



Soloveitchik and St. Paul: A Commentary on the Hebrew Gospels

01/07/2022 | Sarit Kattan Gribetz

The Bible, the Talmud, and the New Testament: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik's Commentary to the Gospels. Edited with an introduction and commentary by Shaul Maggid. 2019: University of Pennsylvania Press, Pp. 440

The
BIBLE,
the
TALMUD,
and the
NEW TESTAMENT
Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik's
Commentary to the Gospels

Edited, with an introduction and commentary, by
SHAUL MAGID

Translated by
JORDAN GAYLE LEVY

Foreword by
PETER SALOVEY

Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik's surprising work, *Qol Qore*, is a Hebrew commentary to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and (though no longer extant) Luke.

In his thought-provoking introduction to *The Bible, the Talmud, and the New Testament: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik's Commentary to the Gospels*, Shaul Magid clearly states that "Qol Qore's distinction is that it is a New Testament commentary written in Hebrew by a rabbinic insider in the nineteenth century who believed that he could prove, through the use of the classical rabbinic sources, that Judaism and Christianity do not stand in contradiction to each other."

Soloveitchik wrote his text in the 1860s; it was translated and then published in several languages in the 1870s, and then largely forgotten for decades. Soloveitchik's Hebrew commentary to the Gospel of Matthew was reprinted in 1985, and in 1995, Dov Hyman wrote a little-circulated pamphlet about it, only 50 copies of which were published.

Then, in 2012, Menachem Butler sent Shaul Magid a copy of Hyman's pamphlet, which he found on a bookshelf in a Jerusalem synagogue. Magid published an article about it in *Tablet* magazine – only to discover that Jordan Levy was already at work translating the French version of Soloveitchik's text. Magid and Levy collaborated on the 2019 volume, Levy translating the French and Hebrew editions, Magid adding notes and writing an extensive introduction. Peter Solovey, a direct descendent of Soloveitchik and the current president of Yale University, penned a moving "Forward."

Magid's introduction tells the surprising story of Soloveitchik's interest in Jesus, Christianity, and Jewish-Christian relations as well as his Gospel commentary's circuitous paths to translation and publication. He compellingly narrates Soloveitchik's engagement with the New Testament and his fascination with Christianity, in particular with the figure of Jesus.

Soloveitchik's commentary is devoted in large part to proving that the teachings of Jesus and Moses are not only compatible but even "symmetrical." He imagined his audience, it seems, to consist of both Christians and Jews; his writings try to show Christians that Jesus was Jewish and Jesus' teachings compatible with rabbinic, even Maimonidean, Judaism, and to explain to Jews that Christianity was based on a figure and a set of ideas that in no way contradict normative Judaism. Magid explains: "Soloveitchik sought to bring the two testaments, and both religions, closer together."

In addition to serving as a commentary meant to reconcile Judaism and Christianity – a text that, at times, even apologizes for centuries of Jewish and Christian misreading and misunderstanding, trying to set the record straight for a more amicable future – it is also a text that polemicizes against a more polemical history of Jewish-Christian difference.

Toledot Yeshu, this infamous "Jewish Version of Jesus' Life Story" that circulated in various iterations in Jewish communities for centuries, was on Soloveitchik's mind when he composed his text. One of Soloveitchik's underlying arguments throughout his work is that the Gospels and the Talmud do not refer to the same Jesus – and therefore that the blasphemous stories about a so-called [Yeshu] ben Pandera in the Talmud do not invalidate or mock the venerable figure of Jesus of Nazareth presented in the Gospels (he argues that they simply refer to another person that happened to be named Jesus and was born out of wedlock to a mother who had had an illicit relationship with her lover, Pandera, and so on). Any correspondences with stories about Jesus Christ, in the Gospels, Celsus, or elsewhere, are deemed mere coincidences. Such arguments were common among Jews defending the Talmud – for example in Paris in 1240, Barcelona in 1263, and by Moses ha-Kohen of Tordesillas in the fourteenth century – but Soloveitchik employs them to somewhat different effect.

This distinction between the Gospel's Jesus and the Talmud's Jesus is essential for advancing Soloveitchik's broader argument, that Judaism and Christianity do not disagree with one another and that the Gospels are narratives about a loving Jewish (even rabbinic) Jesus. But as much as Soloveitchik defends the Talmud and the Gospels and argues for their harmonization, he must vehemently refute Toledot Yeshu, for his argument about the Talmud proves incoherent unless he can demonstrate the unreliability of Toledot Yeshu, which unmistakably – even brazenly – links the mocking traditions of the Talmud with the historical Jesus of the Gospels. In other words, Toledot Yeshu is the screen that prevents Jews from taking Christianity seriously, and that likewise impedes Christians from regarding Judaism as anything other than a hostile religious and historical competitor.

It is not surprising that Toledot Yeshu was on Soloveitchik's mind when he authored his text. After all, the first words of the Gospel of Matthew, as they are apparently rendered in the Hebrew translation at Soloveitchik's disposal, are "Toledot Yeshu" (in Greek, ?????? ?????????? ?????? ??????????, "the book/account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah..."). Soloveitchik discusses the meaning of these opening words at great length in the very first part of his commentary, to which I return below. It is worth noting here, however, that the Hebrew translation of Matthew, which begins with the words "Toledot Yeshu," must have prompted an immediate association with the literary text often called Toledot Yeshu even though the general title form "Toledot + Name" is common for Jewish works (and would not necessarily have evoked association with Toledot Yeshu – indeed, the title Toledot Yeshu is itself a product of the popularity of this form).

Toledot Yeshu – not the Gospel of Matthew – is the first narrative of Jesus' life that Soloveitchik includes in his work, though he does so to discredit it. He includes a long excerpt of the narrative in his Author's Preface, where he advances a blunt refutation of Toledot Yeshu's veracity: "This whole story [that is, the story found in Toledot Yeshu] is a lie from beginning to end" (57). If Toledot Yeshu is an anti-Gospel, then in order to be successful in his reading of the Gospels, Soloveitchik needs his commentary to function as an anti-anti-Gospel – and thus he goes after Toledot Yeshu full-force before the Commentary even begins.

Throughout his Commentary on Matthew, Soloveitchik refutes specific traditions found within Toledot Yeshu, first and foremost traditions about Mary's conception of Jesus and Jesus' parentage. But he doesn't only refute traditions offensive to Christians – he seeks to show, too, that just as the Talmud does not disparage Jesus, so too the Gospels do not disparage Judaism.

In his comments on Mary Magdalene at Jesus' tomb, Soloveitchik explains why the text says that this event occurred "after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning" (he wonders why the specification about the start of the first day is needed): "at first glance, it is strange that he adds 'the first day of the week.' We know that sunrise is after *Mosa'ei Shabbat* (the end of the Sabbath), which is the first day (i.e., Sunday). However, the writer of this book of the New Testament reiterates that he rose from the dead on the first day, which is odd. The reason is that he greatly feared that for this reason, the Sabbath would be rejected in favor of Sunday. Therefore, he stressed that this was after the end of the Sabbath" (166). Here, Soloveitchik clearly argues that the Gospel does not promote the desecration of the Sabbath – in fact, in its language, it goes out of its way to preserve proper Sabbath observance. In offering this reading, Soloveitchik also seems implicitly to engage with denominational politics of his own day, in which debates about whether Sabbath ought to be observed on Saturdays or Sundays were ongoing, and some Reform congregations, for example in Berlin, had recently introduced Sunday services in place of Saturday services.

Many versions of Toledot Yeshu also describe how followers of Jesus remained members of the

Jewish community long after Jesus' crucifixion, causing tension and angst among the Jews. In order to expel Jesus' followers from the Jewish community, the leaders of the community decide to send Elijah, also known as Paul (e.g. MS Strasborg), or Shimon Kepha, also known as Peter (e.g. MSS Huldreich and Wagenseil), to convince these followers of Jesus to separate themselves from the Jewish community. Elijah (Paul) / Shimon Kepha (Peter) tell the followers of Jesus that Jesus conveyed in a vision instructions for how to live properly, commanding them to celebrate Sundays instead of Saturdays, no longer circumcise, and more generally part ways with the Jewish community – thus causing a definitive break between followers of Jesus and other Jews, who now form separate communities, one Jewish and the other Christian.

Both Elijah (Paul) and Shimon (Peter) are devout rabbinic Jews who, working undercover on behalf of the Jewish community, convince Jesus' followers to separate themselves from the Jewish community and to form their own community. In some versions of Toledot Yeshu, even the composition of the Gospels is attributed to Shimon Kepha (Peter); the Gospels are thus presented as an additional ploy used to motivate Jesus' followers to break away from the Jewish community, a framing of their composition no doubt inspired by the long Christian tradition of reading the Gospels (and their critiques of the Jewish establishment) as anti-Jewish texts. This tradition emphasizes that it was not primarily Jesus but Paul (or Peter) who ought to be held responsible for the split and subsequent animosity between Jews and Christians.

While Paul in the New Testament is a Jewish Jesus follower who serves as apostle to the gentiles, assuring them that they need not circumcise or follow other particular Jewish practices to join the movement, Toledot Yeshu's Elijah (Paul) / Shimon Kepha (Peter) is a devout rabbinic Jew (and in Shimon Kepha's case also a famous paytan) who is sent by the Jews as a double-agent to convince Jesus' followers to stop observing Jewish rituals and thereby complete the separation of the two communities.

Just as Soloveitchik's text might be regarded as an anti-anti-Gospel, so too Soloveitchik might be seen as yet another Paul – preaching not that the two communities ought to remain as separate as possible (celebrating Sundays instead of Saturdays, for instance), but that they are essentially synonymous, and ought to get along, despite centuries of misunderstanding. It's telling, perhaps, that, according to Magid, Soloveitchik “invokes Paul frequently in his commentaries to Mark and Matthew and almost always in a positive light. While Paul is often viewed as a main source of Christianity's anti-Judaism in both Christian and Jewish historical-critical scholarship, Soloveitchik views Paul as a Pharisee through and through” (30). Magid also notes that Soloveitchik's presentation of Christianity is far more positive than even his academic and liberal rabbinic contemporaries, including Heinrich Graetz and Abraham Geiger. Is that because Soloveitchik saw himself in Paul, a Jewish apostle to the gentiles (and perhaps also Peter, an apostle to the Jews)?

Soloveitchik tips his hand in this regard on the very first page of his text, in which he explains, in his dedication to Mr. Maurice Schlesinger, that “While writing this commentary of the New Testament, I had no other goal, as I have said in the first volume, but to reconcile these two enemy sisters: the Church and the Synagogue. I wanted to prove that this centuries-old enmity was based on dreadful misunderstandings through false interpretations by everyone – Jews and Christians – that were made concerning the words of Yeshua and the Apostles...” (49). In these opening words, Soloveitchik explicitly states that his primary goal in his extensive commentary is to forge understanding between two institutions, Judaism and Christianity, that he believes are not fundamentally different from one another, and that have been unfairly put into hostile opposition with one another. He conveys a similar message at the end of his author's preface when he states: “If I am here to battle with the old commentators of the New Testament, it is only to restore peace and understanding between men, whose false teachings have for too long divided them” (59).

The persona Soloveitchik adopts as the author of his text is very reminiscent of Toledot Yeshu's

Peter and Paul, but in reverse. It's possible that Soloveitchik regarded himself as the Jewish Paul: the antithesis of Paul both in the New Testament, as Christian readers interpreted Paul through the centuries (as a figure who rejected Judaism and Jewish practice and was harnessed for Christian anti-Jewish purposes, including violence), and in *Toledot Yeshu*, as the Jewish hero responsible for separating Jesus followers from the Jewish community (as a figure who rejected Christianity as blasphemy and diligently worked to ensure that those who followed Jesus no longer considered their religious practice compatible with Judaism). Soloveitchik, in his commentary, offers a Pauline critique that seeks to undo the work of these previous iterations of Paul.

Even though Soloveitchik did not translate the Gospels himself, relying instead on existing translations, he uses his commentary to translate the Gospels' terms and ideas into a language and idiom legible to learned rabbinic Jews. Likewise, his commentary translates rabbinic texts, including Talmudic passages and the writings of Maimonides, into a language and idiom understandable and possibly even compelling to devout Christians of his place and time.

Naomi Seidman, in *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (2006), writes: "The translational relationship that connects and separates Judaism and Christianity is a particularly rich and dense intersection: the asymmetries of Christian political power over Jews are complicated if not ameliorated by the Jewish possession of cultural capital in the form of Hebrew and Jewish-exegetical knowledge as well as symbolic capital in the shared Jewish-Christian belief that Judaism is the 'original' of which Christianity is the 'translation'" (8). Seidman examines acts of translating as enacting a willingness to cross boundaries while still maintaining those boundaries, especially between Judaism and Christianity. Important as well is Gloria Anzaldúa's idea in *Borderlands / La Frontera: the New Mestiza* (1987) of the "border" and the "borderland," especially in thinking of Soloveitchik himself as living in a borderland of Jewish-Christianity, inhabiting a translational stance.

Indeed, Soloveitchik argues at the very start of his commentary that the first word of the Gospel, *toledot*, suggests that the Gospel of Matthew's original language of composition must have been Hebrew, because the Hebrew word (*toledot*) makes more sense in the context of the Gospel than its Greek translation (*geneseos*). The Hebrew rendering of *toledot* (e.g. *toledot Yaakov* in Genesis 37:2) is "the tales or narratives of someone's life," whereas the Greek (*geneseos*) means "genealogies or generations." Given that Jesus did not have progeny and that the Gospel focuses on stories of Jesus' life, Soloveitchik concludes that the original word must have been Hebrew. Soloveitchik uses the Hebrew translation of Matthew to argue that the Gospel was originally written in Hebrew (an argument that has also been made by both ancient and modern readers of the Gospels as early as Papias of Hierapolis, though it is not a widely-held position today). Regardless of the historical accuracy of the claim (the Gospels all seem to have been authored in Koine Greek), the suggestion is fraught with meaning for Soloveitchik's own intellectual project, for his commentary seeks to reconstruct the original (and in his view correct) meaning of the Synoptic Gospels and of a Jewish Jesus. To do so he begins by insisting that the Gospel itself was originally a Hebrew text.

Soloveitchik's text is therefore not only a commentary and an anti-polemic, it is also a work of religious and cultural (if not linguistic) translation, or rather a set of translations, given its meandering publication history in various languages in the decade after it was written – by an author who lived in the borderland of two religious traditions more often in conflict with one another than in symmetry, as he so forcefully argued they ought to be.

For despite its composition in Hebrew, Soloveitchik's text was published first in French, then in German, then in Polish, and only shortly before his death in Hebrew. This is a fitting (even if unplanned) trajectory for such a work – for its translation to be published before its Hebrew original

– especially in the context of translation as a political act of the Jewish-Christian borderland.

Sarit Kattan Gribetz is Associate Professor in the Theology Department at Fordham University. Her first book, *Time and Difference in Rabbinic Judaism* (2020), received a National Jewish Book Award in Scholarship.

Source: [Marginalia](#), October 8, 2021; published under a [Creative Commons license](#).