

Dariusz Konstantynów

INSTITUTE OF ART HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF GDAŃSK

“Perceived with Hebrew Sense and Hebrew Instinct” – “Close to the Christian Ideal”: Polish Art Criticism on Maurycy Gottlieb’s *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* (1878–1879)

In a column dedicated to current events in the theatre and fine arts, published in the 26th issue of *Tygodnik Powszechny* in 1879, an anonymous chronicler, when commenting upon the news of Maurycy Gottlieb’s work that was being painted, i.e. *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* (Fig. 1), expressed his hope that the painting “would bestow considerable glory onto Polish art”.¹ Unfortunately, the canvas, whose inevitable success the Warsaw columnist was proclaiming, remained uncompleted, as only several days after the note was published Maurycy Gottlieb died suddenly in Cracow on 17 July 1879.

This sizeable painting (271.5 × 209 cm), which was initiated in December 1878 in Rome, was displayed at an exhibition of works of Cracow’s Academy of Fine Arts students. It was launched on 25 July 1879, soon after the painter’s death. Several months later it could also be viewed at Józef Unger’s Fine Arts Salon, which was inaugurated on 26 October 1879 with an exhibition of Gottlieb’s works (Fig. 2).²

1 “Teatr i sztuki piękne” [Theatre and Fine Arts], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1879, no. 28, p. 447.

2 *Katalog obrazów wystawionych w Salonie Sztuk Pięknych Józefa Ungra w Warszawie... Listopad* [Catalogue of Paintings Exhibited at Józef Unger’s Fine Arts Salon in Warsaw... November], Warsaw, 1879, p. 6. It was Salomon Lewental, a well-known publisher and book dealer, who bought the painting from the exhibition; in the 1920s his inheritors submitted the canvas to the collection of Warsaw’s National Museum (see: *In the Flower of Youth. Maurycy Gottlieb 1856–1897*, ed. N. Guralnik, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, 1991, p. 209). On the history and meaning of *Christ Preaching at Capernaum*, cf. also: E. Mendelsohn, *Painting a People. Maurycy Gottlieb and Jewish Art*, Hanover–London, 2002, pp. 134–138. However, the issue of the reception of Gottlieb’s painting in Polish art criticism was not analysed in that book.

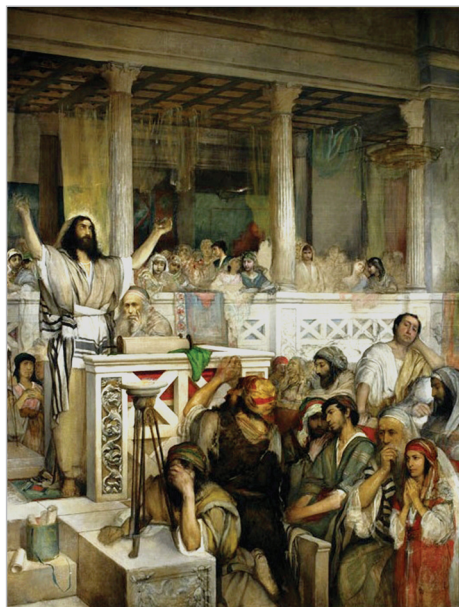


Fig. 1. Maurycy Gottlieb, *Christ Preaching at Capernaum*, 1878–1879, National Museum, Warsaw. Public domain.

By the end of November yet another of Gottlieb's canvases had reached Unger's Salon, this one also showing a scene from the life of Jesus, namely *Christ before His Judges*, which had been started in 1877 and was also unfinished (Fig. 3).³ This painting was mentioned markedly less often than *Christ Preaching at Capernaum*. Some references were limited to laconic statements that in the painting the fanaticism of the college of priests sentencing Christ had been rendered "with tragic horror",⁴ or the penetrating argument that did not support the opinion which stated that Christ was a "colourless, common [figure] saying nothing".⁵ Waleria Marrené perceived Christ not as the traditional embodiment of God-Man who is silent in the face of the priestly tribunal but as a defender of those suffering and the oppressed and speaking to the judges on their behalf rather than in the name of God.⁶

It was both in Cracow and Warsaw that Gottlieb's *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* attracted a large public and incited numerous comments of the critics, though what they were dealing with was merely an outline of a future work. Henryk Struve described it in the following way: "The entire

3 *Katalog obrazów...*, Warsaw, 1879 p. 5; cf. *In the Flower of Youth. Maurycy Gottlieb 1856–1897*, p. 206.

4 B. Zawadzki, "Przegląd artystyczny przez..." [Art Review, by...], *Bluszcz*, 1880, no. 4, pp. 29–30.

5 J. A. K., "Obrazy Gottlieba" [Gottlieb's Paintings], *Nowiny*, 1879, no. 345, pp. 2–3.

6 M. [W. Marrené], "Salon sztuk pięknych Ungra w Warszawie" [Unger's Fine Arts Salon in Warsaw], *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 1879, no. 208, pp. 387–388.

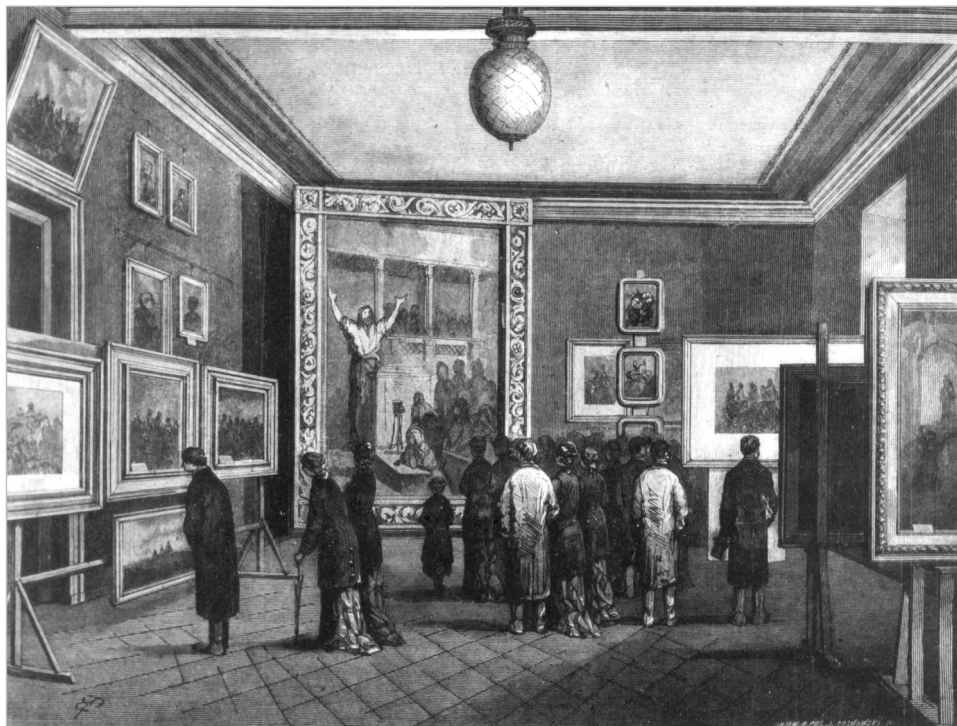


Fig. 2. Bronisław Podbielski, *J. Unger's Exhibition of Paintings (Salon) in Warsaw*, *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 1880, no. 213.



Fig. 3. Maurycy Gottlieb, *Christ Before His Judges*, 1877–1879, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Public domain.

painting shows Christ preaching in the synagogue. Next to him, to his left, there is a women's gallery. In front of Christ, at his feet – as he is standing on an elevation – there is a group of male listeners, also uncompleted, except for more distinctive sketches of some figures only, among whom what is most striking is the portrait of the artist himself, extremely pensive. The most accomplished figure in the whole painting is that of Christ, also constituting the major focus".⁷

The painting aroused so much general interest because, first of all, it had been painted by a Jew with "an acute perception of eastern Biblical poetics", while the topic was of Christ and "what is more in a synagogue, thus seen against Judaism".⁸ The very piece of news that Gottlieb had chosen to tackle such a motif excited curiosity. A journalist from *Przegląd Lwowski* wondered how an artist who expressed "all his love [and] all his soul" in figures of Jews could depict Christ in a synagogue. Although he did not know the image, he surmised, however, that the figure would be unlikely "to shine with the light of His divinity".⁹

All of these kinds of questions and speculations were resolved with the display of Gottlieb's work. After acquainting himself with the painting, a reviewer from *Czas* affirmed that although representing Christ the artist definitely did not refer to Christian art tradition but that Christ in his painting with a nobility, spirituality and sanctity. The countenances of the listeners were so full of wonder and awe that "it feels that these souls – and we must conclude – in the artist's soul a new life has begun, a new gleam, and indeed a completely new revelation of belief". According to the critic, despite this treatment of the figure of Christ the picture had taken on a Jewish character: "The entire force of the old order is inscribed here and renders the racial power of the Chosen People that has not been lost after long centuries of dispersion". In linking a historical subject with religious reflection, the work reminded the critic of the paintings of Henryk Siemiradzki. However, this did not change the fact that Gottlieb was a unique and individual talent, and even the "religious-tribal" aspect was so strongly manifested in the "spirit of ancient Judaism" and still lives in Poland, where "irreligious progress or civilizational assimilation has not yet wiped out the types and autonomous separation". Gottlieb succeeded in reflecting that spirit in his work because he was "of a strangely poetic nature" and perfectly able, in a time that was unpoetic and imbued with materialism which was especially deeply rooted among contemporary believers in Judaism, to see such primordial idealism. The Jews listening to Christ that he depicted, despite being quite characteristic, were nevertheless not "slavishly modelled on typical heads that one can meet in Kazimierz, Brody or any other small

7 H. Struve, "Przegląd artystyczny" [Art Review], *Kłosa*, 1880, no. 758, p. 19.

8 "Wystawa szkoły sztuk pięknych" [The Exhibition at the School of Fine Arts], *Czas*, 1879, no. 172, p. 1.

9 "Kronika" [Chronicle], *Przegląd Lwowski*, 1879, no. 15, p. 136.

Galician town". The reviewer considered them "prototypes of that race, but truly antique, wrapped in the charm of the historical concept of the former synagogue". In his comments he also claimed that Gottlieb was not inspired by Ernst Renan's theory that Christ is not a divine entity but the most perfect of men. He noted that the picture contains no trace of cold, scientific rationalism; it is deep faith, but one that is reflected more on the faces of the listeners than in Christ's expression.¹⁰

The exhibition of *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* in Cracow was seen by Michał Bałucki, who shared his thoughts with readers of the Warsaw-based *Tygodnik Powszechny*. However, on the subject of the painting the writer had nothing more to say than that the face of Christ is "full of the noble solemnity and melancholic reverie of the eastern peoples", and in his dark eye one can perceive deep wisdom, "sweetness" and "love" – that being the essence of Christianity.¹¹ A columnist for *Przegląd Tygodniowy* was equally terse and stated that although Gottlieb depicted a Christ-Jew "in the dress of the teachers of the people of Israel", he did so with such dignity and inspiration that "many a Christian artist would envy him".¹²

Christ Preaching at Capernaum was most intensively commented on during the exhibition at Unger's Salon. There was no hesitation in describing the unfinished painting as "a masterpiece", imbued with poetry, prayer and peace,¹³ which would be enough to recognise Gottlieb's exceptional talent and have his name recorded among the greatest creators of native art.¹⁴

The critics' attention was mainly focused on the "beauty and spirituality anointing the face of the divine teacher", to whom the artist was able to give an original expression "of religious rites and prophetic rapture".¹⁵ They also emphasised that Gottlieb's Christ is "the fruit of true inspiration" which is extremely rarely seen in contemporary art and which can be created only by a selected few artists who live in their own world of ideals providing them with shelter from the "frosty currents of our rational age".¹⁶ The reviewer of *Nowiny* praised Gottlieb for his ability to free himself from the conventional depictions of Christ and for creating a completely new type for this character that is free from "dogmatically mandated majesty", "dry religiousness" and

10 "Wystawa szkoły sztuk pięknych", p. 1.

11 M. B. [M. Bałucki], "Korespondencja Tygodnika Powszechnego" [The Correspondence of Tygodnik Powszechny], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1879, no. 35, pp. 533–534.

12 "Echa warszawskie. XXXIII" [Warsaw Echoes. XXXIII], *Przegląd Tygodniowy*, 1879, no. 33, p. 398.

13 Sęp [W. Maleszewski], "Z Warszawy" [From Warsaw], *Biesiada Literacka*, 1879, no. 203, p. 323.

14 J. A. K., "Obrazy Gottlieba", p. 3.

15 K. O., "Nowy salon artystyczny" [The New Fine Arts Salon], *Kurier Codzienny*, 1879, no. 242, p. 1.

16 K. Matuszewski, "Wystawa dzieł sztuki p. Ungra" [Mr. Unger's Exhibition of Art Works], *Gazeta Polska*, 1879, no. 256, p. 3.

“academic formulae” embarrassing contemporary religious painting. In his work the artist had given proof that the depicted figure feels deeply and sincerely, giving it the solemnity of holiness and revived thought. As a result, he had created a Christ “carried on the winds of his visions and dreams immersing the soul in the celestial fields”.¹⁷

Waleria Marrené also gave high marks to Gottlieb’s work. Like the other critics, she focused on Christ depicted “in a strangely noble, but poetic, way”, on the expressive face and eyes “[that] inspired enthusiasm”.¹⁸ In a further analysis she came to the conclusion that Gottlieb had perceived Christ with “Hebrew sense and Hebrew instincts”, making it quite unlike either the spiritual pre-Raphaelite visions or the sensual images of the Renaissance masters, let alone the conventionalised depictions of contemporary academics. “Gottlieb’s Christ”, she explained, “is a completely fresh character, conceived not from faith, but from love; he is neither God nor an ordinary man: this is a biblical prophet, a Hebrew speaking to the Hebrews and understandable for them. [...] This is not the Son of God, as he is usually depicted by Christian masters; this is a rash spirit of that age, this is the successor of Elijah, Isaiah and Ezekiel”.¹⁹

Stanisław Grudziński, in turn, was extremely critical of all the artist’s works he had seen and made no exception for *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* while evaluating it. He claimed that the painting “did not make any deeper impression, the impression of spiritual truth”; this not being due to the fact that the painter had bestowed “an extremely Semitic character, Arab dress, and purely Hebrew features” upon the Saviour since the public had been accustomed to the manner of presenting Biblical scenes in compliance with archaeological or ethnographical knowledge by Siemiradzki in his *Christ and the Harlot*, just to name one example. Meanwhile, Gottlieb’s work, according to Grudziński, “makes us shiver”, and “a certain chill that we involuntarily felt, did not want to leave our heart”, despite him trying to approach the picture several times, “in different spirits”. Attempting to account for such a reaction, Grudziński decided that the only or most important cause was to be found in “the very concept of Christ”; “To us”, he explained, “He embodies, first of all, love, the love that flowed from heaven to earth like sunlight, in order to uplift, warm up, enlighten everything that is humble, poor, and suffering on the this earth. Without this love we cannot comprehend Christ, and even if we do, we do not let ourselves be overwhelmed by the fervent veneration that his person awakens in us. It is possibly for this very reason that Gottlieb’s Christ does not appeal to us. The artist has perceived him in the Hebrew manner, more as an inspired prophet, a mystic, more lambasting

17 J. A. K., “Obrazy Gottlieba”, p. 3.

18 M. [W. Marrené], “Salon dzieł sztuki” [The Salon of Art Works], *Kurier Poranny i Antrakt*, 1879, no. 311, pp. 2–3.

19 M. [W. Marrené], “Salon sztuk pięknych Ungra w Warszawie”, pp. 387–388.

people, than blessing them, more prepared to die to fight for the truth of his words than spurring the mankind to reach the ideal of ‘one flock with one shepherd’. [...] We feel that there are words of divine wisdom coming from his mouth, but He says them just as prophets did, since they *had to* speak, as divine inspiration burst their lungs and poured out in inspired words. Meanwhile, what we sought in Him was the One who voluntarily promised to testify to the truth, who loved people, and *wanted* to die for their salvation, using his own blood to seal the divine preaching on love. Gottlieb’s Christ is a Hebrew mystic – a genius, prophet of the Hebrew – and it may be this one-sidedness of the concept that accounts for the source of the chill that we were unable to forget if only for a minute. [...] From his perspective, Gottlieb created the figure of Christ which is beautiful and noble, yet it does not harmonise at all with our ideals, therefore it is not his fault”.²⁰

The distinctive image of Christ as presented by Gottlieb was also noticed by Henryk Struve. To him this resulted from the differences between Christian and Jewish spirituality. Christianity is a religion of love, humility and martyrdom, and the Christians believe that salvation has already happened. This belief fills them with a mystical bliss and with gratitude, thus leading to the greatest sacrifices. In Judaism, however, redemption is still being awaited, which fills its followers with feelings of regret and longing. In addition, Jews do not comprehend salvation “spiritually, ideally”, but “realistically” – as a removal of obstacles to earthly happiness and world dominion under the care of Jehovah. That is exactly why a Christian’s humility, ecstasy and mysticism are alien to Jews; for them this is “elegiac contemplation” and “meditation on their despondency” or a sublime pathos based on “the sense of the majestic dignity of the chosen people”.²¹

The “Orthodox Jewish” view on Christ could be seen by Struve even more clearly in *Christ before His Judges*. As much as the preacher from the Capernaum synagogue was ennobled with “pathos and dignity”, which actually “brought Him closer to the Christian ideal”, in the court scene he considered the figure of Christ to be “totally different for Christian eyes”. Struve further argued that Gottlieb’s vision decidedly differed from the Christian tradition of depicting the condemned Christ as humble and submissive, and willingly subjecting himself to the will of God and sacrificing himself in the name of love for mankind. In Gottlieb’s Christ he could not find traces of humility or submissiveness, on the contrary – in the sharp profile clearly appearing in the exact centre of the canvas, in the exasperated expression on his face only insignificantly softened by “a shade of ailing melancholy”, in the gesticulating hand, in the arrangement of his whole body – he saw “an ordinary sectarian,

20 K. Grzymała [S. Grudziński], “Notatki artystyczne. Z Salonu Sztuk Pięknych Ungra, w Warszawie” [Notes on Art. From Unger’s Fine Arts Salon in Warsaw], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1880, no. 2, p. 21.

21 H. Struve, “Przegląd artystyczny. I.” [Art Review], *Kłoso*, 1880, no. 757, p. 3.



Fig. 4. Maurycy Gottlieb, *Christ Before His Judges*, detail.

devoid of moral and spiritual superiority which could impress the High Priest, stir his conscience and penetrate the mysteries of the heart and spirit of the accused" (Fig. 4). This characteristic of Christ accentuated the "more dignified and noble" treatment of the High Priest, on whose face one can read that the sentence gives him a sense of justice and with the conviction of the rightness of his position, appealing to the sympathies of the viewers. Struve called these characterisations of the main figures "dislocated" from the point of view of the "ideal content" of the presented scene.²²

In *Christ Preaching at Capernaum*, despite its close proximity to the spirit of Christianity, Struve found features that decidedly distinguished Gottlieb's painting from the works of Christian artists. He drew this conclusion while comparing it with the works of those contemporary artists who "would develop their Christ's ideals in a more independent way, better matching the concepts of the more present times", and he considered Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, Ary Scheffer, and Gustave Doré to be such. The first of them, despite "the whole turn towards realism", had not renounced "profound emotionality and softness, even certain sentimentalism" in his representations of Christ. Scheffer, in his turn, whenever depicting Christ was always "an ethereal poet and mystic", while Doré's works appealed to the beholder with a combination of "truly romantic fantasy" and "a sublime spirituality of all religious personages, Christ in particular". Gottlieb's Christ, Struve recapitulated, is completely different: "Peace and dignity are the hallmarks of his character. He raises his eyes and hands to the heavens, but from his countenance and movements what appear to us are rather dignity and majestic pathos than sincere affection and

²² Ibid., p. 19.

deep emotion. We have before us a priest of the old order who pays homage to God in heaven and calls upon Him to aid the chosen people, but we do not see the Saviour, sincerely accepting His divine mission, heralding the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God and of the reconciliation of God and humanity to the suffering people. His eyes and mouth do not speak of love, humility and martyrdom; from his entire attitude, from his entire relationship with God and people, it is not known that his heart is filled with heavenly love, truths coming directly from God that he desires to share with his hapless brothers for their perpetual good. [...] This is not a harbinger of a new order, new ideas, a reformer demanding the people's spiritual rebirth, rather this is a priest who, in his own sense of conformity with the existing order of things, is carrying out the duties of his faith...”²³

This opinion of Władysław Maleszewski can be seen as being in opposition to Grudziński's and Struve's views. Maleszewski states that the work marks Gottlieb's “departure from the Jewish Orthodox tradition”. His Christ, reminiscent of the reprimanding Moses, seems to be speaking of general love. “This is the love”, the critic added, “that the painter believed in. He had it in his soul – his Christ testifies to it. There is so much holiness in the figure of the world's Saviour! this holiness is cast upon the thoughts and countenances of the gathered listeners – the old man next to Christ is his follower, while the artist staring at the preacher's figure could be eagerly tempted to follow him”.²⁴

Bronisław Zawadzki discussed *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* three times. He found the work's greatest advantage to be that of the artist presenting Christ without “mystical symbolism”, but “in the spirit of the historical epoch” – a “Jerusalem preacher as he was seen by his contemporaries”. Combining religious painting with elements of historical genre painting in no way diminished the perfect pronunciation of the work; on the contrary, this “robust realism in the conception of the situation” gave the “ideal structure” of the work “a mark of truth and life”.²⁵ To the critic, Christ in Gottlieb's painting brings to mind the works of the early Renaissance masters – “an age of mystical harmony”. He did not find traits of the “more materialistic, cooler era” of today. His face, full of “the majesty of divine tranquillity”, is not disturbed by any human passions or internal dilemmas, there is also no sign giving hint to the unceasing struggle with different types of misfortunes in the struggle of earthly existence. The painter was able to fully feel the “sanctity of the subject”, thanks to which he created a work that Zawadzki counted among “the most sublime ideas known to us in the field of religious painting”.²⁶

23 Struve, “Przegląd artystyczny”, p. 19.

24 Sęp [W. Maleszewski], “Z Warszawy”, p. 323.

25 Br. Z. [B. Zawadzki], “Wystawa obrazów Gottlieba” [The Exhibition of Gottlieb's Paintings], *Kurier Warszawski*, 1879, no. 267, p. 3.

26 Br. Z. [B. Zawadzki], “Salon sztuk pięknych p. Ungra” [Mr. Unger's Fine Arts Salon], *Wiek*, 1879, no. 268, p. 5.

In his own reflections on Gottlieb's painting Zawadzki also did not ignore the question of Christ's "Jewishness" – of this "most ideal expression of the Jewish tribe", a figure who, despite becoming "the ideal for all humankind", as he, after all, "arose from the essence of Judaism and was with its historical idea, its social and psychological values engaged most closely". He wondered therefore if Gottlieb, as a faithful follower of Judaism, wanted to see the Son of God in Christ, or also "the most noble of sages and Hebrew moralists". Trying to resolve this issue he claimed that if the author of the painting had been a Christian, no one would have asked similar questions because Gottlieb's Christ "has the towering majesty of excellence and was held at such a level of inspiration that often tends not to be an earthly pedestal". Taking into account the "tribalism" of the artist as well as the fact that even non-Christians value the ethical aspects of the teachings of Christ – the creator of a new moral order – Zawadzki presumed that in the preacher in the synagogue at Capernaum Gottlieb did not see a divine essence but "only the highest expression of the spirit and truth in antiquity, in this same spiritual entwining with their eternal source: with God". The painter expressed this bond with God by directing Christ's eyes towards the sky, from where there seems to flow peace and wisdom reflected in his delicate and subtle face.²⁷ The critic claims that it is Christ's face that actually expresses the essence of his "divine power", not truly shown in the struggle and triumphs of good over evil, though taking on the shape of an "omnipotent love" that is alien to passions and concerns caused by hostile elements wrestling in nature and in man.²⁸ "The face's profile", he continued, "drawn in the style of Ary Scheffer, has this blissful softness of outline that seems to be the embodiment of a cheerful soul, soft, sending forgiveness where vengeance is usually sent, or at least the lust for rough clash and fight. This face has not been sternly furrowed by any hatred, any contradiction; as there are no elements for hatred; where God connects with the world, there is no equality of wrestlers' force for any struggle to be started. The fewer the traits characteristically unique and casual, the more splendid emanation of Divinity's entirety and harmony, whether I understand this literally or as the most sublime spiritualisation in the truth and good of humanity".²⁹

In another of his statements, Zawadzki ranked Gottlieb's work as one of the "noblest religious inspirations of the 19th century" and rated it as high as Félicité-Robert de Lamennais's *Paroles d'un croyant* and the three first *Psalm* *Przyszłości* [Psalms of the Future] by Zygmunt Krasiński.³⁰ Zawadzki, however, did not elaborate on this comparison, possibly for the simple reason that both works were banned in the Russian Partition. In his article he actually

27 B. Zawadzki, "Przegląd artystyczny przez...", pp. 29–30.

28 Br. Z. [B. Zawadzki], "Wystawa obrazów Gottlieba", pp. 2–3.

29 B. Zawadzki, "Przegląd artystyczny przez...", pp. 29–30.

30 Br. Z. [B. Zawadzki], "Wystawa obrazów Gottlieba", pp. 2–3.

defined them quite enigmatically as the "three Psalms", and as the "words of a believer", thus hoping for the intuition of the reader, on the one hand, and on the censor's inattention on the other. We can only presume what Zawadzki's reasons were. The reference to Krasinski's *Psalmy Przyszłości* shows how profound his reception of Gottlieb's painting must have been so as to make the critic associate it with a historiosophical reflection of the bard of Romanticism for whom Christ was not the world's Redeemer and an innocent sacrifice for its sins but the herald of the new truth which, when mankind participated, would lead to its revival. In Krasinski's concept there is additionally room for the analogy of Poland–Christ, which was most commonly interpreted as a reference to the Polish nation – a sacred and innocent victim of the sacrilegious political and religious conspiracy of the three partitioning powers and, therefore, a nation predestined to herald the truth of Christ's teaching to mankind.³¹

What seems much clearer are the traces of the reading of the inspired words of Father Lamennais (which Krasinski was familiar with as well), criticising the social order, which was full of unfairness and suffering, and calling mankind to revive itself not through revolt and a blood-shedding rebellion but through the love of God and neighbour, i.e. a return to the untarnished fundamental truths that were embodied in Christ. In one of Zawadzki's articles we can find the following description of Gottlieb's Christ: "The divine power which is featured in Christ's gentle and bright countenance is not an expression of victorious resistance that is yielded from the struggle between good and evil, it is not the impertinence of human triumphers, which results from the victories over the opponent, possessing relatively equal resources of intellectual, moral, or physical power, but the peaceful omnipotent power of love, unaware of equal swordsmen and not passionate about battle and toil, which just like a silver moon ray shines on all that is earthly and material, which is cheerful, as it is alien to passion, which is sweet, as it towers over bitterness and anxiety of hostile elements fencing in nature and in human being".³²

In the eyes of the Polish critics, Gottlieb's *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* deserved the highest esteem. For Struve it was the "apogee of Gottlieb's oeuvre".³³ Władysław Maleszewski called it a "masterpiece" conceived by "mature inspiration, aware of where to head, whom to extol".³⁴ The critic for *Nowiny* did not hesitate to claim that even if Gottlieb had painted this one work only, "he would have had the right to be considered as extremely

31 Cf. J. Siennicki, *Chrześcijańska wizja dziejów w pismach Zygmunta Krasinskiego* [The Christian Vision of History in the Writings of Zygmunt Krasinski], Lublin, 2002, pp. 343–344.

32 Br. Z. [B. Zawadzki], "Wystawa obrazów Gottlieba", pp. 2–3.

33 H. Struve, "Maurycy Gottlieb, artysta malarz" [Maurycy Gottlieb, Painter], in: *Sprawozdania Komitetu Towarzystwa Zachęty Sztuk Pięknych w Królestwie Polskim za rok 1880*, Warsaw, 1881, pp. 66–69.

34 Sęp [W. Maleszewski], "Z Warszawy", p. 323.

talented” since his Christ could “easily be put next to similar figures painted by great masters, and he would be no less charming or genuine”.³⁵

Although in the eyes of the critics the painter had not followed in the footsteps of “Christian” 19th century religious artists, as his oeuvre bore the hallmark of the artist’s religious and “tribal” identity, it did not, however, exceed the valid convention at the time of showing the figure of Christ, which was more and more often violated in the latter half of the 19th century. This is what, for example, Jacek Malczewski did – his *Kiss of Judas*, displayed in December 1880 at Krywult’s Salon, was severely commented on by who other but Bronisław Zawadzki, possibly the greatest admirer of Gottlieb’s painting. “And by the way, is this truly Christ?”, insisted the critic. “Can this mindless, almost idiotic physiognomy, without any trace of anxiety and pain, without anointment of divinity, without any traits of sacrifice or heroism, resemble even in the slightest of ways that moral ideal in which the conviction of Christian mankind has epitomised the major virtues and noblest spiritual powers of humanity, the holy, divine ideal? Such a perception of the most sublime protagonist of the Christian religion epos is a simple profanation of the lofty ethical idea. One can conceive Christ more realistically than the old masters of the Renaissance or the old German school, yet this countenance must not be attributed ordinary features of *triviality*”.³⁶ It is no wonder then that Gottlieb’s Christ, perfectly fitting the convention of being presented as God-Man and shown in compliance with the academic poetics, was so highly appreciated not only by Zawadzki, but also by many other critics.

The Christ from Gottlieb’s painting was so impressive that, as Stanisław Grudziński remarked to his great surprise, many could feel in it “the presentiment of the Christian ideal”, which made them suspect that “had Gottlieb lived longer, he would have undoubtedly turned towards Christ with all his heart”.³⁷ Among them was also Władysław Maleszewski, who, although remarking that such questions were the “soul’s mysteries” and he would not dare to explore them, he could not, however, help notice that “only the one who came to believe in His mission, could create such a sublime figure”.³⁸ When notifying of Maurycy Gottlieb’s death, the chronicler of *Przegląd Lwowski* regretted: “It is a real pity that such a beautiful mind and lofty soul could not raise to the heights of Christianity when influenced by the love of beauty”.³⁹ A *Czas* reviewer was more restrained – he thought that the work had been created by a painter “who did not comprehend the Gospel as of yet”, and who had, however, the “premonition of Christ’s divinity”, “an artist-Jew” whom

35 J. A. K., “Obrazy Gottlieba”, p. 2.

36 Br. Z. [B. Zawadzki], “Z wystawy A. Krywulta” [From A. Krywult’s Exhibition], *Kurier Warszawski*, 1880, no. 281, pp. 1–2.

37 Grzymała [S. Grudziński], “Notatki artystyczne. Z Salonu Sztuk Pięknych Ungra, w Warszawie”, p. 21.

38 Sęp [W. Maleszewski], “Z Warszawy”, p. 323.

39 “Kronika”, p. 136.



Fig. 5. Maurycy Gottlieb, *Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur*, 1878, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, detail. Public domain.

“inspiration and art” did not lead so much from Judaism to Christianity, as placed him half-way between, with *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* serving as the image-symbol of the encounter of the Old and New Testaments.⁴⁰

The authors of the above-quoted statements, convinced of the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, could go on speculating along these lines since there were quite a number of Jews who had crowned their integration process with Baptism. There are no suggestions, however, that Gottlieb was considering such an option. Contrariwise, he emphasised that he was a follower of the religion of his ancestors and hid his self-portraits among the figures in his painting *Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur* (Fig. 5) or listening to Christ at Capernaum (Fig. 6). The latter seems to tell us the most about Gottlieb’s views on Judaism since it defines him as a follower of the reform promoted by the integrationists who claimed that there could be no better binding material for Jews living in the Diaspora than Judaism, yet in its primordial, pure form, untarnished by later influences. The reform of Judaism, claimed Samuel H. Peltyn, who was one of its main promoters on Polish territories, “wants to chase away from his soul a Jew of the Talmud, a Jew of Rabbinism, and instead with a friendly hand replant there a Jew of prophets and thinkers, a Jew-descendant of the ancient race and follower of the ancient preaching, yet at the same time, the son of his own times, a man and a citizen”.⁴¹ The integrationists’ attitude towards Christ is also significant:

40 “Wystawa Szkoły Sztuk Pięknych”, p. 1.

41 Judaíta [S. H. Peltyn], *Projekt reformy w judaizmie. Ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem jego strony etycznej. Ułożył...* [A Proposal for Reform in Judaism. With Particular Emphasis on its Ethical Aspect. Arranged by ...], Warsaw, 1885, p. 77.

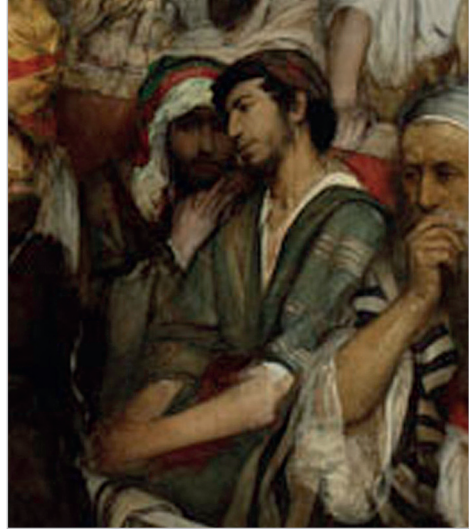


Fig. 6. Maurycy Gottlieb, *Christ Preaching at Capernaum*, detail.

“We are the followers of the preaching of Moses and the prophets, yet we also respect the faith of Christ as identical in its Evangelical purity with ours. In the person of the creator of Christianity we pay tribute to the memory of a great Son of Israel [...]”, wrote Peltyn. He then continued to explain that in his native land, among the divided people of Israel, the words of Christ did not resound, having been drowned by “biased criticism”; Christ’s teaching, however, found a response far away, and that is where it developed. “Still, the followers of Judaism were no longer able to recognise in a huge overgrown oak [...] the plant of their native soil and moved away from it even further”. Peltyn finally declared: “In the believers in Christ we respect the worshippers of the same God and holders of the same moral convictions that we observe; in a way we consider them to be sharing the same religion”.⁴²

Peltyn’s words, though published several years after Gottlieb’s death, voice ideas that were spread at the time when the artist lived and was active as a painter. Perceived in their perspective, *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* seems to illustrate how the integrationists perceived Christianity. Gottlieb did not only remind them that Christ was a religious Jew – an issue that was raised by Jewish historiographers in the latter half of the 19th century, e.g. by Abraham Geiger (*Das Judenthum und seine Geschichte von der Zerstörung des zweiten Tempels bis zum Ende des zwölften Jahrhunderts*, 1865–1871) and, first of all, by Heinrich Graetz, whom Gottlieb must have been familiar with (*Geschichte der Juden. Von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart*, 1853–1875). Gottlieb conceived his painting as meaning to reveal the thought, later expressed by Peltyn, about the kinship and closeness of both Judaism and Christianity.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 125–126.

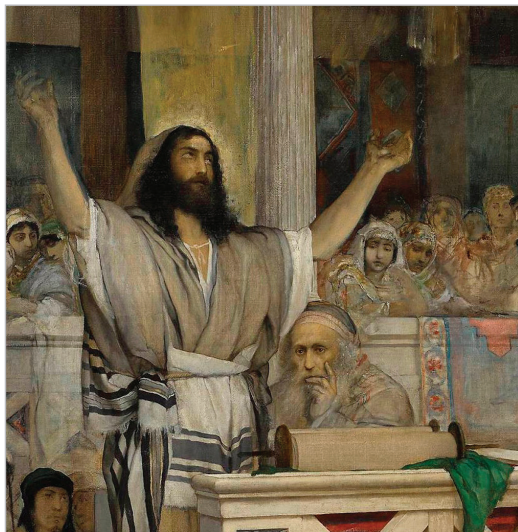


Fig. 7. Maurycy Gottlieb, *Christ Preaching at Capernaum*, detail.

The central point of the composition, quite naturally engaging the beholder's eye in the first place, is taken by the Torah Scroll – the holiest of Judaism's revealed texts – placed on a marble balustrade with Christ directly next to it; he is both a Jewish rabbi wearing a *tallit* – a prayer shawl – and a Christian God-Man, as suggested by the aureole around his head, which is unequivocally reminiscent of a saint's halo (Fig. 7).

Both Gottlieb's work and its perception fit into the atmosphere of the 1870s, it seems therefore unjustified to associate the genesis of *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* with the manifestations of anti-Semitism that Gottlieb must have felt during his studies at the School of Fine Arts in Cracow.⁴³ As much as Mark Antokolski's or Max Lieberman's works were truly targeted by an anti-Semitic attack, the oeuvre of Maurycy Gottlieb, in turn, (and of Gottlieb as an individual), were perceived with much respect and esteem by the critics.⁴⁴ The modern anti-Semitism that both Antokolski but, first of all, Lieberman, suffered from, on Polish territories developed only in the 1880s. The preceding decade seemed to coincide with a time when it was believed that the integration of Jews, namely their transformation into “Poles of Jewish faith”, was considered to be the most appropriate solution of the “Jewish question”.

⁴³ Such was the thesis formulated by Ziva Amishai-Maisels, “The Jewish Jesus”, *Journal of Jewish Art*, 1982, vol. 9, p. 99.

⁴⁴ On the image of Gottlieb as created in the Polish press during the artist's lifetime and immediately following his death, see D. Konstantynów, “Znakomity malarz i ożywiony najlepszymi chęciami obywatel”. Maurycy Gottlieb w oczach prasy polskiej (1877–1880)” [‘An Outstanding Painter and a Citizen Motivated by the Best of Intentions’. Maurycy Gottlieb in the Eyes of the Polish Press (1877–1880)], *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, 76, 2014, no. 1, pp. 113–161.

Such was the atmosphere in which arose the art of Maurycy Gottlieb, a Jew-painter who “to his death sincerely confessed the teaching of Moses, who fairly judged the spirit of Christianity, and was a good son of his country”.⁴⁵

(Translated by Gina Kuhn i Magdalena Iwińska)

Abstract

The views of Polish art critics regarding Maurycy Gottlieb’s painting entitled *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* (1878–1879) are analysed. The canvas, which was first exhibited in Cracow in 1879 and subsequently in Warsaw, aroused particular interest among the public and among art critics, first of all because its author, himself a practising follower of Judaism, had presented Christ as a pious, religious Jew. Almost all of the critics were positive about Gottlieb’s work, pointing out, however, to the different qualities in his representation of the figure of Christ. This resulted, in their view, from the discrepancies between Christian and Jewish spirituality. Still, the image of Christ as created by Gottlieb seemed to them so close to the Christian ideal that some did not hesitate to suspect that the artist himself was not far from converting to Christianity. Both Gottlieb’s work and how it was perceived fit into the atmosphere of the 1870s, it seems therefore unjustified to associate the genesis of *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* with the manifestations of anti-Semitism that Gottlieb must have felt during his studies at the School of Fine Arts in Cracow. Modern anti-Semitism on Polish territories developed only in the 1880s. The preceding decade seemed to coincide with a time when it was believed that the integration of Jews, namely their transformation into “Poles of Jewish faith”, was considered to be the most appropriate solution of the “Jewish question”. Such was the atmosphere in which the art of Maurycy Gottlieb, a Jew-painter, arose.

45 “Wiadomości bieżące krajowe” [Current National News], *Gazeta Warszawska*, 1879, no. 256, p. 2.