile, the situation in Europe had worsened; the abominable Munich pact had been signed; and the Asches remained. Sorrowfully, the novelist cabled his son John to liquidate his beloved Villa Shalom in Nice, and to send his important possessions to the United States.

Parts One and Two of the massive novel were thus written in Nice, France; the third part was composed entirely in America. It was sometime during or after completion of the final part of the manuscript, while living in the United States, that Asch changed the focus, and the title, of his work. Although one can only speculate on the reasons for the dramatic

ammendments, it is clear that the novelist felt more free in his adopted country, in which he was very hopeful that Jews and Christians could reconcile their differences. In his Introduction to the Catalogue of Hebrew and Yiddish Manuscripts and Books from the Library of Sholem Asch compiled by Leon Nemoy for Yale, Asch is full of praise for America and its unlimited possibilities, as he is in What I Believe.

Nevertheless, even in America, entitling his novel The Nazarene was regarded as callous by most Yiddish readers at the time. Critic Shmuel Niger, who, like everyone else, had been unaware of the fact that Asch had deliberately changed the title, notes that the novelist

> was not sensitive enough. This can be seen from the name that he gave his book--a name which calls out quite different associations and group memories for Jews than it does for non-Jews. The book could and should have had a more modest title page. (Ash 282)

The "memories" to which Niger refers deal with centuries of persecution by Christians against Jews in the name of their religion. Had Asch left his novel as originally planned, that is, centering on Viadomsky-Cornelius, and not on the Christian divinity, and had he kept the original title, The Man Who Was There, there is little doubt that the work would not have aroused the angry furor that it did.

The Yiddish Versus the English Text

The differences between the two texts are slight, but they should be noted. Der man fun Notseres (1943) was published by *Kultur Farlag* in two volumes. Parts One and Two make up the first volume of 439 pages; Part Three comprises the entire 370 pages of the second volume. I will translate the chapter titles appearing in the first volume since they do not appear in the English edition, and because they are helpful in serving as a schematic outline of the novel. Part One is divided into the following sections:

1. The archaeologist
2. How Pan Viadomski becomes transformed into Hegemon Cornelius
3. Pan Viadomski's secret
4. Who was Pontius Pilate?
5. Our entrance into Jerusalem
6. Pilate's first steps in Jerusalem
7. I am invited to the home of the High Priest
8. Cornelius becomes acquainted with the situation in Jerusalem
9. Jerusalem and the Holy Temple
10. Hanan ben Hanan
11. Miriam Magdalena
12. Miriam Magdalena's herb-garden
13. Miriam Magdalena's oils

14. The blind oil-mixer
15. Visiting the Tetrach of Galilee
16. Cornelius at Salome's dance
17. Cornelius in K'far-Nahum
18. The Rabbi presides
19. The sermon on the mountain
20. The foremost person of K'far-Nahum
21. Cornelius senses the danger
22. Cornelius takes the matter into his own hands

Part Two is simply divided into two chapters:

1. The manuscript
2. The words of Judah Ish-Kiriot

Chapters in Part Three have only numerals.

Maurice Samuel's translation The Nazarene was printed in one volume in both the original publication by Putnam's (1939) and its later reissue by Carroll & Graf (1984). The pagination is the same in both issues. The untitled chapters in English are roughly, but not exactly, equivalent to the Yiddish. Discrepancies appear in Chapter 7, which is more or less the equivalent of the Yiddish chapters 8 and 9; chapter 8, the last paragraph of which is the same as the second paragraph in Chapter 7 of Der Man fun Notseres; Chapter 9, which is the same as paragraphs three to the end of Chapter 7 in the Yiddish; and

Chapter 10, which is the equal of Chapters 10 and 11 in the Yiddish publication. Der Man fun Notseres has a total of 22 chapters in Part One; The Nazarene has 21 chapters in Part One.

This organizational variance does not seem to be significant. It is possible, however, that Samuel either unconsciously or intentionally made the Jewish Priests, the Cohanim, slightly less amenable to the Romans than did Asch. For example, in Der Man fun Notseres, when Hegemon Cornelius exclaimed to the High Priest Hanan that "order needs to be made in Jerusalem!",

דער אלטער האָט מיטן קאָפ ערנסט צוגעשאָקלט, די קינדער פון כהן גדול האָבן מיך געגלעט מים זייערע וואַרעמע, דאנקבארע בליקן.

[The old man solemnly nodded his head in agreement; the children of the High Priest stroked him with their warm, grateful glances] (92). In Samuel's translation, however, "The old man nodded dubiously, his sons looked at me uncertainly, torn between gratitude and uneasiness" (91). Asch's Priests are more in alignment with the corrupt Romans than Samuel indicates. I wonder whether this extremely gifted translator deliberately attempted to assuage the hostility he knew would greet Asch from the Yiddish audience upon publication of The Nazarene. Unfortunately, Samuel did

not provide an explanation for the discrepancy.

It is significant that the newer edition, unlike the Yiddish or the older Putnam's edition, has subtitled the work A Novel Based on the Life of Christ. It also displays a thoughtful portrait, Christuskopf, reproduced from a painting by Rembrandt, on its front cover. The image looks like the Yeshua Asch portrayed with words--gentle and sorrowful--yet Asch's heroic figure is more Jewish. Yeshua would have his head covered and he would be wearing a prayer shawl in a portrait. While Asch was a great admirer of Rembrandt, and was a proud owner of at least one original painting by that famed artist, it is questionable whether he would have approved of this reproduction on the cover of his novel. This edition also neglects both to credit Maurice Samuel for his translation, and to mention that the book was originally written in Yiddish. These facts are an indication of Sholem Asch's reputation, however undeserved, as a writer of religious Christian works.

The Construction of the Novel

The Nazarene is constructed of a contemporary frame story plus three purportedly eyewitness versions of the life of Jesus.

The Frame Story. The frame story is found in the

opening three chapters of the novel (Part One), in the conclusion of Part One (Chapter 21); in the first chapter of Part Two, in the conclusion of Part Two (Chapter 2, section xix); and, in Part Three, in the beginning three chapters, in Chapter 22, and in the final chapter (29).

A young Jewish scholar comes to the residence of the elderly Pan Viadomsky, once renowned for being a great scholar of antiquity, in order to help him translate an important document. Although impoverished, the young man asks for no salary; the distinction of being able to work with the formerly celebrated Viadomsky is all he wishes. He is aware, however, of the fact that the Pole's name had been linked to quite a few manuscript forgeries; yet while implicated, Viadomsky had never actually been found guilty.

The Jew, whom the Pan names "Josephus" because his erudition reminds him of the ancient Hebrew-Roman historian Josephus Flavius, is capable, kind, and patient. He suffers torrents of antisemitic verbal abuse and insolence from the old man for the sake of scholarship. He does break off their relationship a number of times, however, such as when he discovers, with incredulous disgust, that the Pan is simultaneously collaborating on a treatise "designed to

prove that Jews made use of Christian blood for the preparation of *matzot*" for Passover (375), thus propagating the old blood libels from which Jews suffered for over a thousand years. But Viadomsky apologizes as best he can, and at first demands and then almost begs for a reunion. He is desperate, for he had already entrusted the Jew with his "secret": in a former life he had been the Roman Ciliarch Cornelius (called Hegemon Cornelius by the Jews), the lieutenant of Pontius Pilate, and the person who had "directed the execution" of Jesus of Nazareth (25).

"Josephus," as can be expected, is both astonished and frightened that the irascible old man is deranged. The antisemite additionally points out other Jews in Warsaw whom he insists he recognizes from ancient times. Thus he calls the terrified shopkeeper from whom he once bought a manuscript "Judah," and he greets another perplexed Polish Jew with the name of "Simon Bar Jonah" (Part Three, chapt. 1). But the pains of the Jewish transcriber are rewarded when he is permitted to read the manuscript "found" by Viadomsky, for it appears to have have been written by Judas Iscariot.

The frame story itself is remarkably interesting. The Jewish quarter in Warsaw, complete with its foods and antiquarian shops, the bustle of people before

Passover, the pervasive antisemitism and poverty of the 1930s, are depicted in realistic detail and atmosphere. The interplay between the nasty, old scholar/faker and the young, brilliant, Jewish scholar is also highly credible. Viadomsky is, more than likely, mentally ill. The manuscript is probably another forgery.

The story becomes strained only towards the end, when Viadomsky-Cornelius's relation of his past life somehow spurs the young man into remembering that he too, as the young student Jochanan, had witnessed the events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus. He describes

> an actual touching off of personal memories within me, a stirring of contacts, so that I was gradually drawn out of my present identity, which became weaker and weaker, until it abandoned me altogether, and another took its place, occupied my brain and body and nerves, and transformed me into a contemporary of his world of narrative. (400)

As long as the ancient Ish-Kiriot manuscript was of dubious authenticity, and Viadomsky was of dubious sanity, the story was believable. When, however, the sane and intelligent Jewish translator also relives his previous incarnation, the carefully constructed scaffolding supporting the reader's trust and credibility collapses.

The concept of transmigration of souls stems from the Kabbala and Yiddish lore. According to folk

legends, the soul of a dead person may pass into another being (human or animal) in order to "atone for sins committed in the previous incarnation" (Weinreich 678). Y.L. Peretz rendered the process best in his poignant story, "Thou Shalt Not Covet!"

> As is well known, it is incumbent upon every Jew to fulfill the Torah in its entirety. Whatever part a Jew fails to complete in one incarnation, he has to fulfill in the following, and whatever weakness he is guilty of in one sojourn on earth, he has to correct in the next--because the soul must return to the seat of the All-High whole and sound, pure and undefiled. (144)

Peretz describes the pitiful failure of a saintly person to ascend to the gates of Heaven because, at the instant of his intolerably painful demise, he disobeyed the seventh commandment by wishing his death would be easier. "The highway into the upper realm faded away, the portals of heaven were closed, and the soul was forced to undergo an additional reincarnation, during which it could correct its error, its disobeying the commandment: "Thou shalt not covet!" (145-46). The heavenly host was full of pity for the erred soul, and provided it with a new life "so full of blessings" that he would have no reason to be envious. This learned Reb Zanvele, however, who enjoyed all of life's bounties, got lost in a snowstorm, due to the evil interference of the Celestial Adversary. When, at

last, almost frozen to death, the gentle scholar stumbled into an inn, he envied the peasants who occupied all the places around the fire. "Then there began a new series of reincarnations" (150).

In spite of the fact that this theme appears in Yiddish folklore and literature, Yiddish critic Y. Rapoport disgustedly called Asch's employment of the transmigration of souls "a naive trick" and "tasteless" (89, 90). This condemnation, while containing some truth, is nevertheless too harsh. The mechanism does allow the reader to experience different viewpoints, both ancient and modern, and, importantly, to note the differences between early and late Christianity. Asch's close friend Franz Werfel, who wrote in German, used a similar approach in Höret die Stimme (1937: Hearken Unto the Voice, 1938) in order to transport his readers to the days of Jeremiah: the protagonist falls into a trance and then finds himself living in ancient biblical times. These kinds of dramatic approaches, although expedient and fashionable at the time, nevertheless somewhat demean the novels containing them. I believe that Asch's use of incarnation is one of the critical elements separating The Nazarene from more serious works.

The conclusion of the frame story suffers additionally from a lapse into melodrama, to which Asch

has always been prone. In the final chapter, Cornelius-Viadomsky adds on to his character, which consists partly of the traditional Jewish *gilgul* [the being into which the soul of a dead person may pass], the more specific, Christian application of the concept, the Wandering Jew. According to this legend, a cobbler in Jerusalem taunted Jesus on his way to the crucifixion; he was cursed to live and wander forever until Jesus's return. Similarly, because the Hegemon had tormented Yeshua, he must "pass from incarnation to incarnation" (696). He had given Yeshua vinegar to drink, so "whatever I take unto myself is vinegar, and whatever I give out is vinegar" (696). But when the Pan begs for God's mercy, his eyes fill with tears, a sign of forgiveness. He dies the next morning.

Strangely, the Jewish scholar is joyful for the grace shown Viadomsky. He sits at the Pan's bedside, holding his bony hand until the end. After he dies, Blimele, the daughter of the tailor living in the apartment opposite his, brings him a small bouquet of flowers. The transcriber tenderly "laid them on the calmed heart of Pan Viadomsky" (698).

Asch would seemingly have the reader be moved and affected by all this sentiment. But because the Pole had been such a blatant antisemite and selfish

character, so completely repulsive in both his lives that we witness, it is difficult to feel anything but repugnance towards him. Sholem Asch's trademark, often disconcerting, of mixing realism with melodrama, unfortunately mars this otherwise fascinating frame story. In any case, however, it provides a perspective from which to view the momentous events which are the main focus of The Nazarene.

PART ONE. With the exception of the frame story occupying the first three chapters and the end of chapter 21, Part One of The Nazarene is a fascinating narrative describing the setting and events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. It is told from the point of view of Cornelius, a Roman ciliarch.

The embedded story begins with Pontius Pilate in Rome. He is ambitious, servile, and selfish. Hoping to make as much money from Jewish bribes as his predecessor Gratus, he intrigues for the procuratorship of Judea by courting the step-daughter of Tiberias, little Claudia. Claudia had already been debauched by Tiberias in his famous "school," and the emperor was pleased to have someone make her officially respectable. When the populace became enraged with Tiberias for having the beloved Germanicus poisoned, the wily Pilate mitigated this hatred by spreading

false rumors and displaying forged documents indicating that Germanicus had been attempting Tiberius's own life. As his reward for saving the dissolute emperor and marrying Claudia, Pilate was given the governorship he had coveted so greatly. The lecherous Tiberius did not permit Pilate to take his new bride to Judea, but the more than satisfied new procurator did bring along with him his old friend Cornelius, and he appointed him as the ciliarch of the Jerusalem fortress.

The Ciliarch Cornelius, or Hegemon as the Jews call him, displays the same lust for power and lack of principles as his fellow Romans. He describes their unwelcomed entrance into Jerusalem, and the lukewarm, ambiguous reception given them by the High Priests, the Cohanim. Later, he learns of their insidious political intrigues. He also becomes acquainted with the even more corrupt and more Romanized tetrarch Herod and his debased family. Cornelius learns about Jewish laws, customs, and belief in the coming of a Messiah to liberate the Jews from the yoke of Edom (Rome). Hearing of the "Wonder Rabbi" of Galilee, he spies on him, and observes his effect on the adoring common folk and on the scholars. With an outsider's candor, the Hegemon reports on the sensuous and generous Miriam of Migdal, her exquisite gardens, and her perfumed oils. He is astounded and dismayed by her conversion to

chastity as a result of meeting with Rabbi Yeshua. He witnesses Salome's unforgettable dance with its attendant, grisly results, and he has dealings with the blind Bar Talmai, the violent Bar-Abba, and others. Because he is selfishly motivated solely by greed, he involves himself in every situation promising pleasure, bribery, or promotion.

It is mainly with a desire to impress the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate, as well as Rome, that Cornelius attempts to subdue the rebellious Jews in Galilee. He finds their desire for a Messiah extremely troublesome. When he hears the Sermon on the Mount, the Hegemon decides that the spiritual speeches of the charismatic Yeshua are politically subversive. Even though his appearance mysteriously "awakened a profound faith and boundless trust" (153), Cornelius concludes that the Jew must be executed for the good of the Roman empire.

> He was by no means the helpless weakling which he pretended to be. His teachings could become dangerous to the religious regime of the Jews themselves (and we were interested in perpetuating the power of their present rulers) and therefore to our own rule. It was possible that he constituted a threat to the entire Latin civilization in the Orient. In that part of the world such ideas spread among the ignorant masses with the speed of fire in a dry forest; and among all the eastern races none is so inflammable as the fanatic and fantastically minded Jews. These things always begin very innocently,

> being at first only internal religious matters, and they always end up with revolts against the prevailing local power and against Rome. Oh, we have had our experiences! For however they conceal themselves behind the mask of religion, with which we do not interfere, they all have one ultimate purpose: to overthrow the foreign dominant power. (178)

The narrative terminates with Cornelius interrogating the High Priest about Judah Ish-Kiriot and about what he intends to do with "the prophet of Nazareth" who has attracted such a large following and who is a definite corrupting threat to the status quo.

Sholem Asch brilliantly employs a Roman's viewpoint, the report of someone looking in at the turmoil of events in Judea and Jerusalem at the time. Readers are treated to a vivid portrait of the hubbub surrounding the Holy Temple, with all its splendor and all its corruption. Asch portrays the magnificent, wealthy estates of the priestly ruling class and officials, and also the unspeakable poverty, dirt, and disease of other Jews.

> On the heights Jerusalem shone to the Heavens with its golden Temple, its High Priests, its aristocracy and its towers, but down below it was rotten with poverty and decay. Wherever one turned in those alleys one encountered beggars, cripples, outcasts from every corner of the land. One needed only to catch a glimpse of the Holy City, of the filthy tangle of streets around the wall, in the vale of Hinnom, and by the waters of Siloah; one needed only to explore the region in the Valley of the Kidron at the foot of the Mount of Olives and see the gutters where

> the lowest servitors of the Priestly clan washed the hides of the sacrificed animals, or pass by the midden mounds where the poorest of the poor scraped desperately in the refuse. One had to see all this, and then to reflect on the life of the wealthy contractors who farmed the taxes, on the palaces of the Priestly aristocracy in the Upper City, on the pleasure gardens which they had laid out on the Mount of Olives and in the new quarters. There was an abyss between the levels of the population, between swollen opulence on the one hand and grinding poverty on the other. (71-72)

One can feel the tension of the times, the harsh Roman rule over a far more ethical people, and the intense and fervid desire for the Messiah. Cornelius's tale also places Yeshua in a political framework: he is an agitator for the people's freedom against any earthly rulers. To the Romans and the ruling Jewish aristocrats and High Priests, Yeshua was indeed dangerous. He is portrayed very credibly.

The other characters, too, are lively and believable. The Romans, including Tiberias, Pontius Pilate, and Cornelius; the aristocratic, Romanized Jews, such as the wicked tetrach Herod; the wealthy, powerful High Priests; Miriam of Migdal, pleasure-seeking and pleasure-giving aristocrat who transforms under the sobering influence of Rabbi Yeshua; as well as the diseased and chronically poor, are all fully recreated by the art of the novelist. The entire

ancient Jewish civilization suffering under Roman tyranny is painted with much color and detail. The social, cultural, religious, and political conflicts of the time, among the stratified Jews as well as between them and their rulers, is equally engrossingly described.

Part One is well-conceived and well-executed. Standing by itself as a novelette of almost 200 pages, the work is a product of Sholem Asch at his best.

PART TWO. The second part of The Nazarene, excluding the frame story, comprises the 172 pages of the ancient manuscript putatively written by Judah of Kiriot; it is written in an appropriately biblical style. Because Judah was one of Yeshua's disciples, there is a tone of adoration that is obvious from the very beginning:

> I follow in the footsteps of my Rabbi, and I sit at his feet, and I measure every word, and I seek out closely all his acts, and I have found no evil in him, but his heart is at peace with his God and whatsoever he thinketh and sayeth is in God's ways. (202)

The account, as can be expected, is replete with the miracles performed by Judah's rabbi, as well as with his many parables, revelations, and visions.

Judah's gospel differs from those of Mark,

Matthew, Luke, and John in a number of ways, however. Primarily, the other authors are completely nonintrusive; their main task is to report the wonders and resurrection of Jesus, "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and so that, believing, you may have life in his name" (John 20.31). We learn nothing whatsoever about the four religious historians. In Judah's testimony, "I" is the narrator; we read about Judah's faith, Judah's doubts, Judah's hasty, much-regretted deed. Thus the center of the established Gospels, dealing almost solely with Jesus, differs from the center of the Aschian Judah gospel, which is based on the person relating the story.

A related point is that characterization, so bare in the Christian Gospels, is psychologically filled out in Asch's novel. In John 12.6, Judas is simply described as being "a thief and, being keeper of the purse, used to make off with what had been put into it." The other three apostles don't describe him at all. Judah Ish-Kiriot, on the other hand, is a believable, complex character, impatient and anxious. Not a thief, Judah's motivation in the betrayal of Jesus is fully and credibly treated: Judah wishes nothing more than for his Rabbi Yeshua, in whom he so passionately believes, to prove himself the Messiah. The other characters, too, who are so amply depicted by

Asch, are scarcely given a line each in the four Gospels. A list of these would include Miriam (Mary), mother of Yeshua (Jesus); Miriam of Migdal (Mary Magdalene); Herod; and Pontius Pilate.

Another significant difference between Judah's supposed gospel and the other four Gospels is in the quantity and quality of religious material. Specifically, Asch stays away, in The Nazarene, from any indications of God actually calling Yeshua his son. But Luke, for example, reports that as Jesus prayed "the sky opened and the Holy Spirit in bodily form like a dove descended upon him, and there came a voice from the sky saying: You are my son, whom I love, in whom I am well pleased" (3.21-22). On another occasion, "a voice came from the cloud, saying: This is my son, the chosen" (9.38). The resurrection and the sacrament of the Eucharist are two other religious issues which Asch avoids. The Gospels, in contrast, treat the rising up of Jesus three days after his death as a founding moment of the Christian faith. Jesus had predicted that "the son of man must suffer much, and be rejected by the elders and the high priests and the scribes, and be killed, and rise up on the third day" (Luke 9.22). Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John all treat the resurrection as an established fact. They also describe Jesus's insistence on the Holy Communion, in

which bread and wine are consecrated and received as symbols of the body and blood of Christ. John reports that Jesus told his disciples, "unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (6.56).

A subject which puts Judah's putative gospel in direct opposition to that of the New Testament Gospels is the important question of who are the villains, and who are the righteous, in the tragic legend. Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John regard "the Jews" collectively as evil, for "the Jews sought . . . to kill" Jesus (John 5.18). It was at the insistence of "the Jews," according to this version, that Jesus was crucified. Pontius Pilate found him innocent, and asked the Jewish crowd what to do with the prisoner they gave him, for he wished to set him free. "And they cried out once more: Crucify him. Pilate said to them: Why? What harm has he done? But they screamed all the more, saying: Crucify him" (Mark 15.13-15). Luke writes that Pontius attempted to release Jesus three times, but the Jews, including "the high priests and the chief men and the people" demanded "in loud voices that he be crucified, and their voices prevailed" (23.18-23). The Pharisees are particularly condemned in the New Testament accounts; they are regarded as hypocrites (Luke 12.1) and "fond of money" (16.4).

Sholem Asch takes pains to present a completely different point of view in which Jesus, far from being at war with "the Jews," is himself a Jew. His disciples and his followers, similarly, are Jewish. The Pharisees, according to Asch, were neither hypocrites nor greedy; they were sincerely devoted to the Mosaic law. Some Pharisees believed Yeshua was the Messiah; others did not. One of the most heroic characters in The Nazarene, Rabbi Nicodemon, was a Pharisaic Rabbi very sympathetic to Yeshua. The real villains in Asch's story are the corrupt Romans. It was they who routinely performed crucifixions, and it was they who wanted Yeshua, who had been declared King of the Jews, out of the way, for his philosophy and popularity were of possible danger to the Roman Empire.

Judah's gospel additionally differs from the others in the New Testament in the richness of details. In his report, for example, we witness a touching, sentimental parting scene between Yeshua and his tearful, frightened, mother (283). Where Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John are sketchy, Asch's fictional Judah is substantially more elaborate. Nevertheless, a recital of wonders and parables, while suitable for a religious testament, would not make an exciting novel. Furthermore, there is a long and rather tiresome narration by Mary, quoted by Judah, about her son in

this section (256 ff).

Yet also in Part II, Asch includes startlingly vivid descriptions of three surrounding pagan nations: Tyre, Zidon, and Gederah. Here the writing is enthralling. The panorama of slavery and other abominations found in these non-Jewish countries is depicted extremely realistically, even minutely:

> All the shore of Tyre and Zidon is but one chain of slavery, and the edge of the land is filthy with the sweat of men and their tears. The waters of the Zidonian sea have not their own foam, but the foam of human decay. (324)

It becomes almost unbearable to read about the extreme cruelty of the heathens. It is nauseating, for example, to confront the casualness with which a family of honor sacrifices its first born son, aged about ten, to the burning hot arms of the inflamed idol Moloch (334 ff). There are twenty full pages devoted to the horrors practiced by the other nations, those who do not have God's laws, but instead worship Zeus, Re, Astra, Astarte, Moloch, and other idols.

When Yeshua and his disciples return to their native land, Judah's gospel once more takes on its religious tone. The manuscript is torn off at the point where the disciples, Miriam of Migdal, and Bar Talmai follow Yeshua to Jerusalem.

Judah's gospel, invented by Asch, is very

different from The Gospel According to Judas Iscariot (1929) by Ernest Sutherland Bates, in which Judas fiercely despises the Mosaic Law and even Jehovah. "They taught me the Law of Moses, and I hated it; they told me I must worship Jeshovah, and I could not," he reports. He regards other gods with jealousy, thinking that the deity of the heathens makes people "happy and strong, while Jehovah makes men poor and weak and miserable" (3). Judas is influenced by Satan, who speaks for a full 18 chapters. In this version of the Christ legend, Judas betrays Jesus, whom he loves, in order to show him how evil Jehovah is, "for I knew well that Jehovah would do naught to protect him" (209). Asch's fictive fifth gospel is infinitely richer in plot, characterization, and description than is this lean interpretation.

Asch, in this section, has brought the character of Yeshua to life by surrounding him with a very elaborately detailed environment, and by providing him with the pithiest parables and wondrous miracles derived from the New Testament. Nevertheless, there is a lack of psychological insight, a deficiency in illuminating Yeshua's inner world. Asch does not present a vivid analysis of the nature of the founder of a major religion in Part II. Judah's gospel does succeed on a popular level, however, for there is no

question that Asch's account is a greatly imaginative, if somewhat shallow, portrayal of Jesus's life.

PART THREE. The concluding section of The Nazarene, without the frame story, consists of Jochanan's testimony, although it is interspersed with additions from Cornelius in chapters 2 and 24. Jochanan is a young disciple, aged 16, of the Pharisaic Rabbi Nicodemon. The boy relates his narrative from a devout, Jewish viewpoint.

Although his brothers and father were all shepherds, Jochanan fervently requested to be sent to Jerusalem to study the Torah, to "seek out the ways of God" (411). Studying under the famous Rabbi Nicodemon, Jochanan knew that his "life would be irrevocably dedicated to the Torah" (413). He lived in the home of his father's pious friend, Simon Cyrene, whose two sons, Alex and Rufus, were also pupils of Nicodemon.

Jochanan, being involved in the center of religious circles in Jerusalem, meets many important figures of the day, such as Hillel the watercarrier, Joseph Arimathea, Bar Abba [Barrabas], Simon bar Jonah, and Judah Ish-Kiriot, "a potter by trade, a God-fearing man, a seeker after God's wisdom, a Pharisee and the son of Pharisees, one who awaits the Messiah daily" (419). Most vivid is Jochanan's recreation of this

awaiting of the Messiah. The air of Judea is thick with a longing, with expectation, and with dreams of deliverance from the cruel hands of Edom (Rome). The subject of the Messiah is constantly under discussion. In the wilderness, another Jochanan is even performing baptisms "in preparation for the Messiah" (417). In the evenings, "the esoteric lore of the coming of the Messiah" is studied (429).

There is talk about the Rabbi of Nazareth, who has performed a number of miracles. In most respects, this Rabbi is regarded as being of the honorable school of Hillel, and is highly esteemed by the educated elite, such as Nicodemon ben Nicodemon. In fact, all the Jews respect this "Prophet" from Galilee, Rabbi Yeshua ben Joseph. Jochanan, however, is very astonished when he hears one of his sermons--both astonished at the substance, and astonished that nobody stops or attacks the Rabbi: "It seemed to me," he recalls, "that any Rabbi who uttered such words as the Galilean had uttered, against the laws of purity and impurity, would have been haled before the Sanhedrin" (485). Because he always speaks indirectly, Yeshua escapes condemnation.

Jochanan becomes caught up in the great Yeshua as Messiah debate. He and his friend Rufus "felt that something great and wonderful was happening before our

eyes" (514). There is a steady rise in hope among the Jews, a continuous increase in optimism that the days of the Messiah are at hand. Unlike Judah, however, who eagerly latched onto a number of supposed Messiahs, Jochanan, as well as his Rabbi Nicodemon, follows the traditional Jewish stance of weighing evidence, asking for proof, and being patient. He, like so many other Jews at the time, wants to believe in Yeshua as the Messiah, but never finds real evidence to warrant and substantiate the belief. The sages repeatedly beg Yeshua to "reveal to us who you are, for we are weary of wandering in darkness and doubt, and these are fearful days" (578). Yeshua's answer, invariably, is, "I will not tell you by what power I do these things" (579). He demands perfect and unquestioning faith, which is not possible for Orthodox Jews like young Jochanan.

The approaching Passover holiday brings with it ever-increasing rumors and expectations that the Prophet of Nazareth will prove himself and "will destroy Edom" (544). In anticipation, Roman forces, always present, are further multiplied. "New cohorts of legionaires arrived from Jericho and Caesarea and Samaria and even from trans-Jordan," reports Jochanan. "Askelonites, with bronzed faces, and yellow-haired German horsemen, were stationed everywhere in the

Temple courts. . . . The blood flowed incessantly" (529). Jerusalem stood poised, awaiting earth-shattering events.

At this point, chapter 14, Asch presents entirely new material not found in Parts One and Two. Jochanan describes Yeshua's procession into Jerusalem, the Rabbi riding a small ass, followed by his disciples. Amidst the splendid panorama of the ancient, walled city, the Nazarene is crowned King. And the joyous populace waits, breathlessly, for him "to induct the long-awaited kingdom of heaven" (547). Young Jochanan too is feverishly excited:

> We were faint with expectation of the great moment; we believed that it was almost upon us--that redemption for which so many tears had been shed. O how many generations had passed into the eternal sleep, taking with them into the unknown that one hope: that when the redemption came they would be awakened and called back to life by the trumpet peal of the announcement. It was here! It was upon us! God would arrest the passing of time in the instant when the two processions would come face to face. We already saw the glistering metal tips of Rome's insolent might. Now! They had but to come before the Rabbi, and he would lift up his hand: no, not even that; he would send forth a breath and turn them into dust and ashes. Then the Redemption would begin! (549)

They are, however, heart-brokenly disappointed; "the thread of faith and expectation which had held the mass bound to the prophet of Nazareth was now cut" (550). The Romans, to appease "their lust for

blood," began to slaughter the masses. The followers of Yeshua bitterly realized that "the heavens were not split, no heavenly hosts descended; everything was as it had been yesterday and the day before!" (551). Of course, the above tragedy did not dissuade all Jews from believing that Yeshua was the Messiah. Many, like young Jochanan, hoped until the very last minute of the Nazarene's death that he would perform the necessary, long-awaited miracles.

The novel moves swiftly and suspensefully towards its conclusion. Yeshua both antagonizes and attracts followers. Simon Cyrene and his son Rufus are won over by him entirely; Jochanan, like his Rabbi Nicodemon, remains hopeful but skeptical. Meanwhile, the Romans, and especially Cornelius, are extremely anxious to have Yeshua killed, for political reasons. The Priests are spurred on to conduct an illegal "investigation" of the troublemaking Rabbi. It is Judah, unable to wait any longer for his beloved Rabbi Yeshua to declare himself, who betrays his identity to the Romans, for he wishes to speed up the redemption. Asch exploits an already melodramatic situation here; he even has Yeshua kiss Judah when he sees the guards have come to arrest him. Under Pontius Pilate's orders, Yeshua is whipped, tortured, mocked, and sentenced to die on the cross. Jochanan, in great sorrow, witnesses

everything.

Again, it is not only Judah who waits for the great miracle, but a multitude of the Jews; they are still hopeful that their Messiah will overturn the wicked. "They forgot that within . . . was a man of flesh and blood, agonizing in pain like any man of flesh and blood," notes the young student. The crowd begged for an end to their hunger for salvation. Their hearts were full and expectant. "But the moment had passed, the miracle had not burst upon us. There only stood before us a tormented and beaten Jew, and at his side his hangman, Pilate" (671).

That's how it was for Jochanan and other Jews a number of times: exalted hope in Yeshua as the Messiah--followed by bitter disappointment. After his death on the crucifix, there were "secret rumors" about a resurrection, but the Jews were still one united people (691).

Since this story is told by a man remembering his youth (albeit in a previous incarnation), one can expect, and indeed finds, a more wholesome, if not naive, narrative than that of the corrupt and pleasure-loving Hegemon Cornelius, who regards Yeshua as a Jewish rabble-rouser, or of the impatient but enraptured disciple Judah, who regards Yeshua as the Messiah. By the conclusion of the tragedy, Jochanan is wretched, but

he is still hopeful that the real Messiah will yet come.

* * * * * * * * *

Sholem Asch, then, presents three versions of the Jesus legend: that of a Roman ciliarch, that of a devoted disciple, and that of a young Jewish student. For dramatic purposes, he saves the procession of Yeshua into Jerusalem and all the tragic events following for the conclusion. By serving as bases for comparisons of points of view, each narrative further enriches the reader's imagination of the events that might have taken place during the era of the Nazarene. The multiple versions have a cumulative effect; not only do they clarify the historical situations, they also stress the importance of those events. The reader, assimilating the different viewpoints, is left with a fuller image of Yeshua and the world of ancient Palestine.

Rabbi Yeshua

Rabbi Yeshua ben Joseph of Nazareth is an idealized fictional hero created by the imagination of Sholem Asch. Although his character is grounded in that of Jesus in the New Testament, Yeshua, in The Nazarene, is not identical to Jesus Christ of the gospels. There are many important dissimilarities between the two figures. Among these differences are the following: (1) Rabbi Yeshua is Jewish through and through; Jesus Christ

stands apart from Judaism. (2) Rabbi Yeshua is a holy man, who may or may not be the messiah; Jesus Christ is believed to be the son of God, a divinity, by his followers. (3) Rabbi Yeshua is gentle and kind and full of pity; Jesus Christ, although also gentle, kind, and full of pity, is additionally sometimes angry and harsh, threatening nonbelievers with eternal damnation. That Asch was on a dangerous path fraught with traps at every step is clear--how does a writer, particularly a Jewish one, dare to debase the Christian deity into a fictional character? On the other hand, however, The Nazarene was not a pioneering effort; Jesus had been portrayed for years in both Yiddish and world literature. (See "Jewish Jesus in the Yiddish World" and "Other Fictional Biographies of Jesus".)

One of Yeshua's most distinguishable characteristics is his intense Jewishness. The Roman Cornelius reports that he is a "prominent Rabbi, accepted not only by the fisherfolk of the little port [K'far Nahum], but also by the scholars of the vicinity" (154). He piously celebrates the Sabbath:

> The Rabbi took his disciples and stationed himself with them in the yard to receive the Sabbath. And when the first stars showed he said the "Hear, O Israel" of the evening, and all answered, "Amen."
>
> And we came then into the house. . . . Then he rose and lifted his beaker of wine and sanctified the Sabbath and drank the wine. . . . (277)

They sing songs and go to the synagogue to pray. Yeshua conducts himself like an observant Jew. Even when he breaks established tradition, such as allowing the ignorant to eat without washing their hands in the prescribed ritual manner, he never considers himself a non-Jew. The honor he shows to his Jewish mother is the adherence to a primary law in Judaism. His upbringing, his milieu, are emphatically Jewish. As Yoyl Entin summed up, Yeshua, "the gentlest, most compassionate, the most superhuman in pain and suffering, in love and pity, is at the same time the *most Jewish*" (qtd. by Rosenberg 285). Indeed, most of Yeshua's best qualities derive from basic tenets of the Mosaic law. The famous dictum, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," comes from the venerable Jewish sage Hillel. "Asch's Jesus," declares Madison, "appears as a righteous Jewish man following in the path of the prophets before him and bringing faith to its ultimate goal. . . " (250). Importantly, when Yeshua dies, he says the traditional "Hear O Israel" prayer, the verse recited by Jewish martyrs.

Another quality of Rabbi Yeshua is his mesmerizing ability to speak. His sermons are free of jargon, aimed for the common listener. He uses pithy parables which break "through like lightning to the minds of the simple folk to whom he always adhered himself" (165). Of

course, the subject matter is always riveting: the kingdom of heaven, the exaltation of the poor, and the divine forgiveness of sinners (including tax collectors, harlots, thieves, dove-catchers, and even those who betray fellow Jews to the government). His material, too, has shock appeal, especially to the scholars and sages, who don't know how he is able to speak with such singular authority. When he declares, for example, that "Man is also the lord of the Sabbath. . . , all those that were assembled with him were stricken with terror" (218-19). Yeshua often leaves his audience "greatly astounded" (224). His oratorical skills were applied at every opportunity. "For the proud and powerful his tongue became a flashing sword; for the poor and forlorn it was a well of comfort and hope" (495).

He is, of course, a miracle worker. Many of the wonders Jesus performs in the New Testament are repeated by Yeshua in The Nazarene. He feeds the multitudes from the thin air, he exorcises demons, he cures the sick, gives sight to the blind. He even brings the dead back to life. Judah relates how Yeshua restores the daughter of an esteemed dignitary in K'far Nahum, for example, simply by telling him to "be strong of faith, and thy faith shall help thee." When the learned man returned home, his "little one rose and was like unto one of us" (287). Lazarus, similarly, was resuscitated.

The essence of Yeshua ben Joseph's character, however, was his goodness: his compassion, his love for people, and his thirst for justice. All the sorrows of humanity were his sorrows. He pitied the poor and loved them. He was gentle and kind to the worst elements of society--the ignorant, the despised, the diseased, the wretched. Yeshua adored children. "Suffer the little ones to come unto me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," he asserted (207). Likewise, he was respectful of the elderly. He associated with sinners, even ate with them, in order to bring them comfort, though he knew this was against the Jewish laws of purity.

Yeshua's love extended to animals. He taught the donkey drivers to be gentle to their beasts. "He told them that when they tormented their beats of burden, these cried to God, and the Holy One would demand reckoning of the owners of the beasts, for all living things were His" (502). In a terrible storm, Yeshua braved the tremendous rain and winds to save one little sheep. "His heart was filled with love toward the earth, toward men and toward all creatures" (239).

Miriam, Yeshua's mother, relates to Judah how her son could never "bear the injustices which were committed against the common man" (266). He always takes the part of the underprivileged against the privileged, the meek against the strong, the slaves

against their oppressors. Creating a wholly "good" fictional character is necessarily difficult. He tends, as Yeshua does to some extent, to be rather monotonous in response and action. His credibility suffers as well.

But Asch often idealized holy men, and Yeshua is the holiest of them all. Morgentaler correctly indicates that Asch favored such holy men who "represent the broad democracy of faith as opposed to the narrow constraints of religion, the latter being embodied in such religious functionaries as school teachers, priests, scribes and rabbis" (221). Most notable of Asch's "holy" characters is Yekhiel, hero of Der tilim yid [psalm Jew; Salvation]. In Yekhiel's intense love for all people, his devout love of God, his faith in the good spirit of Judaism in opposition to its sometimes harsh laws, there is a prototype of the later Yeshua of Nazareth. Both Yekhiel and Yeshua are found surrounded by hordes of the sick and the poor, with whom they empathize beyond measure; both are healers--Yekhiel spiritually, Yeshua spiritually and physically. Both seek to comfort the broken, to alleviate all sorrows.

Of course, it would be a mistake to carry the analogy too far. Yekhiel is not considered a scholar; he is made a rebbe by his numerous, adoring followers. Yeshua, according to Asch, is learned, and he assumes

his leadership on his own authority. Yeshua, furthermore, performs miracles, and, importantly, tells his ignorant adherers, those not versed in the law, that they can dispense with formal tradition; faith alone is enough. Yekhiel never deviates this far from established Judaism.

Yekhiel, however, is a fuller, more developed literary character than is the Rabbi of Galilee. Even Shmuel Niger, almost always Asch's advocate, admits that Asch's protagonist Yeshua remains less interesting than "the collective hero - - the socially and spiritually-differentiated Jewish people at that time" (Kritik 32). The personality of the Nazarene remains "locked," complains Rapoport. "Such an unsuccessful character cuts off the wings of our imagination. . . " (94).

In Part I, as witnessed through the eyes of the base Roman Cornelius, a charismatic Yeshua shows potentialities of becoming a truly interesting political agitator. In his search for justice and with his intense compassion, he was capable of drawing the masses towards his own philosophy, which was always ethical and kind, and especially appealing to the downtrodden. In Parts II and III, however, the Rabbi becomes too spiritual, too distanced from reality and even from the reader's feelings. His character is no longer understandable. It lacks motivation and credulity. He

performs wonders, empathizes with all the dejected and lowly, and predicts his own martyrdom, but his own personality remains mystical, abstract. The final, lasting image of Yeshua is quite different from the more substantial young radical so well presented in the first third of the novel. Sholem Asch's holiest protagonist becomes a pure ideal.

* * * * *

Asch, to a great extent, reinvented, or one might say preinvented, the Jesus legend. His Yeshua is a Jesus prior to the theological Christian interpretations, accumulated over scores of centuries, that had been thrust upon him after his death. Asch's Nazarene was a Jew living among Jews. More than that, Yeshua, in Asch's view, was a saintly Rabbi, the saintliest of all his many saintly characters, a martyr who died for *Kidish haShem* [sanctification of the Name]. Although a portion of the novel is based on New Testament lore, Asch in fact boldly recreated the story to exonerate the Jews of Jesus's death, a conception that varies widely from that of the Gospels'.

The writer additionally vindicates Judas, long taken by the Christian world to be an example of Jewish falsehood, treachery, baseness, and greed. The qualities of Judah Ish-Kiriot, in contrast, are the very opposite. Judah is utterly devoted to his Rabbi of

Galilee. When he divulges Yeshua's whereabouts to the Romans, it is only because he is too eager and impatient for his Rabbi to declare himself the Messiah and free the Jewish people from their Roman oppressors. Judah, at that tragic moment, was psychologically unable to conceive of the possibility that Yeshua might actually be tortured and crucified.

The Nazarene is a novel that is intensely and fiercely pro-Jewish in its orientation. It is difficult to understand how any careful reader could fail to recognize this fact. Shmuel Niger is most probably correct when he calls The Nazarene the greatest apologia of the Jewish people in all of Yiddish literature. It is, additionally, a grandiose, captivating historical novel of ancient Palestine. Not only are the dozens of individual characters memorable, the entire ancient civilization that existed in the era and environment of Jesus of Nazareth is memorably described. The sum of the three versions of the Jesus legend Asch presents portrays Jewish social, religious, political, and cultural life in Galilee, Judah, and Jerusalem, among both aristocrats and poor, Romanized Jews and more traditional ones. The Hellenized, Roman environment and culture, as well as pagan civilizations like Tyre and Zidon, are also depicted with detailed, gripping realism. Against this vivid, panoramic background, Asch

places the life and death of the Nazarene. Even though Yeshua is too spiritual, not completely psychologically credible, the nobility and goodness of this heroic and tragic figure stand in dramatic contrast to the dishonest, Christian antisemite of the 1930s, the Pole Pan Viadomsky, who has a pathological hatred of Jews.

The Nazarene is a rich, thoughtful, and sophisticated novel. It is imaginative, interesting, and provocative. In Asch's treatment, gentle Yeshua is transformed into an ideal for all mankind.

Chapter 7: Other Fictional Biographies of Jesus

In a previous chapter I discussed "Jesus in the Yiddish World" and "Christianity as a Theme in Asch's Works Before The Nazarene." In this chapter I shall demonstrate that Asch's fictional interpretation of the Jesus legend was well within the mainstream of modern and popular literature; then I shall compare The Nazarene with other fictional biographies of Christ: The Last Temptation of Christ, The Brook Kerith, and Ben-Hur.

Fictional Biographies of Jesus

Asch's Nazarene was one of a great many religious novels popular in the first half of our century. Fictional works selling a half-million copies or more in which Jesus or Christianity was the focus include, in order of decreasing sales, In His Steps (1897) by Charles Monroe Sheldon, The Razor's Edge (1944) by W. Somerset Maugham, The Robe (1942) by Lloyd C. Douglas, Magnificent Obsession (1929) by Lloyd C. Douglas, The Cardinal (1950) by Henry Morton Robinson, The Silver Chalice (1948) by Thomas B. Costain, The Song of Bernadette (1943) by Franz Werfel, The Keys of the Kingdom (1941) by A. J. Cronin, The Shepherd of the

Hills (1907) by Harold Bell Wright, The Shoes of the Fisherman (1963) by Morris West, The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come (1903) by John Fox, Jr., The Story of the Other Wise Man (1895) by Henry Van Dyke, The Calling of Dan Matthews (1916) by Harold Bell Wright, The Chain (1949) by Paul I. Wellman, Green Light (1935) by Lloyd C. Douglas, The Big Fisherman (1948) by Lloyd C. Douglas, The Miracle of the Bells (1946) by Russell Janney, The Re-creation of Brian Kent (1919) by Harold Bell Wright, The Bishop's Mantle (1948) by Agnes Sligh Turnbull, Black Rock (1908) by Ralph Connor, The Sky Pilot (1899) by Ralph Connor, and The Apostle (1943) by Sholem Asch (Hackett 85-86).

The earlier Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ by Lew Wallace was one of the most widely distributed novels of all time. It was first published in 1880 and dramatized in 1899. In 1913 Sears Roebuck made publishing history by printing an additional one million copies. Wallace earned over a half million dollars from this one novel (Charvat 966). Quo Vadis (1895), dealing with Nero's Rome and the apostle Peter, was published in 30 languages; it enabled Polish author Henryk Sinkiewicz to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1905.

The above-named works were all fictional bestsellers; the list does not include nonfiction books, nor does it include some of the novels generally

considered to be the finest products centering around the life of Jesus. The line dividing the nonfiction from the fiction recreations is necessarily thin, since there is an extreme dearth of documents, other than the New Testament, substantiating the existence of a Jesus of Nazareth. The biographies are relatively new to the field of letters; for centuries, theologians and others were satisfied with the sketchy and even contradictory accounts provided by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, for the reading audience had more interest in the spirituality rather than the biography of its deity. Hegel's 1795 essay on the life of Jesus, in which he attempted to reinterpret the Gospels along Kantian lines, was a landmark study, although it does not appear to have been formally published until 1907 (in Hegels Theologische Jugendschriftn). Ernest Renan's Life of Jesus (1863) was the first biography of Christ to receive broad critical attention. This literary biography emphasized a humanized Jesus. It went through 13 editions in its first two years, 15 editions of a more popularized version in 1864, and was translated into more than a dozen languages. "For all its theological inadequacies," reports Ziolkowski, "it determined more than any other work of the nineteenth century the public image of Jesus as a living human being rather than an ethereal deity" (38).

Interest in the figure of Jesus increased, and popular biographies began to appear in all languages, including Matthew Arnold's St. Paul and Protestantism (1870), J. R. Seeley's Ecce Homo (1868), a bestseller, and Schweitzer's esteemed The Quest for the Historical Jesus (1906; Eng. trans., 1910). According to Ziolkowski, these new liberal biographies that were emerging in many countries and in many languages had three things in common: (1) they made Jesus relevant to the present; (2) they shifted interest from eschatology "to the message of Jesus for life in this world" (41); and (3) they reconstructed Jesus's life in such a way that his motivations could be comprehended. He was no longer an inscrutable deity.

The biographies of the historical Jesus, as could be expected, became more modernized and more fictionalized. Giovanni Papini's Storia di Cristo (1920), popular in a dozen languages, consists of many impressionistic scenes. Gustav Frensser's Hilligenlei (1905; Holy Land), equates Jerusalem with Schleswig-Holstein. There are Emil Ludwig's Der Menschensohn (1928; son of man), John Erskine's The Human Life of Jesus (1945), and countless others.

Among the best of the fictional biographies of Jesus, according to Ziolkowski, are Robert Graves's King Jesus (1946), Nikos Kazantzakis's The Last Temptation of

Christ (1953), and those made more interesting by the figure of Jesus not being presented "directly by the author, but is seen only indirectly or peripherally through the eyes of another character," like Lew Wallace's Ben-Hur, George Moore's The Brook Kerith: A Syrian Story (1916), Lloyd C. Douglas's The Big Fisherman, and Sholem Asch's The Nazarene (17).

Asch's novel, then, is well within the mainstream of the modern literature of his day. The Nazarene, in addition, is an historical romance. The genre of the Historical Romance was also in vogue at the time. Some of the novels in this category dealing with New Testament figures overlap with the religiously oriented works mentioned above. Among these, in addition, to The Nazarene, are Douglas's The Robe and The Big Fisherman. Other writers, notably Thomas Mann, wrote of the Old Testament Joseph in Joseph und seine Bruder (1933-43), translated into The Tales of Jacob (1934), The Young Joseph (1935), Joseph in Egypt (1938), and Joseph the Provider (1945).

There were other noteworthy historical romances of the day which captured a large audience. Hervey Allen's Anthony Adverse (1933), a romance of the Napoleonic era, sold a half million copies in two years, and more than 1,200,000 copies by 1945. Best-selling author Kenneth Roberts wrote Northwest Passage (1937),

dealing with the attempt to find the unknown passage, and Arundel (1930), a story about Benedict Arnold. Margaret Mitchell's long, romantic novel of Georgia during the civil war and Reconstruction, Gone With the Wind (1936), won unprecedented popularity in the United States. It had a sales record of 50,000 copies in one day, and approximately 1,500,000 books were sold during its first year in print. In its first ten years, sales had reached over 3,500,000 copies in English alone (Cowley 1267). These historical romances served as a popular escape from both the depression and the increasingly bad turn of political events in the world at large.

I present these titles and records of popularity in order to emphasize the fact that Sholem Asch's Nazarene was far from being shocking or scandalous, as so many in the Yiddish audience felt it to be. Asch, like Saul Bellow, had early announced he was not only a Jewish writer, but a universal writer, and as such, he did not feel constrained to remain within any kind of specific thematic confines. His good friend Franz Werfel, also Jewish, explored Christian subjects with great sympathy ever since he had been aided by nuns in his escape from Austria. But Werfel wrote in German, not Yiddish. While Jewish curses were poured on Asch's head from the Yiddish audience, Werfel's more

international readership praised him. His Song of Bernadette was a bestseller for two years.

Asch partook of the themes popular with his contemporaries. The Jesus legend with the passion and its built-in melodrama was especially suitable for his style of writing. The thirties, too, was an age of melodrama: in the many romances, both historical and otherwise, that flooded the market; in the advent of the motion pictures, including the wonderful, heavily melodramatic Gone With the Wind; and, not least, in world events, whose drama turned to a gathering of increasing nightmares as the decade reached its close.

The Last Temptation of Christ (1953)

Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957) and Sholem Asch (1880-1957), although brought up in very different parts of the world, nevertheless had a great deal in common. Both authors originated in small, provincial villages (Kazantzakis in Crete, Asch in Kutno, Poland); both extended beyond their native birthplaces to cosmopolitanism; both became famous in translation; both were nominated repeatedly, and unsuccessfully, for the Nobel Prize. As contemporary writers, they were both affected by the same literary movements and themes that interested their generation, including the life of Jesus. Both Asch and Kazantzakis removed Jesus from the

confines of the church and treated him as a human. Jesus was a devout Jew to Asch; to Kazantzakis, he was a Greek peasant. For their successful efforts, both novelists became victims of abuse and both were threatened with excommunication, the one by Jews, the other by the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Even the recent film of Kazantzakis's book, directed by Martin Scorsese, was greeted with strong protests by Christian fundamentalists and the Catholic Church.

The Last Temptation of Christ, however, is quite a different novel from The Nazarene, in spite of the shared protagonist. For one thing, the characters in the novel by Kazantzakis are essentially Greek fishermen. While Asch Judaizes his biblical characters, Kazantzakis has his eating non-kosher foods such as crabs, scorpions, and octopi. They do not wash their hands before eating, nor do they perform any of the Jewish rituals. Charon is used to personify death, and the lyre is played with a bow, as it is still to this day in Crete (Bien 502). In the Greek novel, Jesus is called son of Mary; in the Jewish novel, he is called either Rabbi Yeshua or Yeshua ben [son of] Yosef, for in the Judaic tradition it is the father's name, not the mother's, which is the signifier. If Asch Judaizes the Christians, Kazantzakis Christianizes the Jews. The rabbi in the Greek novel even carries a crosier. The

implications of this difference between the two novels are important, for Asch shows the unity between early Christians and Jews. In The Last Temptation of Christ, however, Jesus and his apostles are extremely remote from Judaism.

The son of Mary, opposite of the educated Yeshua, is illiterate. Like the other characters in the Kazantzakis novel, he speaks in a crass, unintellectual manner. The Greek language used, as translator Bien informs the reader, is demotic. And Jesus's speech is no more lofty than that of the other vulgar fisherfolk. While Asch's Yeshua is a charismatic, mesmerizing speaker, the son of Mary admits

> I'm no prophet. If I open my mouth, I have no idea what to say. God did not annoint my lips with burning coals, did not cast his thunderbolt into my bowels to make me burn, rush frenzied into the streets and begin to shout. . . . (127)

The tragic protagonist is a carpenter who earns the contempt of his neighbors by making crosses for the dreaded Romans to use for their horrible crucifixions. He is "a plain, ordinary man who's scared of everything" (128). He is disliked and mean, even to his tormented mother. This Jesus is constantly struggling. He wishes to marry Magdalene, who has become a prostitute because of him, but he lacks the courage. He is guilt-ridden, agitated, always miserable, "beset with many

temptations" (143).

> When I see a woman go by, I blush and lower my head, but my eyes fill with lust. I never lift my hand to plunder or to thrash or kill--not because I don't want to but because I'm afraid. I want to rebel against my mother, the centurion, God--but I'm afraid. Afraid! Afraid! If you look inside me, you'll see Fear, a trembling rabbit, sitting in my bowels--Fear, nothing else. That is my father, my mother and my God. (146)

Yeshua, on the contrary, is tranquil, serene, beloved, fearless, and holy.

Kazantzakis's entire novel is peopled with unsympathetic, unethical creatures. Zebedee is villainous; Simon Cyrene, a gentle scholar in The Nazarene, is a drunkard and tavern-keeper in The Last Temptation; the Jews, as far as they are portrayed, are wicked sinners; Jerusalem itself is a "holy prostitute" (251). Jesus is in constant strife with his temptations, even on the cross. There he envisions himself as being happily married and a father; this is his last temptation. When he realizes, however, that he has actually been sacrificed, he gives "a triumphant cry: IT IS ACCOMPLISHED!" (496)

The anti-heroic son of Mary is a somewhat more human, more credible and more psychologically developed character than is the saintly Yeshua. The Nazarene, however, published some 14 years earlier than The Last Temptation of Christ, has more historical depth and

texture. The political tensions between Romans and Jews, between the aristocrats and the poor, the holy Temple, the fervid desire for the Messiah among the people, are all vividly depicted in the Asch novel. Kazantzakis doesn't really travel beyond the simple, lawless fisherfolk in his work. His heretical treatment of Jesus is extremely imaginative. On the whole, however, The Last Temptation is neither as rich nor interesting as Asch's historical romance, which has more scope and depth.

The Brook Kerith: A Syrian Story (1916)

Irish writer George Moore (1852-1933) composed The Brook Kerith in 1916. This radical reworking of the Christ legend is surely one of the most engaging of the fictional biographies of Jesus. To Moore, Jesus is Jewish, as he is to Asch. In The Brook Kerith, however, as in Renan's Life, Samuel Butler's The Fair Haven, and later in D.H. Lawrence's novella The Man Who Died (1931), Jesus does not die on the cross. Instead, he is rescued from the crucifix by the wealthy and influential businessman Joseph Arimathea, the central protagonist in the first part of the novel. Once Jesus recovers from his horrible wounds, he becomes the main character, while Joseph is killed by zealots off-stage.

Moore deals with some fascinating questions, such

as how the later Jesus, the one who had been crucified, regarded his own early ministry, doctrines, and conception of God. Before Pilate ordered the punishment inflicted, Jesus had been a harsh fanatic. The young Jesus would not forgive Joseph for leaving him for a few months in order to nurse his father back to health. For this breach, Jesus refused to make him an apostle. The followers of Jesus had to give up their families without so much as a good-bye. He was full of enmity. "A sort of malignant hate glowered" in his eyes, reports Joseph. "He seemed to hate all he looked upon". . . (152). The Temple particularly disgusted him. "With a concentrated hate he spoke of the Temple as a resort of thieves and of the priests as the despoilers of widows and orphans, saying that the law must be abrogated and the Temple destroyed" (182). He threatened his disciples: "Follow me, follow me, or else be for ever accursed and destroyed and burnt up like weeds that the gardener throws into heaps and fires on an autumn evening" (183). Pilate explained to Joseph that he looked for an excuse to free Jesus, "but he gave me no chance; his answers were brief and evasive; and he seemed to desire death; seemingly he looked upon his death as necessary for the accomplishment of his mission" (192).

Sholem Asch's vivid recreation of the crucifixion is the intensely dramatic climax of The Nazarene; it

marks the end of Jesus's life on earth. George Moore, on the other hand, doesn't portray the event at all; the punishment of Jesus is less important in The Brook Kerith than is his non-miraculous resuscitation. Joseph hears from masons "that Jesus of Nazareth had been tried and condemned by Pilate that morning. And is now hanging on a cross". . . (187). Joseph manages to free the body, drag him to his home, and hide him there.

It is the second part of the novel that distinguishes it from lesser narratives. Joseph stages the resurrection to avoid suspicion. The account is not without humor. Joseph correctly predicts the growth of eyewitness reports of Jesus's ascension and descension after his death. Martha and Mary would be the first to spread the rumors, since they were to come to the sepulcher where Joseph supposedly placed Jesus for his eternal rest, and they would find the tomb empty. "A fine story they'll relate, one which will not grow smaller as it passes from mouth to mouth," Joseph thinks (211). In addition, the apostles busily set about squabbling with each other. There are many such lighthearted, whimsical touches--Jesus managing to travel with his two troublesome puppies, for example--that change the tone of this novel from the tragedy it might have been, had Jesus died, to the more philosophical examination of the birth of a religion.

Asch's Yeshua, in comparison, is the most tragic of all tragic heroes.

Jesus the survivor is a changed man. He rejoins the Essenes at the Brook Kerith where he is a gentle, loving shepherd for the next 20 years. It is a visit by none other than Paul of Tarsus to the cenoby that makes Jesus realize how far he had sinned in once thinking of himself as the Messiah. For Paul is a zealous propagator of his own ideas, an excessivly arrogant, self-important fanatic, who rambles on and on to the kindly Essenes about the Lord Jesus Christ, who appeared to him in a dream and told him he must proselytize everyone in the world. Jesus, innocent of the entire matter, asks him what "Christ" means. The irony increases; each thinks the other is a raving lunatic. Jesus comes to acknowledge that "Paul is the enemy of Judaism" (367).

The Brook Kerith was carefully crafted. Moore employed his provocative "melodic line" which blends dialogue, thoughts, and narrative descriptions into one stream. It was skilfully done here; the results are not confusing, although they are sometimes soporific. Moore also made some use of symbolism. Jesus's hunt for a ram to sire the flock of sheep is emblematic of his thoughts on immortality, for example. Apart from this, there are a few quite touching pastoral scenes, especially between

Jesus and the president of the Essenes, regarding life and death.

The radical change in the character of Jesus from self-proclaimed Messiah to shepherd to repentant is made quite credible in the story of The Brook Kerith. The tone of the novel, including its humor, irony, and lack of piety, sets it apart from the general run of religious works about Jesus. Moore's presentation of Paul is far more lively than Asch's too-earnest Paul in his The Apostle. How does it compare to The Nazarene? The novels, though purportedly dealing with the same Jesus, deal with entirely different heroes. Asch's Yeshua is a saintly rabbi who is a tragic victim of the Romans' corruption and of the dissension between the priestly class and the poor. Moore's Jesus, like Kazantzakis's, desired his own martyrdom; but having survived the cross, he looked on life in a much mellower, more modest fashion. The Brook Kerith is a wonderful novel. Comparisons to Asch's The Nazarene are difficult since their stories are so dissimilar. Moore presents an accurate historical view of the Essene brotherhood, but Asch presents an historical view of the entire era. Asch's work lacks Moore's humor. It is also too rambling and describes too many miracles. Yet it is still the more colorful, more passionate, and far more vivid of the two novels describing the life and times of

Jesus of Nazareth.

Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ (1880)

In spite of this novel's subtitle, author Lew Wallace deals very minimally with Jesus himself. Book 1 describes the miraculous birth in a traditionally Christian manner. An angel announces the good tidings: "For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord!" (62). In the manger where Mary and the baby are lying, a shepherd confirms that the child "is the Christ!" All the visitors repeat "The Christ!", as they fall "upon their knees in worship. One of them repeated several times over, 'It is the Lord, and his glory is above the earth and heaven'" (64). Wallace's tone, unlike that of Asch, Kazantzakis, and Moore, is clearly one of adoration and unquestioning belief in Jesus as God's son. "Happy they who then believe in him!" Wallace concludes in the first section (80). The author's complete faith in the New Testament limits his recreation of the life of Jesus. He essentially adds nothing to the shadowy gospel accounts.

As in the New Testament, the Pharisees in Ben-Hur are described as an organization "whose bigotry and power will shortly bring the world to grief" (41). Asch, in contrast, vividly portrays the Pharisees as a law-abiding, highly ethical group. Wallace pictures

Jerusalem as a "copy of Rome, a centre of unholy practices, a seat of pagan power." When Pompey entered the Holy of Holies, reports Wallace, he "came out without harm, finding but an empty chamber, and of God not a sign" (43). This too greatly differs from The Nazarene. While Asch, much more skilfully and with greater detail, describes the corruption of Jerusalem, he never suggests the absence of God.

Jesus does not reappear in Ben-Hur until the final section, Book 8, in which he is crucified and assumedly resurrected. The birth and death of Christ thus frame the adventure story of Judah Ben-Hur. Jesus, shortly before his betrayal, is shown to cure the leprous mother and sister of Judah because of their devout belief in him (501). Again, as in the New Testament, Pontius Pilate is more merciful than the Jews in sentencing Jesus. "Twice the Roman denied his guilt; twice he refused to give him over" (532). The wicked priests and the people, however, prevail. The good and faithful believers, such as Ben-Hur, come to realize the necessity of the crucifixion, "for when the Nazarene was risen, he understood the death was necessary to faith in the resurrection, without which Christianity would be an empty husk" (541). The last words of Jesus are those of the New Testament: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (552). The last words of Asch's Yeshua, on the

other hand, are the words of the traditional Jewish *Shema* prayer, "Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord Is One." Wallace additionally tells of the marvelous natural events accompanying the birth and death of Christ: the bright shining star, and the blackness at noon. None of these is repeated in the later novels discussed.

Wallace's "Tale of the Christ" is not much of a tale. The phenomenal success of his book is due rather to his adventure yarn about a fictional heroic prince, Judah Ben-Hur. Here, in the bulk of the novel, the author presents an improbable story of the Jewish patrician who is wrongly accused of attempting to assassinate the Roman governor of Judea. His immense fortune is confiscated by the greedy Romans, and Ben-Hur is sentenced to the galleys for life. His youth, outstanding strength, handsome physique, and regal bearing, however, impress the ship's owner, a Roman duumvir, to adopt him as his only son and heir shortly before he dies. Thus Ben-Hur becomes the richest man in the Roman Empire. He is additionally kind, incredibly handsome, astute in business, a champion swordsman, and the best charioteer in the world. The plot is crammed with dangerous deeds, secret dungeons, torture, romance, exotic Egyptians and Arabs, horses, camels, battles, a chariot race, revenge, counter-revenge, and piteous,

maudlin scenes. As if this weren't bad enough, there are offensive tales of slaves refusing their freedom in order to continue serving their beloved masters. Free Simonides even voluntarily became a servant in order to marry Rachel, who agreed to become his wife only if he "would become her fellow in servitude" (193).

The language Wallace employs is more stilted than archaic. Quoted speeches go on for many pages at a time. But the central problem of Ben-Hur is its total lack of credibility. There is no logical reason given for the crucifixion. Jesus is well-loved until he is betrayed. Then all at once he is sentenced and jeered at by the Jews. The heroic figures instantly convert to Christianity, also without motive other than wishing revenge upon the Romans. In sum, Ben-Hur adds nothing to an understanding of Jesus or the beginnings of Christianity. It is purely popular fluff with a religious attitude, far inferior to The Last Temptation of Christ, The Brook Kerith, and especially The Nazarene.

* * * * *

In its grandiose scope and realistic detail, Sholem Asch's The Nazarene is one of the best of the fictional biographies of Jesus Christ. It is especially

excellent in its vivid evocation of the entire Jewish vs. pagan world of some 2000 years ago. The portraits of ancient characters, such as Nicodemon, Simon Cyrene, Herod, Pontius Pilate, Tiberias, Herodias, the Jewish High Priests, Salome, John the Baptist, and countless others, are fully developed and very memorable. Asch's psychological insight into the character of Judas Ish-Kiriot is original, highly believable, and brilliant. The novelist's sympathetic portrait of women depicted during the patriarchal age of Jesus of Nazareth is also unprecedented. The mother of Jesus is especially finely drawn. She is womanly, not ethereal, full of love for her son, but unfortunately doomed to suffer because of him. (Asch expands her life and character further in Mary). Miriam of Migdal is so much more than a prostitute who reforms, as she is sketched in the New Testament. Asch describes her beauty and her baseness, her physicality and her spirituality.

His novel is the successful result of thirty years of study and thought about his subject. Asch pored over not only the New Testament and other ancient documents, but also over modern historical scholarship, which bears out his vindication of the Pharisees who are dealt with so harshly in the gospels.

Sholem Asch's The Nazarene provides many unforgettable images and scenes. Additionally, unlike

other novels, it reminds the reader that the early Christians were Jewish, and that the central morality of both religions derives from the same roots. Asch significantly and deliberately uses only the Hebrew name of Yeshua, which means "salvation." In its amount of detail and its panoramic vision, in its fine depiction of an ideal hero who is learned and gentle and kind, The Nazarene is a superior novel of the life of Jesus.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

Reputation theorists present convincing arguments demonstrating that writers' reputations have less to do with the intrinsic aesthetic merits of their works than with the extrinsic social, political, institutional, and cultural factors affecting them. Reception theory points to the significance of the audience of any given work. Indeed, the entire process by which reputations are made is no longer regarded as extraneous to literature, as it was during the New Critical period. "All the literary chit-chat which makes the reputations of poets boom and crash in an imaginary stock exchange" is "meaningless" criticism, says Northrop Frye in Anatomy of Criticism (18). This position, as well as "the notion of literature as an institution responsible only to itself," to use Leslie Fiedler's phrase (57), is no longer tenable. He notes that certain writers who are very highly regarded today, authors such as Pound, Eliot, Proust, Mann, and Joyce, were formerly considered "too trivial, ephemeral, obscure, obscene or eccentric" (60-61). In a telling example, Fielding, Sterne, Scott, the Brontes, and Dickens (except for Hard Times) were excluded from The Great Tradition by one of the guiding lights of New Criticism, F.R. Leavis.

The study of reputation is extremely vital because

it is central to the study of the making and unmaking of canons. The most reputable authors have their works anthologized, studied as masterpieces, and thus canonized, which in turn magnifies the writers' reputations. Furthermore, these authors who have achieved recognition, whose names are well known, are the ones whose works are repeatedly published and republished, partly out of quality, partly on the basis of some perceived commercial demand, and partly because of their current literary standing. Jerzy Kosinski's Steps, for example, had been published by Viking. The novel won the National Book Award in 1969 and sold more than 400,000 copies. But when the same manuscript was later submitted to Viking in the 1970s under another writer's name, it was rejected. Doris Lessing conducted a similar experiment, using the pseudonym Jane Somers. Somers's work was rejected; Lessing's of course was not. Viking published only one unsolicited fiction manuscript out of 130,000 submissions over 27 years. Random House published one manuscript out of 60,000-70,000 unsolicited entries (Rodden 58, 416).

It is common knowledge that advertisers, publishers, and corporations pay millions of dollars to create or change reputations. Market research supports the thesis that advertising does promote favorable public impressions. This factor, as well as political

and other factors, must be identified in any study of the dynamics of reputation. Because literary critics in previous decades have recoiled so rigidly from the possibility of committing any intentional or other "fallacies," they have overlooked the importance of any extrinsic information, however vital and relevant.

Recent scholarship has begun to demystify the process by which literary reputations are formed. For example, New Historicist critic Gary Taylor in Reinventing Shakespeare insists that Shakespeare owes his high regard in the field of letters principally to the fact that English became the most prevalent language. "Shakespeare's current international reputation is the fruit not of his genius but of the virility of British imperialism, which propagated the English language on every continent," he explains (380). In most of Central and South America, where English imperialism was not victorious, and Spanish remained the primary language, Shakespeare is not considered to be the foremost dramatist and poet, Taylor notes. "But the global currency of English has given him an insurmountable advantage, in the potential market for his words, over rival literary exports from France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Russia, Japan--not to mention ancient Athens and Rome" (380). And even Shakespeare, Taylor asserts, "is just as vulnerable to accidents of

war and shifts of ideology, just as helpless against the political power of a reigning orthodoxy." In other words, if the English revolution of the 1640s had turned out differently, if France had won the wars against Britain, if England had suffered cultural upheavals in the late eighteenth century as did the other nations, "then Shakespeare would almost certainly not have achieved or retained the dominance he now enjoys. . ." (379).

John Rodden, in The Politics of Literary Reputation, similarly discusses the reputation of Eric Blair, who became the renowned George Orwell mainly because of postwar cultural politics; specifically, the Cold War made Orwell's earlier writings more relevant and meaningful to his English-reading audience. "No reputation germinates in a value-free environment; all reputations flourish or perish in light of relations and access to power and influence," Rodden explains. Reputations are invariably "political," for they are entangled in ideological beliefs (xii).

The fortunes and the "strange fate" of William Faulkner have been subjected to such an investigation by Frederick Crews in the New York Review of Books, who also finds political reasons for the rise in Faulkner's reputation from obscurity to Nobel Prize laureate. Crews assserts that it was Malcolm Cowley who, by publishing

The Portable Faulkner, was the main stimulus for this spectacular shift. "But had he done so for objective aesthetic reasons?" questions Crews. The answer is no. In the 1930s, Cowley had joined the left's condemnation of Faulkner for being a narcissist and a nihilist. Cowley's "change of heart in the Forties had everything to do with his ideological somersault in the same period." To ex-Stalinist Cowley, Faulkner's abstention from political involvement in the Thirties, his complete indifference to the masses, suddenly "took on a Jamesian splendor in his eyes." He proceeded to give what had formerly been considered as Faulkner's guilt-ridden, slavery-haunted, bigoted, misogynistic South, an affectionate, "noteworthy makeover" (47).

Lawrence H. Schwartz published a full-length study of the issues involved in Faulkner's transformation in Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism. Schwartz addresses the topic of why Faulkner, in the Forties, was elevated, unjustly in his opinion, at the expense of more "social novelists" such as Richard Wright, Erskine Caldwell, and John Steinbeck. In the Thirties, Faulkner's sensationalist material, his open adultery, constant drunkenness, and moodiness did little to sway critics to embrace his works as humanistic and universal, as they would a decade later. In the postwar era, the blurring of old antagonisms

among political groups, including Agrarians and leftists, was essential to the acceptance of Faulkner's themes, which were rendered more attractive by a number of critics. At the same time, Faulkner's vast scope and complexity attracted a huge amount of attention. The result was an interpretation, or rather misinterpretation, of Faulkner's novels compatible with the dominant critical apolitical style of the universities. Faulkner, strangely enough, was praised for his "moral vision" and love of humanity. His reputation, without help from his texts, and to some extent in spite of his texts, inflated.

It is not only in literature that reputations shift according to circumstances or acts external to the work itself. Robert Kapsis, in his recent study Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation (1992), chronicles the changes in Hitchcock's reputation "from popular entertainer to distinguished auteur" (2). Kapsis affirms the impact of the director's avid self-promotion, which continued for decades; the importance of his television shows; "changing aesthetic standards on the critical acceptance of Hitchcock as a significant film artist" (2); and, very importantly, sponsorship by prominent members of the film community, especially Andrew Sarris in the United States and Francois Truffaut abroad. Theorists believe that Truffaut's book

Hitchcock, first published in 1967, "succeeded in persuading many film critics, scholars, and other members of the international film art-world that Hitchcock was a great artist" (69). Once established as an auteur, his reputation endured even after his death because there were enough important others who had a stake in preserving his reputation, especially those reissuing his films.

In Renaissance Revivals (1986), Wendy Griswold investigates revivals of City Comedies and Revenge Tragedies. A sociologist, like Kapsis, she is especially skilled in demonstrating the dependence of revival patterns to institutional and social conditions which interact with the thematic material of the plays themselves. She concludes that plays, although preserved because of their "theatrical and their literary power," become accessible for theatrical revival only in certain contexts. "They are revived disproportionately if they address some currently salient social concern shared by members of the audience" (210). The "social concern" helping to revive a play's popularity is, of course, unrelated to the aesthetic merits of the work.

Feminist critics, such as Jane Tompkins, and critics who study the arts of minority groups, are reexamining the traditional canons, highlighting

literary figures who, for various reasons, have been unfairly neglected, and they are researching the reasons. Although I do not agree with Tompkins's claims of the importance of Susan Warner's Wide, Wide World, she is to be commended for bringing to light the fact that most women "scribblers" were ignored for a century. It is important to ask the right questions about a writer's reputation: For what audience is the artist great, for which group is he insignificant? For what reasons?

The power and status of the author's linguistic community are also vital to the issue, as Taylor has shown. What, then, is the status of Yiddish and of Yiddish writers? Yiddish literature, as Howe and Greenberg point out, is

> virtually unknown to Americans. The reasons for this neglect are many: translations that are often inadequate, because done by devoted non-literary people, or are twisted into sentimentality, because done by translators whose attitude toward Yiddish is one of familiar condescension; a body of criticism in English that has seldom risen above the level of special pleading; and a curious resistance, if not indeed snobbish parochialism, among American literary people. There is, of course, another and more serious reason: the cultural distance between East European Jewry and Western Society is much larger than the distance, say, between American and French culture. (Intro. 1-2)

What is the status of Jewish writers? Cynthia

Ozick believes that works written by Jews simply do not survive, unless they deal with Judaism. "The fact is," she cynically states, "nothing thought or written in the Diaspora has ever been able to last unless it has been centrally Jewish. If it is centrally Jewish it will last for Jews" (168-69). On the other hand, writers like Bellow universalize the Jewish experience. Asch attempted to do this as well; in The Nazarene he succeeded.

Of what importance is the quality of translation? More than one critic has claimed, for example, that Maurice Samuel's elegant translations of many of Asch's works only improved the original, a claim which Samuel himself denied. Did he, however, help catapult Asch to fame in the English-speaking world? What is the significance of the fact that Asch, like I.B. Singer, has had a score of translators? (In addition to Samuel, James Fuchs, A.H. Gross, Isaac Goldberg, Norbert Guterman, Milton Hindus, Elsa Krauch, Joseph C. Landis, Meyer Levin, Willa and Edwin Muir, Moshe Spiegel, Leo Steinberg, and Arthur Saul Super have translated Asch from Yiddish to English.) Why did Carroll & Graf's recent reissue of The Nazarene neglect to mention the fact that it was translated, and neglect to credit Samuel? At the very least, translators give writers a new audience, a critical issue for a small linguistic

group.

There are of course numerous other matters that affect reputation. The dynamics of political affiliation and disaffiliation are important. When Asch's Nazarene was refused publication by the Socialist Forverts for which he had written many years, and it was also refused by the Warsaw Haynt which was struggling against intense antisemitism, Asch accepted the offers of Paul Novick, editor of the Communist Frayhayt, to have his works appear in that New York Yiddish daily. This act too changed his audience. It also subjected Asch to further resentment by many of his former Forverts readers, who were in a continuous bitter, ideological battle with the Frayhayt that has only begun to abate over the past two decades. Even Niger was aggravated by what he regarded as an unnecessary, even unethical, act on Asch's part to be published in the left-wing paper. The fascinating correspondence between Asch and Novick, by the way, is on file at the Beinecke Library. Novick is courteous and solicitious; Asch, on the other hand, repeatedly asks for his payments. The fees he was promised were insignifcant ($5 per page, for example); it is clear that Asch did not wish to gratuitously present his work to the Communists. Nevertheless, Asch paid for his political boundary-crossing, and not only in the Yiddish world, for in 1952

he was haled several times before Joseph McCarthy, Chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, to discuss his connection with the Frayhayt. Asch defended himself by answering that this was the only avenue open to him as Yiddish writer at the time. America, furthermore, was then in alliance with the Soviet Union (Paner 45-46).

Critics undoubtedly play a significant role in establishing a person's reputation. Lionel Trilling, according to John Rodden, was largely responsible for bolstering Orwell's fame in America. Cowley built up William Faulkner. Truffaut and Sarris promoted Hitchcock. For Sholem Asch, however, there was a constant carping and eventually an entire campaign launched against him by the powerful Abraham Cahan, editor of the Forverts, and by his employee Herman Lieberman. Both of these men devoted years to vilifying Asch. These mean-spirited actions were concommitant with the building up of Asch's reputation among English readers by English-language critics, such as Fadiman, Cournos, Jack, Bates, Kazin, and Rahv.

Many writers help construct their own reputations. Ernest Hemingway most readily comes to mind; he was quite aggressive in building his own self-image. Norman Mailer, in Advertisements for Myself (1959), deliberately cast himself as Hemingway's successor.

Sholem Asch too attempted to enhance his own prestige. What I Believe (1941), for example, was a bold display of knowledge obviously made to revert charges, often made against him by some Yiddish writers, that he was unscholarly. Richard Schickel, in Intimate Strangers, asserts that celebrities did not really exist until the advent of television. Nevertheless, there were of course famous people before 1950, and they were able to increase their popularity, as did Asch, with numerous newspaper interviews, publicized appearances, and the like.

Psychoanalytic critics further explore the layers of a writer's reputation. The human dimension, the interplay between emotions and production, and between people, is important. Asch was evidently often egotistical and self-aggrandizing. He loved to receive awards and prizes. "He loved to feel that he is being noted, that people see him, talk about him. . . . Asch had. . . . a weakness for titles, the rich, and. . . Gentiles" (Madison 243). As noted earlier, the writer was awarded the order of *Polonia Restituta* by Pilsudki's Polish government. Asch accepted the medal, and even wore it in his lapel for a while. He yearned for the Nobel Prize, for which he was nominated in 1933 and again in 1944. Asch's editor at Putnam's, Earl Balch, detected antisemitism in Stockholm. "I know that one

member I talked to was in frequent correspondence with Hitler," he reported (qtd. by Siegel 170). All these factors altered Asch's literary reputation, positively among English readers, but negatively among the Yiddish audience.

A vital issue, extraneous to the text but central to the whole subject of Sholem Asch's reputation, was the Holocaust. Asch was condemned by many Jews for writing The Nazarene, The Apostle, and Mary, as well as other stories and treatises dealing with Christianity, during the Jews' worst period in history. While Jesus had been a somewhat popular subject for decades by the Jewish avant-garde, virtually all of the Yiddish writers abandoned Christian themes by the late 1930s, when they sensed the utter non-chalance and even malicious hostility of the western world towards Jewry. Sholem Asch, on the other hand, doggedly pursued the themes engulfing him either because of, as he later claimed, or in spite of the apocalypse enflaming the Jewish people. And though these themes, popular in American culture at the time, enabled him to reach a wide audience in translation, his reputation in the Yiddish world suffered the consequences.

* * * *

There are many different perspectives from which to assess the reputation of Sholem Asch. As a Yiddish writer, he was a master of the short story, a romanticist, a realist, a dramatist, a melodramatic writer, an intimate and sentimental artist of the shtetl, a portrayer of the international scene, an historical novelist, a pursuer of themes of messianism and salvation, and the author of more than 50 published works, including Der Tilim Yid, the quintessential Jewish novel. Asch was also a widely translated writer, the first Yiddish author to become internationally renowned. In English, Asch's reputation rests largely upon his later works, those written partially or entirely in America, all of which became bestsellers as well as recipients of critical acclaim. Specifically, Asch became known in the United States for being the author of The Nazarene, The Apostle, Mary, East River, and Moses.

Sholem Asch is an ideal subject for a study in reputation because he represented two antagonistic selves, one the polar extreme of the other. His novel The Nazarene was interpreted in different ways by different audiences. Stanley Fish's documentation of alternative readings of "Lycidas" is not nearly as startling as the investigation of the various, completely opposite, themes found in Asch's novel. Ab

Cahan, dictatorial editor of the Forverts, as well as his underling Chaim Lieberman, roused Asch's former Yiddish readers into regarding the novelist as a dangerous and vile missionary. Without a Yiddish text, for the powerful Cahan saw to it for four years that no publisher accept the novel, even Asch's most devoted fans had no resources to combat the ridiculous charges. Asch was ostracized, criticized, physically attacked, and threatened with excommunication by Yiddish and Orthodox Jewish groups.

On the other hand, the same Sholem Asch, author of the same Nazarene, was lauded by such Jewish-American critics as Alfred Kazin and Philip Rahv. With Maurice Samuel's ably translated text in hand, they praised Asch's profoundly Jewish novel, and openly scoffed at the parochial Yiddish writers who believed Asch's sole intentions were to convert Jews to Christianity. Christian-American critics also appreciated The Nazarene for its historical accuracy, its beauty, and its insight into the character of Jesus and early Christianity.

I approached the study of Sholem Asch and The Nazarene from an eclectic point of view involving both textual documentation, comparative analyses, and cultural/historical factors tangential to the novel. In sum, I attribute the plunge in Asch's reputation among the Yiddish population following publication of The

Nazarene to two main components: Ab Cahan's war against Sholem Asch, which resulted in the lack of a Yiddish text for years, and the tragic chronological coincidence of The Nazarene appearing the same time as the Holocaust. The novelist's nonfictional ecumenical schemes, his commercial and critical successes which induced envy among other writers, his history of antagonizing Jewish readers, his arrogance and other disagreeable personality traits, all aided in turning public opinion, within most of the Yiddish-speaking community, against the giant in Yiddish literature.

Ab Cahan, who had been waiting for years for a pretense to assert his absolute power over Asch, found his golden opportunity with the publication of The Nazarene, a novel Cahan had already told Asch he would not feature, and that Asch should not even dare to write. The phenomenally popular and critical success of The Nazarene in translation no doubt made Cahan even more determined to destroy Asch's reputation; in the Yiddish world, he still had the capabilities and means to carry out his whims. Because of Asch's immense stature among Yiddish readers, and because of Cahan's growing need for domination, the editor's campaign became bitter, ruthless, and prolonged.

Essentially, Cahan's contest with Asch was a popular victory for the aging editor because The

Nazarene, although written in Yiddish by a consummate Yiddish novelist, was made to seem offensive to its Yiddish audience at the time it was published, due to Cahan's effective campaign. Cahan had the powerful Forverts at his disposal, which he shamelessly exploited in denouncing Asch.

The illustrious novelist, on the other hand, was just as stubbornly unrelenting as was Cahan. After The Nazarene came numerous defenses, explanations, and other works employing Christian themes, including What I Believe; East River, depicting a Jewish-Catholic intermarriage; stories like "Kristus in geto" [Christ in the ghetto]; The Apostle: A Novel Based on the Life of Saint Paul; and Mary, idealizing the mother of Jesus. Asch gleefully wrote his wife in 1949 of the enormous interest expressed over his manuscript of Mary, which would soon be published in English translation in 100,000 copies:

> The little Yiddish writers in the Forverts and other papers thought already that they've killed me, that they yelled and silenced me away. This book will fall like a bomb among them. They'll hear again from Sholem Asch! In the choir of screams my voice will be the highest heard in history. (Briv 149-51)

Indeed, Asch's opponents were forced to choke back their anger once more as Mary became the third bestseller in the nation. Most of their rage, however, had already been spent on The Nazarene.

It should be noted that Hebrew historian Joseph Klausner, author of Jesus of Nazareth and From Jesus to Paul, was, like Asch after him, attacked as an apostate, a heretic, and a missionary. While it was clear that most of the criticism came from readers who "merely skimmed the pages," hundreds of articles in 12 different languages appeared condemning Klausner, reports Kling. "Some extremists accused Klausner of being in the pay of missionaries and seeking to convert Jews. . . " (93).

Marc Chagall was also criticized by Yiddish groups for his many crucifixion scenes, and for his stained glass windows in the cathedrals of Metz, Reims, and Zurich. He, like Asch and Klausner, was accused of having converted to Christianity. Jacob Glatstein and Yiddish journalist S.L. Shneiderman often attacked Chagall for his disproportionate number of gifts to Christian edifices. Shneiderman, writing in the Forverts and Midstream, would rebuke the artist with such caustic remarks as "Perfectly understandable. . . . Cathedrals are for eternity. Synagogues are for burning" (qtd. by Alexander 475).

Chagall and Sholem Asch were two of a very small number of well-known Jewish personalities who continued to be sympathetic to the Jesus-ideal after the Holocaust. Asch went on to write The Apostle and Mary. Chagall, until his death in 1985, revelled in stained-

glass windows celebrating Christian themes. Even though the United Nations headquarters in New York has a policy of avoiding the display of any religious symbolism from any denomination, Chagall presented, as a gift, the Dag Hammorskjold Memorial Window, in which there is a crucifixion scene. The artist, however, outlived the writer by some thirty years. Although Chagall is still criticized by some Jews, his magnificent windows in the Hadassah Hospital, his continuing stature in the world of art, and the passage of time, have all helped to diminish the hostility against him.

Sholem Asch died in 1957, surviving Ab Cahan by only six years. The psychological and physical ravages of the Holocaust were still raw wounds among Jews in the Fifties. The very slow healing process that will have to continue over many more future generations had only just begun. The obituaries were full of praise for the famous author. Yet Sholem Asch has not yet regained his rightful place as a tremendous pioneer and master in Yiddish literature, and as one of its greatest, if not the greatest, of its novelists. The Nazarene, though not without flaws, is a fascinating, imaginative work of fiction. I would speculate that not a single Jew rushed off to be baptized after having read it. It is, in fact, as Kazin indicated, a Jewish interpretation of the life of Jesus. More than that, it

is a marvelous recreation of Jewish life occurring some two thousand years ago in the territory that is now Israel. Sholem Asch, unlike the postmodern meta-novelist, believed that the high function of the literary artist was to envision transcendent order and wisdom, and to present this ideal to his readers. He accomplished this goal to a great extent in The Nazarene. The intrinsic merits of the novel were unrelated to the downfall of Sholem Asch's reputation among his Yiddish audience. Though Asch was prone to provocation, The Nazarene, like Sholem Asch's whole public stature, was a victim of other circumstances, both unfortunate and tragic, over which Asch had little control.

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The venomous attack on Sholem Asch by much of his Yiddish audience, an audience who had formerly revered him, is an extreme example of the problematic and conditional nature of reputation. No matter how talented, no matter how highly regarded or famous they may be, people can, nevertheless, be undone for any number of sociological, political, religious, or cultural reasons. Although these factors affecting reputation may sometimes be marginal to aesthetic issues, they are actually central to the way literary works are received.

Ezra Pound, for example, spent the war years broadcasting Pro-Fascism in Italy. He was a fan of both Mussolini and Hitler. When, in 1949, the jury for the prestigious Bollingen Award elected Pound winner for the Pisan Cantos, some of which contain antisemitic remarks, a controvery erupted. The New York Intellectuals, a group consisting of Irving Howe, Philip Rahv, Meyer Schapiro, and Clement Greenberg, were scandalized. They agreed, as did Karl Shapiro, the one Bollingen judge to vote against Pound, that "the poet's political and moral philosophy ultimately vitiates his poetry and lowers its standard as a literary work" (Howe, Margin 154-55). Pound kept the prize, but his reputation suffered nonetheless. Similarly, the discovery of Paul de Man's youthful collaborationist articles have had a serious impact on this important critic's reputation.

Other reputations have been damaged by deliberate, contrived campaigns. The campaign of Cahan and Lieberman against Asch has been eclipsed by Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1989 announcement that Salman Rushdie, author of The Satanic Verses, as well as all who were involved in its publication and were aware of its contents, were sentenced to death. In the Fifties, many victims of Joseph McCarthy's Communist hunts, while almost always innocent of the political subversion of which they were accused, nevertheless

found themselves blacklisted and sometimes ruined professionally.

A reputation can be built up through publicity and the same seemingly extraneous sociological, political, religious, or cultural factors that effect a negative image. The dominance of English was a lucky advantage to add to Shakespeare's genius. George Orwell's success was partly political, while Faulkner's acclaim was partially due to his apolitical stance. Hitchcock was fortunate in that he had influential promoters.

Qualities affecting reputation, though rooted in everyday experience, are continually shifting and are often difficult to predict. Asch knew he risked antagonizing his Yiddish audience with his novel about Jesus. Yet it would have been virtually impossible for him to predict the enormity of the hatred that would be drummed up against him. Nor could he have foreseen, in 1939, the tragic extent of the death camps which culminated in the murder of millions of Yiddish speakers, a catastrophe whose horrors were not fully documented until after 1945.

Reputation is protean, ever mutable, slippery, ungraspable, often elusive. Modern literary criticism has acknowledged that no literary work can be objectively appraised. A text must be studied within

its historical and cultural context. The concentration of meaning is embedded within the text itself, but the context of the work and the reception by its audience are significant factors in how a work is understood and valued. This instability must be extended to the area of reputation studies as well. The causes of a rise or fall in a writer's standing may be multiple and complex, as in Asch's instance; they may or may not be easily identifiable.

The shift in Sholem Asch's reputation in the Yiddish world was not due to the actual text of The Nazarene, which was falsely accused of being a proselytizing tome. Instead, the the author's decline eminence among a large part of his former Yiddish audience was caused by significant historical, cultural, and personal variables. Asch's example serves as a specific, clear prototype of the ups and downs of a writer's reputation and of the kinds of determinants that can affect it.

Asch's contributions to Yiddish literature were staggering both in quantity and quality. He was the first to bring an idyllic quality into a literature that had previously been somewhat negative, the first to have his plays produced internationally, the first to excel in the historical romance, the first to move artistically outside the shtetl and depict the world at

large. His writing was at once poetic and prosaic, detailed and panoramic, realistic and romantic. In the period between the world wars, Asch was the most popular Yiddish writer in the world. His translated works and the prizes they received brought great prestige to Yiddish literature. He composed some of its best short stories and novellas, including "Dos shtetl," "Reb Shloyme nogid" [wealthy Shloyme], and "Di kishuf-makherin fun Kastilyen" [witch of Castile]. He was an important playwright who wrote God of Vengeance and other highly regarded dramas. He also published scores of novels, the best of which are the trilogy Three Cities, Tilim Yid [psalm Jew], which is probably the most beloved novel in all of Yiddish literature, The Nazarene, and East River.

Any serious student of Yiddish literature must acknowledge the integral part that Asch played in its development. His writing, to be sure, was far from impeccable. His earlier novels and dramas show, at times, a lack of cohesion; many of his characters are superficial; many plot details are inconsistent; there is often a lack of meticulous craftsmanship. More distracting to the modern reader than Asch's stylistic errors is his continual blend of melodrama with realism. Yet Sholem Asch's importance in Yiddish literature is greater than the sum of his many works, a number of

which are quite excellent. When Asch commenced his literary career at the turn of the century, Yiddish was not recognized as a legitimate language. Even through the 1930s, it was widely regarded as a folk patois. There was no country that claimed Yiddish as its official language, nor was it considered a vehicle capable of expressing "high" cultural thoughts and artistic literature. Sholem Asch was largely responsible for the international acceptance of Yiddish. It was his fame and success that paved the way for I.B. Singer, who was awarded the Nobel Prize.

Many members of the generation who remember the attacks against Asch still think of him as a convert, whose later works ought not to be read. A few others, infected with an academic snobbishness, have disdained to seriously consider the value of the popular author. Still other Jews, especially those survivors from Europe who were not influenced by the Forverts, have always revered Asch. Any examination of modern Yiddish literature reveals that Asch is a central figure, quite as important as Sholem-Aleichem or Y.L. Peretz had been before him. It was Asch who escaped parochialism and opened up new avenues of thematic material, and it was Asch who helped Yiddish literature achieve international recognition.

The Nazarene was one of Asch's best works. Now

that the heat and fury of the old charges against him have expired, I am quite hopeful that the reputation of Sholem Asch will once again regain its earlier eminence, for he was one of the greatest masters in Yiddish literature, and an important contributor to world literature.

A Note on Standardization of Spelling, Transliteration, and Translation

I have used spellings employed by the Library of Congress for authors' names. Although Sholem Asch will sometimes be printed as "Shalom" Asch or other variations, I will, for expediencey, use the Library of Congress designation with the variant in parentheses in the Bibliography. I have, however, listed the critic Samuel Charney under his more prominent pseudonym: Shmuel (Sh.) Niger.

I have complied with the system of transliteration provided by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. In transliteration of Yiddish to English, it is standard practice to capitalize only the initial letter of the first word.

I have translated or annotated entries wherever necessary. Unless otherwise indicated in the Bibliography, translations occurring throughout both text and Works Employed are my own.

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