

QUESTIONS THAT PAINTINGS POSE—1

BY BRUNO ALBER

Rabbi Jesus on the Run

In 2017 a Jewish friend gave me a book as a present: "Behold the Man: Jesus in Israeli Art" (a book that accompanied the exhibition of the same title in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem). He knows of my iconographic passion, especially for images that deal with the relationship between Jews and Christians. In this book of images and commentaries, I found this deeply disconcerting picture by Samuel Hirszenberg entitled: "The Eternal Jew" of 1899.

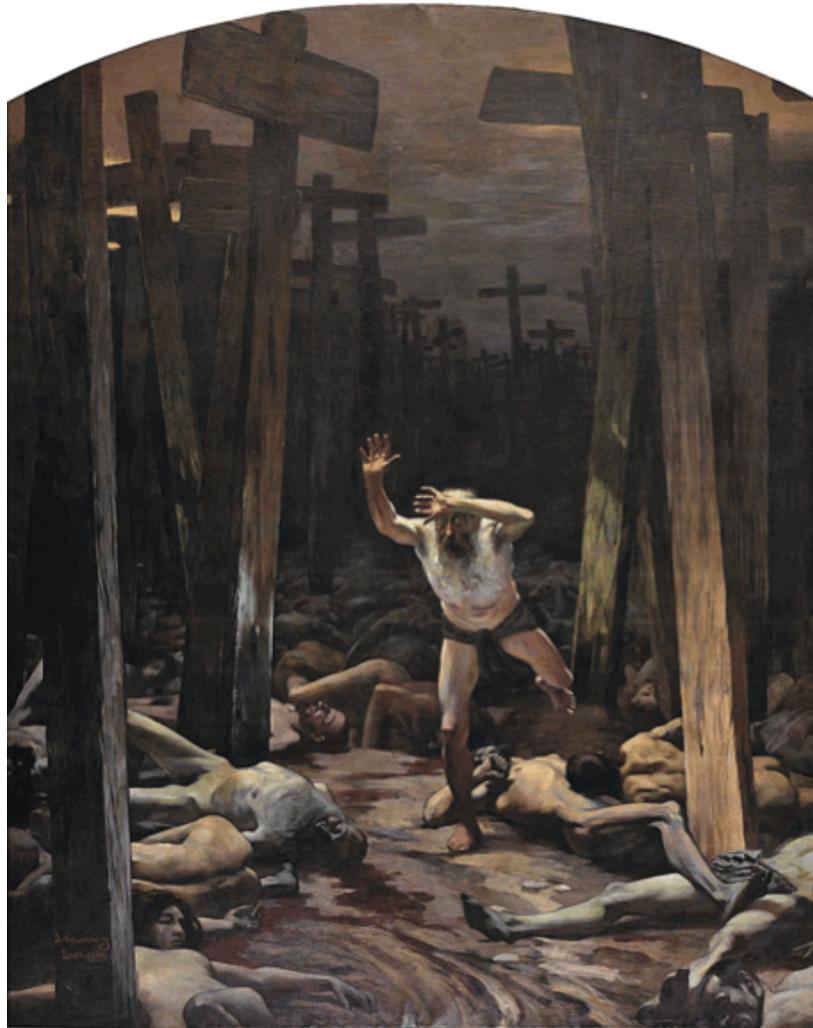


Fig. 1: "The eternal Jew," 1899, (343 x 293 cm), Jerusalem, Israel Museum
<https://paintingvalley.com/the-wandering-jew-painting#the-wandering-jew-painting-9.jpg>.

To my shame, I must confess that I was not aware of either the painter or the picture. Which in turn casts a light on how large the Blind Spot in German perception still is, despite ...

With this oil painting we wish to open a small cycle, with the intention of illuminating a smouldering wound on the body of the Church. For only in perceiving and looking unsparingly at a catastrophic injury, can the first step to healing be taken.

What does the picture show us, painted in the form and size of an altarpiece?

At first inspection we find a hardly decipherable chaos. The observer is confronted with an unfathomable grove full of oversized crosses, the ground covered with those slain who lie in their blood. Above this an evening sky, which no longer endures letting any light shine to clarify the event. From this forest of abominations, a man hurdles forward, his eyes wide open; he is naked, with only his loincloth on, like the one Jesus had on the cross. He is running for his life, in fear and panic, driven like an endlessly harassed animal. He is rather staggering than running. Will he stumble with the next step, or even fall on one of the corpses that lie in his path?

He is staggering under the cone of a spotlight that snatches him and his surroundings from the world of shadows in an undefined way. Against the glaring light he raises his left hand protectively above his eyes, fixating the viewer, as his other hand is stretched helplessly upwards—like a drowning person.

Even more than the first impression of this expressive scenery, we are struck and distraught in a deeper way, by what seems to have sprung from a nightmare, shock frozen in an endless loop. Even before we are able to ask, we are engulfed by something that does not fit, that does not allow us to join things together. The deeper we want to push our way into the picture, the more it blocks our understanding. Who and where are the murderers of those slain here? And from which crucifixion did the naked rabbi escape? He bears portrait-like features of the painter himself and will reappear in a later horror painting, in the "Black Banner"¹ (compare fig. 2 and fig. 3).

¹ The title of the picture refers to an Antisemitic terror group in Russia that represents pogroms and expulsions.



Fig. 2: Detail from "The Eternal Jew" of 1899.



Fig. 3: Detail from "The Black Banner" of 1905.
View this object at thejewishmuseum.org

Let us put aside the realistic approach, which only describes the surface, and listen to the voices beyond the logic of everyday life. Perhaps a visionary who is able to interpret the signs of the times correctly, manages to combine the different parts in such a way that a new reality will emerge?

There is, first of all, the title of the picture: "The Eternal Jew," which evokes a wealth of imaginations, all the stories about the man who cannot die, who is cursed to eternal wanderings through time, who has been coming and going through the forest of legends under many and very different names, since the 13th century. In the early stories, he is still a Roman soldier who did not allow Jesus to rest on his way of the cross and whom he therefore condemned to this fate.

When this primitive—though gladly heard—story that gives you the creeps appeared in print in 1602, the Roman soldier had long since become a Jewish cobbler by the name of Ahasverus,² who lived in Jesus' time and had done everything to discredit this teacher of a false doctrine. Ahasverus was the one who had stirred up the priests and the high council and who, at the trial under Pontius Pilate, had become the instigator of the calls for crucifixion. He was the one who then, at the decisive point, had refused to allow him who dragged his cross to pause and catch his breath under his door; at this point the curse of Jesus is supposed to have occurred: "I will stand and rest, but you shall go," etc.

² Known in other countries as Isaac Laquedem, Paul Marrane, Buttadeus, etc.

The romantic enthusiasm of the 19th century for all the unreal moments of life gratefully absorbed this material. There are numerous serious revisions or variations of this motif in literature, music and works of the fine arts. For example one by Gustave Doré (1832–1883), who in 1856 created twelve large-format wood engravings for "La Légende du Juif Errant" (The Legend of the Wandering Jew). These engravings illustrate the poem by Pierre-Jean Béranger (1780–1857) and were distributed worldwide.

It is easy to see how these works of art were also used to serve anti-Semitism and spread anti-Semitic clichés among the people.



Fig. 4: Three engravings by G. Doré for "La Légende du Juif Errant," 1856.

Folio I: Ahasverus refuses Jesus a rest

Folio II: The eternal Jew with the cross on his path

Folio III: Ahasverus at the cemetery

Both the reader who was formed by the Church and liberal citizens on the other hand saw in the wandering Jewish cobbler an image of the Jews par excellence, as Constantin Frantz (1817–1891)³ wrote in his essay on the emancipation of the Jews, "Ahasverus or the Jewish Question," in 1844:

*"The Jewish people themselves are the eternal Jew. They rejected the Savior, and so they have been scattered over the entire earth and find no rest anywhere. They want to mingle with the nations and in this way kill off their own life as a people, and cannot manage to do so."*⁴

3 C. Franz was a prominent publisher who disparagingly called the empire that Bismarck created "The German empire of the Jewish nation."

4 Cited from Alex Bein, *Die Judenfrage* (The Jewish Question), Volume 1: *Annotations, Digressions, Register*, Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1980, p.4

Furthermore—

If you place the path of the painter's own short life under the picture of the Eternal Jew, the enigmatic allusions get clearer contours.

Shmuel Hirszenberg—the name was transposed into German as Samuel Hirschenberg—came from a poor Jewish working class family. He was born in 1865 in Lodz, located in the part of Poland that was annexed by Tsarist Russia. His artistic talent was already noticed when he was a pupil, but his parents could neither afford nor imagine an academic education for him. It was made possible however by the help of several patrons. At the age of 15 he began to study art. He first went to Krakow to the Academy of Fine Arts, later to Munich, and in 1891 he completed his studies at the Academie Colarossi in Paris with distinction. There—like a sponge—he absorbed the most modern painting styles, processed them, developed them further and reproduced them in his own unique way.

From his parents' home he brought a pious Judaism with him into his years of apprenticeship, as his early paintings show. This imprint gradually gave way to emancipatory views that were strongly imbued with socialist ideas, which he found in the “Bund,” a Jewish political workers' movement that was active primarily in the Russian-Polish area.

His Yiddishness, however, caught up with him in another way: in anti-Semitism, which he encountered first in its Polish-Catholic version, then in the German-“Völkisch” (*folky*) manner and finally in its French version. All three had one thing in common: contempt for the Jews. In this way Samuel Hirszenberg learned to read between the lines.



Fig. 5: "The destruction of Jerusalem by Titus," 1846, Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1805–1874), in oil (585 x 705cm), Neue Pinakothek, Munich https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kaulbach_Zerstörung_Jerusalem_durch_Titus.jpg). Fig. 6: Detail of the painting, lower left corner

He saw through both the hypocrisy of many Catholic and Protestant Christians and the false bottom of the seemingly enlightened educated middle classes. In Munich's Neue Pinakothek, he will have stood stunned before the crown jewel of the collection, the "Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus" (Fig. 5), which was on display there since the museum opened in 1853. Painted by Wilhelm von Kaulbach in 1846, it was purchased for the collection by King Ludwig I for the price of 35,000 gold ducats (a record sum at the time!).

And in Paris he not only saw the 12-part series of Doré's "The Wandering Jew." In Munich, the detail (Fig. 6) with the eternal Jew will not have escaped his notice either. That this contempt for everything that is Jewish did not remain just an intellectual speculation, was drastically demonstrated to him by the pogroms of his Eastern European homeland, to which he returned after his studies (in 1891).

The bitter experiences he had gathered over the years coagulated in 1899 in the painting "The Eternal Jew," which he had been working on for a long time and which was now completed. He exhibited it, first in his Polish homeland, then in the Parisian "Salon," where it even won a prize, but found no buyer. (The jurors in Munich and Berlin were even able to prevent the presentation of the painting in their respective cities.)

Hirszenberg painfully realized the incompatibility of his previous environment with his existence. And also that the hope for a political solution in Europe is tantamount to a utopia. From the socialist "Bundist," a Zionist had matured. From now on, his only concern was the question: How can his Aliyah be realized? In October 1907 the time had come: He received an invitation to teach the painting class at the Bezalel School of Art in Jerusalem. Now at last he can emigrate.

He had brought along his painting. Barely a year after his arrival in Jerusalem, on September 15, 1908, he died, exhausted. As a man who was saved, who had escaped the Forest of Crosses.

Nevertheless what Joseph Roth confided to his diary on the occasion of the so-called massacre of Hebron and Safed (Israel) in August 1929 remains valid. In this pogrom, some 87 Jews were killed by incited Arabs. His immediate reaction to this was to go to the former Berlin ghetto in the area of Grenadier Street. He noted:

"In the days when the Jews were killed in Palestine, I went to Grenadier Street, not to Jerusalem. I had the feeling that it was important to be close to the bereaved, closer than to the dead. [...] It is not only in Jerusalem that there is a Wailing Wall. Grenadier Street is made of Wailing Walls. The punishing hand visibly weighs

heavily on the bent backs of the people. Of all the thousands of paths that it has taken, that it still takes today and will continue to take, not a single one is a way out; not a single one is the path to a concrete goal on earth. Not to a 'home of the fathers,' not to a 'home,' not to a 'place of refuge,' not to any 'freedom.' [...] Where a Jew halts his step, a Wailing Wall arises. Wherever a Jew settles, a pogrom arises."