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“HOW JEWS SEE JESUS”:  
CHRISTIAN REFERENCES IN AMOS OZ’S NOVEL *JUDAS*

In 2014 the prominent and internationally known Israeli novelist Amos Oz<sup>1</sup> published a successful book, which raised interesting reflections about the Christian-Jewish relations. *Judas*<sup>2</sup> tells the story of a young student from Jerusalem whose research focuses on “the way Jews deal with the Christian History and Jesus”.

Until the early decades of the twentieth century Christianity has been the subject of several controversial books written by Jewish authors. These works emerged in the European diaspora where Jews represented a religious, social and cultural minority; as a consequence, they usually expressed the need to defend Judaism and its values from the danger of anti-Semitic propaganda. This situation changed by the end of the Second World War when an increasing number of thinkers devoted their attention to the figure of Jesus and to the relations between Christian and Jews trying to promote a mutual understanding. In 1948 the French historian Jules Isaac published his volume *Jesus and Israel*, one of the first books that deeply analyses the Christians-Jewish relations. After the Second Vatican Council, a great series of publications concerning the same topic appeared: *Jesus My Brother* (1967) by Shalom Ben Chorin, *Jesus* (1969) and *The Last Days of Jesus in Jerusalem* (1980) by David Flusser, *The Rabbi from Nazareth* (1974) and *Joseph's son?* (1976) by Pinchas Lapide<sup>3</sup>.

The intent of this article is to focus on Christian elements as portrayed in Israeli fiction, with particular reference to Oz’s last novel. I will take literary creation in

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<sup>1</sup> Amos Oz is one of the most known contemporary Israeli authors. He was born in Jerusalem in 1939 but moved to the Kibbutz Hulda at age 15 where he worked in agriculture. His parents were both Zionists who migrated to Palestine from Eastern Europe. Since 1986 Oz lives in Arad, in the Negev desert, and teaches at Ben-Gurion University. Oz has published novels, short stories, essays, and books for children and youth and numerous articles about the Israeli-Arab conflict. He is one of the leading figures in the Peace Now movement. Oz has received many honours and awards and his work has been published in more than fifty countries.

<sup>2</sup> A. Oz, *Ha-besora 'al pi Yehuda* (The Gospel according to Judas), Jerusalem: Keter 2014. English edition: *Judas*, London: Chatto & Windus 2016.

<sup>3</sup> J. Sievers, *Gesù di Nazareth visto da scrittori ebrei del XX secolo*, “Tertium millennium”, November (1997), pp. 48-53.

order to investigate the Jewish approach to Christianity focusing on the following questions: How do Jewish authors deal with it? What is their attitude towards Jesus? Are Christian components just part of their creative production or do they express their own experience?

Since the beginning of Modern Hebrew literature<sup>4</sup>, writers of fiction didn't show a great interest towards Christianity. Their main concern was to revive Hebrew Language and to promote a national identity among the Jewish people. Sometimes Christian characters appeared in their literary works, often with a very marginal role, but the theological and spiritual aspects were completely ignored<sup>5</sup>. However, starting from 1920s, many Jewish intellectuals, who then became the cultural leaders of Pre-State Israel, turned their attention to Christianity. Important authors of the time, such as Uri Zvi Greenberg<sup>6</sup> and Hayyim Brenner<sup>7</sup>, showed a great interest for the figure of Jesus and his message. In most cases, they absorbed Christian ideas and symbols through the influence they received from Russian literature that actually represented their main contact with non-Jewish culture<sup>8</sup>. Other examples can be found in the Hebrew poetry, which emerged in the same period<sup>9</sup>.

In the late forties the Israeli Nobel Prize S.Y. Agnon<sup>10</sup> started to write *Shira*<sup>11</sup>, one of his greatest novel. Throughout his life, the writer was able to complete and

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to authors who started to revive literature in Hebrew language from the late eighteenth century. See R. Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose*, Seattle: University of Washington Press 1988. This article does not include Yiddish writers. For an examinations of both Hebrew and Yiddish authors who wrote on the topic see H. Bar-Yosef, *Jewish-Christian Relations in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature: A Preliminary Sketch*, in: E. Kessler and M. J. Wright (eds.), *Themes in Jewish-Christian Relations*, Cambridge: Orchard Academic 2005, pp. 109-150.

<sup>5</sup> H. Bar-Yosef, *Jewish-Christian Relations in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature: A Preliminary Sketch*.

<sup>6</sup> Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896-1981) was an Israeli poet and intellectual who immigrated to Palestine from Galicia in 1923. For the Christian references in his works see: N.H. Rosenblum, *Ha-'antititui ha-te'ologit-historit she-ba-natsrut Be-shirat Uri Zvi Greenberg* (The Theological-Historical Christian Antithesis in Uri Zvi Greenber's Poetry), "Prakim" 4, (1966), pp. 263 – 320.

<sup>7</sup> Yosef Hayyim Brenner (1881-1921) was a Russian born writer. He immigrated to Palestine in 1909 and was considered one of the founding fathers of the Hebrew Literature. He wrote about the issue of Christianity in several articles and essays he published during his short life.

<sup>8</sup> H. Bar-Yosef, *Jewish-Christian Relations in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature: A Preliminary Sketch*.

<sup>9</sup> R. Kartun-Blum, *Ma atem hoshvim – she'ani Elohim? Bein shirato shel Natan Zach la-brit ha-hadasha* (What do you think – that I am god? N. Zach's poetry and the New Testament), "Keshet ha-hadasha"<sup>3</sup> (Spring 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Winner of the Noble Prize in Literature in 1966, S.Y. Agnon (1888-1970) is among the most popular Hebrew authors of all the time. He was born as Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes in Buczacz (Galicia) to a family, which was both traditional and modern. His father was very religious while his mother used to teach him European Literature. Agnon began to write in both Hebrew and Yiddish at the age of eight and started to publish when he was fifteen. He left Buczacz in January 1907 for Jaffa and stopped writing in Yiddish. By that time, he had published around seventy pieces in Hebrew and Yiddish. In 1908 he published his first story in *Eretz Israel, Agunot* (Forsaken Souls), using the

publish only a few chapters of the book, before deciding to abandon it once he became ill. The unfinished text was then partially completed and published by the author's daughter in 1971<sup>12</sup>, one year after his death. *Shira* was particularly appreciated and became a very popular reading. The story takes place in Jerusalem in the 30's, during the Arab riots. The protagonist is Manfred Hebrst, a middle-aged lecturer of Byzantine History at the Hebrew University. Immigrated to Palestine from Germany, he is married to Henrietta but his familiar life, as well as his academic carrier, has become too much boring. He has only one refuge: to spend days and nights wandering in the streets of Jerusalem searching for Shira, the charming nurse he met at a hospital years before. The references to Christianity emerge through the main character's field of study, which focuses on the burial practices of the poor during the Byzantium Empire and among the Church fathers. In particular, the interest in Christian religion is witnessed by Professor Herbst's attraction to monastic life, defined as an escape from the existential questions that torment the different characters of the novels. Agnon seems to intersect Christian and Jewish elements when talking about monasticism, which is often related and equated to the Essean ethos<sup>13</sup>. Christian asceticism and spirituality are considered a form of change for a better and more ethical life. For this reason they represent a threat for Jewish Nationalism as demonstrated in the novel by the case of Priest Shikerson, a Jewish Apostate, who decided to convert to Christianity because he disapproves the concept of "the chosen people", which he believes to be an anti-ethical principle.

Agnon's interest towards Christianity is also reflected in another story, *In Mr Lublin's Shop*<sup>14</sup>, a sort of autobiographical tale portraying the life of the author while living in Leipzig during World War I. In the German city he used to meet four old Christians who inhabited his neighbourhood. These characters seem to have a mythological dimension and share with Agnon the Old Testament values.

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pseudonym Agnon, which then became his official family name. In 1913 he left Eretz Israel for Germany where he married Esther Marx from which he had two children. Agnon first worked as private teacher and editor but after the fortunate meeting with a wealthy Jewish businessman, the publisher Zalman Schocken, he could devote all his time to the literary career. He became a member of a circle of Hebrew writers in Hamburg and collaborated with Martin Buber on a collection of Hassidic stories. In 1924 because of a fire that burnt his home, all his books and manuscripts were destroyed. He then returned to Jerusalem where he lived until his death in 1970. Several of his works were published posthumously. In addition to the 1966 Nobel Prize for Literature Agnon received numerous literary awards, including the Israel Prize. His works influenced almost all the later generations of Hebrew authors.

<sup>11</sup> S.Y. Agnon, *Shira*, Jerusalem: Schocken 1971. English edition: *Shira*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> The original Hebrew version was edited by Agnon's daughter, Emunah Yaron, including two very different endings written by the author.

<sup>13</sup> H. Weiss, *Notes on Christians and Christianity in Agnon's writings* in: M. Poorthuis, J. Schwartz and J. Turner (eds.), *Interactions between Judaism and Christianity*, in *History, Religion, Art and Literature*, Leiden and Boston: Brill 2009, pp. 511-526.

<sup>14</sup> S.Y. Agnon, *Be-hanuto shel Mar Lublin (In Mr. Lublin's Shop)*, Jerusalem: Schocken 1974.

Despite his estimations of Christian norms and devoutness, his literary production also includes some negative notes. In his early writing, which focused mainly on the Polish history, Agnon reports several episodes, which describe the contrasts and fights between Christians and Jews. As a young writer, he turned his attention to the blood libels, which had characterized Jewish life in Poland since the Middle Ages<sup>15</sup>.

His controversial and changing attitude towards Christianity can be certainly ascribed to the author's personal experience: before arriving to Palestine in 1913, Agnon spent most of his life in Europe and, although he grew up in a very religious and traditional environment, he was deeply influenced by his mother's assimilationist tendencies, which included a very close contact with non-Jewish cultures. As in the case of his contemporaries, he was fascinated by Christianity and tried to explore its tradition by the point of view of a Jew living in Christian lands. This is the most important aspect we should consider once dealing with Jewish-Christian relations.

On the contrary, turning our attention to the first generations of native Israeli writers, we notice that only few of them have shown a real curiosity for Christianity. Despite the presence of the local Christian community, contacts between Jews and Christians received less attention in Israeli literature. The general tendency, especially during the early decades of the State, was to ignore non-Jewish elements in order to foster a unique "national identity"<sup>16</sup>. One of the few exceptions is the novel by Yigal Mossinson<sup>17</sup> *Judas Iscariot*<sup>18</sup> (1962), in which the author describes early Christianity as an anti-Roman underground organisation and criticizes the apostles for having rejected Jesus's original message. Sporadic references to Christianity appear in some popular contemporary Israeli novels: the fascinating figure of Theodora, a catholic nun, who arrived to Jerusalem against her will and stayed in a convent for more than fifty years, is portrayed by David Grossman<sup>19</sup> in *Someone*

<sup>15</sup> H. Weiss, *Notes on Christians and Christianity in Agnon's writings*. Another reference appears in his volume *Only Yesterday*, where a kind Christian man saves the protagonist from starvation. This great story is about a young Jew who leaves his little *shtetl* to reach the Land of Israel during the second wave of migration, which took place between 1904-1914. See B. Harshav, *The Crisis of Jewish Identity, S. Y. Agnon's Only yesterday* da B. Harshav, *The polyphony of Jewish Culture*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2007, pp. 41-60.

<sup>16</sup> I. Even-Zohar, *The Emergence of a Native Hebrew Culture in Palestine: 1882-1948*, in: A. Sahpira, *Essential Papers on Zionism*, London: Sphere Books 1971, pp. 727-744.

<sup>17</sup> Yigal Mossinson (1917-1994) was one of the great Israeli writers in the early years after the foundation of the State. During his career, he wrote successful novels, plays and adventure books for the youth.

<sup>18</sup> Y. Mossinson, *Yehuda 'ish Krayot (Judas Iscariot)*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1963.

<sup>19</sup> David Grossman is a leading Israeli novelist, born in 1954 in Jerusalem. He studied philosophy and drama at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and later worked as an editor and broadcaster at Israel Radio. Grossman has written novels, short stories and novellas, drama, and a number of books for children and youth. He has also published several books of non-fiction, including writings on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His books have been published in thirty-five languages.

to *Run With*<sup>20</sup> (2000); another example is found in *Spanish Charity*<sup>21</sup> (2011), written by the great novelist A.B. Yehoshua<sup>22</sup>, which describes the story of an aging Israeli film director, partially set in Santiago de Compostela. The suggestive Spanish pilgrimage city becomes the background of an intrigued and original book.

With his latest novel, Amos Oz takes a step forward and place, for the first time, Jewish-Christian relations at the centre of the plot. The story of *Judas* is set in Jerusalem between the end of 1959 and the beginning of 1960. Shmuel Asch, the young protagonist, is a doctoral student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. After his father's loss of job and the abandonment of his girlfriend Yardena, he decides to give up to his studies and interrupt his dissertation. While pondering to leave Jerusalem, Shmuel sees a job announcement at the University cafeteria: an old and very cultured man is searching for someone who can keep him company during the afternoon hours in exchange of housing and a modest salary. So he arrives at the house of Gershom Wald, a seventy-year-old man who lives together with a strange and very fascinating young lady, Atalia Abravanel – who he discovers to be Mr. Wald's daughter-in-law. Shmuel moves to the attic of their house and starts living a very solitary and lonely existence. He experiences a gradual detachment from his family and friends while trying to find out Atalia and Mr. Wald's secrets. Through the dialogue of the protagonist with the different characters, in particular during the afternoon talks to Mr. Wald, Shmuel reveals the intent and details of his doctoral thesis: to analyse how Jews perceived Jesus.

Showing an accurate knowledge of references and sources, Oz offers the reader the chance to explore the attitude of Jewish authors and thinkers towards Christianity throughout the ages. Shmuel's research starts from the ancient times: he quotes passages from Talmud, Joseph Flavius, the sage Shimon Ben Azai, he exposes the many controversial tales dating back to Middle Ages, legends and writings from different historical and geographical backgrounds. The protagonist points out that most of Jewish sources mention Jesus in negative terms, focusing on a number of clichés which have been dominant during the centuries and that “are still heard in the University corridors<sup>23</sup>”. Jesus is described as a false prophet, an idolater devoted to sorcery, an illegitimate son or a subversive character who tried to bring uprisings

<sup>20</sup> D. Grossman, *Mishehu larutz 'ito*, Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuhad 2000. English edition: *Someone to Run With*, London: Bloomsbury 2003.

<sup>21</sup> A.B. Yehoshua, *Hesed sfaradi* (Spanish Charity), Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuhad 2011. English edition: *The Retrospective*, London: Halban 2013.

<sup>22</sup> A.B. Yehoshua was born in 1936, in a Sephardi family living in Jerusalem from five generations. After studying Hebrew literature and philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he started a teaching career. From 1963 to 1967, he lived and taught in Paris, and since 1972, he has taught Hebrew and comparative literature at Haifa University. Yehoshua has published novels, short stories, plays and essays and is one of the best internationally known Israeli authors. He has received many literary prizes both in Israel and abroad. His novel *Five Seasons* was selected as one of the ten most important books since the creation of the State of Israel.

<sup>23</sup> A. Oz, *Ha-besora 'al pi Yehuda*, p. 51.

in the society. Mr. Wald, Shmuel's main interlocutor, refuses to listen to what he calls "horrible tales". According to his opinions, these polemic texts circulated in time of persecutions, whenever Jews were subjected to oppressions by Christian authorities or perceived the Christian religion as a danger for their faith. He even compares the terrible prejudices against Jesus to defamations against Jews and Judaism, referring to them as "dirty insults"<sup>24</sup>. Both Shmuel and Mr. Wald agree that Jewish scholars who examined the issues of Christianity, focused their attention on futile details, trying to demonstrate that Jesus was born from his mother's adultery or contesting the story of his crucifixion. Instead, they all failed to deal with the most essential questions, the real meaning of his message, that is, universal love: "Is it possible to love everyone?" asks Mr. Wald "Is it really possible that everyone with no exception love everyone and all the time with no exception? Did Jesus always love everyone? Did he really love the money changers at the Temple doors, while he was caught by anger, jumped on their stands and turned them upside down furiously? ... Yes, that's the way one should discuss with Jesus the Nazarene"<sup>25</sup>. Shmuel too is surprised to verify that most of Jews persisted in denying his unnatural birth, his death and miracles while completely ignoring the spiritual and moral meanings of his teachings. That's why all their polemics should be considered worthless and without any fundamentals. When telling Atalia about a discussion between Ramban<sup>26</sup> and a Jew converted to Christianity, which took place in the XIII century, he says: "This reasoning does not convince me because it is not related to the real message, Jesus's message, the message of universal love, forgiveness, kindness and mercy"<sup>27</sup>. Reflecting on the different positions he explores in his research, Shmuel notices that while Jews always evidenced Jesus's Jewishness, Christians seems to forget completely that Jesus was first of all a Jew who never rejected his faith<sup>28</sup>. He definitely considers him as a sort of "reformed Jew" who didn't come to create a new religion but to restore the authentic values of Judaism, to free it from all the superfluous rituals, which had been imposed by the sacerdotal class. When asked about his personal view, Shmuel relates to Jesus with very remarkable words: "I am an atheist... I do not believe even for a moment that Jesus was God or the son of God. Yet, I love him"<sup>29</sup>.

Shmuel's encounter with Christianity took place when he first read the New Testament at the age of 15. Since then he was particular fascinated by the one he believed to be the most loyal and devout of his disciples: Judas. The apostle, that in

<sup>24</sup> A. Oz, *Ha-besora 'al pi Yehuda*, p. 75.

<sup>25</sup> A. Oz, *Ha-besora 'al pi Yehuda*, p. 75.

<sup>26</sup> Moshe Ben Nahman was born in Gerona, Spain, in 1194. Known also as Nahmanides, he was a rabbi, philosopher and doctor, considered one of the most important Jewish sage of all the time.

<sup>27</sup> A. Oz, *Ha-besora 'al pi Yehuda*, p. 124.

<sup>28</sup> This is the main issue that occupied the debate of modern Jewish thinkers on Jesus. See J. Sievers, *Gesù di Nazareth visto da scrittori ebrei del XX secolo*.

<sup>29</sup> A. Oz, *Ha-besora 'al pi Yehuda*, p. 131.

Christian world became the emblem of Jews and the symbol of a “traitor” that led Jesus to the cross, is never mentioned in the Jewish sources dealing with Christianity. Why didn't Jews even say a word about him? Why did no one devote his attention to the role he had in Jesus's life? According to Shmuel's personal perception, Judas's figure has been misunderstood throughout the ages and this has been one of the main causes of the hostile relations between Christians and Jews as in the past as in the present. He wants to demonstrate that his betrayal was necessary for the birth of Christianity: “In fact” he states, “without him no crucifixion would have happened and without crucifixion Christianity would have never existed<sup>30</sup>”. This idea emerges in the controversial text, known as “The gospel of Judas<sup>31</sup>”, which is actually the same title chosen for the original Hebrew edition of Oz's novel. The apocryphal gospel reports a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, recently reconstructed by the experts, which clearly evidences that the apostle from Kerioth was the only one who really understand Jesus's message. According to this tale, his betrayal was actually a result of Jesus's request, because he needed his help in order to accomplish the mission to redeem the mankind through his death. In fact, the gnostic adepts, then condemned by the Church fathers, believed that Jesus had to be freed from his body to reveal his divine nature. Although not excluding that Oz is familiar with the gnostic tradition<sup>32</sup>, his hero builds the defence of Judas's betrayal with “more concrete proofs”. First of all he highlights that Judas was the only apostle coming from Judea, the only acculturated Jew. Being a Sadducee and a clever and wise man, he was chosen from the sacerdotal class to verify if Jesus really made miracles and prodigies and had to be considered a danger for Judaism or simply one of the many preachers of the area. Therefore Judas approached Jesus pretending to be one of his disciples but was then so impressed by his teaching, by his humility and empathy towards the mankind, that he ended up to become his most devout disciple. In Shmuel's opinion, he was the first one to believe in the divine nature of Jesus and he wanted him to show his prodigies to the rest of the world. For this reason he tried to convince Jesus to go to Jerusalem. But the teacher was uncertain and afraid; he felt that something terrible was going to happen. Judas thought then to organize Jesus's arrest and push him to crucifixion corrupting members of the sacerdotal class. Oz devotes a touching chapter of his book to the narration of Jesus's last hours and the consequent Judas's end. Shmuel points out that the apostle, who came from a very reach family, did not need the thirty dinars he received in exchange of the betrayal. When he sent Jesus to the Roman authorities he was sure that another miracle would have happened, that he would have got down from the cross and showed the world he was the Messiah. At the moment

<sup>30</sup> A. Oz, *Ha-besora 'al pi Yehuda*, p. 88.

<sup>31</sup> Probably dating back to the second century CE, the gospel was reconstructed starting from a manuscript in Coptic language discovered in Minya (Egypt) in 1978 and published in 2006.

<sup>32</sup> D. Neuhaus, *Ma peshar kol ha-bgidot be-sifro shel Amos Oz (The Meaning of Betrayals in Amos Oz's book)*, “Haaretz” November 28 (2014).

of his death, the apostle was caught by regret and despair. So he decided to hang himself at the same fig tree that some time before Jesus had cursed because there was no fruit on it. Shmuel writes: “Why has no believer wondered how a man, who sold his teacher for the miserable amount of thirty dinars, soon after Jesus’s death decide to kill himself for the pain<sup>33</sup>? The protagonist underlines that Judas’s death was another proof that he really believed in the Messiah and perceived his human death on the cross as a betrayal of the teacher towards his disciples. That’s why he chose to die with Jesus, becoming the only Christian who didn’t survive his death. In that moment, he really betrayed his teacher, in that moment for the first time Judas lost his faith<sup>34</sup>.

When starting to read the narration of Oz’s novel the first question that comes to mind is: why does a Jewish author feel the need to turn his attention to the man who is considered the archetype of the traitor in the Christian tradition? Is it just a fictional element or is there any particular meaning? As going on with the reading, one finds out that all the characters experience the “treachery”, which is actually the novel’s main subject. In showing the other face of the Judas, Oz wants to convince us that sometime betrayal is necessary for changing the course of history. This happened to Judas, to Jesus, who was a traitor for the Jews, and to many political leaders of our time. Oz quotes among the others: Abraham Lincoln, Charles De Gaulle, David Ben Gurion. They managed to do big things because they had the courage to betray their own people’s ideals. Mr. Wald says to Shmuel: “Those people who have the courage to change are always considered traitors by those who are incapable of changing, those who are afraid, despise and don’t understand change<sup>35</sup>”. In that case he is referring to one of the mysterious character of the novel Shaltiel Abravanel. He was a member of the Zionist Executive Committee the only one who opposed Ben Gurion’s decision to establish the State of Israel, a traitor of his nation. According to Mr. Wald, Shaltiel was a dreamer, because like Jesus, he believed in universal love<sup>36</sup>. In another passage he states: “The world is crooked and sad, full of sorrows but every man who comes to redeem it immediately causes streams of blood<sup>37</sup>”. By exploring the theme of treachery, Amos Oz looks at one of the key questions of his creative universe: Israel’s existence. As many other Israeli intellectuals, Oz is discussing the very meaning of the State, its foundation and the current conflict with the Palestinians. The novel has then a precise political connotation, as the author stated in a number of interviews realized after the publication of the book.

Comparing *Judas* to all the other Israeli literary works which include Christian references, we should highlight two main aspects: first of all, Christianity is not just

<sup>33</sup> A. Oz, *Ha-besora 'al pi Yehuda*, p. 197.

<sup>34</sup> D. Neuhaus, *Ma pesher kol ha-bgidot be-sifro shel Amos Oz*.

<sup>35</sup> A. Oz, *Ha-besora 'al pi Yehuda*, p. 255.

<sup>36</sup> A. Oz, *Ha-besora 'al pi Yehuda*, p. 254.

<sup>37</sup> A. Oz, *Ha-besora 'al pi Yehuda*, p. 76.



a secondary element of the story but becomes part of the plot itself, secondly, until the publication of *Judas* there is no specific fictional work describing the historical Jesus, nor analyses the figure of Judas, a shared subject in both Christian and Jewish traditions. Despite *Judas* is not properly a text on Christianity and that religion is just the background on which Oz builds the story of his protagonist, we should emphasize that the author demonstrates a great ability to deal with a very delicate issue, which hasn't been explored so much before in the Israeli literary production.

In addition, we should point out that Amos Oz is not new to this topic. One of his early stories *The Trappist Monastery*<sup>38</sup> (1962), is set in Latrun where an Israeli soldier is fighting near the convent and discovers the asceticism and the mysterious aspects of the monastic life. In *Unto Death*<sup>39</sup> (1971) the author tells the adventure of a Crusader, who arrives to Jerusalem trying to reach his quest for purity and death. Christian references are also found in Oz's memoirs *In the Land of Israel*<sup>40</sup> (1982), when he describes a visit with Father Professor Marcel Dubois. In his autobiographical novel, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*<sup>41</sup>, he remembers that his great uncle, Joseph Klausner<sup>42</sup> invites to consider Jesus a real Jew, to admire him because he came with the purpose of restoring the authentic biblical message<sup>43</sup>. Klausner was a Jewish historian and a leading intellectual of pre-State Israel. In 1922 he published his famous volume *Jesus of Nazareth*, one of the first book dedicated to Jesus's Jewishness. Although in Oz's novel Klausner is only quoted once, we cannot exclude the influence he had on the writer's approach to the topic<sup>44</sup>.

The increasing interest of Jews towards Christianity, as reflected in Oz's production, can be certainly attributed to a general trend: many contemporary Israeli authors have recently begun to explore Christian religion and its traditions. The growing number of Jewish scholars, who devote their studies and research to "Christian topics", also witnesses this aspect.

In the latest years the dialogue between Christians and Jews in Israel have received a great attention and is now subject of many intellectual and academic

<sup>38</sup> A. Oz, *Minzar ha-shatkanim* (The Trappist Monastery), Jerusalem: Keter 2000.

<sup>39</sup> A. Oz, *'Ad mavet*, Bnei Brak: Sifriat Poalim 1971. English edition: *Unto Death*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1975.

<sup>40</sup> A. Oz, *Po ve-sham be-Eretz-Israel*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1983. English edition: *In the Land of Israel*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1983.

<sup>41</sup> A. Oz, *Sipur 'al 'ahava ve-hosheh*, Jerusalem: Keter 2002. English edition: *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, London: Chatto & Windus 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Gedaliah Klausner (1874–1958), was a Jewish historian and professor of Hebrew Literature. Born in Olkeniki, Lithuania, he moved with his family to Odessa where he started his activities in the Zionist movement. Later he decided to migrate to Palestine and became one of the main local intellectual. He was also chief redactor of the *Encyclopedia Hebraica*. He devoted a great part of his studies to the topic of the Jewish identity and the relations with Christians.

<sup>43</sup> P. Stefani, *La Lettura*, "Corriere della Sera", November 9, (2014).

<sup>44</sup> Kartun-Blum R., Morris O., *Natsrut u-bgida: siha 'al ha-te'uzza ha-'azuma shel Amos Oz* (Christianity and Betrayal: Dialogue on Amos Oz's Great Courage), "Haaretz", November 14 (2014).

debates. Most Jews recognize that reading their tradition through the “strangers’ eyes” allows a better awareness of themselves. At this point, the analysis of their relationship with Christians could be a precious tool in order to reflect on their own identity. Perhaps, the publication of Amos Oz’s *Judas* is a sign of an increasing openness to the dialogue and the interest it raised among the readers could foster a better mutual understanding.

“How Jews see Jesus”:  
Christian References in Amos Oz’s Novel *Judas*

Summary

The debate around the relations between Christians and Jews has recently become one of the discussed issues in the cultural Israeli world. This article examines the references to Christianity and to Jesus in the contemporary Israeli fiction. Through the analysis of some literary works produced by the best-know Israeli writers, we will try to describe the way the authors deal with Christian elements and explore their personal considerations. In particular a great attention will be devoted to Amos Oz’s last novel *Judas*, published in 2014. The story is based on the life of a young student who is writing a doctoral dissertation on “How Jews see Jesus” but it ends up focusing on the figure of Judas. In revealing the intent of his research the protagonist presents a detailed investigation of the Jewish attitude towards Christians quoting sources from the ancient times until today. Through Oz’s book it is possible to explore the complex relationship between Christians and Jews and offers new starting points for the future debates.

**Keywords:** Jewish-Christian Relations, Israeli Literature, Jesus, Judas, Christian References, Dialogue.

„Wie sehen die Juden Jesus?“  
Christliche Referenzen im Buch von Amos Oz *Judas*

Zusammenfassung

Die Debatte um das Verhältnis zwischen Christen und Juden erhielt in der letzten Zeit in der israelitischen Kulturwelt eine besondere Lebendigkeit. Im folgenden Artikel wurde eine Analyse der Referenzen bezüglich des Christentums und Jesus in der heutigen israelitischen Literatur durchgeführt. Durch die Analyse der ausgewählten literarischen Werke, veröffentlicht durch die bekanntesten israelitischen Schriftsteller, versuchen wir die Art und Weise darzustellen, auf welche die Autoren den christlichen Elementen gegenüberstehen sowie ihre persönliche Einstellung zu untersuchen. Eine besondere Aufmerksamkeit

wird auf das letzte, 2014 veröffentlichte Werk von Amos Oz – „Judas“ gelegt. Es ist die Geschichte eines jungen Studenten, der eine Doktorarbeit zum Thema: „Wie sehen die Juden Jesus?“ vorbereitet. Seine Aufmerksamkeit wird jedoch schnell auf die Gestalt des Judas gelenkt. Gemäß seiner Forschungsabsicht führt er detaillierte Untersuchungen durch, bezüglich der Einstellung der Juden zu Christen, indem er zahlreiche Quellen heranzieht, von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart. Dank des Buches von Oz lassen sich die komplizierten Relationen zwischen Juden und Christen untersuchen, was ein guter Ausgangspunkt zu weiteren Nachforschungen darstellt.

**Schlüsselworte:** jüdisch-christliches Verhältnis, jüdische Literatur, Jesus, Judas, christliche Referenzen, Dialog.

### „Jak Żydzi widzą Jezusa?“

#### Chrześcijańskie odniesienia w powieści Amosa Oza *Judasz*

##### Streszczenie

Debata wokół stosunków między chrześcijanami i żydami stała się w ostatnim czasie żywo dyskutowanym tematem w świecie kultury izraelskiej. W niniejszym artykule dokonano analizy odniesień do chrześcijaństwa i Jezusa we współczesnej literaturze izraelskiej. Poprzez analizę wybranych dzieł literackich opublikowanych przez najbardziej znanych pisarzy Izraelskich, usiłujemy opisać sposób, w jaki autorzy odnoszą się do elementów chrześcijańskich oraz zbadać ich osobiste nastawienie. Szczególna uwaga będzie zwrócona na ostatnie dzieło Amosa Oza pt. *Judasz*, opublikowane w 2014 r. Jest to historia życia młodego studenta przygotowującego pracę doktorską na temat: „Jak Żydzi widzą Jezusa?“, którego uwaga jednak koncentruje się na postaci Judasza. Zgodnie ze swoim odkrywczym zamiarem badacz przeprowadza szczegółowe poszukiwania dotyczące odniesienia żydów do chrześcijan cytując źródła poczynawszy od starożytności aż do czasów dzisiejszych. Dzięki książce Oza można zbadać skomplikowane relacje między żydami a chrześcijanami, co stanowi dobry punkt wyjścia do dalszych badań.

**Słowa kluczowe:** stosunki żydowsko-chrześcijańskie, literatura żydowska, Jezus, Judasz, chrześcijańskie odniesienia, dialog.

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