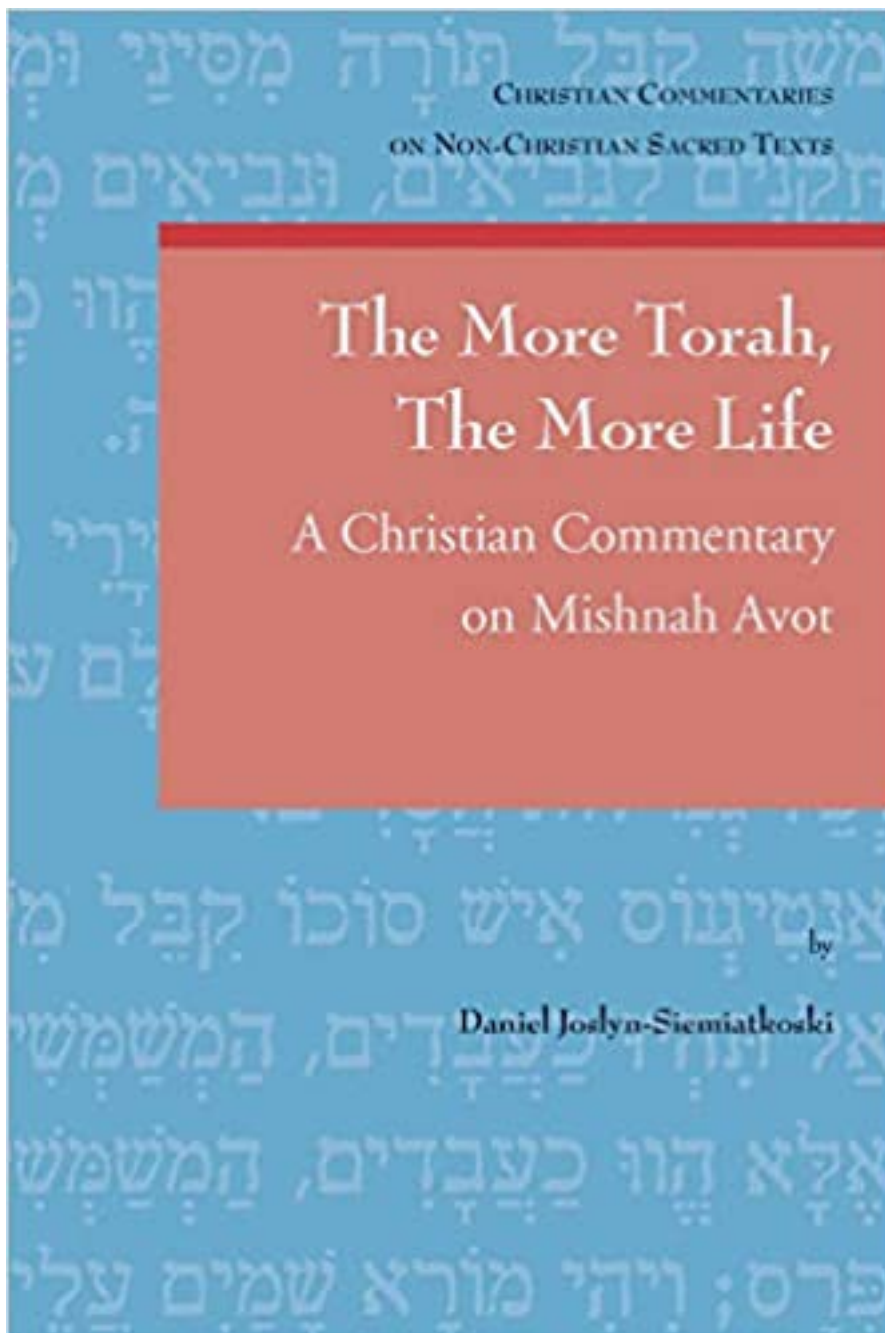




# The More Torah, The More Life. A Christian Commentary on Mishnah Avot

01/07/2021 | Ophir Yarden\*

**Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski: The More Torah, The More Life. A Christian Commentary on Mishnah Avot. Leuven: Peeters, 2018. xvi + 294 pp. \$73, paperback.**



Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski (hereafter JS) is Professor of Church History at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas and a priest in the Episcopal Church. *The More Torah, The More Life* is the eighth volume in Peeters' series *Christian Commentaries on Non-Christian Sacred*

*Texts*, which includes works on texts mostly from the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, and is, thus far, the only volume presenting a Jewish text. A tenth volume on the “People of Scripture” in the Qur’an is forthcoming. This is a work of comparative theology, which JS defines with the words of Francis X. Clooney, a leader of the discipline, as “reread[ing] one’s home theological tradition...after a serious engagement in the reading of another tradition” (2–3).

JS’s chosen text for engagement is the Mishnah’s tractate *Avot*, which is an excellent starting point. *Avot*, a tractate whose name, JS points out, can be rendered as “Fathers” but also as “First Principles” (6, per Meiri), can be considered one of the two possible “beginnings” of the Mishnah and is an apt text with which to begin a comparative theology of Judaism. (The other beginning would be tractate *Berakhot* which deals with prayer and blessings and opens standard editions of the Mishnah and Talmud.) As the only mishnaic tractate dealing only with morality and not law, it is sometimes called *Ethics of the Fathers* (in the sense of Church/Desert Fathers, who are widely cited by JS). *M. Avot* is a collection of aphorisms and sayings by the early rabbis and their predecessors, who are presented as the chain of tradition from the Great Assembly of Second Temple times through the second century CE. JS characterizes *Avot* as having aspects of wisdom literature (with connections to Ecclesiasticus), Greek thought and emerging rabbinic Judaism. *Avot* is a text often encountered in Jewish studies courses and features prominently among rabbinic texts.

The tractate *Avot* is different from others not only in that it contains no legal material, but also in its collection of proverbial statements by rabbinic and proto-rabbinic figures. *Avot* begins with the words: “Moses received *Torah* from Sinai, and he transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets transmitted it to the men of the Great Assembly.” As the rabbis saw themselves as the heirs to the traditions of the Great Assembly, this opening becomes a self-justificatory statement for the rabbinic sayings and the entire oral Torah (Mishnah) that ensue. JS’s book is structured according to tractate *Avot* itself. His commentary addresses the first five (of six) chapters of *Avot*, discussing each mishnah (paragraph) in turn.

JS’s introduction mainly introduces *Avot* itself and the task at hand of creating a Christian comparative theological commentary. He notes that his is not the first Christian commentary on *Avot* and surveys his predecessors. This section, which is quite brief (five pages), might profitably been expanded and grounded in early modern Christian interest in Jewish texts. He does not mention William Surenhusius, whose Hebrew-Latin edition of the entire Mishnah was published in Amsterdam (1698–1703) and collected many of the fruits of the previous century’s study of the Mishnah by European scholars, both Jewish and Christian. He does, however, tell us that from the first Christian translation of *Avot* into Latin by Paul Fagius in 1541 until the end of the nineteenth century, seventy-eight translations were produced. He concludes his survey of pre-contemporary Christian scholarship with a brief discussion of the contributions of H. Strack, H. Danby, C. Taylor and R. T. Herford whose work on *Avot* “presented rabbinic Judaism in a favorable light to Christian audiences,” though sometimes (Strack) with a supersessionist agenda (23).

JS concludes his introduction with a section headed “Towards a Comparative Theology Commentary.” He expresses awareness that such a commentary could fall into the pit of Sandmel’s parallelomania.<sup>[1]</sup> He deftly sidesteps this by asserting that “in itself a parallel is not meaningful. Rather the comparative theologian must discern the deeper meanings at play in the Jewish text before reflecting on them from a Christian context” (25). If parallelomania is his Scylla, then his Charybdis is allo-Semitism—the objectification (positive or negative) of Judaism—which he proposes to avoid with precisely the tool of comparative theology. As per the methodology of the *Christian Commentaries on Non-Christian Texts* series, he distinguishes between Jewish *commentary* on the text and comparative theological *reflection* from a Christian perspective. The distinction between in-faith commentary and cross-faith reflection is both useful and humble.

For each saying (a mishnah), but sometimes two or three, JS presents the text in English (in his

own translation, done in consultation with those of Danby and the English version of the Kehati edition translated by A. Ehrlich and A. Tomaschoff). He makes no distinction as to the language of the original. Readers might find an indication of the few lines in Aramaic of interest. The text of the mishna(s) is followed by a précis of traditional and modern Jewish commentary, which is legion on this popular tractate. His rich digest makes use of the parallel compilation *Avot of Rabbi Nathan* and relies on several classical authors including Rabbenu Yona, Maimonides, Rashi, Meiri and Sforno. It is a worthy effort in its own right. The commentaries were accessed mostly in English translation (although JS is clearly able to work with the Hebrew texts).

Because much of the subject matter of *Avot* is Torah and its study and practice, it affords JS many opportunities to explore theological issues interwoven across Judaism and Christianity. One of his points of focus is the potential meanings of Torah for Christians. He wisely retains the Hebrew term *Torah* rather than adopting a translation such as “law.” He seeks to “allow Christians to hear polemical New Testament passages with different ears” (113). His reflections draw upon Church fathers as well as both medieval, modern and contemporary theologians. Reading Christian reflections on this foundational Jewish text invite further Jewish reflection.

JS uses the far-ranging maxims of *Avot* as opportunities to address a wide variety of topics— some of which are beyond what might be anticipated—including: Jewish-Christian relations in our era and pertinent documents issued since the Second Vatican Council (164), the Bar Kokhba revolt (173), the *Shulhan Arukh* (16<sup>th</sup> century code of Jewish law) (204), Zionism (253-6) and Ecumenism (267). The discussions of these topics are worthwhile and may broaden the applications for the volume in university courses. Especially due to the wide range of topics encountered, indices of topics and authors would have been most welcome. JS most certainly achieves his goal:

first [to] identify the meaning of the *Avot* text and Jewish commentaries on it. From there I will explore how these understandings of the text resonate with the Christian tradition. Just as the sound waves of music carry [differently] in different spaces, so too when I listen with Christian ears to tunes made by *Avot* and its commentators I may discern different aspects of the music than the original composers might have imagined. But I will listen and hear with the humble appreciation of a listener for the composer and performers of the work I encounter. (27)

The book is slightly marred by some sloppiness in proofreading. Marc Hirshman is called Marcus in footnote 1, and on the back cover the publisher’s blurb misstates the volume’s title as *The More Torah, The Moral Life*, which may well be a true statement but is not what is printed on the front cover.

All in all, I welcomed the publication and immediately used excerpts in my classes. While not all previous Christian attention to *Avot* has been negative or supersessionist, Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski’s comparative theological commentary is as novel and welcome as *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. The final chapter of *Avot*, the sixth, is not included, as it is not part of the original Mishnah tractate (though JS does announce its inclusion in the introduction (28). We may look forward to his reflections on chapter six in the future.

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