

***THE APOSTLE* BY SOHEM ASCH AS A HAGGADIC MIDRASH OF *THE BOOK OF ACTS* AND THE PAULINE EPISTLES**

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Abstract: This article proposes that the second part of Sholem Asch's christological trilogy—the novel *The Apostle*—be considered as a form of haggadic midrash of *The Book of Acts* and Pauline epistles. By giving certain examples, the author explains why the 'midrash key' differs in this case from a simple fictionalisation of *New Testament* texts—and further discusses what this reveals about the attitudes, expectations and desires of Asch himself.

Introduction: A word about a very dialogical heart

As one of the most notable Yiddish writers Sholem Asch continues to generate considerable interest and his work gives rise to discussions and controversies. As Ben Siegel noted in the first monograph on his work, 'Asch was not a *tidy* writer'.¹ His oeuvre, which was completed over many decades, addressed a broad range of themes, from the life of the Eastern European Jewry, through the histories of Jewish immigrants in the United States, to religious, philosophical and social issues. It was his trilogy² that brought Asch both popularity and notoriety: *Der man fun Natseres* (1943; English version *The Nazarene*, 1939),³ *The Apostle* (1943),⁴ and *Mary* (1949).⁵ After these publications Asch began to be perceived as an author strongly concerned with a Jewish-Christian dialog, though he also met with a certain ostracization from the greater part of his Jewish readers. The publication of *The Nazarene* can be seen as a turning point in both the literary reception and public perception of Asch. This change is amply illustrated by Ben Siegel's comparison of Asch's funeral with the funerals of two other classical Yiddish writers, Isaak Leib Peretz and Sholem Aleichem:

An approximate 100,000 Warsaw Jews had followed Isaac Leib Peretz's funeral procession in 1915, and another 100,000 had lined New York street in 1916 to mourn Sholem Aleichem.

¹ Siegel 1976: ix.

² *The Apostle* was translated into English by Maurice Samuel. *Mary* was translated into English by Leo Steinberg. Neither book has been published in the original Yiddish version; for more information, cf. Sitarz 2010: 53.

³ Asz 1943, vol. 1-2; Asch 1939.

⁴ Asch 1943.

⁵ Asch 1949a.

Wrapped in his large woolen prayer shawl, Sholem Asch was buried quietly in the West London (Reform) Synagogue's cemetery in Hoop Lane, Golders Green.⁶

It is known for certain that from the entirety of Sholem Asch's literary output, it was these two works—*The Nazarene* and *The Apostle*—that were given particular consideration by the Nobel Committee for Literature in the years 1946 and 1947.⁷ Both nominations were submitted by a Jewish professor emeritus of German and Scandinavian literature, Walter Arthur Berendsohn. In the review prepared by the member of Academy appointed to research Asch's oeuvre, we read that he considered *The Apostle* to be a greater and more trustworthy work than *The Nazarene*, which was based on less widely available sources. Nevertheless, the author of the review went on to say that he lacked sufficient expertise to assess whether the book deserved the Nobel Prize or not: 'Undersigned do not have the proper knowledge to confirm a historical reliability of the work and need to be content with only an aesthetical estimate which is noticeably high.'⁸

Magdalena Sitarz, who has written the first Polish monograph about Sholem Asch, stresses that one of the unique features of his work is his constant concern with central issues of Judaism and Christianity, a concern which remained unchanged in spite of the tragedy of Holocaust. The fact that during this time Asch was writing books which offered a very positive perspective on figures such as Jeshua (Jesus), Saul (Paul) and Miriam (Mary) is neither an example of ignorance nor of a *faux pas* on the part of the author. Rather it reflected his wish to express a willingness to seek a deeper understanding and hope for peace between two sides – the Jews and the Christians. Asch believed that a return to the common roots of the two religious traditions could help to avoid being trapped by the many lies that had appeared down through the ages. As Siegel notes:

In these novels Asch reconstructed the ancient settings with meticulous detail and deep moral awareness, but he stretched scriptural narrative to emphasize the religious ties linking Jew and Christian; an inveterate idealist, he hoped to help create a climate of mutual understanding that might lead to a better world. Instead, his 'interfaith' efforts led to a broadside of acclaim and suspicion, praise and abuse, bestsellers and near isolation.⁹

Unfortunately, there is no monograph devoted exclusively to Asch's Christological trilogy, though some commentary and analysis can be found in the works by Sigel and Sitarz¹⁰ mentioned above; moreover, Polish readers may be particularly interested in the book series devoted to Asch's writing, with new volumes being published biennially by library of Kutno, the writer's hometown.¹¹

⁶ Siegel 1976: 1.

⁷ Cf. Sitarz 2010: 60-61.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Siegel 1976: 2.

¹⁰ Magdalena Sitarz discusses a variety of press articles concerning the Christological novels, and includes an impressive bibliography: Sitarz 2010: 325-347.

¹¹ Kalinowski 2011, 2013, 2015; Kuligowska-Korzeniewska, Adamczyk-Garbowska 2013.

A Midrash key

One of the Sholem Asch's well known methods when writing a novel was to 'work through' some relevant issues—whether sociological, existential or confessional. It should be noted, however, that he never considered these issues to be ultimately solved; rather he wished to leave them open for further discussion. One can say that Asch was happy to leave the final say on these issues in the hands of the Higher Judge—God.

This applies also to Asch's novel *The Apostle*, which tells the story of the life and missionary work of Saul of Tarshish. The book also tells the story of the rapid growth in the belief of Jeshua of Nazareth to be the Messiah of Israel. Asch presents an incredibly varied and convincing storyline, in which stories from *The Book of Acts* are intertwined with tales from the author's own imagination. This form is somehow reminiscent of the *sui generis* Haggadic Midrash to the biblical story discussed, as well as to the Pauline Epistles.

The Apostle is divided into three parts. The first is made up of twenty chapters, opening with 'First Fruits' concerning the events that happened during Shavuot, fifty days following Jeshua's crucifixion, when Saul zealously opposed the new movement within Judaism. The last chapter of this first part—'I Will Send Thee'—recounts Saul's visit to Jerusalem after his conversion, when he presented to Peter the Apostle what was revealed to him by God and that he had been chosen to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. The second and the longest part of the book is made up of thirty-five chapters and presents the events from roughly 37 AD to 61 AD. It opens with a description of the chaotic rule of Caligula, and ends concludes with Saul's first journey to Rome, which resulted in his imprisonment and cancellation to the Caesar. The final, shorter part of *The Apostle* comprises twenty-two chapters, telling the story of Saul's fate during his imprisonment in Rome, the extraordinary story of a development of a group of local followers of Jeshua and their martyrdom under Nero, with a description of the Apostle's death as well (timing of the part: from 61 AD to 67 AD).

A Midrash is defined as an exegetical and interpretational tool for the deeper understanding of biblical works.¹² In the history of old Yiddish literature Midrashim were especially used in the form of *maasious* (*mayses*) – 'a term which designates a variety of narrative forms, from *exempla* (hagiographical stories) to parables and allegories (*mesholim*) drawn from the aggadic materials of the Talmud or *midroshim*'¹³—as well as in

¹² There are two types of Midrash—the Halachic Midrash and the Haggadic Midrash. The former is used for purposes of legal clarification while the second is a more informal, literary form that introduces new moral truths or rules into common use. Statistics indicate that Midrashim take up thirty percent of the whole Talmud. They include various forms of biblical interpretation and also address many topics from history, philosophy, theology, ethics, folklore, medicine, mathematics, physiology, botany, etc. The almost unlimited possibilities of the Midrash makes it an excellent tool for conducting profound analysis, providing explanations of subtleties or suggesting spiritual exercises which are not constricted by those categories which are important when working on divinely inspired texts. As an informal form for cultivating a deep spiritual life, Midrashim can sometimes resemble legends, literary biographies, proverbs, aphorisms or maxims. R. Żebrowski, Hag(g)ada, in: *Polski Słownik Judaistyczny Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, [http://www.jhi.pl/psj/hag\(g\)ada](http://www.jhi.pl/psj/hag(g)ada) [accessed 15 June 2017].

¹³ Baumgarten 2005: 296.

ethical Jewish texts.¹⁴ The process of ‘Midrashic adaptation’ to Yiddish literature dates from the Reformation, an era which saw profound sociological and religious changes. Demands of accessibility led to the vernacularisation of the sacred Book. This also inspired Jewish society to bring the Hebrew Bible to the masses in a form that would be understandable for them in Yiddish, with the addition of commentaries and exegetical materials both translated from Hebrew and written in Yiddish.

What is striking while reading *The Apostle*¹⁵ is its ‘Midrashic’ style and method in the construction of its storyline. It is uncertain whether Asch purposely chose to do it in this way or whether it arose naturally as a customary tendency for someone with a Jewish background. This article attempts to clarify this issue, or at least to point to some clues.

***The Apostle* in brief**

Usually in critical commentary and monographs on the work of Sholem Asch, remarks about *The Apostle* appear quite off-hand. In most cases it is mentioned in the context of the Asch’s Christological trilogy, with a comment that the novel presents the story of Paul the Apostle and the origins of Christianity. Nevertheless, such a perfunctory description tells only half the story and indeed tells it in a way that Asch himself would be opposed to. The word ‘Christianity’ leads to immediate associations with the reality of the Church from which the Jews were already excluded; according to *The Apostle* this gives rise to a major misunderstanding because Asch’s intention from the beginning was to outline the Jewish roots of the monotheistic faith. In a letter written by the novelist to his wife he confesses, ‘I would like to start where the division begins—in the era of the first Christian—and preach Judaism and Christianity as one.’¹⁶ As Magdalena Sitarz concludes in the summary of her monograph on Asch’s work, ‘all in all, the profound description of Judaism is not presented with an analagous description of Christianity. This lack of symmetry and artificiality of Christians characters is a result of the author’s ignorance.’¹⁷ Such a thesis can easily lead to polemics. On the one hand, if we take Christianity in its current institutional form, truly there would be no analysis of that form in Sholem Asch’s work. On the other hand, if the novelist’s primary aim is taken to look at Christianity as a ‘product’ exclusively emerging and constantly deriving from the heritage of Judaism, then *The Apostle* could certainly be taken as a very synthetic description of this intention.

One of the most intriguing aspects of *The Apostle* is the extent to which the novel is based on the storyline of *The Book of Acts* and the Pauline Epistles, indicating that the author had read and studied the *New Testament* in detail. What is more, the way he constructs the text demonstrates how appropriately and accurately he can use this knowledge. Amazingly, it is worth bearing in mind that he refers to the sources usually being met with great hostility from Jewish readers. Nevertheless, it is not enough to

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 207-259.

¹⁵ For my analysis I will use the English version of the novel: Asch, *The Apostle* (1949b).

¹⁶ Sitarz 2010: 76.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 303.

say that the plot focuses exclusively on the story of Saul. It would be more accurate to conclude that the storyline generally focuses on him, while not neglecting to describe other events—which, in fact, are still under his direct or indirect influence. Consequently a storyline emerges that is built around several dozen characters, of which Saul is only meaningfully outstanding.

Despite the chronology being synchronous with *The Book of Acts* as well as occasionally quoting whole paragraphs from the *New Testament*, it would be precipitous to condemn the author for bias or for the plot being excessively derivative. Asch is known for providing a broad backdrop to his stories by adding whole chapters of sociological or personal descriptions, e.g. about the cities of Alexandria¹⁸ and Rome,¹⁹ or about people like Sabina Poppea²⁰ or Antonius the slave.²¹ In most cases these stories are presented only once and they are hardly ever mentioned again. Such an approach significantly enriches the plot and, far from confusing the reader, on the contrary makes the story even more intriguing. What is worth mentioning in particular is the acceleration of the storyline that begins at the moment of Saul's first imprisonment in Rome, which is not presented in *The Book of Acts*. This puts paid to Rosa Feld's allegation that Asch's novel is derivative and can only be considered at best a literary biography rather than a real, fully-fledged novel.²²

All parts are interspersed with author's appositions, which are strongly reminiscent of the Midrashic style of 'filling the gaps'. This is particularly true of the last part of the novel, where descriptions and biblical analogies can be found to the things that have no characterization in *The New Testament* and are exclusively the products of Asch's imagination (though do not contradict *The New Testament* forms). Also worth mentioning is the usage of a typical Haggadic Midrash motif—the *peticha* (entrance, introduction)—which is the explanation of one part of a biblical text by another as a realization of the old rule that the Holy Bible explains itself.²³ As an example, one can refer to Asch's method of clarifying plots from *The Book of Acts* with reference to specific verses from the Pauline Epistles and *vice versa*.

Saul behind the scenes

From the beginning to the end of the novel Sholem Asch presents Saul of Tarsish as an extremely zealous and charismatic man, devoted and coherent in his beliefs and his intellectual interpretation of them. His character develops as a result of his progressive revelation of the nature and the will of God. It is this which determines Saul's attitude to the people and situations he encounters. Also among his main traits can be counted his absolute faith in the one and only God of Israel and his inner imperative so as to stand unbent in his convictions.

¹⁸ Asch 1949b: 211-223.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 587-600.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 653-660.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 640-645.

²² Cf. Sitarz 2010: 111.

²³ Cf. Rosik, Rapoport 2009: 141.

The author reveals little about Saul's appearance. In most cases he describes him only by the features of his character and behavior: 'Saul, who was all motion and restlessness, as if his veins ran quicksilver instead of blood.'²⁴ It may be intentional to present the main character in such a manner that outlines his total devotion to the spiritual world and lack of interest when it comes to his appearance. What is more, he was famous for his excessive predilection for asceticism. Apart from his constant renewal of Nazirine vows he even planned even to join the ascetic sect of Essens at some stage and live in the wilderness. The novel notes that it was only his Pharisaic master, Rabbi Gamaliel, who managed to deter him, saying that 'Those who multiply vows, multiply sin. They transgress against the commandment: "Ye shall care greatly for your bodies."²⁵ This was not the only situation when the old Pharisee had to intervene. Nevertheless, he never condemned his pupil—somehow he was all the more proud of him and felt responsible for him. It is worth mentioning the argument between the teacher when Gamaliel stood for a developing sect of Galileans before the Small Sanhedrin. As the author concludes, it was then that Saul received a lesson that was to remain long in his memory, even if the results were not to be seen until much later. The Master was trying to convince the young zealot that what is more pleasing to God is not the cold fulfillment of the Law, but rather love for his fellow man:

But not the laws and commandments are the chief thing; we are the chief thing. The laws and commandments were created for us, not we for them; and they have but one purpose, to purify us and train us till we can unite our hearts with God and with His will; for the *Tora* consists but of a single sentence, that sentence which the Venerable Hillel, whose name is given to our school, taught to one of the heathen. For there came one of the heathen to Hillel, and asked to be taught the whole *Tora* in the time that a man can stand on one leg. To which our teacher replied thus: 'That which thou desirest not to be done unto thee, do not unto another. This is the whole *Tora*. The rest is commentary.'²⁶

The New Testament features only a couple of general sentences about Saul's childhood and his path from Tarshish to Jerusalem. Asch 'Midrashically' fills those gaps by the story of a young man being brought up in Hellenistic surroundings among the Gentiles. From the outset Saul used to wonder why the world is settled as it is, why there are Jews and Gentiles and what role Israel as a chosen nation ought to play in all of this. As the time is running the young man comes to the conclusion that the purpose of Israel is to be like a rock within the chaos of pagan nations to bring the Messiah who would be a redeemer not only for the Jews but for all mankind.²⁷ Moreover, Saul is intrigued by his pagan neighbors. He is well educated in Greek language and literature and admires the Hellenistic love for idealistic beauty and philosophic intuition: 'as he grew into young manhood there arose in him, in spite of his contempt for the idol-worship of the gentiles, and even in the teeth of it, a grudging admiration of their serenity and wholeness of spirit, their joy of life, and their feeling for the beautiful.'²⁸

²⁴ Asch 1949b: 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*: 83.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 96.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 55, 79.

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 77.

Saul is known from Pauline Epistles for his hard-work and independent spirit in any situation. While reading his letters a reader can feel the Apostle's confidence, passion as well as toughness and demanding heart. One may recall the famous phrase from the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians 3:10: 'If any man does not work, let him not have food.' Asch seems to derive from that feeling an idea how to explain such an attitude by creating the story about his past. In the first chapters of the novel readers meet Saul as a man who cannot stand being dependent on anyone and would rather to skip Gamaliel's lectures and earn his living than being forced to ask for help:

He regarded the earning of his bread by the labour of his hand as an important principle, perhaps the most important principle of the moral life. For, being dependent on no one other than himself for his daily bread, he was free to act and speak as his conscience dictated... . In matters which concerned Saul's conception of the moral life no compromise was possible, not even under the pressure of his honoured teacher.²⁹

Another motif from the Pauline Epistles that Asch develops is more ironic—the mysterious 'thorn in the flesh sent from Satan' (2 Corinthians 12:7). This is often brought to mind by the author when his protagonist experiences a sudden, inexplicable change in his condition. Such changes are very similar to epilepsy, but Asch relates them to Saul's unusual predisposition to receiving heavenly visions. Epilepsy or ecstasy? The author avoids giving any clear answer and the issue remains unresolved. What is more certain is that in these mysterious moments Saul receives sudden clarification about what he ought to do next and every seizure brings a breakthrough:

It was with him as though he were being sped beyond the limits of this world and entering into another which knew no limits and no boundaries; a world in which there was neither yea nor nay, only an infinite space of blazing brightness, through which he fell for ever... and continued to fall... through infinite time... In that condition impossible became possible...³⁰

When it first appears in the book, it is explained that the condition is the result of Saul's ascetic lifestyle. It is terrifying for his parents: 'he would work himself into a condition of ecstasy which resembled a trance; he would fall down, and foam would break out on his lips.'³¹ The second seizure comes the day before the stoning of Stephen when Saul acts as a volunteer. It happens again on the road to Damascus when he sees someone and then loses his sight which, as Asch explains, used to happen right after the ecstasy.

Although *The Book of Acts* makes no connection between the Man seen by Stephen during his agony, the Man seen by Saul while he alone is being stoned in the suburbs of Listra, the Man seen by John which he describes in *The Book of Revelation* and the Man seen by the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel—Asch makes such a connection.³² Is this an example of the author's literary freedom or has he purposely used a Midrashic key? Asch goes even further. On the road to Damascus when Saul had a vision of Jeshua alone he sees him as an orthodox Jew:

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 84.

³⁰ *Ibid.*: 111.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 80.

³² Compare: *ibid.*: 111-112; Revelation 1:12-15; Daniel 7:9-13; Ezekiel 43:2. More about that mysterious Man can be found in the book of Intrater 2011.

A man who is spirit and flesh and blood. He is taller than any man Saul has ever seen. Yet not a giant; he is an ordinary man; a Rabbi, in prayer-shawl and phylacteries; with great eyes, mournful yet radiant, filled with faith and love, eyes such as Saul has often seen among the disciples. His beard and earlocks are black, interwoven with grey. A man, not an angel; clothed in white, as for the Sabbath.³³

For many people, both Christians and others, there is often one issue that actually remains unsolved: where was Saul during the years between his conversion and his coming out as a preacher of the Gospel? Asch fills this gap very quickly and convincingly: in the beginning Saul decided to live in the wilderness, then he went to Petra, the capital of Arabia, and finally he reached Mount Sinai, the sacred place where the most important revelation to humanity ever had happened. His ascetic dream came true but, as the author relates, Saul was not satisfied with that solution. He did not want to live in biological lethargy with all the other ascetics waiting for a spiritual breakthrough because it stood in opposition to his strong need for reasonable and productive activity:

He was aware of certain feelings which he dared not give reign to; of certain thoughts which he dared not think through... They were the inmost secret of his life, binding him, from boyhood on, to the Messiah. There were born of his passionate desire to witness, and indeed to hasten, the redemption; they were born also of his love for his fellow Jews and of his compassion for the gentiles; that he had been dedicated in his mother's womb to the approaching Messiah.³⁴

Finally the breakthrough comes. As Asch writes, what was the core of Saul's spiritual revelation about the God-like nature of Jeshua did not appear through seizure, but rather when the future Apostle was looking at the sky. Later Saul explains that it was a moment when he was dreaming Jacob's dream and saw the heavenly ladder, which—it became clear for him—was a symbol of Jeshua the Messiah, the intercessor between God the heavenly Father and mankind. What inspired Asch in that paragraph was perhaps a passage from Colossians 1:15-20 where it is stated that all cosmology and cosmogony starts and ends in Christ, the Messiah.

Referring once again to the issues of cosmology and cosmogony, it is interesting to notice one more figure that Sholem Asch introduces in the novel's discussion about the nature of the Messiah. This time it is a cabalistic idea of *Adam Kadmon*—both divine and human intermediary between God and mankind suffering after the division from the Creator which is an outcome of the presence of evil in the world. The revelation of the true nature of the Messiah received by Saul matches perfectly with the cabalistic conception of *Adam Kadmon*. The use of such motifs is also characteristic in a Haggadic Midrash creation.³⁵

³³ Asch 1949b: 172.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 80.

³⁵ 'As a pupil of Gamaliel, Paul simply operates with conceptions familiar to the Palestinian theologians. Messiah, as the Midrash remarks, is, on the one hand, the first Adam, the original man who existed before Creation, his spirit being already present. On the other hand, he is also the second Adam in so far as his bodily appearance followed the Creation, and inasmuch as, according to the flesh, he is of the posterity of Adam. Paul, therefore, is not dependent upon Philo for his Christology, as most scholars hold; indeed, he differs from him on most essential points. With Philo the original man is an idea; with Paul he is the personality of Jesus. With Philo the first man is the original man; Paul identifies the original man with the second Adam. The Christian apostle evidently drew upon the Palestinian theology of his day'; Ginzberg, *Adam Kadmon*; Jewish Encyclopedia, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/761-adam-kadmon> [accessed 26 October 2017].

The second and the third parts of the novel are no more and no less a literary adaptation of the Apostle's missionary journeys known from *The Book of Acts* as well as the process and sociological context for writing his epistles. It is worth mentioning the countless conversations Saul has with his listeners, opponents, students, friends, spiritual leaders in Jerusalem or foster children in faith. Every one of them brings to mind discussions characteristic of the Pharisaic environment where Jewish mindset is evident and seems to be the only appropriate way to talk about such ultimately spiritual issues.

Jewish therapy – Summary

Asch consequently sets the whole history of the first groups of believers in Jeshua as the Messiah of Israel in the Jewish context. However, it would be a great misunderstanding, to assume that by his work he tries to polemicize the traditional Christian interpretation of this period of Church history. What the author wants to outline is the truth about the Jewish core, the Jewish roots of the whole story. Asch desires to bring closer the divided family of Abraham, to reconcile the sides using common historical and literary therapy, and to provide a depiction of it in his entirety through Jewish eyes again:

And what is the dominion of God? The dominion of God consists of the commandments he has given us through his chosen prophets—both of the Old and the New Testaments. The will of God is expressed through Christ and the Sermon on the Mount. These teachings created our civilization, which we call the civilization of the Jewish-Christian idea. We live and die for this civilization, because it is the only one which contains the possibility of salvation for our life at present and a hope for life after death in the expectation of the resurrection of the dead.³⁶

What Sholem Asch offers in his Christological trilogy is maybe the first contemporary Haggadic Midrash for *The New Testament*. Significantly, he does not do it so as to prove anything but rather to fill the missing Jewish interpretation of these books. Asch considered it to be his duty and was ready to pay a bitter price for his missionary and reconciliation attempts. As the outcome of this attempt, the divided family of Abraham received a literary masterpiece, *The New Testament* Midrash.

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³⁶ Asch 1945: 86.

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