

INTRODUCTION

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I.

Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik (~1805–1881) was an Orthodox Jew from the distinguished Soloveitchik family: the grandson of Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin (founder of the famous Volozhin yeshiva in Lithuania) and the brother of the great-great-grandfather of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (one of the founders of Modern Orthodoxy).¹ Elijah Zvi received a traditional education in Volozhin and remained an Orthodox Jew all his life; but he also cultivated friendships with Christians and carefully studied the New Testament.

In the 1860s, Soloveitchik published a peculiar commentary on the Gospels called *Qol Qore*. Interpreting Jesus in light of classical rabbinic sources, he attempted to show that “the New Testament is in no manner

¹ For an introduction to Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik, see Dov Hyman, *An Essay on Eliyahu Zvi Soloveitchik: The Man and His Work* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Rimonim, 1995); Shaul Magid, “Introduction: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik, the Jewish Jesus, Christianity, and the Jews,” in Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud, and the New Testament: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik’s Commentary to the Gospels*, trans. Jordan Gayle Levy, intro. and notes by Shaul Magid (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); and the articles in this volume of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*.

contrary to the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) or the Talmud.”² The commentaries on Luke and John, if they ever existed, are lost. The commentary on Mark is extant only in a French translation. The commentary on Matthew alone has been preserved in Soloveitchik’s original Hebrew.

Thanks to the labors of translator Jordan Gayle Levy and editor Shaul Magid, Soloveitchik’s long-neglected commentaries on Matthew and Mark are now available in an excellent new English version.³ In collaboration with Magid, the *Journal of Textual Reasoning* is pleased to present this exciting collection of articles engaging with Soloveitchik’s commentaries.

In certain respects Soloveitchik’s approach is reminiscent of recent New Testament scholarship that situates Jesus firmly in a Jewish context, increasingly produced by Jewish scholars drawing liberally on rabbinic parallels. One thinks, for example, of the scholarship collected in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler.⁴

But Soloveitchik’s work is not a *historical* reconstruction; indeed, it was dismissed by historical scholars in the early *Wissenschaft des Judentum* movement.⁵ Rather, his work attempts something more unusual: to systematically read the Gospels using rabbinic methods, as if they were part of the rabbinic corpus. The Jesus Soloveitchik discovers is one who fits comfortably within the framework of rabbinic Judaism. His is a Torah-observant Jesus, whose rulings rarely diverge from rabbinic consensus.

² Soloveitchik, *The Bible*, 55.

³ Cited above, footnote 1. On previous English translations of this work, see Shira Billett, “From Volozhin to London: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik’s Jewish-Christian Holy Spirit,” *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 16.2 (October 2025): 195–231, esp. 201–205.

⁴ Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵ Cf. Billett, “Volozhin to London,” 229.

He is, in Magid's words, a "Maimonidean Jesus,"⁶ called to convert all nations to a belief in the unity of God. He is *a messiah* (anointed by God for some special task), but not *the Messiah*. He is certainly *not* the incarnate God, the Jesus of orthodox Christianity!⁷

Soloveitchik's reasons for writing such a work remain somewhat opaque,⁸ but the title of the work offers a clue: "*Qol Qore*," "A Voice Crying." These words allude to Isaiah 40:3, "A voice crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the LORD," which the Gospels applied to John the Baptist and his ministry of repentance.⁹ Jesus himself identified John with Elijah the prophet: "And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come" (Matt. 11:14). As Soloveitchik interprets him, Jesus means here not that John is literally Elijah himself, but that "just as Elijah, who will come in the future, will teach the path of repentance, Yoḥanan [John] did the same when he taught the people how to return to [the LORD] with all

⁶ Shaul Magid, "A Jew Who Loved Christianity as a Jew: The Strange Nineteenth-Century Orthodox Case of Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 16.2 (October 2025): 161–194, esp. 186–190.

⁷ Though see Susannah Ticciati's provocative argument, in this volume, that "if Jesus is not the Messiah for rabbinic Jews, he is not not the Messiah (as Christians understand it)." (Ticciati, "Response to Shaul Magid's *The Bible, The Talmud, and the New Testament: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik's Commentary on the Gospels*," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 16.2 (October 2025): 266–292, esp. 291).

⁸ Several of the contributors to this issue speculate about his reasons. Billet emphasizes Soloveitchik's stated aim of reconciling Jews and Christians (Billet, "From Volozhin to London," 227). Magid suggests that Soloveitchik writes to make conversion superfluous and to counter rising anti-semitism (Magid, "A Jew Who Loved Christianity," 164–65). Martin Kavka argues instead that Soloveitchik's commentaries are works of disputation evincing an under-current of disdain for Christianity (Kavka, "How Nice: On R. Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik and Christianity," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 16.2 (October 2025): 231–46, esp. 245–6). To these proposals we might add his practical hope, articulated in the introduction included in the self-published 1868 English edition (but not, unfortunately, in Levy's translation), that Jews and Christians might collaborate in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. (Elias Soloweycyck, *Kol Kore (Vox Clamantis): The Bible, The Talmud, and the New Testament* (London: Rabbi Elias Soloweycyck, 1868), 74–76.) I'm grateful to Shira Billet for providing me with a copy of this edition.

⁹ Matt. 3:3, Mark 1:3, Luke 3:4, John 1:23.

their hearts and all their souls.”¹⁰ Soloveitchik expands on the nature of Elijah’s ministry elsewhere: “What is Elijah’s mission as proclaimed by the prophet? To bring the reconciliation of hearts through repentance, according to the final statement of Malachi [4:4–5].”¹¹

As Shira Billet points out in her article in this volume, Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik saw himself as being called to the same reconciling ministry as his namesake, Elijah.¹² Thus the epigraph to his work: “Elijah comes only to bring peace to the world” (m. Eduyot 8:7). Several times Soloveitchik quotes a beautifully conciliatory passage from the midrashic collection *Tanna debe Eliyahu*: “I bear witness before the heavens and the earth that Israel and the nations of the earth, man and woman, manservant and maidservant—the Holy Spirit rests upon all of them in accordance with their actions.”¹³ Traditionalists often understood this work as the book which, according to b. Ketuvot 106a, was revealed to the third-century sage R. Anan by Elijah himself. Shira Billet speculates that this connection to Elijah may help account for Soloveitchik’s interest in this text,¹⁴ with its irenic implication that God’s holy spirit may rest on Christian Gentiles as well as Jews.

Soloveitchik regarded his own work as continuing the same ministry of peace and reconciliation. His goal, as he says in the preface, is to “reconcile the two adversaries,” Jews and Christians.¹⁵ “Harmony between men,” he adds, “is precisely the goal that I aspire to, that every student of Torah must aspire to, every Israelite and every man worthy of that name!”¹⁶ He quotes Psalm 120:7, which he paraphrases: “‘All my

¹⁰ *The Bible*, 162.

¹¹ *The Bible*, 338.

¹² “From Volozhin to London,” 194–5 and 211n48.

¹³ *Tanna Debe Eliyahu* 9, qtd. *The Bible*, 69. He returns to this text again in his commentary on Mark 1:10 (*The Bible*, 281). See Billet, “From Volozhin to London,” 209–10.

¹⁴ See again Billet, “From Volozhin to London,” 211n48.

¹⁵ *The Bible*, 56.

¹⁶ *The Bible*, 57. See b. Sukkot 53b.

desires are for peace; even though I wage war against men,' I only do so for the purpose of obtaining peace." This work of reconciliation, he concludes in a Maimonidean vein, is for the sake of the worship of God in his unity:

May the favor of [the LORD] descend upon my work, so that it may produce in the hearts of those who read it abundant and beneficial fruits, that with a unanimous spirit they will embrace the worship of one God, and that through my humble intervention, the words of the prophet will come true (Zephaniah 3:9): *For then I will make the peoples pure of speech, so that they all invoke [the LORD] by name and serve him with one accord. Amen.*

To be sure, this preface also makes amply clear that his work was already encountering enormous resistance from both Christians and Jews. Christians were not amenable to such a radical reinterpretation of their foundational scriptural texts. Jews were suspicious of his positive posture towards Christian figures and scriptures. To this day, Soloveitchik remains a "cautionary tale" within Orthodox Judaism.¹⁷ Even the sympathetic contributors to this volume are not prepared simply to defend Soloveitchik's approach as it stands.

But despite its limitations and flaws, Soloveitchik's work is a remarkable monument in the history of Jewish-Christian relations, one that still has much to teach us. And with its play of text and method (reading Christian texts as if they belonged to the rabbinic tradition), reading scripture across difference for the sake of peace and reconciliation, Soloveitchik's work is especially apt for consideration in this *Journal of Textual Reasoning*.

II.

This issue of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning* is divided into two parts. Part I, "Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik in His Context," examines Soloveitchik in his historical setting. In "A Jew Who Loved Christianity as a Jew: The Strange Nineteenth-Century Orthodox Case of Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik," Shaul Magid introduces readers to the enigmatic figure of Elijah Zvi

¹⁷ Billet, "From Volozhin to London," 229n99.

Soloveitchik. (The other contributors to this volume read Magid's essay and used it as the jumping-off point for their own reflections). Magid frames Soloveitchik as an "ecumenical" figure (194) who argued "for a symmetry (not identity)" between Jewish and Christian scriptures (166). Magid situates Soloveitchik in the context of nineteenth-century Christian missionary efforts, the anti-Jewish Christian Historical Jesus school of F.C. Baur and others, and the rising *Wissenschaft des Judentum* movement. Unlike the latter, Soloveitchik reads the gospels in the ahistorical, synthetic way that the Tosafists read the Talmud. Ironically, his ahistorical readings often yield "a gospel that may have been closer to its proximate meaning than canonical commentaries" (170). The overall picture of Jesus that emerges in Soloveitchik's commentary is a "Maimonidean Jesus," a prophetic figure preparing the way for the final redemption by proclaiming God's unity to all people, Gentiles as well as Jews.

In her piece "From Volozhin to London: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik's Jewish-Christian Holy Spirit," Shira Billet expands on this picture by focusing on the role of the "holy spirit" in Soloveitchik's commentaries. The "holy spirit," of course, is a category used in both classical Jewish and Christian texts. Nineteenth-century missionaries would pray that the Holy Spirit would guide Jews to a true understanding of the Bible; Soloveitchik appeals to the holy spirit to inspire his own commentary. Whereas Orthodox Jews were often inclined to limit the holy spirit's inspiration to Israel alone, however, Soloveitchik offers a more universalistic interpretation of the holy spirit, "notably unconstrained by the particularism that identifies 'God's people' as Jacob or Israel" (216). Billet concludes with a word of hope: "The remarkable story of Soloveitchik's largely forgotten work may give hope that efforts toward reconciliation—even if they are flawed or fail to achieve their aims within the lifespan of an individual—may have an impact within a longer arc of history" (231).

In Part II, "Soloveitchik and Supersessionism," contemporary Jewish and Christian thinkers reflect on the contemporary significance of Soloveitchik's work, particularly as it bears upon the vexed question of supersessionism. In "How Nice: On R. Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik and

Christianity," Martin Kavka argues that Magid is simply wrong: Soloveitchik was not enamored of Christianity and does not challenge the assumption that these are radically different and mutually contradictory traditions. Rather, Soloveitchik displays the disdain or at least ambivalence towards Christianity typical of other Orthodox Jewish leaders. True, he affirms that his aim is reconciliation; but as Kavka points out, reconciliation may result either from showing that disagreement is merely apparent (as on Magid's "ecumenical" reading of Soloveitchik) or that one group is mistaken and must be brought into the fold of the other (as on Kavka's reading). In short, Soloveitchik is a kind of "Jewish supersessionist" (240): Christians must change their understanding of themselves *as Christians* in order to share in the divine promises.

In "Can God Reject the Jewish People?: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik, Supersessionism, and Modern Jewish Thought," Elias Sacks too argues that Soloveitchik's Jesus is a supersessionist—but in his reading, it is the Jews who are superseded after all. Focusing on Soloveitchik's treatment of the parable of the tenants (Mark 12:1–11), Sacks observes that Soloveitchik's Jesus "[continues] to envision the replacement of the Jews by others, but he also alters this doctrine by predicating the Jews' displacement on their attitudes toward divine unity ... as well as by identifying the group displacing the Jews as gentile adherents of monotheism in general rather than the Christian church in particular" (255). This poses a challenge to contemporary Jewish thought because Soloveitchik arrives at his supersessionism from within a framework that emphasizes "argumentative strategies that pervade much of modern Jewish thought" (263): ethical monotheism (e.g., of Hermann Cohen) and the use of the Talmudic method of scriptural interpretation (a wide array of modern thinkers, including Textual Reasoners). Sacks ends with a provocative question: "Do recurring moves in modern Jewish thought both elevate monotheism in a way that renders Jewish displacement conceivable and then compound the danger by endorsing a hermeneutic that might confer biblical legitimation on this idea?" (261)

Finally, in her "Response to Shaul Magid's *The Bible, The Talmud, and the New Testament: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik's Commentary on the Gospels*,"

Susannah Ticciati offers a Christian theological reflection on Soloveitchik's work. She distinguishes between two approaches to supersessionism: the *accommodationist* approach, in which "Christians accommodate Jews inside their Christian vision, adapting their Christian vision to make positive room for Jews," and the *limiting* approach, in which "Christians acknowledge the finitude of their vision, and concomitantly the conceivable rationality and integrity of Jewish thought and practice beyond that vision" (266). For reasons outlined by Kavka and Sacks, Soloveitchik would appear to be a sort of "accommodationist in reverse" (266). But Ticciati discerns something else in Soloveitchik's work: a tendency to undo deep conceptual binaries that pit Judaism and Christianity against one another. She focuses on two: the "inward" and "outward" contrast pair in the Sermon on the Mount and the (apparently more intractable) binary of Maimonidean and Chalcedonian Christology. In the latter case, she argues, rabbinic Christology and Nicene orthodoxy are not contradictory because they are answers to different questions. On Soloveitchik's terms, then, "Jews do not necessarily deny what Christians affirm" (291). This limiting strategy is closely related to his Talmudic hermeneutics, and for Ticciati, it provides the best path forward for Soloveitchik's stated goal of reconciliation between Jews and Christians.

III.

This will be my last issue as an editor of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*. I took over as editor of the *JTR* in 2015, along with my dear friend Deborah Barer, while we were still graduate students at the University of Virginia. As a Christian scholar whose work focuses on early Christian scriptural interpretation, I had few qualifications for the role, except perhaps *hesed* (love expressing itself as loyalty) for my teacher and mentor, Peter Ochs. I've always viewed my role as temporary and transitional; and so I'm delighted that in Nechama Juni, the *Journal of Textual Reasoning* has found an editor amply suited to the task: a brilliant scholar, full of energy and ideas, endowed with a deeply charitable spirit.

Still, over the course of a tumultuous decade, I have tried to steward the *JTR* according to its mission of cultivating new avenues of contemporary Jewish thought in dialogue with classical Jewish texts and methods of study. I hope that I leave the journal in a better condition than when I found it. I am especially proud of the work I was able to do during the COVID pandemic: transitioning to our new platform at William & Mary¹⁸ and editing our massive issue on the brilliant but under-appreciated Jewish philosopher Hasdai Crescas.¹⁹

It is fitting that my final issue has focused on the intriguing figure of Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik. In his strange devotion to Christian texts, his fascinating readings and misreadings of them, I see a kind of inverted picture of my own attraction to Jewish texts and my attempts to make sense of them (reading and no doubt misreading them) from within the Christian tradition. At the same time, and along the lines of Ticciati's essay in this volume, Soloveitchik's work is also an instructive model for me as I try to apply Jewish methods of interpretation to the Christian scriptures.

But unlike Soloveitchik, who labored in relative isolation, I have been blessed to learn to read like the rabbis from scholars such as Peter Ochs and Elizabeth Alexander, and to study Jewish texts with dear friends and colleagues such as Deborah & Ben Barer, Bethany & Stephen Slater, and Randi Rashkover. And I am not the only Christian, I think, with a desire to learn such things from our Jewish neighbors. Soloveitchik's project of reconciliation through Talmudic interpretation surely appears less quixotic now than it did in his own day!

To be sure, these are dark and violent times. I often find myself reciting the same words of Psalm 120:7 to which Soloveitchik appealed: "I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war." In this volume and in its continuing work, may the *Journal of Textual Reasoning* be an instrument of truth and of peace.

¹⁸ <https://journal.libraries.wm.edu/jtr/index>.

¹⁹ *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 13.1 (2022) (<https://journal.libraries.wm.edu/jtr/issue/view/38>).