

**Shaul Magid, Ed.
and Jordan Gayle Levy, Trans.**
*The Bible, the Talmud, and the New Testament:
Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik's Commentary to the Gospels*

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BENJAMIN E. SAX

bsax@icjs.org

Institute for Islamic, Christian, Jewish Studies, Baltimore, MD 21204

In *The Bible, the Talmud, and the New Testament: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik's Commentary to the Gospels*, Shaul Magid and Jordan Gayle Levy aim to provide the English-reading public new insights into the possibilities for Jewish-Christian dialogue through an English translation of Soloveitchik's commentary to the gospels, *Qol Qore*. The Soloveitchik name is familiar to anyone who studies Jewish thought because of the family's generations of distinguished Talmudists, though Elijah Zvi (1805-1881), and especially this work, are far less well-known. In the forward to this volume, the president of Yale University, Peter Salovey, not only discusses the theological impact of the Soloveitchik dynasty, but also shares that he is, in fact, a descendent of Elijah Zvi, who is his great-great-great grandfather. Salovey expresses his pride that his relative set the parameters for a "difficult dialogue" in the nineteenth century, which, he argues might even be considered a template for further interreligious engagement. As a traditionalist molded in the Lithuanian tradition, Soloveitchik's affirmation of Christianity is worth consideration, especially since he was arguably more radical than even his liberal peers. This translation may even capture the *zeitgeist* of our contemporary cultural moment. There has been a noticeable uptick in academic work on Jewish-Christian dialogue, including the publication of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* in 2011. Given the recent success of television programs like *Shtisel* and *Unorthodox*, there also appears to be popular interest in ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic communities. Soloveitchik's views on Judaism and Christianity may finally garner attention of those working in interreligious dialogue.

While it was not uncommon in the nineteenth century for Eastern European Jews to write about Christianity, most did so in response to missionary activity. Soloveitchik's work stands apart because of his attempt to affirm Christianity. The

absence of source material makes the task of understanding his position challenging. Levy does not have full access to Soloveitchik's original writing and so Magid must turn to Soloveitchik's intellectual milieu to piece together a story of translation and reception.

This volume focuses specifically on Soloveitchik's commentaries on the books of Mathew and Mark. He allegedly also wrote a commentary on the other book of the synoptic gospels—Luke—but it appears no longer to exist. There is no existing Hebrew text of his commentary on Mark either, but Levy is able to draw upon a French translation by Rabbi Lazare Wogue, a colleague of Soloveitchik's, published in 1870 in Paris. For his commentary on the book of Matthew, Levy draws upon an undated Hebrew edition as well as one published by a Protestant mission in 1985, though he suggests it was written in the 1870s. Complicating matters further, Magid explains that we do not know which New Testament Soloveitchik consulted in his commentary. It could have been a German or a French edition, or possibly Hebrew, or even Nehemiah Solomon's Yiddish edition, which was intended to convert Jews. Magid and Levy believe that he most likely consulted a Hebrew translation, so they compared the commentary to a Hebrew translation by the noted Lutheran theologian and Hebraist, Franz Delitzsch (1813-1870). Even though Magid did not find evidence that Soloveitchik consulted Delitzsch's translation, or was even familiar with his work, "given their shared interests in Judaism and Christianity, as well as Delitzsch's stellar reputation among many Jewish scholars," Magid infers, "it is likely that he was familiar with it" (12).

Levy's translations of Soloveitchik's commentaries sound appropriately rabbinic, which make Soloveitchik's views on Christianity all the more poignant. Conceding the possibility that Soloveitchik may have consulted Delitzsch's translation, Levy draws on *The Delitzsch Hebrew English Gospels* in her translation of New Testament texts. Translating a translation of sacred texts may give some scholars pause. As in most Jewish translations of sacred texts, in Soloveitchik's *Qol Qore* we find a pedagogical impulse toward some kind of acculturation. In this way, I wonder if Levy's translation is intended to teach something about living a religious life without the conventional borders separating Christianity and Judaism.

Soloveitchik makes clear in his preface that despite claims to the contrary, Judaism and Christianity—and specifically their sacred texts the Talmud and the New Testament—are not mutually exclusive. In fact, one goal of his commentaries was to demonstrate how these traditions are equally true. This position was radical even for many nineteenth-century Jewish reformers and proponents of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, who sought to highlight the basic Jewishness of Jesus, albeit for polemical purposes. Even though antisemitism bedeviled most of nineteenth-century Europe, Magid argues that there is little to no evidence that Soloveitchik engaged with the Jewish-Christian polemics of his time. Likewise, he did not publish opinions on the missionary activities of Christians in Eastern Europe, most notably the efforts of the famed British Hebraist and missionary Alexander McCaul (1799-1863), or even engage with Eastern European Jewish defenses against McCaul. In Magid's view, Soloveitchik's *Qol Qore* may have stood against the

anti-Talmudic missionizing efforts of the mid- to late-nineteenth century. His commentary sought to reorient readers toward a non-messianic Jesus, whose life and teachings, when read through a rabbinic lens, may even sound Maimonidean. Take, for example, his long commentary to Mathew 12:2, “The *Perushim* [Pharisees] saw this and said to him: ‘Look! Your disciples are doing what is not to be done on *Shabbat*.’” Here, Soloveitchik cites Maimonides, the Babylonian Talmud, the Gospel of Luke, Leviticus, and Exodus, in addition to supplying an etymology of the word “Sabbath” in Hebrew, English, German, Russian, and Polish. He makes the case that Jesus not only “did not permit . . . the desecration of the Sabbath, or even the rabbinic prohibitions,” but also he did not seek to change the day from Saturday to Sunday (169). Note as well Soloveitchik’s view on the resurrection of Jesus, which for him is a Christian misreading of the text, since, as in Maimonides’ interpretation of the term, resurrection merely points to the immortality of the soul. In Soloveitchik’s view, Jesus was a proto-Maimonidean who advocated for the unity of God and was thus a good rabbinic Jew.

One might generalize that the nineteenth century in Europe was marked by the setting of boundaries: geographically, theologically, and politically. Since the writings of Aristotle and Euclid, setting boundaries has consumed much of what is called religious thought or theology. Read in this context, Soloveitchik’s commentaries are indeed radical. And yet he appears to demand little of his orthodox Jewish community, while at the same time demanding something much greater from his Christian neighbors: Judaizing Jesus means taking away his messianic status, which, as it turns out, many Christians are unwilling to do. The ability to set boundaries discloses power. Interreligious dialogue often reflects cultural and political power in boundary settings: who is in or out, what ideas are appropriate or inappropriate, etc. Honest dialogue, indeed engagement, requires some acknowledgment that any religious faith, especially that of biblical or theistic orientation, perforce engenders some intolerance, possibly even some prejudice. Religious knowledge, after all, is privileged knowledge. Recognizing this, Soloveitchik sought to broaden the scope of what was considered privileged in order to reconcile “these two enemy sisters,” Judaism and Christianity (49). His voice, then, should be welcomed into our interreligious conversations, and we should be grateful for Magid and Levy’s attention to his work.