"In the Beginning Was the Word"- Its Hebrew Translation and its Role in Hebrew Literature: The Case of Meir Wieseltier[1]

Hanna Soker-Schwager

1.

"In the beginning was the Word" – this is how the gospel of John opens. In the gospel's original Greek, *logos* was the word used, which was then translated into English as *word*. In Hebrew, logos is rendered as *davar*, which carries two meanings: *thing*, or object, as well as *word*. The Hebrew, here, seems to capture a tension in the original Greek *logos*. Though it is often associated with meanings like *word*, *idea*, *rationality*, *argument* – *logos* as it functions in John primarily refers to the incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth of the divine word, the word with which God first created. The *logos* thus comes to join opposites – the divine and the mundane, language and body, metaphysical and physical. Does the English *word* yield this connection, the process of incarnation? Does it communicate the embodiment of the divine in flesh and blood? Or is it rather to the Hebrew *davar* we must look to access this yoking of two meanings – word and thing, language and body?

Perhaps the question was one of translation right from the beginning. Goethe's Faust too wonders how to translate the opening of John's Gospel. "In the beginning was the *Word* "- thus runs the text.

> Who helps me on? Already I'm perplexed!
> I cannot grant the word such sovereign merit,
> I must translate it in a different way
> If I'm indeed illumined by the Spirit.
> "In the beginning was the *Sense*." But stay!
> Reflect on this first sentence well and truly
> Lest the light pen be hurrying unduly!
> Is sense in fact all action's spur and source?
> It should read: "In the beginning was the Force!"
> Yet as I write it down, some warning sense
> Alerts me that it, too, will give offense,
> The spirit speaks! And lo, the way is freed,

I calmly write: "In the beginning was the Deed!"[2]

Confused, Faust, tries to translate *logos* as *word*. Then, unsatisfied, he replaces it with *sense*, and next he tries force. Finally, he writes *deed*. All these together display this tension between abstraction and bodily enactment that the original Greek logos holds.

The question of the language in which the gospels were originally written has a long history. Translation, therefore, has always been a crux. In Mark and Matthew we find *Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani* (my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me), a direct transcription from the Aramaic, as is the phrase *Talitha kumi* (Little girl, I say to thee, get up!).[3] In turning to the masses, Christianity needed apostles and those who could mediate. The logos itself may have offered a type of mediation – one however that is hard to translate as such. As said, it takes different meanings in different translations: word, idea, force, act, deed, thing. In Luke, where the question arises how to tell the story of Jesus, logos means narrative.[4] Yair Zakovitch argues that there is no notion of incarnated word in Judaism.[5] Is there a link between the complexity of John's notion of the logos and the dominant Gnosticism of his time?[6]

The emergence of Gnosticism itself has in fact been associated with translation as such by scholars who attribute a significant role to Gnosis in the creation of the Septuagint, the first Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. They argue that due to fundamental grammatical differences between Biblical Hebrew and Koine Greek, the opening of Genesis was interpreted in different ways. Thus for instance the Hebrew *bereshit bara Elohim* [in the beginning God created] was translated as if the Hebrew text ran *bereshit bara et Elohim* [in the beginning he created God]. It was this dualistic interpretation of the first verse of the Bible that formed the basis of the idea of two agencies: one creative and the other created. And this in turned spawned dualistic, Gnostic notions of a good God and an evil one. Could it be that perplexity originates in a problem of translation?

Already in ancient Greek philosophy the notion of the logos was central to Western thought. Christianity took the logos from here when it described the relations between the Son and the Father in the Trinity. The logos is the Messiah, he is God's son who mediates between the divine and the human. In the second half of the 20th century, the logos came to feature centrally in Western philosophy when Jacques Derrida introduced his analysis of "logocentrism", questioning Western philosophy's reliance on essentialist, rationalist thinking which posits the logos as unitary principle and source of certainty. This monolithic thinking – among other things, the source of monotheism itself – comes under criticism from Derrida's deconstruction which presents hermeneutic strategies based in plurality and hybridity. Anti-logocentrism subverts the fit between word and thing, signifier

and signified, and questions the hierarchical relations between origin and copy, or speech and text.[7]

The Hebrew for logos as it appears in John is *davar* – which denotes both word and thing – therefore capturing a tension that is central to the three religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but not less so to literature in so far as it reaches toward the reality behind the mesh of words. At the same time, this tension between language and body touches on a fundamental gap between Judaism and Christianity – one, at least, on the basis of which these religions have been trying to define themselves in relation to each other, in an ongoing process of confrontation and reconciliation.

In Judaism, then, there is neither incarnation nor transubstantiation, like the wine and the bread turning into the blood and the flesh of Christ. In Judaism creation is first and foremost a narrative of creation in words. This is how the Jewish Bible starts: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said 'Let there be light'; and there was light."[8] Creation, in this narrative, occurs through God's speaking out: the world is created by means of speech. But this is only one version of the story. A competing version appears in chapter two of Genesis, and here creation occurs in terms of the body, especially where God creates Eve from Adam's rib: "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. The rib which the Lord God had taken from man, He made into a woman, and he brought her to the man. And Adam said: 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.'"[9]

In Genesis' first rendering of creation, plants, animals and, only finally, Adam and Eve are created; in the second rendering, it is first the human, then plants and animals, on whom the first human then bestows their proper names. In the second version, therefore, emphasis on divine creation in language has disappeared. Only at the end of the process, woman is split off from man. The description of the manner in which Adam's flesh is "closed up" at the place from which the rib was taken, is strongly reminiscent of the closing of Christ's wounds at his resurrection.

This tension between creation in language, through the word, and creation from the perspective of the body, of earthly matter, flesh and blood, is resolved in Christianity when it introduces the Holy Trinity and adds the figure of Jesus Christ as the physical incarnation of spirit and Word. Jesus is the logos which negotiates between the divine and the mundane, and this is what singles out Christianity.

Still, as against the prevailing notion that the logos as a mediating entity is non-existent in Judaism, Daniel Boyarin, the Talmud scholar, argues there were certain tendencies in early Judaism that referred to a logos as a kind of messenger or intercessor between God and the world: he

suggests that the Biblical idiom "*dvar Adonai*" – which is translated as *the word of the Lord*– bears this out.[10] One instance in support of this refers to Genesis 1: 26: "Let us make Man in our image, according to our likeness". Scholars have asked to whom the first person plural in "Let *us* make Man"? may refer and they argue that here we can see God turning to exactly this mediating entity at his side, whose presence is crucial in the act of creation if the transcendental divinity is to be preserved.[11]

   But maybe the Gospel of St. John wasn't written in Greek to begin with, and the word *logos* is not the first one whose translation had to be faced? Some scholars have argued that the gospel was written in Aramaic. This is how we find it in an ancient source: "*milekadmin hoveh memra*"[12] : "In the beginning there was the expression or statement".[13] The *memra* is a type of logos, a mediating entity. Ancient Judaism, argues Boyarin, included a theological approach that had some affinity, in this matter, with ancient Christianity. There existed a "*yah katon*", literally a little god, alongside God.[14] With the rise of Christianity, however, mainstream rabbinical authorities made a major effort to highlight its difference and departure from Judaism, doing their utmost to negate the status of the logos, the messenger of God, who had until then been part of Judaism as well.

   Christianity, from its side, gave prominence to the Holy Trinity, and the Son of God, his worldly intercessor, in order to offset itself from Judaism. Right from the start, Christianity was at loggerheads with Judaism where it comes to the tension between spirit and flesh. When Paul uses the phrase "Israel after the flesh", this is a gesture in the direction of the ritual sacrifice that was still practiced, at his time, in the Temple, as well as of the Jewish ritual of circumcision. Paul distinguishes between Israel after the flesh and Israel after the spirit – the latter is how he calls early Christians. Augustine, quoting Paul, describes the Jews as "indisputably carnal" in his *Tractatus Adversus Judeaos* according to Boyarin in his *Carnal Israel*.[15] While identifying and describing this approach, Boyarin turns it upside down, to suggest a point of strength in Judaism rather than a flaw. He argues that the Jewish sages credited the body with a significance that other cultures tended to attribute to the soul. They defined the human creature as a body animated by the soul. For the Hellenistic Jews, or the Christians – at least those who spoke Greek – the essence of the human is a soul that dwells in the body. Boyarin claims that the Jewish sages rejected this dualism which became popular throughout the Greco-Roman world.

   In fact, the entire history of Western religion – both Judaism and Christianity – revolves around these tensions and articulations between spirit and flesh. One solution appears in John's gospel in the form of the logos: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [...] And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

These tensions between spirit and flesh, present from the inception of Western theology, also imply Gnosticism's dualism, with its good and evil divinity. Through history these two have been differently defined. Yotam Hotam points at the inversion of values characteristic of modern Gnosis which values the body positively, as opposed to its early, negative associations with the principle of evil. Zionism, for Hotam, can be considered a secular-messianic or secular-redemptive movement, in other words, an heretical Gnostic theology in modern guise. Zionism developed under the influence of late 19th and early 20th century German *Lebensphilosophie* ("philosophy of life"), which referred to two clashing, dualistically split principles: spirit (*Geist*) and life (*Leben*). In the philosophy of life, spirit is seen as related to an illusory reality, while life equals true reality, experience, nature's spark of truth. For Hotam this modern vitalist approach is a version of the Gnosticism of some sects active around the beginning of the Christian era. One might consider this a translation of Gnosticism to contemporary symbols and metaphors. With the difference, however, that two key concepts have traded places, namely, immanence and transcendence. In early Gnosis, the hidden, true divinity is transcendental and opposes the false world of immanent nature. This changes in modernity when in the philosophy of life, immanent nature becomes the preferred object of reflection, while it is now the point to remove the oppressive shackles of the transcendental spirit.[16]

Aware of dualistic Gnosticism, the Jewish sages debated it with fervor. The Talmud mentions Elisha ben Abuyah who erred in believing there are two powers, or two gods: he became known as "the other one" for that reason,[17] much like Jesus who in later Jewish texts was called "that man". John was a Jew, and scholars disagree whether or not his gospel can align with contemporary Jewish approaches. While Zakovtich and Ruzer have argued in favor of a Gnostic influence on John, Jörg Frey considers it in line with dualistic streams in ancient Jewish thought.[18] Zionism, in any case, under the influence of the philosophy of life, and having rebelled against theology in the name of life and the relationship to immanent nature – Zionism itself reintroduced the theological in its ideologically devout approach to immanent nature.

This is a theological strain that can be felt throughout modern literature in general and in modern Hebrew literature specifically. The latter too, shifts between times when it invests itself in the effort to capture the transcendent, and times when its main goal is to "touch" the real, make the body present, have its words carry the very taste of Madeleines. In Hebrew literature this tension is also borne out by the two-fold meaning of the word *makom*, which serves simultaneously as one of God's appellations, and thus refers to the transcendent, while also simply referring to *place* in the concrete sense, as geographical site and land. In the course of two thousand years of Jewish exile a deep rift and disconnect between these two meanings of *makom* – the transcendent and the mundane

– emerged. In the beginning of the Zionist project however, we see a "messianic" drive to forge a link between *makom* as a name for the divinity and *makom* as actual physical location, in the Holy Land. This new messianic charge was a source of concern for Jewish intellectuals, like Gershom Scholem, who warned against the dangers of a messianic fusion of the political and the theological and compared it to the threat of a volcano that may explode at any moment.[19]

2.

To bring into focus how the logos with its tensions has left its impact on modern Hebrew literature, let's read a poem by Meir Wieseltier, which I sometimes call "The Gospel of Meir Wieseltier". Wieseltier is considered the leading living poet in Israel today. He has been publishing ever since the 1960s, and at age 78 his voice can still be heard fulminating.

From his very earliest poetry, Wieseltier warns against the dangers of a messianic ideology of Zionism. In his poem "71 AD" Wieseltier draws a clear analogy between 1971, representing the euphoric messianic years following the Six Day War, and the year 71 AD, with the great Jewish revolt against the Romans, which ended with a huge catastrophe for the Jews. "My son", he begs, "don't join the Sicarii in a frenzy. / […]/ Don't take your wife and offspring to a cliff in the desert. / […]/ Take your gentle wife and your tender young ones/Get yourself a home […] and you will dwell there and not among the dead" (1973, 85). Bracketing together two historical periods in one title – "71 AD" – Wieseltier conveys the complex constellation and warns us against the dangers of a messianic politics like the one which emerged in Israel in the early 1970s reproducing a catastrophic ancient messianic episode which led to the destruction of the Temple and many deaths.

Some years earlier when he was only 19 years old, Wieseltier wrote a disturbing poem which includes explicit criticism of those who joined the revolt against the Romans – thus criticizing the way politics and theology were joined in the Zionist project. It also reveals, however, a strong sense of intimacy with the rebels.

Let us consider the poem now:

    Take a Look at my Rebels/ Meir Wieseltier

                Verses on a theme of Jerusalem and feet,

                wood, and fire

Take a look at my rebels

my spindly legged rebels,

Yokhanan of Gush-Halav was scrawny and beloved

and Shimon of the Desert

had flat feet.

(Not one cross on Gologotha

                              but three

and in Galilee they cried over twice as many).

The one who hammered the nails was a master craftsman

and the one who prepared the crosses worked with honest hands.

The WPA in the Roman workshop

                           Drudged

in the streets of Jerusalem.

Where housing projects stand now, crosses once dreamed

of more newcomers.

Rain fell like a grid, and blood

soaked into the dust and the wood.

Hearts churned with vengeance

red and clenched.

And my rebels drank cheap wine and said:

We'll drink a toast yet in Pilate's cellar.

Under their robes they were spindly and wasted

and their feet were flat.

Yokhanan of Gush-Halav was scrawny and beloved

and had never seen Bar Giora.

(In Galilee the sign of a cross against the sky

was no big deal.)

Josephus didn't tell you any of this

but he knew

They would not drink a toast in Pilate's cellar

(Pilate was already dead)

and his heart was as cold

as a Roman legion

against the alleys of Jerusalem.

   ***

My rebels were dressed

like wind-ravaged trees.

They knew they'd only find peace

at the end on a bed of fire.

Bar Giora tarried in the desert

and the ones in Jerusalem wanted to rest and buy protection

while in Gush-Halav people played

with iron

and prepared for surgical intervention.

Rain stuttered on the roofs

And sputtered

tunes.

Covered in heavy hoods, drowsy-eyed

Lizard legions rolled through the mud.

At dawn blue penciled

crosses appeared against the sky.

And when a new governor was appointed,

he shook hands with all the centurions

and the elders of Jerusalem.

The city swayed as on a swing.

My rebels stared

drank cheap wine and spoke:

> but sometimes the words stuck on their lips
>
> and they pressed against the window, and heard the thump
>
> of hammers in honest hands.[20]

How should we understand this intimate call, which enfolds a shade of sympathy for the cruel messianic rebels, for Yokhanan from Gush-Halav and Shimon of the Desert? And to what extent is this intimacy related to the question of the logos with which I have been dealing so far? I will seek to show how despite its focus on the Jewish rebels, the poem engages in a condensed dialogue with the Christian notion of the logos and with its uncanny intimacy between blood, flesh, and wine.

Yokhanan from Gush-Halav and Shimon of the Desert were leaders of the great Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire from 66-73 AD during which the Jewish temple was destroyed. In Flavius Josephus' *The Jewish War* (c. 75), they are described as particularly cruel. This is what Josephus writes about Yokhanan from Gush-Halav: "He was the most cunning and deceitful of evil men, who had become renowned for these despicable actions […] he knew how to present himself as a lover of mankind, but for his own benefit he had no trouble spilling human blood as if it were water [..] and to fill the Galilee with oppression and violence."[21] Shimon Bar Giora is described by Josephus as he is being led along in the Romans' triumphal procession, a rope around his neck, and eventually thrown off a rock.

In the Zionist revival, however, these rebels are recast in a different role: Bar Giora is no longer regarded a symbol of cruel fanaticism but comes to represent the heroism of the uprising of the "new Hebrew".

The change can already be felt in the translator's introduction to the 1923 Hebrew translation of Flavius Josephus. Dr. Y. N. Simchoni seeks, he writes, to remove the "veil of oblivion" that has come to cover the heroism of the Jewish rebels against the Romans. They must be restored as the brave men they were who succeeded in their struggle against the powerful Roman empire, even if they were forced to surrender eventually. Simchoni presents this historical oblivion as a triumph of "Judaism of the spirit", the triumph of Talmudic scholars over those who supported a political Judaism, men of power and action. "The [religiously approved] idea of a good deed [even if it is] accompanied by a transgression has grown alien to them", and he sadly observes that all the "great actions" and the "sacred worship of God" – including those of Yokhanan of Gush-Halav and Shimon of the Desert, vanished from the history books of a "spiritual Judaism" which preferred to busy itself with textual hairsplitting.

So, in the early twentieth century, with the return to "political Judaism", in pre-statehood Israel a

Jewish vigilante organization called "Bar Giora" now assembled under the motto "In blood and fire, Judea fell, in blood and fire, Judea will rise". This group sought to invoke a continuity between the great revolt of the first century AD, and the early twentieth century return to Zion of the pioneers.[22]

In "Take a Look at my Rebels", Wieseltier manages to invoke three historical periods and three types of rebels: the Jewish rebels in the great Jewish revolt against the Romans – Yokhanan from Gush Halav and Shimon Bar Giora. Into their narrative he inflects, parenthetically, the story of Jesus the rebel who was crucified on Golgotha ("Not one cross on Golgotha, / but three, / and in Galilee they cried over twice as many"). To these he adds the "new rebels", the Zionist pioneers, who are represented in this poem by the housing projects built for the new immigrants – or in Wieseltier's words: "Where the housing projects stand now, crosses once dreamed/of more newcomers". This constellation is dominated by the ambiguity of "newcomers" – here the historical victims approaching the cross blend with the immigrants of the 1950s [*Olim Chadashim*]. In this way, Wieseltier exposes the theological foundation of the Zionist project in its attempt to constitute a modern, secular nationalism, while adopting a messianic narrative of redemption.

The figure of Jesus in Hebrew literature undergoes a dramatic change in the early twentieth century, as Hannan Hever and Netta Stahl have shown.[23] From functioning as a major symbol of Jewish-Christian antagonism, Jesus now comes to feature as a pious Jew who never really intended to institute another rival religion. The image of the suffering Jesus now serves to remind us of the wandering Jew and of the Jewish pioneer who struggles with the hardships of his new homeland.

In putting the Jewish zealot rebels and Jesus together into one stanza, Wieseltier reproduces the unholy mixture of imagery Zionism used in its attempt to forge a narrative of revolt, suffering, and redemption. Zionism relied heavily on revolutionary energies, and for this purpose it recruited the rebels' ardor, even if their story carried elements of heresy and false messianism. Gershom Scholem used the Talmudic notion of the *mitzvah haba'a be'averah* [a good deed done from religious duty, even if it involves certain transgressions] in this context.[24] Thus Zionism generated a peculiar blend of heretical redemption. In Wieseltier's poem there appears to be no great difference between the rebels, on the one hand, and the various sects from which Jesus emerged – they all ended on their respective crosses. He mentions Yokhanan from Gush-Halav in one breath with the crucifixion at Golgotha, and then adds the immigrants who settled in the newly established Israel in the 1950s, employed in workfare, like the laborers in Jerusalem under Roman rule: "The WPA in the Roman workshop Drudged/ in the streets of Jerusalem". Here Wieseltier uses the Hebrew notion of *avodot dchak* – workfare, in English – to link between the hard labor in Roman-ruled Jerusalem workshops and that in 1950s Israel: workfare was the labor new immigrants were made to carry out to earn their

living, depleting and unheroic labor.

This portrayal of labor contrasts with the Hebrew poetry of the early twentieth century in which pioneering work was described in Christian terms, borrowed from the New Testament and conveying a mood of sanctification and spiritual elevation, as for instance in Shlonsky's poem "Yizrael" : "Man is flesh, and here in the holy land he labors -/ And the soil brings its bread […] Who counts for great here? Who for small/ In the kingdom of labor and flesh?/ Here the soil is what we turn over – the scroll of a new testament – and there are the twelve of us".[25] Wieseltier, in his poem, undermines this type of religious enthusiasm and focuses on the pain, blood, nails and crosses. He presents all of it as foolish self-sacrifice which repeats itself throughout history.

Addressing Shlonsky's poem "Yizrael" this tendency to combine Jewish and Christian figures together in the attempt to glorify the rebels, Wieseltier exposes the artificiality of this superimposition and the violence needed to achieve it. He reveals what hides behind the figure of Christ as a symbol of the pioneer, and presents it as an accumulation of victims, Jews and Christians, who are crucified and who crucify in turn, generation after generation, in a messianic-theological-political furor, with always the same result: a mixture of blood, ashes and wooden planks, the blows of hammers and the grim glimmer of nails beaten into the crucified body.

This artificial "pasting" is suggested in the poem's motto: *Verses on a theme of Jerusalem and feet, wood, and fire*. Right from the start I was intrigued by what appeared to be the poet's excessive interest in the rebels' feet. A look into Flavius Josephus did not yield an explanation. Next though, it struck me that the point is simply in the rhyme, the rhyme as such: *Yerushalyim – raglayim* – which unfortunately does not survive in the English translation: Jerusalem and feet. Similarly there is an assonance between the Hebrew *etz* and *esh* –which again is lost in translation where it becomes: *wood* and *fire*.[26] Rhyme creates a phonological relationship between what is not otherwise related. This is Jakobson's poetic principle and it explains the fascinating effect of poetry. Wieseltier, however, in so doing, also exposes the skeleton underneath this effect by drawing attention to the baselessness of the rebellion and the crucifixion; he achieves this by means of the arbitrariness of the rhyme. By rhyming *ne'ehav* and *tslav* – that is, *beloved* and *cross* – he subverts Zionism's visionary pathos which romantically deployed Christian imagery in order to glorify the pioneer: crucifixion and the sacrifice of life in the name of God or the land – they are all the same thing, says Wieseltier.[27]

This is Wieseltier's typical poetic violence which sharpens the knives of poetry and turns them against the swords of bloody-superfluous-war. Here poetic violence takes the shape of arbitrary rhyme which cuts sentences at unexpected points and presses the words into a baseless link: between

Yerushalayim and *raglayim* (Jerusalem and feet), and between *tslav* and *neehav* (cross and beloved). The poem is full of these rhymes –*raglayim, kiflayim, kapayim, Yerushalayim; Gush-Halav, neehav, tslav; ruah, lanuah, bituah, nituah; gagot, manginot, ligyonot*. Most of this, unfortunately, is not preserved in the English version.

Wieseltier, following Faust, decides that in the beginning there must have been an act, or deed. By means of his rhyme as well as by focusing on materiality and on the activities of the laborers and craftsmen Wieseltier produces the theater of cruelty[28] of those who are crucified across the generations. In spite of its historiosophic tone, in a kind of take-off of Flavius Josephus, the poem does not offer a cold and objective report. It holds a cruel intimacy – maybe like that of the director who observes his own invented characters in their struggle against a cruel fate, and like God who sacrifices his own son.[29]

3.

This cruel intimacy, it would seem, includes elements of the sado-masochistic cannibalism of Christ's Last Supper, when he turns to his disciples as follows: "Take, eat, this is my body […] Drink from it […] for this is my blood".[30] Twice we are told that the rebels drank cheap wine; and when at the end of the poem the wine drinking ritual is mentioned again, the poem is abruptly interrupted, leaving a vacancy and silence: "My rebels stared/drank cheap wine and spoke:" The punctuation mark, a colon, announces a quote, but nothing is said! Instead there is a gap, Wieseltier inserts a silence marked by a double space, followed by a final stanza which articulates what the preceding silence has already achieved: "but sometimes the words stuck on their lips".[31] Is the Word, the one of John's gospel, arrested here, as Wieseltier refuses to join it with the flesh in order to achieve incarnation, indeed, refuses a messianic fusion between words and things?

Wieseltier's speaker somewhat resembles Jesus, in both his voice and authority, as well as in the intimate manner in which he turns to the disciples during the last supper. But Wieseltier's speaker interrupts the scene and does not communicate the "thing", the word that has turned into flesh. He does not say: "This is my blood, drink it". Instead he inserts an empty, silent double space, and then he lets us hear the blows of the hammers, a sound that is neither thing nor speech – just noise, action and matter. If we read it in the light of the sentence "In the beginning was the Word", then we can observe how the poem is stuck between words and things: the words are not articulated, they form a lacuna in the poem.[32]

In a kind of impoverished version of the Last Supper, the word gets stuck on the lips. "Take a look at my rebels," says Wieseltier, with a gesture that creates a kind of communal comradeship,

one in which he himself takes part, like Christ in the Last Supper. The poem resonates something of this sado-masochistic participation. In *Totem and Taboo* Freud already portrays the totemic meal as a cannibalistic ritual by means of which the individual expresses his ambivalence in the form of identification with the father, as well as guilt about having killed him. Here, in this poem, we find Wieseltier protesting against sacrificial rituals – starting from Jesus, through the fanatical Jewish rebels, to the sacrifice of the newcomers to Israel. At the same time however, he himself reproduces the ritual in presenting us with a close-up of the nails, the blows of the hammers, and the thunderous music of the poem, which cuts lines with a poetic slash of the knife. Freud writes that in Christianity, the religion of the son replaces that of the father. This change is marked by the return to the ancient custom of the totemic meal, now in the form of the communion. In this ritual the brothers eat from the elected son's body and drink from his blood – no longer from the father – and this is how they devote themselves and identify with him.[33] Yitzhak Binyamini argues that it was the project of Christianity, especially in its Pauline version, to remove the figure of the father and replace it with that of the son by way of a narcissistic model.[34] Could it be that in the voice of young Wieseltier we hear traces of the same cannibalistic-narcissistic model associated with the religion of the son? Maybe this is what's behind the enigmatic intimate call "Take a look at my rebels", the way it produces a language of communal brotherhood between the speaker and the rebels – to whom he refers as "my rebels" (my emphasis – HS) – as well as between him and the reader whom the speaker addresses with an intimate familiarity: "take a look".[35]

The power of Wieseltier's poem seems to lie in the way it pulls between two extreme and opposing positions. Now the speaker uses a thunderous voice with a quasi-divine authority, as though he himself were the logos, the divine intercessor who connects word and thing,[36] yet at the same time, he constitutes himself through an anti-logocentric gesture, stopping the word on the threshold, refusing to continue in his mediating role. In this latter gesture he gives up trying to put things into words to tell a historically meaningful story:[37] With one blow he smashes his own text and falls silent.

What is left is the sound of the hammers hitting. This poet will not take it upon himself to be the intercessor. He will take the place neither of God nor of his son, Jesus, the logos. Turning away from the community, he grows silent and only the blows of the hammers can be heard. Though they express nothing, they may contrive to communicate how the hammers' blows, driving the nails down, affect the reader.

Quoted poem in the original Hebrew

בּוֹא תִּרְאֶה אֶת הַמּוֹרְדִים שֶׁלִּי / מאיר ויזלטיר

חֲרוּזִים עַל מוֹטִיב יְרוּשָׁלַיִם וְרַגְלַיִם עֵץ וָאֵשׁ

בּוֹא תִּרְאֶה אֶת הַמּוֹרְדִים שֶׁלִּי

אֶת הַמּוֹרְדִים שֶׁלִּי פְּחוּסֵי רַגְלַיִם,

יוֹחָנָן מִגּוּשׁ חָלָב הָיָה רָזֶה וְנֶאֱהָב

וְשִׁמְעוֹן מִן הַמִּדְבָּר

פְּחוּס רַגְלַיִם.

(לֹא צֶלָב אֶחָד בְּגֶלְגָּלְתָּא עָמַד

אֶלָּא שְׁלֹשָׁה,

וּבַגָּלִיל לֹא בָכוּ עַל כִּפְלַיִם).

מִי שֶׁתָּקַע מַסְמָרִים הָיָה אָמָּן בִּמְלַאכְתּוֹ

וְשֶׁהֵכִין צְלָבִים עָמַל יְשַׁר כַּפַּיִם.

פּוֹעֲלֵי דְּחָק בְּבָתֵּי-מְלָאכָה רוֹמִיִּים

עָבְדוּ

בְּחוּצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם.

בְּמָקוֹם שֶׁעוֹמְדִים עַכְשָׁו שִׁכּוּנִים חָלְמוּ צְלָבִים

עַל עוֹלִים חֲדָשִׁים.

וְהַגֶּשֶׁם יָרַד כְּמוֹ שְׁבָכָה, וְהַדָּם

הִתְעָרֵב בֶּעָפָר וּקְרָשִׁים.

וּלְבָבוֹת הִתְעַרְבְּלוּ בִנְקָמָה,

אֲדֻמִּים וּכְבוּשִׁים,

וְהַמּוֹרְדִים שֶׁלִּי שָׁתוּ יַיִן זוֹל וְאָמְרוּ:

בַּמַּרְתֵּף שֶׁל פִּילָטוֹס עוֹד נִשְׁתֶּה לַחַיִּים.

וּכְשֶׁהִפְשִׁילוּ אֶת הַשִּׂמְלָה הָיוּ רָזִים וּשְׁחוּפִים

וּפְחוּסֵי רַגְלַיִם.

וְיוֹחָנָן מִגּוּשׁ חָלָב הָיָה רָזֶה וְנֶאֱהָב

וְאֶת בַּר גִּיּוֹרָא לֹא הִכִּיר בְּעַיִן,

(וּבַגָּלִיל לֹא הִתְרַגְּשׁוּ לְמַרְאֵה סִימָן צֶלָב

עַל רֶקַע הַשָּׁמַיִם)

כָּל זֹאת לֹא סִפֵּר לָכֶם פְּלָוְיוּס
אֲבָל הוּא יָדַע
שֶׁבַּמַרְתֵּף שֶׁל פִּילָטוֹס לֹא יִשְׁתּוּ לְחַיִּים,
(וּפִילָטוֹס כְּבָר מֵת)
וּלְבָבוֹ הָיָה קַר
כְּלִגְיוֹן רוֹמָאִי
עַל רֶקַע סִמְטָאוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם.

וְהַמּוֹרְדִים שֶׁלִּי הִתְלַבְּשׁוּ בִּבְגָדִים
שֶׁשָּׂווּ לָהֶם מַרְאֶה שֶׁל עֵץ
מִזְדַּעֲזֵעַ בָּרוּחַ.
וְהֵם יָדְעוּ שֶׁרַק עַל מַצָּע שֶׁל אֵשׁ
בָּאַחֲרִית
יַסְפִּיקוּ לָנוּחַ.

וּבַר גִּיּוֹרָא בּוֹשֵׁשׁ בַּמִּדְבָּר
וּבִירוּשָׁלַיִם בִּקְשׁוּ מְנוּחָה וּבִטוּחַ,
וּבְגוּשׁ חָלָב שִׂחֲקוּ אֲנָשִׁים
בְּבַרְזֶל
וְהִתְכּוֹנְנוּ לְנַתּוּחַ.
וְהַגֶּשֶׁם גִּמְגֵּם עַל גַּגּוֹת
וְשָׁרַק
מַנְגִּינוֹת.
וַעֲטוּפִים בַּרְדָּסִים כְּבֵדִים וּמְנַמְנְמֵי עֵינַיִם
בּוֹסְסוּ בַּבּוֹץ חַרְדּוֹנֵי לִגְיוֹנוֹת.
וּבַשַּׁחַר שֶׂרְטְטוּ בְּעִפָּרוֹן כָּחֹל
צְלָבִים עַל רֶקַע הַשָּׁמַיִם.

וּכְשֶׁנָּצִיב חָדָשׁ קִבֵּל מִשְׂרָה, לָחַץ
אֶת יְדֵי כָּל הַצֶּנְטוּרְיוֹנִים
וְזִקְנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַיִם.
וְהָעִיר הִתְנַדְנְדָה כְּמוֹ בְּנַדְנֵדָה.

וְהַמּוֹרְדִים שֶׁלִּי לָטְשׁוּ עֵינַיִם,

וְשָׁתוּ יַיִן וְאָמְרוּ:

אַךְ לִפְעָמִים נֶעֶצְרָה הַמִּלָּה עַל הַשְּׂפָתַיִם.

וְנִלְחֲצוּ אֶל הַחַלּוֹן וְשָׁמְעוּ אֶת קוֹל הַפַּטִּישִׁים

שֶׁל אֲנָשִׁים יִשְׁרֵי כַּפַּיִם.

Notes

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2   Goethe, *Faust* Part I, p. 30, ll. 1224-1237; trsl. Walter Arndt (London & New York: Norton. 1976).

3   Eli, Eli: Mark 14:34; Matthew 27:46; Talitha kumi: Mark 5:21–43, Mattew 9:18–26, Luke 8:40–56).

4   Luke 1:1-4; Yair Zakovitch and Serge Ruzer, *In the Beginning Was the Word*: *Eight Conversations on the Fourth Gospel* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2014), 136. [Hebrew]

5   Yair Zakovitch argues that in Biblical traditions, "the *shekhina* is not presented as being connected to the flesh, and there appear to be no mentions of or references to "the flesh" that parallel those in John", Ibid, 123.

6   See under "Gnosis/Gnostica", Tora Education Institute, Tali Foundation: http://www.talispiritualeducation. org.il/

7   Jacques Derrida, "The Father of The Logos", in: *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981).

8   Genesis 1:1-3. All quotations from the Bible are from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise stated.

9   Genesis 2:21-23.

10   Daniel Boyarin, "'The one who said that the world came to be': The Logos and its Rejection", in *The Logic of Jonah: New Perspectives on the Literature of Midrash, Agadah, and Piyut,* (Yehoshua Levinson, Yacov Elboim, & Galit Hazan-Rokem; Jerusalem: Magnes 2007), 151-164. [Hebrew]

11   Menahem Kister, "'Let Us Make Man' –Monotheism Between Unity and Plurality" *Issues in the Study of the Talmud* (Jerusalem: The Israeli National Academy of Sciences, 2001), 28-65. [Hebrew]

12   *Genizah Manuscripts of Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch*. See: Boyarin, "The one who said that the world came to be': The Logos and its Rejection", 151.

13   Boyarin refers to Rudolf Bultmann who claimed that John's gospel was originally written in Mandean Aramaic; see Boyarin ibid. 151; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trs. G.R.Beasley. Murry (Oxford 1971), 21.

14   Boyarin ibid. 154, Refer to Moshe Idel, "Enoch in Metatron", *Immanuel* 24/25 (1991), 220-240.

15   Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (California: University of California Press, 1993).

16   Yotam Hotam, *Modern Gnosis and Zionism: The Crisis of Culture, Life Philosophy and National Thought* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007).

17   Babylonian Talmud, *Hagiga* 14b.

18   Zakovitch and Ruzer, *In the Beginning Was the Word,* 117-136. [Hebrew]; Jörg Frey, *The Gospel According to John, from the Jews and for the Benefit of the World* (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2014), 11-24.

19   Gershom Scholem, "Confession on the Subject of our Language – A Letter to Franz Rosenzweig, December 26, 1926," in *Acts of Religion*. Edited with introduction by, Jacques Derrida and Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 226–227.

20   Meir Wieseltier, *The Flower of Anarchy*. Translated by Shirley Kaufman, with the author. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 11-13. The poem was originally written in Hebrew in 1960.

21   Flavius Josephus, *The War of the Jews*, trsl N.Simhony (Givatayim: Massada, 1968), Vol. 1, Book 2, Ch. 21, line 1; p.186. [Hebrew]

22   Wieseltier's description of the rebels in the poem above as being "dressed like wind-ravaged trees" refers to Bar Giora's ploy against the Romans, as Flavius Josephus recorded this. He dressed up to look like a ghost with the aim of putting fear into his enemies. Ibid., Vol.2, Book 7, Paragraph 2, p.374.

23   Hannan Hever, *Captured in Utopia* (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 1995). [Hebrew]; Netta Stahl, *A Jewish Photographer* (Tel Aviv, Resling, 2007). [Hebrew]

24   Gershom Scholem, "Mitzvah Achieved in the course of Transgression", *Sources and Studies in the History of Sabbateanism* (Tel Aviv: Bialik Institute, 1974), 9-67. [Hebrew]

25   Avraham Shlonsky, *In the Wheel – Poems* (Tel Aviv: Davar, 1927) 124-125. Cf. also Hannan Hever, *Captured in Utopia*, 31-32. In the Hebrew original Shlonsky drops the article from *ha-brit ha-hadash*a – Hebrew for the New Testament - thereby turning it into a concrete, secular notion referring to a new covenant or alliance with the soil, resulting in a secular notion which carries traces of a religious sublime.

26   Yehuda Visan too considers the poem exemplary of modernist Hebrew writing. "This poem should have served as the basis for the new Hebrew poetry. It is a prime instance of Eliot's poetics, including its graphic aspects, in Hebrew." This is in contrast with current Israeli poetry which takes the form of prose, with cut-off sentence and lacking any musicality, Visan writes. He points out the strategic similarity between the opening verse of Wieseltier's poem – "Take a look at my rebels" – which invites the reader in, and "Let us go then you and I" in Eliot's "Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock". "It is a sublime architectural and musical symphony, combining an objective bird's eye view with the beak's concrete picking at worms – combining crosses that dream against the sky with spindly–legged rebels and lizard-legions rolled in the mud - bringing together historical wealth and input from tradition, with an existential experience that can be related to the present - this is how the new Hebrew poem should have looked. This is modern poetry at

its best. This is how it sounds". Yehuda Visan, "The Stuff from Which Poets Are Made", *Makor Rishon*, Saturday supplement, 17.6.2016.

27   In doing so he seems to ridicule Jakobson's argument to the effect that the resonance and similarity created by assonance and rhyme project themselves onto the poem's meaning. This gives it its penetrating, multi-dimensional and plural-significant symbolic quality. Of course this is not full-blown ridicule: Wieseltier uses rhyme and assonance for his own purposes. Exactly as Jakobson's principle prescribes! Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics", *Style in Language* (T. Sebeok (Ed.); Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1960), 350-377.

28   Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*. Translated from the French by Mary Caroline Richards. (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

29   The hortatory "Take a look at my rebels" is nevertheless not just ironic, as no good poetry can ever be merely that. Wieseltier in fact attacked Zach's non-committal irony. Something in the intimate address in the present poem complicates this irony.

30   Matthew 26: 26-28.

31   In the original Hebrew, at this spot, the poem has *mila*, word, in the singular. For obscure reasons this is translated as the plural, *words*.

32   Wieseltier applies a performative caesura when the rebels (here identified with Christ) are expected to affirm: "This is my blood, drink it". The Christian ritual is under erasure, but at the same time the text of the poem's narrator, too disappears: after first turning with a certain familiarity to his reader, he falls silent. Yitzhak Laor argues that the violence in Wieseltier's poetry is first and foremost directed against himself and his poetry, a violent regression of the poem which withdraws into itself. Yitzhak Laor, "Hearts' Desires Will Be Put to Death," In *Narratives with no Natives* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1995), 224–248. [Hebrew]

33   Sigmond Freud, *Totem and Taboo*. Translated by James Strachey, (London: Routledge, 2001[1913]).

34   Yitzhak Binyamini, "The Son's Supper – the Pauline Lord's Supper as Communal-Personal Cannibalism", in eds. Binyamini, Yitzhak and Tsivony, Idan, *Slave, Pleasures, Master – on Sadisim and Masochism in Psychoanalysis and in Culture Studies* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2002), 271-285. [Hebrew]

35   Binyamini argues that Jesus' masochism originates in the Jewish attitude to God. The Jew expects his God's/Father's/Lord's guardianship as well as his punishment, and this is reflected in the ritual of circumcision. Much like the Jew asks to be castrated or slain (as in Abraham's sacrifice of his son), Jesus implores God to crucify him. Ibid., p.284.

36   On the back cover of the English collection of Wieseltier's poetry, "The Flowers of Anarchy", Amos Oz is quoted: "Wieseltier is the savage yet compassionate poet of Tel Aviv". He further writes that Wieseltier is both cruel and compassionate – an epithet usually reserved for the Jewish God.

37   As Zakovitch mentions (*In the Beginning was the Word*, p.136) in the Gospel of Luke the word *logos* carries a different meaning: it refers to narrative, the question of how to tell the story of Jesus.