

A JEW WHO LOVED CHRISTIANITY AS A JEW: THE STRANGE NINETEENTH- CENTURY ORTHODOX CASE OF ELIJAH ZVI SOLOVEITCHIK

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When the King of Prussia once asked Augustus Neander (a Jewish convert to Christianity who became a renowned Church historian), “What is the best evidence of Christianity?” Neander is said to have replied, “The Jews, your Majesty.”

Philip Schaff, *Saint Augustin, Melanchthon, Neander*¹

Daniel Boyarin begins his book *The Jewish Gospel* with the following declaration: “If there is one thing that Christians know about their religion, it is that it is not Judaism. If there is one thing that Jews know about their religion, it is that it is not Christianity. If there is one thing both

¹ Philip Schaff, *Saint Augustin, Melanchthon, Neander* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1886), 33.

groups know about the double not, it is that Christians believe in the Trinity and the Incarnation of Christ (the Greek word for messiah) and that Jews don't, that Jews keep kosher and Christians don't."² Leo Strauss wrote more declaratively in his *Philosophie und Gesetz* (*Philosophy and Law*), "There is no reconciliation between Judaism and Christianity; Judaism is the anti-Christian principle pure and simple."³ *Prima facie* there is not much one can contest about these comments empirically, certainly not among Christians and Jews who don't know much about their own religion, to say nothing of the religion of the other. But to those who do, while the external frame of the comments may serve a social purpose, keeping Jews and Christian separate, theologically the categorical distinctions proclaimed cannot bear the weight of the claims (and this is precisely Boyarin's argument in his book, while Strauss, I assume, stood by his comment as both empirically and theologically defensible).⁴

The Jewish search for the Jewish Jesus was a veritable cottage industry in nineteenth-century Europe.⁵ From various corners of the Jewish world, historians and theologians investigated the Jewish roots of Jesus either to wage a polemic against Christianity (as Susannah Heschel put it describing Geiger's position, "Judaism was the religion *of* Jesus while Christianity the religion *about* Jesus") or to claim that Jews should be accepted into European society because, carrying the religion of Christianity's ostensible founder, Judaism represented an enlightened religion on par with Christianity.

² Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospel* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 1.

³ Leo Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1935), 94.

⁴ For another view, see Joseph Soloveitchik's essay "Confrontation" in *Tradition* 6.2 (Spring-Summer, 1964): 5–29; and Abraham Joshua Heschel's "No Religion Is an Island," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 21.2 (January, 1966): 117–133.

⁵ Among Jews, see Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger, The Search for the Historical Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Among Christian there is a veritable library on these figures. Most recently, see Matt Jackson-McCabe, *Jewish Christianity: The Making of the Christian-Jewish Divide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). I will address some of them in a section below.

Below I discuss the case of a somewhat odd, and mostly hermetic, participant in this enterprise, a largely unknown traditional Lithuanian rabbi named Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik. Soloveitchik was likely born in Slutzk, Russia, in 1805 and died in London in 1881.⁶ He was the grandson of Hayyim ben Isaac of Volozhin (1749–1821) (the eldest son of Hayyim’s daughter), the founder of the Volozhin yeshiva in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and was educated in his grandfather’s institution of higher learning, the most prestigious in the nineteenth century.⁷ Later in life, Elijah Zvi lived mostly an itinerant existence, travelling between Lithuania, Russia, Germany, Poland, France, and then England. Sometime in the 1850s, though we don’t exactly know when, how, or why, Soloveitchik seemed to become enamored by Christianity, particularly the Gospels, but unlike most other Jews with similar inclinations, he never converted and remained a traditional Jew his entire life.

In fact, Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik was likely the first Jew who remained a Jew, certainly in modernity, to have penned a verse-by-verse commentary to the Synoptic Gospels in Hebrew. His commentary to Mark, Matthew, and Luke (Luke has not survived), entitled *Qol Qore* (“A voice calls,” a play on the verse “a voice calls in the wilderness” from Isaiah 40:3 (see also John 1:23) was written over the course of a few decades and published in multiple languages—first in French, German, and Polish translations before the original Hebrew appeared in the late 1860s. *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 he could prove through the use of the classical rabbinic sources that Judaism and Christianity do not stand in contradiction to one another. In his view, Judaism and Christianity seek to achieve similar ends;

⁶ See my introductory essay to *The Bible, The Talmud and the New Testament* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 1–40.

⁷ See Shaul Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century: Creating a Tradition of Learning* (Oxford and Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 190–233.

⁷ See Israel Cohen, *Vilna* (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 2003).

spreading biblical monotheism to the world. Most other similar works at that time were written either by Jewish converts to Christianity or by rabbinic figures who polemicized against Christianity.⁸

What is at stake in Soloveitchik's New Testament commentary? Given the little we know of his life and the fact that he seemed to be working mostly in isolation, Soloveitchik's program remains largely shrouded in mystery. In short, we don't really know. However, after a brief assessment of his itinerant life, I offer a number of suggestions, drawn from remarks he made in the commentary and his introductions to a variety of other works. I suggest his project was at least twofold.

First, countering conversion. Soloveitchik was living at a time when there was increased activity among Christians to convert Jews in Eastern Europe. By suggesting that Judaism and Christianity are largely symmetrical, could Soloveitchik have been suggesting that conversion to Christianity was unnecessary on theological grounds given that Judaism and Christianity offer compatible teachings? By symmetrical I do not mean identical. Soloveitchik certainly noticed the differences between the two religions and did not try to merge them, and yet he maintained that theologically they were not incompatible but expressed a similar commitment to the monotheistic worldview of the Hebrew Bible. That being said, what theological advantage is there to becoming a Christian?

⁸ A notable example is Emmanuel Frommann, who wrote a kabbalistic commentary to Luke in Hebrew. On Frommann, see Elliot Wolfson, "Immanuel Frommann's Commentary on Luke and the Christianizing of Kabbalah," in *Holy Dissent*, G. Dynner, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), and David Ruderman, *Missionaries, Converts, and Rabbis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020). Another important example is Jacob Emden, who did not write a commentary to the Gospels but knew them well and spoke about them highly. Soloveitchik in some way saw Emden as a predecessor to his project. On Emden, see Jacob J. Schacter, "Rabbi Jacob Emden, Sabbateanism, and Frankism: Attitudes Toward Christianity in the Eighteenth Century," in *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schacter (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2012), and Gavin Michal, "R. Yaakov Emden's Surprising Views of Christianity," at <https://www.kotzkblog.com/2019/12/253-r-yaakov-emdens-surprising-views-on.html>, December 1, 2019. Most recently, see Susannah Heschel, "Debates for the Sake of Heaven: Jewish Understandings of Christianity and Islam in Modern Europe," in *Emet le-Ya'akov: Facing the Truths of History: Essays in Honor of Jacob J. Schacter*, Zev Eleff and Shaul Seidler-Feller eds. (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023), 122-143.

There were certainly social advantages in making such a move and, as Todd Endelman notes, that may have been the impetus of most Jews who converted after emancipation. But Soloveitchik seems uninterested in that concern.⁹ His concerns lie exclusively with theological matters.

Second, countering antisemitism. In numerous places, Soloveitchik mentions rising antisemitism as an impetus for his work. He believed that if Jews and Christians understood one another's scriptures properly, the enmity between them would dissipate. His views on antisemitism appear to be primarily founded on the assumption of a theological debate. We should be reminded the very term "antisemitism" was just coming into use in the decades when he was writing, and thus he was not likely aware of its ramifications.¹⁰ Coupled with antisemitism, it seems Soloveitchik was also concerned with the overarching negative views Jews had of Christians. It is actually quite unusual for Jews to make this claim, although precedent does exist in earlier figures such as Menachem Ha-Meiri (fourteenth century) and later Jacob Emden (eighteenth century) among some others. While he does not mention the highly anti-Christian work *Toldot Yeshu*, he most certainly was aware of it. In this sense it appears Soloveitchik did not view anti-Jewish enmity against Christianity as essentialist, like many of his peers, but rather as the product of textual misunderstanding, which he sought to resolve with his commentary.¹¹

Even though Soloveitchik seemed to be working alone and did not seem to read widely in nineteenth-century Jewish or Christian biblical

⁹ See Todd Endelman, *Leaving the Fold: Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 49–87.

¹⁰ See, for example, in Didier Musiedlak, "Wilhem Marr (1819-1904) and the Left in Germany: The Birth of Modern Antisemitism," in *The European Left and the Jewish Question, 1848-1922* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2021), 81-94.

¹¹ See for example, Eliyahu Stern, "Anti-Semitism and Orthodoxy," *Representations* 155.1 (2021): 55–81. Stern's essay is devoted in part to Naftali Zvi Berlin (1816-1893), who led the Volozhin yeshiva, the same institution where Soloveitchik studies decades earlier, from 1854–1892. Soloveitchik certainly knew of him. Berlin's view of the essential nature of antisemitism is developed in his short work *Se'ar Yisrael*, published as part of his *Commentary to the Song of Songs*.

studies, critical or otherwise, below I offer a brief assessment of several figures active in his lifetime who may illuminate some of his commentary even as they were working at cross purposes. The only figure discussed below that he mentions explicitly is Jacob Emden, whose positive assessment of Christianity is a matter of scholarly debate. In addition, I offer a brief assessment of some of the “historical Jesus” work at the time. While Soloveitchik didn’t appear that interested in the historical Jesus project—he assumed Jesus was a Jew and espoused authentic Judaism—the work of scholars in that field gives us a sense of the stakes and fault lines for Jews and Christians that Soloveitchik may have been interested in, had he been aware of them.

An Itinerant Life

There is very little known of Soloveitchik’s life, in large part because he never held any official rabbinical or teaching post. In addition, his work on Christianity was known to his family and, as a result, he is somewhat written out of the history of the Soloveitchik family that became widely known through Elijah Zvi’s great nephew Hayyim Soloveitchik of Brisk (1853–1918).¹² Soloveitchik’s commentary argued for a symmetry (not identity) between the teachings of Jesus and the teaching of Moses that he painstakingly illustrated through rabbinic literature and the works of Moses Maimonides. He was aware of how his interest in Christianity would be received in the Jewish world where he was raised. He expresses both the frustration and his deep commitment in the following remark he made in the “Introduction” to the first Hebrew edition of the commentary in 1879.

I know that I will not escape from the criticism from both sides [Jews and Christians]. My Hebrew brethren will say, “What happened by R. Eliyahu! Yesterday he was one of us and today he is filled with a new

¹² The attention paid to Isaac Zev Soloveitchik in Karlinsky’s *First in the Genealogical Chain of Brisk* is because his son Joseph Baer (the “Beit ha-Levi”) became a famous rabbinic scholar. Karlinsky devoted one page of the lengthy study to Elijah Zvi. On Berliner, see Gil S. Perl, *The Pillar of Volozhin: Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin and the World of Nineteenth-Century Lithuanian Torah Scholarship* (Boston, 2012).

spirit?!" And my Christian brethren will say, "This one who is a Jew comes to reveal to us the secrets of the Gospel?! How can we accept that he speaks correctly and a true spirit dwells within him?" These two extremes are really saying one thing. That is, it cannot be that what he is speaking with his mouth is what he believes in his heart. On this criticism my soul weeps uncontrollably. Only God knows, and God is my witness that in this I am free of sin.¹³

In his earlier commentary to Maimonides's "Laws of Idolatry" in *Mishneh Torah*, we can see the beginning of Soloveitchik's intellectual trajectory that will culminate in our *Qol Qore* on Mark and Matthew. Commenting on Maimonides' history of idolatry in chapter one of "Laws of Idolatry" Soloveitchik writes, "Our teacher [Maimonides] brings proof from Jeremiah that even when Jeremiah was rebuking Israel for abandoning God and going after other gods of wood and stone, he said that all nations know that only God is one, they only err by elevating those that God himself elevated." This is a close, and largely conventional, reading of Maimonides' text, but this sentiment will appear again, many times, in his commentary to the New Testament, where Soloveitchik will criticize his fellow Jews who think that Christianity maintains Jesus is God. If the ancient idolaters knew God was one, certainly those in antiquity who had already been exposed to the monotheism of the Israelite religion must have known that as well. In this way Soloveitchik wanted to put to rest any Jewish notion that Christianity constituted idolatry. It was, for him, simply a different iteration of biblical monotheism.

Soloveitchik's New Testament commentary was likely written in Hebrew between 1863 and 1868, at which time he published the English *Qol Qore* on Maimonides' "Thirteen Principles of Faith."¹⁴ In fact, in the 1868 English edition, Soloveitchik begins by saying, "It may, perhaps, appear presumptive of us to undertake writing a commentary on a book

¹³ Soloveitchik, *Qol Qore* (Hebrew edition, 1879), 15, and Hyman, *R. Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik*, 132.

¹⁴ Hyman, *Eliyahu Zvi Soloveitchik*, 134.

like the New Testament, and to choose a path that has seen trodden by so many ... But our object is not to comment; but be impelled by the circumstances of the times ... we desire to institute an inquiry into the cause of an existing misunderstanding.”¹⁵

Writing in what appears to be a Christian voice, the author (or translator) states that the misunderstanding has three components: “Our Jewish brethren have no faith and that the summit of the Christian belief centers in the *eradication* of the Law of Moses” (italics original). “That we Christians are their opponents and merely seek their subversion.” And “that the generality of Jews, as well as Christians, being unacquainted with that which constitutes the Judaism of the present day (viz., the Rabbinic Tradition) look upon the chasm that separates Judaism from Christianity to be of such great magnitude as to render all efforts of reconciliation in vain.”¹⁶

There is some mystery behind the first Hebrew publication of *Qol Qore*. The frontispiece of the Hebrew edition has it published in Paris with no date. Dov Hyman, a physician based in New York who wrote a Hebrew pamphlet about Soloveitchik, notes that it could not have appeared before 1879, when the Polish edition appeared, nor later than the end of 1880, when we know Soloveitchik was already living in Frankfurt am Main.¹⁷ The 1985 Jerusalem edition of *Qol Qore* on Mark and Matthew was published by a Protestant mission in Jerusalem, which I obtained from a Protestant minister in Arizona. This 1985 reprint is also available in many libraries. I was able to obtain the first edition from the National Library in Jerusalem and compared it to the 1985 reprint. Except for very few small corrections, the editions are identical. In this essay, I use the 1985 Jerusalem edition, checking the first edition for changes.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Qol Qore: A Voice Crying* (London: Elliot Stock, 1868), 3.

¹⁷ I want to thank Menachem Butler for providing me with a copy of Hyman’s text.

The Attempt to Convert the Jews in the Nineteenth Century: Situating *Qol Qore* as a Response to Conversion

Before I turn to Soloveitchik's commentary, a short methodological note is in order. Much of New Testament scholarship in the time of Soloveitchik, certainly in scholarly circles, was based on the historical-critical method. In the case of the Synoptic Gospels, this meant focusing on the differences between the Gospels in an attempt to decide which version was the earliest and distinguishing the setting of each Gospel in relation to the historical Jesus. One of the interesting things about Soloveitchik resisting this method is that it has often been thought that the historical-critical method enabled modern Jewish thinkers to engage with the New Testament to make their case either against it, or in favor of its proximity to rabbinic ideas.

Trained in the Volozhin yeshiva, known as Eitz Hayyim, the flagship Lithuania yeshiva of the time, Soloveitchik was a harmonizer, and his reading of the New Testament, like his reading of the Talmud, was ahistorical and uncritical—in that sense a throwback, as it were, to premodern renderings of the New Testament, perhaps most closely resembling the anonymous fourth-century *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*, long thought to be the product of a Jewish-Christian community.¹⁸ It was a text Soloveitchik was unaware of, or he certainly would have cited it, since it supported his basic project.¹⁹ His Lithuanian Talmudic training

¹⁸ On this text see Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Jewish Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), esp. 22–57. See also Annette Yoshiko Reed, “Secrecy, Suppression, and the Jewishness of the Origins of Christianity,” in her *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018). I want to thank Reed for sharing her chapter with me in draft form. The *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* claims to be an account of Clement of Rome's conversion to Christianity and his travels with the apostle Peter. Its importance is the way it depicts Judaism and Christianity as two parts of one larger system, not meant to stand in opposition to one another. In an AAR session where I presented Soloveitchik's reading of Matthew, New Testament scholars noted how much his reading harkens back to much earlier texts like the *Homilies*.

¹⁹ See Annette Yoshiko Reed, “‘Jewish Christianity’ after the ‘Parting of the Ways’: Approaches to Historiography and Self-Definition in the Pseudo-Clementines,” in *The Ways*

resulted in his reading the New Testament the way a Tosafist (medieval glossators on the Talmud) would read the Talmudic text, noticing contradictions in the text or its commentaries (usually Rashi) and using other texts to resolve the discrepancy.²⁰ This is not to say synthetic theologically minded methods weren't operative in the Christian world when he was writing; they certainly were. It is to say, rather, that it is highly unlikely Soloveitchik knew about them. His commentary most closely reflects the Tosafist method of synthesis, with which he was intimately familiar.²¹

For example, Soloveitchik often notes an apparent contradiction in the text or its reception (that is, the way it has been viewed as either anti-Jewish or against rabbinic ideology) looks for precedent in Talmudic literature to debunk that claim that he then reads into the text into the Gospel to solve a misunderstanding. The result is that he often offers readings of the text that, stripped of an entire history of Christian interpretation (not only historical interpretation, but also Christian anti-Jewish interpretation) yields a gospel that may have been closer to its proximate meaning than canonical commentaries. Soloveitchik's attempt to erase the categorical distinctions between Judaism and Christianity in *his* time interestingly takes a close reader to a much earlier time of what was later called by scholars "Jewish-Christianity," obviously with different considerations, and different goals.²² It is precisely his rabbinic training in harmonization that enables him to do that. Yet Soloveitchik

that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, A. Becker and A.Y. Reed eds. (Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 189-231.

²⁰ The Tosafists were a circle of medieval French commentators of the Babylonian Talmud, some descended from Rashi, who initiated a method of Talmudic analysis called "*pilpul*" or casuistry, solving textual dilemmas, many of their own creation, by evoking other rabbinic passages that they would then connect to the problematic text at hand. In the Lithuanian centers of Talmud study, this method was widely adopted. For a definitive study in English, see Ephraim Kanarfogel, *The Intellectual History and Rabbinic Culture of Medieval Ashkenaz* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2012).

²¹ See, for example Aryeh Leibowitz, "The Emergence and Development of Tosafot on the Talmud," *Hakira*, vol. 1.5, 143-163.

²² See Reed, *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism*, 15-56.

was not interested in any kind of Jewish-Christianity, however described. He was interested, rather, in illuminating the symmetry between two distinct religions that have been engaged in theological war with one another for millennia. In addition, whereas many Jews in the Historical Jesus school separate Paul from the Synoptics to salvage Jesus from the ostensible anti-Judaic Paul, Soloveitchik does no such thing.²³ Paul is as Jewish for Soloveitchik as is Jesus. I have not located one negative comment about Paul in his commentary, although for unknown reasons he never wrote a commentary of Paul's epistles.

Why would Soloveitchik, a traditional Jew from Lithuania who remained an adherent to traditional Jewish life, spend much of his adult life writing and then disseminating a rabbinic Hebrew commentary to the New Testament? While we have no definitive answer to this question, Soloveitchik does claim his commentary could contribute to alleviating a misunderstanding between Jews and Christians and thus help alleviate antisemitism, a growing problem in the middle decades of the nineteenth century both for those who remained in Eastern Europe and for those who immigrated westward yet remained attached to their Eastern European pedigree.

For our purposes, what is more important was the reign of Alexander I during the Napoleonic period (1801–1825). As Israel Bartal argues, Alexander I's spiritual, even mystical nature and traditional inclination was viewed positively by many leading rabbinic figures of the period. Bartal notes, "[Alexander I] believed with a full heart that he could enable the Jews to see the true tradition of the TANAKH and remove the barrier placed before them by the Talmud that prevented their belief in Jesus. And

²³ Recent scholarship has questions Paul's anti-Judaic stance. See, for example. Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987); Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); and John Gager, *Who Made Early Christianity?: The Jewish Lives of Paul* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

they would truly become Hebrew Christians.”²⁴ In addition, in 1817 Alexander I established the Society of Israelite Christians, whose purpose was to support converts and to serve as a resource for Jews interested in converting to Christianity. As opposed to other cases in the Middle Ages where conversion was often forced, using methods often draconian, Alexander I seemed to sincerely believe that Jewish conversion to Christianity would enable Jews to evolve spiritually and be a more integral part of his empire.

Given that this story predates Soloveitchik’s time by some decades, for our purposes there are a few important features that will play a role as we move more deeply into the nineteenth century. The first is the introduction of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews to Eastern Europe.²⁵ This Protestant missionary organization based in England was active in the empire and Poland for much of the nineteenth century, often using Jewish converts such as Nehemia Solomon (1790, n.d.) and Stanislaus Hoga (1791–1860) as translators and emissaries to approach Jewish communities and teach them about conversion.

Soloveitchik’s project, as we will see, attempts to debunk the view, held by Jews and Christians, that Judaism and Christianity are mutually exclusive, with the former being true and the latter being false or even idolatrous. This would be closer to the medieval Jewish polemics *against* Christianity and, in a different, more moderate way, the Reformers’ polemical project from Abraham Geiger to Leo Baeck.²⁶ Soloveitchik does

²⁴ Bartal, “British Missionaries in the Environs of Chabad,” [Hebrew] 17. Unpublished manuscript. I want to thank Professor Bartal for access to this essay [my translation].

²⁵ See William Thomas Gidney, *The History of the London Society for Promotion Christianity among the Jews from 1809-1908* (London, 1908); and Ruderman, *Missionaries, Converts, and Rabbis*.

²⁶ Baeck’s *The Essence of Judaism*, first published in 1905, was a direct response to Adolf von Harnack’s attack on Judaism entitled *The Essence of Christianity* (in German the title was *Was ist Christentum?*), published in 1902. In a later essay “Romantic Religion” (1922), Baeck takes aim at Pauline Christianity and argues for Judaism’s superiority as a rational religion. See Walter Homolka, “Leo Baeck and Christianity,” *European Judaism* 40.1 (Spring, 2007): 129–135. For another example of a Jewish thinker who tried to argue for the utter incompatibility

not write his commentary to falsify Christianity or even show its deficiencies but rather to show its common cause with Judaism—that is, to claim that Christianity is true as Judaism is true and that the truth of each depended on the other. As I read it, *Qol Qore* is a text for Jews seriously considering Christian claims, wherever they have been exposed to them, and to gentiles who have been taught to believe that Judaism is an inferior religion, thus holding that emancipated Jews should become Christians.

Moving to the time of Soloveitchik's commentary (the 1850s and 1860s), the work of the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity to the Jews (The London Society) continued and became more popular and arguably more effectual through the work of the missionary Alexander McCaul (1799–1863).²⁷ While Soloveitchik never mentions them, they were very active in Russia and based in London where Soloveitchik eventually resides. It is hard for me to imagine he did not know of their existence.

McCaul was a professor of Hebrew and rabbinical literature at Kings College, London, and was offered the bishopric in Jerusalem in 1841. He was a fascinating and important figure of the nineteenth century who published numerous works related to Judaism and Christianity. One of his most popular, and for our purposes most important, works was *The Old Paths: Or, the Talmud tested by Scripture: being a comparison of the Principles and doctrines of Modern Judaism, with the Religion of Moses*, published in London in 1836.

The Old Paths is an exhaustive work that cites copiously from the body of rabbinic literature to argue that the rabbinic sages erred in their

of Judaism and Christianity, see Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, *Judaism and Christianity: The Differences* (New York: The Jewish Book Club, 1943).

²⁷ On McCaul, see David Ruderman, *Missionaries*, and idem. "Towards a Preliminary Portrait of an Evangelical Missionary to the Jews: The Many Faces of Alexander McCaul (1799–1863)," in *Jewish Historical Studies* 47 (2015): 48–68; and Eliyahu Stern, "Catholic Judaism: The Political Theology of the Nineteenth-Century Russian Jewish Enlightenment," *Harvard Theological Review* 109.4 (2016): 483–511.

interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and thus that modern Judaism, as an heir to the rabbis, is mistaken. McCaul's missionizing message was for Jews to return to their authentic Mosaic religion (that is, to reject the Talmud), which is best represented by Protestant Christianity.²⁸

More specifically, I suggest that Soloveitchik likely knew of *Netivot Shalom*, because it was a widely disseminated text on a topic that was clearly important to him. Moreover, it was covered in the Hebrew press in London and was the topic of numerous critical responses by well-known Jewish writers.²⁹ In a way, one can read Soloveitchik as in some way a response to McCaul, who believed that the Jews misunderstood their own rabbinic tradition; Soloveitchik, on the other hand, believed that Christians misunderstood their own gospel.

Stanislaus Hoga, the Jewish apostate and collaborator with McCaul who translated *The Old Paths* into Hebrew as *Netivot Shalom*, was in some way quite close to Soloveitchik, although it is doubtful either knew of the other.³⁰ This seems odd, because Hoga was a covert to Christianity, albeit one who some say later seemed to return to the Jewish fold (although that is far from certain) and then defended Judaism against McCaul's missionizing. Like Soloveitchik, Hoga, from Poland, was raised in a traditional world of extreme piety and Talmud study. Unlike Soloveitchik, Hoga prodigious talents resulted in attracting the attention of a Polish prince, who took him to study modern languages. Some years later, Hoga resurfaces in London as a Christian, taking the name Stanislaus Hoga (in

²⁸ See McCaul, *The Old Paths*, 652.

²⁹ On this see, Eliyahu Stern, "Catholic Judaism."

³⁰ On Hoga, see Beth-Zion Lask Abrahams, "Stanislaus Hoga—Apostate and Penitent," *Transactions: The Jewish Historical Society of England* 15 (1939–1945): 121–149; and David Ruderman, "The Intellectual and Spiritual Journey of Stanislaus Hoga: From Judaism to Christianity to Hebrew Christianity," in David B. Ruderman, ed., *Converts of Conviction: Faith and Skepticism in Nineteenth-Century European Jewish Society* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 41–53. I want to thank Professor Ruderman for making this text available to me before its publication.

his home region, he was referred to as Haskel Hameshumad, “Ezekiel the apostate”).³¹ After a time, Hoga became involved with the London Society.

While there is some controversy over whether or not Hoga returned to Judaism late in life, David Ruderman has argued that he did not. If Ruderman is correct, Hoga would represent one who embodies what Ruderman calls a “mingled identity,” both Jew and Christian or, perhaps, neither Jew nor Christian. In his earlier work *The Controversy of Zion*, Hoga makes the provocative remark that “it is vain to think of the conversion of the Jews to Christianity before Christians themselves are converted to Judaism.”³² Here I think we can see how close Hoga comes to Soloveitchik, albeit from opposite ends of the conversion divide. My reading of Soloveitchik is that Jews need not convert to Christianity because all that is true in Christianity is part of Judaism. And Christians need not try to convert Jews for the very same reason.³³

As I mentioned above, this may be one of Soloveitchik’s goals in his commentary *Qol Qore*. Both religions, for Soloveitchik, express the same core value of divine unity expressed in different forms. Exhibiting this shared goal need not require diminishing the status of the Talmud nor claiming the superiority of Judaism.

In trying to contextualize Soloveitchik’s *Qol Qore* around the question of missionary activity and Jewish conversion to Christianity during the middle and late decades of the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe and England, I am forced to remain somewhat in the realm of speculation regarding Soloveitchik’s awareness of this activity, as he never mentions it explicitly. However, given that the issue was a popular topic in the

³¹ See Lask Abrahams, “Stanislaus Hoga,” 139.

³² Cited in Lask Abrahams, “Stanislaus Hoga,” 128.

³³ This itself is not new. We can see similar sentiments earlier—for example, the reform thinker David Friedländer (1750–1834). In 1799, Friedländer wrote an Open Letter to Wilhelm Teller advocating a “dry baptism” where Jews would join the Lutheran Church on shared moral values but not accept the divinity of Jesus, etc. One can hardly imagine Soloveitchik, who likely did not know of this, would have agreed with such a move, but Friedländer does make his suggestion based on values that he shared with Soloveitchik.

Jewish press and was of concern for Jewish communities as they moved into and beyond emancipation, it is hard to imagine he did not have at least cursory exposure to the phenomenon. In any event, I think it is safe to say that *Qol Qore* offers a distinctive contribution to the literature on conversion of conviction among traditional Jews in this period, lending a traditional voice to the very expansive and provocative rendering of the complex relationship between these two religions.

Where Does Soloveitchik Fit into the Historical Jews and Jewish-Christianity Debate in the Nineteenth Century?

I do not think it is hyperbolic to say that the question of Jesus' Jewishness and the theological reflections that followed were of the most important debates in nineteenth-century Protestant Christianity, certainly in western Europe. This includes many liberal Jews in Europe and America.³⁴ It is thus puzzling that Soloveitchik, who wrote his commentary in the heyday of Protestant debates about Jesus and Judaism, seems unaware, or uninterested, in either the Protestant or the Jewish debates. Soloveitchik spent decades working in relative isolation while the debates about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, or Jewish-Christianity, raged around him.³⁵ He must have read some German, although likely not fluently, and while living in London in the later years of his life, he must have been aware of some of these debates, as they were covered in the Jewish press (as Shira Billet shows in her essay in this collection). We know very little about his life in London other than that he

³⁴ I focus here on the European theater. On Jesus in American Judaism, see Matthew Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); and Magid, *American Post-Judaism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 133–157. The historical Jesus actually begins in the eighteenth century with the publication of Gotthold Lessing's publication of *Anonymous Fragments* from 1774–1778, written by Hermann Samuel Reimarus.

³⁵ The term "Jewish-Christianity" was invented by the Irish Diest John Tolland (1670–1722) in his book *Nazareneus* (1718). On Toland, see Reed, *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism*, 264–281. This term became widely used in the Tübingen school, led by F.C. Baur, but as Reed notes, Baur uses it in a much different way than Toland.

became blind in the last years of his life. And yet he never addresses any of this, not the Tübingen School led by F. C. Baur nor the work of Abraham Geiger and Henrich Graetz, who published a revised edition of the third volume of the *History of the Jews* in 1863 that deals extensively with the origins of Christianity.³⁶ This was exactly the same time Soloveitchik was finishing his commentaries to Mark, Matthew, and Luke. In addition, Ernst Renan published *The Life of Jesus (Vie de Jesus)* in 1863, which was a bestselling work, in French. We can assume Soloveitchik read and spoke some French, as he lived in Paris for a few years, but he does not mention Renan's work.

As I mentioned, Soloveitchik had little interest in the Jewish Jesus *per se*. This was, for him, a given but not useful for his purposes. Soloveitchik was writing a commentary to a text and was not engaged in historical analysis or, for the most, open discussion on matters of doctrine and belief. In line with his yeshiva training, textual commentary was the best path toward clarifying doctrine and beliefs.

Nor was he interested, like Graetz, in rewriting the history of the West with Judaism at its center. He would also not have been very interested in "Jewish-Christianity" (a term invented by John Tolland in the eighteenth century that Soloveitchik likely did not know) to describe the Jesus movement. He also ignored (perhaps intentionally) the Jewish parody of Jesus, *Toledot Yeshu*, which he certainly was aware of, but never mentions, as it existed in many editions in Hebrew and Yiddish.³⁷

In these cases, as in many others of the time, what are being debated are generally historical claims. Soloveitchik was interested solely in the Gospels as a text that he believed dutifully and accurately expressed true Christian teaching. It was for him, notably, the New Testament without Paul, whom Soloveitchik periodically mentions in passing when it suits

³⁶ On the publication of Graetz's "Origins of Christianity" in the second edition of volume three of *History of the Jews*, see Reed, *Jewish Christianity*, 370, note #29.

³⁷ On the most recent edition of *Toledot Yeshu* and its many editions, see *Toledot Yeshu: Two Volumes and Data Base*, trans. and ed. M. Meerson and P. Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

him, but not in any detail. As we will see below, for many Christian theologians of this period who are interested in Jewish-Christianity, Paul is the very apex of Christianity as a true religion, without which, F. C. Baur claims, it is deficient, even false (or, for Baur, “Jewish”).

One would think at least Geiger and Graetz’s writings about Judaism and the origin of Christianity would have interested Soloveitchik, and yet they appear nowhere in his work. This is not to say he wasn’t aware of them but only to say that even if he was, they did not merit inclusion in his commentary. On the other hand, as I mentioned above, he was aware of the work of the eighteenth-century German rabbi Jacob Emden, although he mentions Emden only in passing. Emden’s remarks, as startling as they were in their positive views of Christianity (and Islam), were largely made in passing, and he never devoted a study to flesh out those ideas.

Jacob J. Schachter has argued that Emden’s views may have been motivated by his utter disdain for, and fear of, Sabbateanism, thereby using Christianity as a tool to leverage his political power against the Sabbatean communities in their midst. Schachter writes, “[Emden] was trying to convince the Christians that instead of trying to enter into an alliance with the Sabbateans against the Jews, they should be seeking an alliance with the Jews against the Sabbateans.”³⁸ Thus, for Schachter, Emden’s deviance from popular opinion on the negative assessment of Christianity was largely pragmatic, an attempt to appease Christian clergy to side with the Jews against the heretical Sabbateans. Susannah Heschel has recently challenged that assertion by noting, as Schachter acknowledges as well, that Emden’s comments about Christianity precede his war against Sabbateanism and also appear in his Hebrew writings (e.g., his commentary to *Ethics of the Fathers*) and thus cannot be reduced to a pragmatic or political claim.³⁹ Even given Emden’s earlier views of Christianity, Schachter does not view Emden’s remarks critically deviant

³⁸ Jacob J. Schachter, “Rabbi Jacob Emden, Sabbateanism, and Frankism: Attitudes toward Christianity in the Eighteenth Century,” 383.

³⁹ See Heschel, “Debates for the Sake of Heaven.”

from his predecessors, viewing him rather as the last of the medieval thinkers whose views do not portend a modern approach to the matter, whereas Heschel views him as a proto-modern thinker precisely because he is willing to view Christianity outside the orbit of polemics that dominated Jewish views of Christianity in the Middle Ages.⁴⁰ As one example, she notes that Abraham Joshua Heschel cites Emden approvingly in his essay promoting ecumenicism, "No Religion Is an Island."⁴¹

I will return to Emden below, but for our limited purposes, what seems clear is that Soloveitchik appears to have been largely oblivious to what was going on around him with respect to these questions. The question I would like to briefly address is: How does his approach to Christianity, constructed in isolation, interact with the Protestants and Jews of his day who were engaged with this issue?

There are several ways one could divide the debates about Jesus and his Jewishness, Christianity, and Judaism in the nineteenth century. The first can be exhibited by F. C. Baur and the Tübingen school as a thoroughly internal Christian theological debate about the nature of Christianity itself. This debate in large part uses Jesus's Jewishness, or "Jewish-Christianity," not as the cornerstone of that religion but rather as a tool against Judaism.⁴² This approach, which is initiated in part by Schleiermacher, comes to a head perhaps in Adolph Harnack's *What Is*

⁴⁰ There are medieval views that reflect Emden's, in particular Menachem Meiri, a fourteenth-century Talmudic glossator. However, the body of Meiri's work was not known until the Cairo Geniza discoveries that came to light, beginning around 1896, when twin sisters Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned from Egypt to England with fragments and showed them to Solomon Schechter. On the Meiri and his views of Christianity, see Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (New York: Bergman House, 1961); and more recently, Moshe Halbertal, "Ones Possessed of Religion: Religious Tolerance in the Teachings of the Me'iri," *Edah Journal* 1.1 (2000): 1–24.

⁴¹ Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," reprinted in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. S. Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 249, 250.

⁴² On the Tübingen School, see Horton Harris, *Tübingen School: Historical and Theological Investigation of F.C. Baur* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

Christianity?, published at the turn of the twentieth century.⁴³ Judaism is certainly implicated in Christianity—Jesus was, of course, a Jew—but Baur views that largely as a negative force to be overcome. As Kant noted in his “Lectures on Anthropology” in the previous century, the greatness of Jesus is that he was able to overcome his Jewishness. This overcoming, for Kant, is Christianity.⁴⁴ This idea appears later in the work of Bible scholar Julius Wellhausen.

The second way to look at the debate about Jesus, his Jewishness, and Christianity is the way Jews wrote about Jesus, both to separate Judaism from Christianity, arguing for Judaism’s superiority, while at the same to argue for their proximity to each other as claim for Jewish emancipation. This is quite a nuanced and complex position, developed at length in Susannah Heschel’s *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*.⁴⁵ The battle over the historical Jesus was in some way an emancipatory battle, with Jews claiming that Jesus’s Jewishness to make space for their inclusion in a Christian society, and Christians both affirming Jesus’ Jewishness but also claiming that his greatness was his ability to overcome his Jewishness.

It is thus noteworthy that Annette Yoshiko Reed has written that Matt Jackson-McCabe’s study of this phenomenon in his *Jewish-Christianity* contains no Jewish thinkers.⁴⁶ The missing Jews in Jackson-McCabe’s study are significant. In this debate, Jews are at best presented figurally, and Jewish-Christianity is a term used differently than it is by John Toland, who invented it and used it to show the integral nature of Judaism in Christianity. Toland, a Deist and free-thinker who was not part of the conventional Christian debate, wrote, “Christianity was no more than

⁴³ Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986 [1900]).

⁴⁴ See for example, the discussion in J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 79–124.

⁴⁵ Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁴⁶ See Annette Reed’s response to Jackson-McCabe’s *Jewish-Christianity* at a session honoring his book at the 2021 SBL conference in San Antonio, Texas.

Reformed Judaism."⁴⁷ For Baur, Jewish-Christianity marks a very early stage of the Jewish movement that was overcome by Gentile Christianity and, more specifically, Pauline Christianity. If Paul is true Christianity, as Baur asserts unequivocally, then what of Jewish-Christianity? Jackson-McCabe writes,

In most cases, then, Baur found the Jewishness of early Christianity to be less the cultural flesh in which absolute consciousness first became incarnate than the primary cultural barrier it had to overcome in order to fully actualize itself as an independent dogmatic and social reality ... Jewish Christianity represents the obfuscation of the transcendent religious consciousness of Jesus and Paul by the particular values of Judaism ... As such Judaism is not only the polar opposite of Christianity in principle, it is what Jesus and Paul rejected in historical fact.⁴⁸

According to Baur, the importance of affirming Jewish-Christianity was precisely to show its deficiency, its "primitive" nature, and how the Judaism of Jewish-Christianity had to be overcome to produce the "true" Christianity of Paul.⁴⁹ In some sense, for Baur, all Christianity that is not directly indebted to Paul is "more or less occluded by Judaism." Thus, Baur and his school needed Jewish-Christianity to distinguish "bad" Christianity, which was "Jewish," from "true" Christianity, which was decidedly *not* Jewish. A century earlier, Toland used Jewish-Christianity toward the opposite goal, in one case referring to the *Epistle of Peter to James*, that "Paul ... wholly metamorpho'd and perverted the true

⁴⁷ Toland, *Nazarenus*, 33. This is quite similar to what Kohler, who likely did not know Toland's work, writes in his *The Origins of the Synagogue and the Church* in 1929. Graetz makes a similar assertion. See "The Significance of Judaism for the Present and Future," in *The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*, 291. "It was reckoned as one of the merits of the founder of Christianity, that he aided the progress of religious consciousness by eliminating the ceremonial law. On this view he becomes, in a sense, the founder of reformed Judaism."

⁴⁸ Jackson-McCabe, *Jewish-Christianity*, 66, 68.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Baur, *Paul: The Apostle of Jesus Christ* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1873) 1.3; James Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 31, and Reed, *Jewish-Christianity*, 260, 261.

Christianity (as some of the Heretics have express it) and his being blam'd for doing so by other apostles, especially by James and Peter."⁵⁰

Toland was more indebted to the fourth-century *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* that viewed Christianity as a form, and not a perversion, of Judaism. As Reed notes on Toland, "the image of the Jewishness of Christian origins in the *Epistle of Peter to James* differs thus from the 'Jewish-Christianity' that Baur later uses to reconstruct. Here, Jews are not saved through Jesus, but rather through continued fidelity to Moses ... the *Epistle of Peter to James* reframes Christian supersessionism as an act of radical suppression, an erasure of the truth that Jewish and Christian teachings are not just compatible, but the same."⁵¹ Soloveitchik, unaware of all of this, seems to come to a similar conclusion, not historically but exegetically.

At the same time Baur and others were revising Toland's "Jewish-Christianity" to sever "primitive Christianity"—that is "Jewish-Christianity"—from its mature true Pauline form, Jews were engaging with the same texts to offer a different response, both to Christians and to Jews. The two most well-known are Abraham Geiger and Henrich Graetz. Less known but also important are Augustus Neander (1798–1850)—born David Mendel, a member of the Mendelssohn family—a Jewish convert to Christianity who became a celebrated church historian, and Kaufmann Kohler (1843–1926), a student of both Geiger and the neo-Orthodox rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, who became the rector of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and also was the editor of the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, where he wrote most of the entries on Jesus and Christianity.⁵² Another figure of note is Leo Baeck, whose book *The Essence of Judaism* (first edition 1901, with a revised second edition in 1905) was a direct response to Harnack's

⁵⁰ Toland, *Nazarenus*, 24, cited in Reed, *Jewish-Christianity*, 266.

⁵¹ Reed, *Jewish-Christianity*, 280, 281.

⁵² On Kohler and Christianity, see Yaakov Ariel, "Christianity through Reform Eyes: Kaufmann Kohler's Scholarship on Christianity," *American Jewish History* 89.2 (2001): 181–191; and Evan Goldstein, "A Higher and Purer Shape": Kaufmann Kohler's Jewish Orientalism and the Construction of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America," *Religion and American Culture*, 29.3 (2019): 326–360.

What is Christianity? published in 1900. Baeck's later essay "Romantic Religion" (1922), a frontal critique of Pauline Christianity, culminates the nineteenth-century debate, finalizing Baeck's counterattack on Harnack and the whole Tübingen school.⁵³

This is not the place to go into detail about how Geiger, Graetz, Kohler, Neander, and many others adjudicated the separation and similarities between Judaism and Christianity.⁵⁴ My very limited focus here is to tease out a few general principles of these Jewish thinkers on the question of Jesus, his Jewishness, and Christianity as a way to better understand Soloveitchik's program.

Each of these figures wrote in the midst of a double polemic: first against the Christian Historical Jesus school that in many cases used the historical Jesus to denigrate Judaism or at least diminish Judaism's role in the formation of Christianity; and second, engaging in inner-Jewish polemic about how much Jesus Judaism should absorb. That is, how "Jewish" was Jesus? And how much should that matter to Judaism? This surfaces in an interesting early twentieth-century Zionist polemic known as "the Brenner Affair," between Ahad Ha-Am and Joseph Hayyim Brenner, regarding the inclusion of Jesus as part of the new Jewish (Zionist) canon of heroes.⁵⁵ Jesus was a Jew, of course, who spent almost his entire life in the land of Israel.

Geiger and Graetz, in different ways (they were also polemicizing *against* one another), claimed that the purer form of Christianity can be found in the Jesus movement—that is, as a part of Judaism—which then became corrupted by Paul and the Hellenization that became emblematic of Gentile Christianity. Graetz is quite explicit in his claim that Christianity became contaminated by Hellenistic paganism, the after-

⁵³ On Baeck, see Michel Meyer, *Rabbi Leo Baeck* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

⁵⁴ On Graetz and Neander, see Reed, *Jewish-Christianity*, 371–387. On Kohler, see the note above. On Geiger, see Heschel, *Abraham Geiger*.

⁵⁵ On the "Brenner Affair," see Nurit Govrin, *Meora Brenner: Ha-ma'avak al hofesh ha-biyui* (Jerusalem, 1985). See also, Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi*, 90–116.

effects of which can be seen in the Christianity of his day, especially in its treatment of Jews.⁵⁶ Geiger makes similar comments, blaming Hellenism for the denigration of Christianity, which was once a valiant and positive part of Jewish history. Both in different ways argued that Christianity can only be viewed as part of Jewish history, an idea that became popularized sometime later in Joseph Klausner's *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life and Teachings*, the first modern Hebrew study of Jesus, published in Jerusalem in 1922 and then translated into English by the Christian Hebraist Herbert Danby in 1925.⁵⁷

In any case, Geiger and Graetz and others in their wake in large part simply inverted Baur's conclusions by accepting certain basic assumptions. Instead of Baur's claim that Paul purified Jewish-Christianity through his universalism, they viewed Gentile Christianity as Paul's Hellenization of Christianity, which included the adaptation of elements of paganism. History, then, is not used to assert Jewish-Christianity to affirm the Jewish roots of the church, but rather to illustrate its deviance from Jesus. Texts like the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* are not "gnostic" (as Baur claimed) but the remnant of a Jewish-Christianity that held both Judaism and Jesus's innovation intact.

What should be noted here is that Geiger in particular, in reclaiming Jesus for Judaism *against* Christianity ("Judaism is the religion *of* Jesus, Christianity is the religion *about* Jesus"), claimed that Reform Judaism, in some way in the image of Jesus, was a true form of prophetic Judaism before it became corrupted by rabbinic legalism, something Jesus warned the Pharisees about in the Gospel. So, in addition to undermining Baur's erasure of Judaism, he is also noting Judaism's own corruption. Graetz was less polemical in that regard and was primarily interested in placing Christianity in its proper place as part of the history of Judaism. "The deployment of Christianity, as an offspring of part of Judaism ... forms a

⁵⁶ See Graetz, "Historical Parallels in Jewish History," in *Henrich Graetz: The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*, trans. and introduction, I. Schorsch (New York: JTS Press, 1975), 259–274. See also, idem, "The Significance of Judaism for the Present and Future," 275–302.

⁵⁷ The first known play about Jesus written in Hebrew was "Jesus of Nazareth," authored by Natan Bistrizky in 1921.

part of Jewish history.”⁵⁸ How then, Graetz intimates, can Jews continue to be excluded from European (Christian) society? If Geiger’s project was a historical one toward theological ends, Graetz’s *History of the Jews* was a multivolume attempt to offer an alternative narrative to the world history project made famous by Hegel.

In general, this debate, with Baur et al. using the Jewish Jesus *against* Judaism and Geiger using the Jewish Jesus *against* Gentile Christianity, was based largely on canonical materials. Graetz, whose project was fundamentally historical, draws from whatever materials are at his disposal to make his case. Kohler’s contribution here is that he works largely on little-known and non-canonical Christian materials to show the similarity of early Christianity to Reform Judaism using texts that Christian themselves do not know. Perhaps because Geiger remained devoted to canonical Christian texts and wrote for Christians as well as Jews, his intervention was the most penetrating and influential (Graetz only wrote about these matters in the second edition of volume 3 of *History of the Jews*, and Baeck covers territory already discussed by Geiger).

Where does Soloveitchik fit into all this? First of all, in writing a commentary to Mark, Matthew, and Luke as opposed to writing about Jesus or early Christianity, his aims are textual in a traditionally Jewish way: commentary is a lens through which one can (re-)read the text being commented upon. His commentary provides a lens through which the Gospel can be reassessed. Thus he wants his reader to see that the Gospels are “Jewish” whose Jewishness (here meaning their symmetry with the Talmud) can be illustrated as such by reading them through the lens of the most canonical Jewish texts of his time, certainly in the Lithuanian Eastern European theater where he was raised: the Talmud, Midrash, and Maimonides. He refers to scripture when necessary, but his interpretive lens is decidedly *not* scripture. In some sense, he believed that the gospel was misinterpreted by its readers, both Christians and Jews, because they did not know the Talmud, an argument similarly made by Geiger,

⁵⁸ Graetz, *History of the Jews*, 4:54, and Reed, *Jewish-Christianity*, 372

although Geiger also had his own critique of the Talmud that Soloveitchik does not.

As I mentioned at the outset, Soloveitchik was not arguing that Christianity and Judaism were identical; he was arguing that they are symmetrical. Thus, his project was not polemical in the classical sense, nor was it historical, as with Geiger and Graetz. In a decidedly ahistorical manner, Soloveitchik viewed the Synoptic Gospels as the purest articulation of Jesus's teachings and the Talmud as the purest articulation of Judaism's teachings, even though they stand in some cases half a millennium apart. He exhibits no animus toward the Talmud (quite the contrary!), the way we see in Geiger, and no application of history to prove Judaism's uncorrupted rational core, the way we see in Graetz (Graetz did think Judaism was corrupted by Jewish mysticism).⁵⁹ He did not seem intent to prove Judaism's superiority over Christianity, nor was he arguing for Christianity's deficiency. Quite the opposite: Christianity properly understood (through a rabbinic lens) can be positively affirmed by Jews, and Judaism could be properly understood by Christians. Soloveitchik's ahistorical and non-polemical approach thus takes him outside many of the nineteenth-century debates and puts him in closer proximity to Emden a century earlier—albeit Emden appears more interested in Christianity (and Islam) as empires, noting their tolerance, and does not delve into the textual intricacies of the gospels nor, to any great extent, the theological details of their teachings. In addition, there is no indication Soloveitchik was aware of the complex triangulation between Judaism, Sabbateanism, and Christianity that ostensibly motivated Emden's views. Let us now turn to Soloveitchik's commentary as a lens through which we can see his reconstruction of the gospel through a Talmudic/Maimonidean lens.

⁵⁹ "In these lands the insane theories of the Kabbalah had spread their snares and disturbed the minds, and produced pseudo-messianic orgies that cast shame upon Judaism even to the end of the last century." Graetz, "Historical Parallels," in *The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*, 268.

Soloveitchik's "Maimonidean Jesus"

Soloveitchik was an exclusively canonical thinker. As a product of the traditional world of Lithuanian Jewry only a few decades after the death of the Vilna Gaon, for Soloveitchik the Jewish canon is comprised of rabbinic literature (the Talmud and Midrash, and the legal writings of Moses Maimonides). Scripture is, of course, the base-text for all of this, but it is really the Talmud that stands as the best articulation of normative Judaism in Soloveitchik's environs.⁶⁰ The prominence of Maimonides in this canonical mix will become more evident some decades later with the rise of Brisker School of Talmudic analysis by Soloveitchik's family coming out of the Volozhin yeshiva, where Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik studied.

One the more vexing dimensions of the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke), certainly for a Jewish reader, is the question of Jesus's claims to be the messiah, or whether others considered him to be so.⁶¹ In addition, one of the dominant themes in Jewish criticism of the Gospels is that such a claim is, within Jewish thinking, impossible for a variety of reasons. On this question, the legal code of Maimonides is often invoked where, in his "Laws of Kings," Maimonides delineates the criteria of the messianic vocation.⁶² On Maimonides's criteria, Jesus as the true messiah is simply impossible. What, then, are Jews to make of this claim of Christianity? One common trope was that Jesus was a false messiah, while others, such as Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, for example, make the

⁶⁰ Even for many of the *maskilic* critics of traditional Judaism, rabbinic and Talmudic literature loomed large. For example, see Jay Harris, *How Do we Know This?: Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* (Albany: SUNY, 1994).

⁶¹ It is worth noting that Soloveitchik reads the Synoptic Gospels uncritically, without any understanding of the synoptic problem that becomes a mainstay of New Testament scholarship in the ensuing decades.

⁶² See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Kings," chapters 11 and 12.

distinction between the “false messiah” and the “failed messiah,” the latter being more applicable to Jesus than the former.⁶³

Soloveitchik takes a somewhat different tack in his assessment of Jesus’s messianic vocation. Rather than denying Jesus as messiah, something difficult to do given the plethora of references to his messianic vocation (although these are more oblique in the Synoptic Gospels than later on), Soloveitchik claims that the central vocation of the messiah, as he reads Maimonides, is to teach people the fundamental lesson of Judaism: the unity of the Creator.⁶⁴ Thus, in almost every reference to the messiah in Mark and Matthew, Soloveitchik comments about Jesus’s success in spreading the true gospel, the unity of God.

In at least one place, Soloveitchik openly denies that Jesus is the Messiah and claims that most people have misread Matthew 24:5, which states: “For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the mashiach,’ and they will mislead many.” Here Soloveitchik writes,

Many will come in my name—there are those who say that Yeshua cautioned them not to be mistaken if a man comes in his name and says that he is the Messiah, that he may not mislead them. However, the meaning of this verse is difficult, for how is it possible that a man would come in the name of Yeshua and make himself out to be the Messiah? Who would believe that Yeshua sent him? And what does he mean by saying, “many will come in my name”? This is the meaning: Yeshua told them that many would come in his name claiming that he was the Messiah, and by this they will mislead many. Therefore, what he is really saying is, “I am giving you distinct signs of when the Messiah comes.”

Rather than *being* the Messiah, for Soloveitchik Jesus is the one who spreads the necessary condition of belief in divine unity as the prelude to the Messiah (a kind of spiritual, as opposed to political or militaristic,

⁶³ Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth* (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 2004), esp. 148–153.

⁶⁴ Maimonides lays out his views of the Messiah and the messianic age in numerous places. His “Laws of Kings,” at the conclusion of his *Mishneh Torah*, and also in his epistle to the Jew of Yemen, known as *Iggeret Teman*.

Joseph messiah). The extent of his success makes him a messianic figure, but not the final one who comes to redeem Israel.

Commenting on Matthew 14:14, Soloveitchik remarks,

Good news of the kingdom—a distinct sign of when the Messiah will come, when all the nations will know the good news of the kingdom, which is *the unity of the Creator*. Both Jews and Christians together believe only in one God and that the Messiah will surely come, just as Yeshua promised; and when the good news of the kingdom—being the unity of God—is proclaimed to all the nations, then the end will come.

Soloveitchik uses the unity doctrine as that which unites Judaism and Christianity, and Jesus's teaching as exemplifying this idea. His literal messianic vocation thus becomes, for him, beside the point.

On the question of the resurrection of Jesus, Soloveitchik again mirrors Maimonides in eliding resurrection with the immortality of the soul. The matter of resurrection is taken up in a lengthy comment Soloveitchik makes to Matthew 22:23. It is worth citing his comment in full:

There is no resurrection of the dead—I have already written that the foundation of the belief in the resurrection of the dead is compiled of two principles: the first is that the dead will rise in the time that the Creator, blessed be his name, wills it; the second is the belief in the immortality of the soul, that is, that the spirit of man does not die when it is separated from the body but that it will remain immortal and forever enjoy the pleasantness of YHVH in accordance to the good deeds that it performed in this world. Both our Jewish and Christian brothers firmly believe in these two principles, for they are united in the foundations of the religion on which the Torah of Moshe rests. Only the Sadducees turned away from the path of the Torah and the commandments and refused to believe in these two principles. Therefore, they asked Yeshua "How will it be for the dead that rise if one woman had seven husbands...?"

And in a comment to Mark 12:27, we read: "Let us repeat this, for it is an important and indisputable fact: in the dual belief of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead, our Israelite brothers are in perfect accord with our Christian brothers." Finally, on Mark 8:33, Soloveitchik is the most explicit when he writes,

There was absolutely nothing impossible about them seeing Yeshua after his death, and I cited, in the same place, that according to the Talmud a sage distinctly revived his deceased colleague and conversed with him. Only his disciples were mistaken on the thought of Yeshua: he did not mean that he would actually resurrect physically, but that he would *reappear* in order to convince them, by this act, of the principle of the immortality of the soul. Read carefully my commentary in this spot, and you will then understand this passage. Petros as well, in my opinion, was one of those who “doubted.” He believed that Yeshua spoke of a literal flesh and bone resurrection, and knowing the thing to be impossible in the temporal order, he accused him of announcing unbelievable things to them.

The move to replace Jesus’s ostensible claim of bodily resurrection with the Maimonidean-infused idea of the immortality of the soul, an idea that is more than likely the product of medieval and not late antique Judaism, illustrates Soloveitchik’s larger project of subverting the notion that Judaism and Christianity are categorically distinct and irreconcilable entities.

The Jewish Jesus and Anti-Judaism: The Overt Context of R. Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik’s Project

As a coda, I want to briefly examine something less endemic to Soloveitchik’s commentary *per se* and more about the context (*sitz im leben*) of the project more generally. In my introductory essay to *The Bible, The Talmud, and the New Testament*, I suggested that Soloveitchik’s project may have been responding to the proliferation of attempts to convert Jews to Christianity in Eastern Europe in the mid-nineteenth century during the reign of Czar Alexander II.⁶⁵ If, as Soloveitchik argued, Christianity was no different than canonical Judaism, why convert? The missionary argument that Christianity is the perfection of Judaism is ostensibly undermined by Soloveitchik’s commentary.

⁶⁵ See my *The Bible, The Talmud, and the New Testament* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 16–25; and David Ruderman, *Missionaries, Converts, and Rabbis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

Qol Qore was written in the mid-nineteenth century, probably over the course of about a decade. While antisemitism would rise precipitously in Europe in the 1870s, including antisemitic legislation followed by pogroms, Soloveitchik's focus was the theological animus Christians held toward Jews.⁶⁶ He claimed it was based on a misunderstanding of the New Testament by both Jews and Christians. While Wilhelm Marr coined the term "antisemitism" in 1879, Moritz Steinschneider, a leading figure in the *Wissenschaft des Judentum* movement, already used the term "*antisemitisch*" as early as 1860.⁶⁷ It does not seem, however, that Soloveitchik's main purpose was eradicating antisemitism as we know it today. He never used the term, which itself was not remarkable as the term was just coming into usage during the latter part of his life. It seems, though, that Soloveitchik believed that if Jews and Christians understood the New Testament properly, that is, the way *he* did, the theological foundations of Jew-hatred among Christians would begin to wane.⁶⁸ And, I would add, I think he believed that Jews would not hold negative views on Christians. His most sustained comment about the impetus for his project appears in his prefatory remarks to the 1868 London edition of *Qol Qore: The Law, the Talmud, and the Gospel*.

But our object is not to comment; but impelled by circumstances of the times, so eventful in themselves, and so important in their bearing as to the cause of the Lord, we desire an institution inquiry into the cause of an existing misunderstanding. For since the fire of dispute has been

⁶⁶ See Steven Zipperstein, *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History* (New York: Liverlight, 2019); and Jeffrey Veidlinger, *In the Midst of Civilized Europe: The Pogroms of 1918-1921 and the Onset of the Holocaust* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2021).

⁶⁷ See Anver Falk, *Anti-Semitism: A History and Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Hatred* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 21.

⁶⁸ I follow here the sharp distinction between antisemitism and Jew-hatred made by Hannah Arendt. "Antisemitism, a secular nineteenth-century ideology ... and religious Jew-hatred, inspired by a mutually hostile antagonism of two conflicting creeds, are obviously not the same; and even the extent to which the former derives its arguments and its emotional appeal from the latter is open to question." Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), xi.

kindled in the camp of our Hebrew brethren, it has divided the worshippers of God into two sections, the one Jews, and the other Christians. Does it not appear marvelous to contemplate that after the lapse of centuries, when empires have crumbled into the dust, monarchies have ceased to exist, dynasties have fallen into decay ... and yet that fire of contention has not ceased but is still raging with its primitive fury.⁶⁹

Being “impelled by the circumstances of the times” is never explained, but it is certainly plausible that this referred to Christian attitudes toward Jews. And it is somewhat unconventional, to say the least, that Soloveitchik called Jews *and* Christians “Hebrew brethren.” This commentary, constructed by someone deeply immersed in classical Judaism, executed with passion, candor, and sincerity, and driven by an unyielding, albeit naïve, belief that the author had solved a millennia-old problem, offers us a window into the mind of one Eastern European rabbi in the nineteenth century who courageously contested what most Jews, certainly in his environs, took for granted, succinctly expressed by Leo Strauss as cited at the beginning of this essay: that Judaism and Christianity were irreconcilable.

The history of the twentieth century was not kind to Soloveitchik’s prediction and, perhaps partly as a consequence, his work has wallowed in obscurity. While Soloveitchik’s belief that Jew-hatred was the result of a misunderstanding of the Gospels was both reductionist and naïve, his attempt to offer a non-polemical and ahistorical view of Judaism and Christianity did not totally disappear.

The nineteenth-century polemical approaches of Geiger and Graetz did not quite translate to America, for America, in its commitment to freedom of religion, was less antagonistic to Jews and Judaism than the world of Geiger and Graetz, although Kaufmann Kohler, writing from America and also a one-time student of Geiger, still espoused a moderate anti-Christian sentiment that seems to have been a remnant of that era.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *Qol Qore* (London, 1868), 1, 2, and Hyman, *R. Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik*, 54, 55.

⁷⁰ On Kohler’s views of Christianity and Islam, see his “Christianity and Mohammedanism, the Daughter Religions of Judaism,” in Kohler, *Jewish Theology; Systematically and Historically*

Perhaps in America, certainly as we move further into the twentieth century, the debate became more about ecumenicism and less about arguing for the viability of Judaism.⁷¹ In that sense, it became less a scholarly enterprise and more of a sociological one. America in the Progressive Era was a society where many minorities were vying for acceptance in a tolerant society.

Among many in the Orthodox camp, excluding some notable exceptions such as Irving (Yitz) Greenberg and Jonathan Sacks, Soloveitchik's project would seem anathema, and Emden's comments about Christianity were largely ignored or contextualized so as to blunt their dissonance. Neither Greenberg nor Sacks seem to have known about Soloveitchik, but I do not think either would ever have acceded to Soloveitchik's radical claim that Judaism and Christianity were almost entirely symmetrical. At most they weigh in on a variety of ways for Jews and Christians to express fidelity to the Bible—Jews through the Talmud, and Christians through the gospel. There have been a variety of other attempts to explore the similarities between Judaism and Christianity, especially since Christianity has altered its anti-Jewish position post-Vatican II.⁷² Those attempts, however, knew little or nothing of Soloveitchik's earlier effort to do the same at a time when Christian enmity for Judaism was strong.⁷³

Considered (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1928), 426–446. Figures such as Isaac Mayer Wise, Stephen Wise, and Emil Hirsch, and later Byron Sherwin, Irving (Yitz) Greenberg and others offered much softer assessments of Christianity in America.

⁷¹ See my, *American Post-Judaism*, 133–157, and the sources cited there.

⁷² See, for example, the essays included in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000). For a review of the *Bible, The Talmud, and the Gospel* that addresses some of these questions, see Jon D. Levenson, "A Tale of Two Soloveitchiks," *Mosaic Magazine*, December 3, 2019, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/religion-holidays/2019/12/a-tale-of-two-soloveitchiks/>

⁷³ As an interesting aside, one would think that in Israel, where Jews were not living under the umbrella of Christianity, it would cease being a subject of much interest. However, Karma Ben Johanan in her book *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022) shows this not to be the case. In her

For many in the liberal camp in America, ecumenicism was on the rise, especially after World War II, and then even more so after Vatican II in the 1960s. The somewhat reductionist and certainly more radical premises of Solovetchik's commentary are dated and naïve in the way scholars today view the Talmud in relation to Jesus and nascent Christianity, but as the ecumenical spirit lives on as we move further into the twenty-first century, Soloveitchik's project, dated as it may be, can serve as an interesting and welcome exegetical precursor to that sentiment.⁷⁴

chapter "Christianity in Religious Zionist Thought" (194-228) she shows the way settler rabbis offer vituperatively negative assessments of Christianity in a world where Christianity poses no threat. How to understand this continued obsession with Christianity in a Jewish state remains unanswered.

⁷⁴ For some examples, see Peter Schafer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospel: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2013); and Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism*.