

MY FATHERS, JESUS, AND ME

That's one of the central problems of history, isn't it, sir? The question of subjective versus objective interpretations, the fact that we need to know the history of the historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us — Julian Barnes, *The Sense of Ending*

Dear Reader,

I would like you to know my story before you examine, or after you have already read my book. In writing this down, I am addressing you, while at the same time clarifying thoughts and feelings to myself. Yet, please realize that I, as a person, am of little significance here. It is the painting itself and not the painter that matters.

I live in the country where Jesus lived. The first time I heard about Jesus was when I was five or six years old. I grew up in Acre (*Acco* in Hebrew, *Acca* in Arabic), a town in Western Galilee, on the Mediterranean Sea. The town, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a historic port-city populated since the Phoenician period. It is a fortified town with a citadel, mosques, khans, and baths. There are many remains of the Crusader town, above and below street level, dating from 1104 to 1291, among them the halls of the Knights of St. John. Walls from the eighteenth-century Ottoman period surround the town.

Arabs and new Jewish immigrants inhabited Acre, some of them like my parents were Holocaust survivors. It was only two or three years after the War of Independence, and what concerned the people was simply getting on with their lives. They soon started working together, buying and selling, and even developing friendships. My parents were not religiously observant, but we did celebrate Passover and refrained from eating leavened bread during the eight days. The Christian Arabs were celebrating Easter at the same time. One morning our housekeeper Um (Mother of) George, took me with her to visit her home and later her church. Unaware of the Jewish laws regarding the holiday, she gave me freshly baked pita bread to eat, which I enjoyed. Only later at home did I become alarmed, realizing that I was not supposed to eat it.

The church was a big hall on a building's ground floor. I remember darkness lit up with many candles. There were icons, paintings, and objects made of silver and gold all around, and a strong smell of burning incense. To my question, Um George answered that the figure of the young man I saw on a cross was Issa (Jesus in Arabic). I must have kept this memory in mind as it represented a double "sin" of eating something forbidden and going into a prohibited place. I broke a taboo; I crossed over some separation line. Yet, I was fascinated by something different, by the "other" and the "not us." At this moment, writing about Jesus, I am again an observer looking in from the outside.

Missionaries in Acre, at the time, were handing out free Bibles, which included the Old and New Testaments. Somehow, I got hold of a copy and read the New Testament and mainly the Gospels before my twelfth birthday. A few years later, the Ministry of Education came out with a regulation forbidding bringing such Bibles to class. Christianity is not taught in the Israeli educational system, and most Israelis know very

little about it. Furthermore, Christianity is sometimes associated with anti-Semitism, pogroms, and persecution of Jews.

Jews who convert to Christianity are considered worse than traitors, and their families often prefer them dead rather than commit this shameful act. A story is told about an old Rabbi whose only son passed away, fearing for his life, no one in the congregation had the heart to relay the sad news to him. An old member of the congregation volunteered. He went to the Rabbi and told him that his son had decided to convert and went to a church to be baptized. The Rabbi was shocked. The man continued to report that miraculously, at the last moment, a lamp fell from the ceiling and killed the son on the spot. 'Blessed be the Lord,' said the Rabbi, much relieved. He was later glad to learn that this was not the case at all and that his pious son died only of a heart attack.

Years later, I read the unparalleled masterpiece *Memories of Adrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar. In one scene, Adrian meets Rabbi Akiva in Jerusalem and says to him that all other nations came to terms with the Roman culture and could find similarities between their gods and goddesses and the Roman ones. Only the Jews set themselves apart and refused any co-existence and mutual recognition. Foolish me, only at that moment in the novel did I realize that Adrian, considered an enlightened emperor, was none other than the hated "Adrianus," described in Jewish texts as a terrible murderous despot. I was surprised to realize that in the dispute, I was actually on his side.

What first attracted me to the Gospels were not ideas and messages, but rather their tone and ambiance. The Old Testament, I felt, to be nationalistic and dramatic; the New Testament universal, intimate and lyric. It spoke to the heart and the imagination; it was emotional, full of mystery, love, and sorrow. I did not see yet the anger and hate that

crept up in different places. It had simple, sometimes naive parables and fewer threats and admonitions. It was a time of my sexual awakening, and all these impressions got mixed-up in my mind with notions of virginity, images from the classical art books of the Madonna breastfeeding the infant Jesus, the adoration of the Magi, the crucifixion, blood, thorns, and roses. Occasionally I fantasized about converting to Christianity, becoming a monk and joining a monastery, imagining that all my teenage problems would disappear.

Through all these discoveries, I did not believe in God. My mother had told me how her father, a devout person all his life, shaved off his beard after her mother was murdered by Ukraine Nazi collaborators, a few days before he was murdered as well. She was an only child who adored her father. She went to high school and gradually became less observant and did not adhere strictly to the Sabbath and dietary laws. Her father said to her once that what comes out of one's mouth is more important than what goes in it. The very idea, I later discovered, was expressed by Jesus (Mt 15: 17-20). My childish "atheism" did not disturb me at all. I was convinced that Jesus existed, and I was convinced that he was honestly searching for God. Thus, I believed in the son and was not too concerned about the father. Towards the end of high school, my interest in Jesus moved to the background. I was busy surviving my adolescence and later my military service.



This brings me to the second period in my life when Jesus was again in center stage. In my undergraduate studies, one had to take a few hours of general studies, outside of the major's program. In addition to passing an exam, students had to get the professor's signature as proof of attendance. Professor David Flusser, from the department of

religious studies, was highly popular among the students, as he would sign without any questions, and everyone passed his exams easily. According to the rumors, he did not bother to read the exams at all, and one could write about football and still get an “A.”

I took his course on the Dead Sea Scrolls, expecting not to stay after the first lesson. Around 900 students were registered, and less than twenty attended his lectures regularly. I do not remember much of what he said, but I remember vividly the awe I felt witnessing his originality and the width and depth of his knowledge. Occasionally, I felt as if an intellectual storm with thunder and lightning was taking place in my brain. It was for moments like that, until then not encountered, that I had come to the university. In my graduate studies in clinical psychology, again needing extra credits, I enrolled in his seminar on Early Christianity. In one of the meetings, I stumbled upon the topic for my masters' thesis and my interest in Jesus, this time intellectually, surfaced again. We were discussing Albert Schweitzer's view that the New Testament's Christology (that is the descriptions of the person and deeds of Jesus) arose because of the followers' belief crisis in the face of unfulfilled eschatological expectations (beliefs about the ultimate destiny of humankind and the world). My immediate reaction was that the real cause of the crisis might have been the very death of Jesus, and not the fact that the world did not reach its end and the kingdom of God did not materialize. I immediately realized that I could examine the question empirically, applying psychological theory and using the method of content analysis. This meant that I had to read the New Testament again and do so repeatedly and carefully.

Professor Flusser was my advisor, and I was lucky to find an open-minded second advisor, Professor Ze'ev Klein, from the department of psychology, thus making my

thesis interdisciplinary. Based on my thesis, I was able to publish articles in two respected journals, but there were only a few reactions to them at the time. Only much later, upon rereading these articles, did I realize that I had not delivered my message effectively enough. I hope that I have done it better now. My relationship with professor Flusser was complicated. I would visit him in his home, and we had stimulating conversations. I told him about the Beatles, about whom he knew nothing; he was surprised that I knew neither ancient Greek nor Latin. When my wife came to bring him my thesis' final draft, while I was on reserve duty in the army, he spoke to her with much concern about planning my future academic career. However, often when I knocked on his door, he would snap, "who are you?" and "what do you want from me?" I could no longer sustain the relationship with him any longer, and even more importantly, I realized that I am not going to find a father substitute. I must be a father to myself.



The third Jesus period in my life (which makes the writing of this book now the fourth one) started in my early forties when I attended one of the yearly Psychological Association's retreats. I selected a workshop ran by Pierre Suleiman, who was at the time one of the "tribe's elders," loved and admired by his former students and clients, who one evening arranged a surprise 75th birthday party for him. Pierre was an existential psychoanalyst, not a person of complex theoretical constructions, but of intuition, a warm personality and words of wisdom. I could not find any traces of him on the web, which suggests that he did not publish; neither did he look for exposure in the media. He would say to us, "Life is simple, don't make it too complex: love, eat, drink and enjoy friendships," and somehow it had an impact on us. In the group's meetings, Pierre felt my

ironic cutting streak addressed towards him, and the next day, meeting me in the hallway after breakfast, he told me that he used up a lot of pipe tobacco, smoking and thinking why I had to be so aggressive.

This personal and human message (not in a psychotherapy session, nor an interpretation, but just a token of caring) touched me, and I returned home a much-mellowed person. His workshop was dedicated to the issue of boundaries, and in the group's meetings, Pierre had us enter a state of deep relaxation and visualize encounters with significant people in our lives— partners, siblings, and parents. We then had to visualize scenes of these figures trespassing our boundaries and later scenes where they are babies and us their parents, concluding with scenes of reconciliation.

Whenever I wanted to enter a deep state of relaxation, I would visit the Mount of Beatitudes in my imagination, as I still do now occasionally. I would see myself sitting behind the octagonal church, designed by Antonio Barluzzi in a neo-Byzantine style, looking through the vineyards on the slope of the hill, to the archaeological remains of the Capernaum [Nahum's village] Synagogue, to the shining Sea of Galilee, and the Golan Heights in the distance. When we were asked to think about our mothers, I did not feel any intense emotions. My mother was always apprehensive and over-protective, even staying awake at nights until I returned home from being with friends or on a date. During my military service, I had to write her daily, which was then quite a burden. Yet, imagining myself as a fat sitting Buddha, I could laugh it off, understanding the reasons for her anxieties and feeling how much she cared about me.

When it was time to visualize my father, painful memories surfaced immediately. Pictures were flashing in my mind of him yelling at me for sloppy homework and tearing

up my notebooks; threatening to take me away in his work's van and leave me far away on the mountains alone. I remembered how he used to cut off a tree's shoot, swish it in the air and then hit me a few times on my back. This is a biographic fact now, something that, among many others, made me who I am, and thus, I would not wish it to be any different (thank you, Friedrich Nietzsche). As I matured, I came to live in peace with him. Since his death, my love for him has grown, and I see myself, at least physically, more similar to him. That day at the workshop, visualizing a confrontation and coming to terms with my father, I had a sudden vision. I saw myself as a child, approaching him with a stick in my hand, handing it over to him, and saying, "Father, if you must beat me, here is a stick, go ahead, it is all right with me." At that very moment, I was able to understand the reason, until then incomprehensible to me, behind Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about "turning the other cheek." Later, on my way home, I was thinking that my father, like Joseph, was also a carpenter and a carpenter's son:

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist the evildoer. But whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well. And if someone wants to sue you and to take your tunic, give him your coat also. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to the one who asks you, and do not reject the one who wants to borrow from you (Mt 5:38-41).



Why do I write? Why this book? Gustave Flaubert gave me the answer: "The art of writing is the art of discovering what you believe." I see a common pattern between the

present book, my two books about Nietzsche, and my book in Hebrew about Qohelet (Ecclesiastes). I encountered these three persons as an adolescent and immediately felt that they spoke to me directly, that they had something special to teach me, which one day I would have to decipher. With each of them, I entered a long period of incubation, occasionally returning to read them, and about them. These persons stood out, not only because of their ideas, but also because of the style they used, and they made me wonder what it was in their lives that made them so different from others. Quite late in life, I started the journey of writing about them, filling notebooks, rewriting, and talking about them, with anyone who wished to listen. Each of these trips took several years.

My first engagement was with Qohelet, the optimistic pessimist, the teacher of the wisdom of life. After writing several articles and a book in between on psychotherapy and sex therapy, I moved on to Nietzsche, a teacher of skepticism, the critic of modernity and academia. This author of the *Antichrist* felt a deep identification with Jesus and had penetrating insights about him. It was natural for me to return then to my first scholarly subject, to Jesus, the foremost reformer of Judaism, the idealistic teacher of the love of others.

