

FROM VOLOZHIN TO LONDON: ELIJAH ZVI SOLOVEITCHIK'S JEWISH- CHRISTIAN HOLY SPIRIT

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“Elijah comes not to distance, but to draw closer,” wrote Rabbi Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik (~1805–1881) in the Preface to *Kol Kore, or The Talmud and the New Testament*, an enigmatic rabbinic commentary on the Gospel of Matthew.² Identifying with his ancient namesake, Soloveitchik evoked

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² Eliyahu Tsevi (Elijah Zvi) Halevi Soloveitchik, *Kol Kore, or The Talmud and the New Testament: Book of Matthew, with a commentary demonstrating to all that the New Testament came only to spread throughout the world the monotheistic belief in the blessed creator, as well as to strengthen the Torah of Moses* [Hebrew] (Paris: Imprimerie Polyglotte de Charles Blot; n.d., c. 1879), 7. The statement is a paraphrase from a series of statements in *Mishnah Eduyot* 8:7, esp. the statement attributed to Rabbi Judah: “[Elijah will come] to draw closer, but not to distance.” All translations below are my own, and from the Hebrew text, unless specified otherwise.

On the life and work of Elie/Elias Soloweczyk (Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik), see Dov Hyman, *An Essay on Eliyahu Zvi Soloveitchik: The Man and His Work* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Rimonim, 1995),

rabbinic descriptions of Elijah's conciliatory role in the messianic era. In the volume's epigraph, "Elijah comes only to bring peace to the world,"³ he alluded to the utopian aim of the project: to end nearly two thousand years of enmity between Christians and Jews.

Soloveitchik, an orthodox Jew of prominent rabbinic lineage educated in the traditional intellectual milieu of the Yeshiva of Volozhin,⁴ subsequently engaged in extensive study of the New Testament and dialogue with Christian missionaries.⁵ He came to believe that Christians and Jews both read the sacred texts of the other—the Talmud and the New Testament—"blindly," resulting in misunderstanding of the doctrines at the core of Jewish-Christian disputation.⁶ *Kol Kore* aimed to shine light on what Soloveitchik saw as the fundamental theological compatibility of Judaism and Christianity, even as he believed each religion ought to preserve its distinctive way of life.

of which only fifty copies were printed; and Shaul Magid, "Introduction: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik, the Jewish Jesus, Christianity, and the Jews," in *The Bible, the Talmud, and the New Testament: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik's Commentary to the Gospels* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

³ *Kol Kore*, title page. For the full quotation, see *Mishnah Eduyot* 8:7: "[Elijah will come] neither to distance nor to draw closer, but to bring peace to the world, as it is written: *Behold I dispatch to you Elijah the prophet ... and he shall reconcile the hearts of fathers to their sons and the hearts of sons to their fathers* [Malachi 3:23–24]."

⁴ Soloveitchik was a grandson of Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin (1749–1821). Descendants of his brother were respected rabbinic authorities in Soloveitchik's lifetime and beyond. See Hyman, *Essay*; Magid, "Introduction," in *The Bible*, 1–5; and Peter Salovey's "Foreword," *ibid.*

⁵ In 1875, John Miller, a missionary, wrote of Soloveitchik, "[W]e have long known that he was often engaged in protracted and earnest conversation with the missionaries of our Society [for the Propagation of the Gospel Among the Jews]; "A Remarkable Book," *Jewish Herald* no. 349 (1 February 1875): 21).

⁶ Soloveitchik, *Kol Kore*, 6–7. This metaphor is highly significant in this context. Christians had long portrayed Jews as reading Scripture "blindly," resulting in the iconic contrast between blind Synagoga and clear-eyed Ecclesia. Soloveitchik defends Judaism by denying the contrast between Judaism and Christianity, and by arguing that Jews have something to teach Christians about their Scriptures. Two *loci classici* of the Christian claim are Justin Martyr ("Dialogue with Trypho") and Saint Augustine (*City of God*, ch. 18).

In writing a singular book for two distinct audiences across an ideological divide, Soloveitchik was aware of the exceedingly fine line he walked. He suspected Jews would mistakenly perceive in him a “different spirit [*ruah aheret*]⁷” of untruth (or apostasy) and Christians would doubt a Jew could interpret the New Testament with the “steady spirit [*ruah nakhon*]⁸” of truth.⁹ Nevertheless, he wrote, “perhaps the words that come directly from ... my heart will take root in their hearts and ultimately produce a fruit that helps quell the conflict.”¹⁰ With this goal in mind, he disseminated translations of his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew in French, German, and Polish—after a failed attempt to complete an English edition—before finally publishing the original Hebrew text.¹¹

Soloveitchik’s concerns were not unfounded. With rare exception, neither Jews nor Christians received his work as he intended, and after his 1881 death, his name largely fell into oblivion for over a century. Recent

⁷ Biblically, the expression *ruah aheret* has a positive connotation, referring to Caleb, who remained loyal to the true word of God, in the face of the sin of the spies (Num. 14:24). In Soloveitchik’s usage, the expression takes on a negative connotation, serving as a contrast with a true spirit. A similar usage of this term can be found in Pinhas Hurwitz, *Sefer Ha-Brit*, where a “different spirit [*ruah aheret*]” connotes a spirit that is different from the “holy spirit [*ruah hakodesh*],” the latter being a source of true knowledge, the former being an alternative source that does not provide true insight. See Hurwitz, *Sefer Ha-Brit* (Vilna, 1814), “Divrei Emet,” 41b. In Soloveitchik’s usage, *ruah aheret* may refer specifically to apostasy, as in Hanokh Yalon’s suggested meaning for the eponym of notorious rabbinic heretic Elisha ben Abuya, i.e., Aher (Perverse One). See *Pirke Lashon* on “a.h.r.” (I thank Burton Visotzky for this reference). Soloveitchik’s use of this expression may rely on its ambiguity, suggesting that his own true “different spirit” (as in Caleb) was misidentified as false.

⁸ This expression comes from Psalm 51:12. Psalm 51 contains one of the few appearances of the term “holy spirit” in the Hebrew Bible (v. 13). Soloveitchik implies that Christians would doubt an unbaptized Jew could interpret the New Testament with the Holy Spirit.

⁹ Soloveitchik, *Kol Kore*, 4–5.

¹⁰ Soloveitchik, *Kol Kore*, 7.

¹¹ Rabbi Elias Soloveitchik, *Kol Kore (Vox Clamantis): The Bible, The Talmud, and the New Testament* (London: Rabbi Elias Soloveitchik [~1868]); and Elie Soloveitchik, *Kol Kore (Vox Clamantis): La Bible, le Talmud, et L’Évangile: Évangile de Mathieu* (Paris: Librairie Sandoz et Fischbaucher, 1870), with a second edition and companion volume, *Évangile de Marc*, in 1875). The German (1877) and Polish (1879) translations were based on the French.

Christian interest in his work¹² and ongoing Jewish interest in his famous family¹³ paved a path for the recovery of this fascinating figure and the recent publication of an English translation of the surviving volumes of *Kol Kore*.¹⁴ In an introductory essay, Shaul Magid expands upon a little-known 1995 study of Soloveitchik and considers unique aspects of his project among 19th-century Jewish studies of the New Testament, especially noting its debt to Maimonides.

This article further situates Soloveitchik's work historically and within Jewish thought. I begin with the historical context of the birth of *Kol Kore* in 1860s London, the setting in which the project was most likely conceived and the Hebrew manuscript, the basis of all the published translations, first written. I present new details about Soloveitchik's first attempt at a published translation, into English, a project which he abandoned abruptly, literally in mid-sentence. I consider what the three surviving copies of this incomplete translation tell us about this episode and the initial reception of *Kol Kore* among Jews and Christians in London.

Following this historical account, I turn to the centerpiece of my discussion, which considers Soloveitchik within Jewish thought. I focus on his understanding of the holy spirit, an important concept within the internal history of Jewish thought, and a contentious one in discourse between Jews and Christians.¹⁵ A close reading of Soloveitchik's com-

¹² See Eliyahu Tsevi (Elijah Zvi) Soloveitchik, *Kol Kore, or the Talmud and the New Testament* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies and Research, 1985), issued by a Protestant organization.

¹³ The title of Shaul Magid, "The Soloveitchik Who Loved Jesus," (*Tablet*, 14 December 2012), showcases how interest in the Soloveitchik family contributed to the recovery of the forgotten Soloveitchik.

¹⁴ Magid, ed., *The Bible*, featuring a translation by Jordan Gayle Levy.

¹⁵ In Jewish thought, "the holy spirit" translates the Hebrew expression *ruah hakodesh*. Hebrew does not distinguish between capital and lowercase letters, and it is not standard to capitalize the Jewish expression "the holy spirit" in English. In Christian thought, however, the Holy Spirit is part of trinitarian understandings of God and is always capitalized in English. A challenge of writing about Soloveitchik's view of the holy spirit in this article is that Soloveitchik argues for shared conception of the holy spirit between Judaism and Christianity, one that can best be understood, on his account, by interpreting the New Testament in light of Jewish sources. Since my analysis situates Soloveitchik's account within

mentary on Matthew 1:18–20 (Christ’s conception via the Holy Spirit), showcases his method of drawing upon an eclectic array of Jewish sources, including rabbinic, philosophical, and mystical traditions, to present a view of rabbinic Judaism, or “The Talmud,” with which he approaches the New Testament. I give particular attention to Soloveitchik’s intellectual debt to his grandfather, Hayim of Volozhin (1749–1821), author of the mystical-ethical treatise *Nefesh Ha-Hayim*. Soloveitchik’s understanding of the holy spirit rests on a particular conception of the human being that in turn bears on his understanding of the Jewish-Christian encounter. His account of the holy spirit thus proves crucial for understanding the aims, methods, and sources of *Kol Kore*, as well as the anthropology and sociology that animate the project.

In the conclusion, I return to 1870s Europe and the aftermath of the publication of *Kol Kore* to narrate a partial reception history of this neglected but never completely forgotten project.

I. Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik in London

Soloveitchik arrived in London sometime after 1857 and before 1863,¹⁶ having led an itinerant life with significant stops in various cities, including Königsberg, where he had published a German translation of *Sefer Mada* (*Book of Knowledge*), the first volume of Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* (*Code of Law*).¹⁷ This was a time of increased integration for Jews in Western Europe, as Jewish Emancipation continued to spread with the proliferation of enlightened liberal political ideals, and for Jewish intellectual life, as different forms of Haskalah and the Science of Judaism developed and expanded their reach. 1860s London, heir to unique brands

Jewish thought, I have opted not to capitalize the expression “the holy spirit” except in New Testament contexts, where it is standard.

¹⁶ Due to scant historical evidence, the dating of Soloveitchik’s whereabouts is murky. His presence in Berlin is attested as late as 1857, and in London as early as 1863, although his arrival date is unknown. See Magid, “Introduction,” in *The Bible*, 7.

¹⁷ For details on Soloveitchik’s itinerant life and various publications, see Magid, “Introduction,” in *The Bible*, 6–7; and Hyman, *Essay*.

of English and Jewish enlightenment,¹⁸ was particularly well-suited to be the birthplace of Soloveitchik's singular project.¹⁹

The first book Soloveitchik published in London was an 1863 translation of a broad selection from Maimonides' 14-volume *Mishneh Torah*.²⁰ Among its subscribers were Rabbi Nathan Adler (chief rabbi of England), Sir Moses Montefiore (the most widely recognized lay leader of English Jewry), Louis Loewe (first headmaster of the primary rabbinical seminary, Jews College) and Rabbi Barnett Abrahams (chief judge of London's rabbinical court), as well as Christians highly active in the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Among the Jews,²¹ such as Reverends John Weir, John Wilkinson, and W. Myers.²² The presence

¹⁸ On the uniqueness and independence of English Jewish enlightenment, see David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key: Anglo-Jewry's Construction of Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ David B. Ruderman's work showcases both the well-known social-political challenges, for Jews, of Jewish-Christian encounters dominated by intensive Christian missionizing, as well as the surprising intellectual fertility that also emerged from the Jewish-Christian encounter in nineteenth-century England, due to unique historical and intellectual features of the English context. See David B. Ruderman, *Missionaries, Converts, and Rabbis: The Evangelical Alexander McCaul and Jewish-Christian Debate in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020). Ruderman's work on Solomon Bennet (1767-1838) provides an earlier example of a Polish Jew who, like the later Soloveitchik, emerged from encounters with Christians in England with a desire to bring reconciliation between Jews and Christians through new publications. See David B. Ruderman, *The Making of an Anglo-Jewish Scholar* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025).

²⁰ Elias Soloweyczyk, ed. *Moses Maimonides: Yad-Hachazakah, or Mishne Torah, Containing Ethical, Theological, and Philosophical instructions* (London: Thos. William Nicholson, 1863).

²¹ The British Society, and its publication arm, the Jewish Herald, were spawns of the earlier and more influential London Society for the Promotion of Christianity Among the Jews and its diverse networks of publications. The workings of the London Society are described extensively in Ruderman, *Missionaries*.

²² These names, among many others, are listed as subscribers in Soloweyczyk, ed., *Moses Maimonides*, iii and vii. For more on Adler, see Derek Taylor, *Chief Rabbi Nathan Marcus Adler: The Forgotten Founder* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2018); on Montefiore, Abigail Green, *Moses Montefiore: Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); on Abrahams, Doreen Berger, "Abrahams, Barnett," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) (online). On Weir, see "Baptism of Jewish Converts," *Jewish Herald* no. 188 (1 August 1861), 114-116; on Wilkinson, see *Jewish Herald* no. 169 (1 January 1860), 8-9.

of these subscribers attests to Soloveitchik's acceptance within the mainstream Jewish community before the publication of *Kol Kore*, but after he was already publicly known to be in conversation with missionaries.²³

Soloveitchik first attempted to publish his commentary on the New Testament in London, in English translation, around 1868, with the title *Kol Kore (Vox Clamantis): The Bible, The Talmud, and the New Testament*.²⁴ This translation of the introduction and commentary on Matthew only survives in three incomplete copies, now held at the Bodleian, Cambridge University Library, and the library of Kings College London. These copies reveal important details about the condition under which Soloveitchik first attempted to disseminate his project. This translation was self-published, suggesting that he did not succeed in securing a publisher.

²³ Frequent conversations with such missionaries, who likely supplied him with his first Hebrew copy of the New Testament, may have been crucial to his gaining the requisite competency in Christian Scripture and doctrine for penning his commentary. The *Jewish Herald* contains frequent requests for Hebrew copies of the New Testament to distribute to Jews all over the world, such as the following 1861 conversation with one "Rabbi E-," who "admitted that Jesus was a great prophet like Moses" but criticized him for turning Jews away from their faith and "indignantly repelled the idea that Jesus Christ could be God." The rabbi "had never read the New Testament" and believed it was forbidden to do so by the Talmud. But, reported the missionary, "he asked me... if I had the New Testament in Hebrew ... and I dare say, if I had, I might induce him to read that," and followed up with the request that "If you... furnish me with a few copies of the Scriptures (Old and New) in the Hebrew, I would advertise them along with my other Bibles, and might thus draw Jews around me." (*Jewish Herald* no. 188 [1 August 1861], 126). On English missionizing to Jews in the half century preceding Soloveitchik's arrival in London, see Ruderman, *Missionaries*, describing especially the influential missionary work of Alexander McCaul (1799-1863), who insisted on Hebrew language fluency among missionaries in the service of intense engagement with learned Polish and Russian Jews.

²⁴ Magid mentions two English-language volumes published around 1868 that are both related to Soloveitchik's project (Magid, *The Bible*, 9). My discussion refers to one of these. The other, *Kol Kore: A Voice Crying* (London: Elliot Stock, 1868), is lost, except for the first eighteen pages, preserved in a bound volume containing several pamphlets for Christian missionaries now held at Burke Library (Union Theological Seminary) in the Missionary Research Library collection. A markedly different version of Soloveitchik's introduction to the Gospel of Matthew, this one was written not in a Jewish but in a Christian voice. No author is listed. This project is clearly connected to Soloveitchik's work, though his role in it is unclear.

Where the name of a publisher typically appears, the cover page of each installment reads: "London: Published by Rabbi Elias Soloweczyk, 109 Gravel Lane, Houndsditch."²⁵ In lieu of a named translator, the text was "Translated by Several Learned Men."²⁶ The English translation was published piecemeal, in seven installments of roughly fifteen pages each.²⁷ The seventh installment ends on page 112, at the beginning of the commentary on Matthew 3:8, and so each of the surviving copies ends abruptly at this same point in the translation. (The full German translation of *Kol Kore* on Matthew runs to 352 pages).

The ad-hoc, self-published, and incomplete nature of this publication suggests that although 1860s London was a supportive enough context for the birth of the project, Soloveitchik did not find sufficient support for disseminating it. A note printed along with one of the installments by one Charles Schwartz, editor of a Christian missionary magazine, attests to Soloveitchik's character and urges "all that love Israel to subscribe to this work, and thereby to assist our brother in procuring a livelihood for

²⁵ 109 Gravel Lane, Houndsditch, was home to a Jewish family of rag merchants with the surname Levy from as early as the 1851 census to as late as 1869. Also at this address lived one Woolf Davis, whose 1852 wedding at the Great Synagogue in London was officiated by Chief Rabbi Adler. It has been suggested that Woolf Davis may have been a member of the Levy family (See Melody Amsel-Arieli, *Jewish Lives: Britain 1750–1950* (Bransley: Pen & Sword, 2013), 77–79.) I mention this historical detail to show a connection between the residents of this address and the mainstream Jewish community as of the early 1850s. I do not know what connections this family (or any other residents at this address) had, if any, to the Jewish community, or to Christian missionaries, by the late 1860s, when Soloveitchik used this address for *Kol Kore*.

²⁶ There is no evidence as to whether these (or some of them) were Christian, but the English translation is called "The Gospel According to Saint Matthew," whereas in the French translation, translated by a Jew, is simply "Évangile de Matthieu," without the honorific "Saint." The "Holy Spirit" is translated in some places in the English translation as the "Holy Ghost" (although this is not consistent).

²⁷ The installments begin and end on random pages, not at the natural stopping points one would expect from planned installments. The installment pagination is as follows: No. 1, pp. 1–16; No. 2, pp. 17–32; No. 3, pp. 33–48; No. 4, pp. 49–64; No. 5, pp. 65–80; No. 6, pp. 81–96; No. 7, pp. 97–112.

himself and his family; and at the same time in the publishing of a work which may, with God's blessing, be very useful to Jews and Christians."²⁸

The absence of any Jewish endorsements suggests that the work failed to gain support among Jews.²⁹ It is noteworthy, however, that the surviving copy held at the Bodleian bears a stamp, in Hebrew, from the library of the "Yeshivat Ohel Moshe v'Yehudit" (Yeshiva of the Tent of Moses and Judith), i.e., Lady Judith Montefiore College. The College, established by Moses Montefiore in 1868 in memory of his late wife,³⁰ centered around a traditional *beit midrash* ("house" of Torah study) and scholarly library including rare manuscripts that attracted scholars of the nascent field of academic Jewish Studies. The College was run by Rabbi Louis Loewe, longtime friend and beneficiary of Montefiore and predecessor to Barnett Abrahams as head of Jews College. All three of these men had subscribed to Soloveitchik's 1863 translation of Maimonides, and the stamp shows

²⁸ This note is only found in the copy that survives at Cambridge University Library, which was acquired by the library in 1872. It is impossible to know if this note appeared in all copies printed, or only in copies that went to Christian readers.

²⁹ It is noteworthy that Rabbi S. Levy reported in 1942 that "[i]n [Moritz] Steinschneider's copy of Soloveitchik's *Kol Kore* [in French translation] there is a printed page containing a commendation of the 'blind rabbi,' Elias Soloweczyk, in December 1880, from Rabbiner Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) and Dr. Nehemiah Bruell (1843–1891)" (S. Levy, "English Students of Maimonides," in *Miscellanies Part IV: Essays Presented to Elkan Nathan Adler on His Eightieth Birthday* [London: Jewish Historical Society of England, 1942], 81–82). It is unclear whether that note was connected to *Kol Kore's* publication in any way. Steinschneider's copy, as Dov Hyman reports, was likely destroyed in the 1966 fire at the JTS library, but Jacob Dienstag reported to Hyman that he had seen the letter in that volume prior to the fire. See Hyman, "Essay," 95–6.

³⁰ The Yeshiva's traditional curriculum is described in *Curriculum and Regulations of the Yeshiva "Tent of Moses and Judith" in the town of Ramsgate, founded by Sir Moses Montefiore in memory of his beloved wife Lady Judith Montefiore, of blessed memory* [Hebrew] (Lyck: Rudolph Siebert, 1869). For background on the Yeshiva/College, as well as information about its academic library, see D. A. Jessurun Cardozo and Paul Goodman, *Think and Thank: The Montefiore Synagogue and College, Ramsgate: 1833–1933* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

that Montefiore and Loewe continued to follow his work and, at some stage, deemed it worthy of inclusion in the library dedicated to Judith.³¹

Nevertheless, the nature of the publication and its abrupt discontinuation, followed by Soloveitchik's departure for Paris after a decade in London, raises questions about how it was received in London, and what impact its reception may have had on Soloveitchik's standing within the Jewish community. In addition to the financial challenges the project faced, Soloveitchik may have also encountered ideological opposition that rendered it impossible to launch this project from the place of its gestation, or for Soloveitchik to remain in Jewish London.

It is striking to contrast the failed English translation with the French translation published shortly thereafter, in 1870. The annotated French translation is a properly published volume with a publisher, date, and respected, named Jewish translator. This was sufficiently successful to make it possible to publish, five years later, a French translation of the second volume of the commentary (on Mark) by the same translator, and a second edition of Matthew that includes a hearty list of subscribers, including many Jews. It was in Paris, as well, that Soloveitchik was able to publish his original Hebrew text, of which the only known surviving copy was preserved at the library of the Alliance Israélite Universelle.

In a Preface to the 1875 second edition of the French translation of *Kol Kore* on Matthew, and in a parallel Preface to the Hebrew edition, Soloveitchik may allude to the ill-fated attempt to publish *Kol Kore* in London (in English) before succeeding in Paris (in French):

When I first published my book, *Kol Kore*... I sent it out into the world to see what would happen to it, and instructed it as follows: When my Hebrew and Christian brothers encounter you and ask you where you are from and where you are headed, tell them, "I am the work of a humble man who labored intensely on me with the sweat of his brow, and my master sent me to find favor in your eyes. And he is following right behind me with more segments [to be published]" ... And my book

³¹ Barnett Abrahams died suddenly in 1863 (age 32), before *Kol Kore* was published.

returned to me and said, "I approached your Hebrew brothers, so too your Christian brothers, and they are agitating against you."³²

Soloveitchik adds that this poor reception tempted him to abandon the project, but he found the resolve to persist, taking inspiration from Proverbs, in order that the work might reach those who would benefit from it.³³

II. Soloveitchik on the Holy Spirit

In his work on the New Testament and the Talmud, Soloveitchik was occupied with ethereal questions of the spirit. In the context of the narrow strait he was traversing, the proper "spirit" would determine the difference between authorized and unauthorized beliefs, between surviving the journey or straying into Scylla or Charybdis. As we have seen, he worried that both Jews and Christians would reject his work as coming from an improper "spirit."³⁴ In this context, he gives special attention to the proper understanding of the "holy spirit," an expression that has distinct resonances within Christianity and Judaism, which he tries to reconcile and unify into one shared understanding.

In testimonials of London-based missionaries in the 1860s regarding their attempts to persuade Jews to accept baptism, a constant theme is the expression of the hope that the (Christian) "Holy Spirit" will bestow success on the missionaries themselves and also that it will overflow onto their Jewish interlocutors, such that they achieve what the missionaries understood to be true insight and understanding (i.e., accepting

³² *Kol Kore*, 1 (translation from the Hebrew). The Preface to the second edition of the French translation tells the same story at more length and in more extreme terms. See *Kol Kore (Vox Clamantis)* (1875), 7–8. The French Preface seems to refer to the reception of the first French edition, whereas in the Hebrew version, the referent could be to any initial attempt at publishing the work, even an incomplete one. He could also be referring to both experiences.

³³ *Kol Kore*, 1–2. Soloveitchik draws on language from Proverbs 23:9 and 14:22–23. This appears slightly differently in the French and the Hebrew, the French expressing more opposition to Soloveitchik's opponents, the Hebrew more modest and conciliatory in tone.

³⁴ See Soloveitchik, *Kol Kore*, 4–5, and my discussion above, especially n7.

Christianity).³⁵ Soloveitchik, in trying to gain understanding of the New Testament and Christian doctrine from his missionary interlocutors and using these conversations to achieve his own aims (reconciliation of Judaism and Christianity, rather than supersessionism) also sought true understanding through the “holy spirit” (*ruah hakodesh*), a commonplace term in traditional Judaism that generally refers to true knowledge derived from divine inspiration, although within the history of Jewish thought, the term has diverse resonances in different periods and literary traditions.³⁶

Soloveitchik’s own understanding of the holy spirit, which he sees as crucial to his project, is introduced in his commentary on Matthew 1:18–20. Soloveitchik read the New Testament in Hebrew, most likely in the version widely circulating among London-based missionaries, which was central to their mission to Jews.³⁷ He shared the belief among some contemporary Christian theologians and scholars that the Gospel of Matthew had originally been written in Hebrew. The Hebrew phrase “*ruah hakodesh*” that appeared in his Hebrew Gospel of Matthew was, for him, the original Christian term for the Holy Spirit, identical to the traditional Jewish term. His attempt to reconcile the meaning of the holy spirit across both traditions would have been driven by this perception of identity in

³⁵ One missionary reports of his recent visit with a Jew who “told me he had read the tracts I gave him, and asked me for some [more] ... I provided him with them, and pray that God may guide him by his Holy Spirit into all truth” (*Jewish Herald* no. 173 [May 1, 1860], 68). Another missionary reports on “facts testifying to the quickening power of the Holy Spirit on the hearts of many Jews by Missionary effort” (*Jewish Herald* no. 185 [May 1, 1861], p. 66). Another missionary, describing his remarkable successes at converting Jews, writes, “I feel overjoyed and thankful to our God, whose Holy Spirit strengthens me to preach Christ” (*Jewish Herald* no. 184 [April 1, 1861], 52).

³⁶ For a summary of conceptions of the holy spirit in Jewish biblical, rabbinic, and medieval philosophical sources, see Adam Afterman, “Moses Maimonides on the Holy Spirit,” *Journal of Religion* 100, no. 2 (April 2020), 159–188; on early modern Jewish kabbalistic conceptions of the holy spirit, see Adam Afterman, “The Rise of the Holy Spirit in Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah,” *Harvard Theological Review* 115, no. 2 (2022), 219–242.

³⁷ See n23 above.

the original terminology. In *Kol Kore*, the biblical verses appear in Hebrew above the commentary:

(18) The birth of Yeshua [i.e. Jesus] the messiah was thus: When Miriam [i.e. Mary] his mother was betrothed to Yosef [i.e. Joseph], but before their union, she was found pregnant from the Holy Spirit (*m'ruah hakodesh*). (19) Now Yosef, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to subject her to disgrace. So he said to himself, I will send her away privately. While he was thinking in this way, behold, the angel of God appeared to him in a dream, saying, Yosef son of David, do not be afraid to take Miriam as your wife, for what is impregnated within her is from the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:18–20).³⁸

These verses epitomize the delicate nature of Soloveitchik's task in writing a single commentary for two opposing audiences. From a Christian perspective, these verses, whether taken literally or allegorically, contain an essential tenet of Christianity, namely the idea that Christ is not (merely) human and participates in the Godhead. Amongst Jews over the course of a long history, these verses were subject to much scorn, whether seen as describing an event that defied credulity to cover up an illegitimate birth or in violation of theological commitments about the unity and incorporeality of God. These verses even troubled Jews preparing for baptism, as attested in a missionary's 1864 report: An "English Jew ... told me ... he was reading the New Testament I gave him, and though the conception of the Virgin by the Holy Ghost was repugnant to his Jewish feelings, it should not prevent him" from baptism.³⁹ In commenting on these charged verses, Soloveitchik needed to tread carefully around the sensitivities and sensibilities of both audiences.

³⁸ Soloveitchik, *Kol Kore*, 68–70. The translation is an adaptation of Levy's in Magid, *The Bible*, 67–69.

³⁹ *Jewish Herald* no. 173 (1 May 1860), 68. Perhaps the only doctrine in Christianity that Jews objected to even more viscerally was the concept of the Holy Trinity, which was perceived as contradicting the unity of God. Missionaries reported on conversations with Jews who "thought the dogma of the Trinity to be heresy" (*Jewish Herald* no. 218 [1 February 1864], 19) or whose "chief and greatest difficulty" with Christianity was "the divinity of the Lord and the Trinity" (*Jewish Herald* no. 225 [1 September 1864], 136).

III. A Close Reading of Soloveitchik on Matthew 1:18–20

Soloveitchik comments on Matthew 1:18–20 in two segments. On the phrase “[she was found pregnant] from the Holy Spirit” (v. 18), he notes that Christians were themselves divided into “two schools of thought” on whether the virginal conception by the Holy Spirit was a literal or an allegorical doctrine. He carefully states “I, the commentator, am not worthy, based on my limited knowledge, to decide between these two schools.” To this he adds, somewhat opaquely: “However, when we bring to the scales of wisdom the words Jesus himself spoke (John 10:24) we will understand the intended meaning somewhat.”⁴⁰ I return to this obscure reference to John 10:24 after explicating Soloveitchik’s full discussion of the holy spirit. The locus of Soloveitchik’s discussion is his comment on Matthew 1:20, which appears as follows, with section breaks added to facilitate my analysis:

“Is from the Holy Spirit” (Matt 1:20):

[a] Since my Jewish and Christian brothers are both mistaken on what the holy spirit (*ruah hakodesh*) is, I will explain it to them.

[b] It is written in *Tana debe Eliyahu*: “Heaven and the earth are my witnesses that whether a Jew or a Gentile, a man or a woman, a male or female slave—the holy spirit rests on a person in accordance with one’s actions.”

[c] Toward understanding this [statement]: It is written *For God’s portion* (or: *a part of God*) *is His people; Jacob is the rope of His possession* (Deut 32:9). This means both the soul of the Jew and the soul of every single human being is tied and fixed in the supernal realm, literally “a part of God,” as it were, and it descends like a dangling cord until it reaches the human body, and like an actual cord, when one shakes a cord at its lower end, then of necessity it also shakes its upper end. So it is with every human being: If every person adjusts his deeds, speech, and thoughts all toward the good, then he will draw the holy spirit from God to himself, in that

⁴⁰ Soloveitchik, *Kol Kore*, 69. The last sentence does not appear in the Levy translation in Magid, *The Bible*, although it appears in all the original editions published by Soloveitchik. (Although, as I discuss below, some of the nineteenth-century published translations refer to a different verse in John, correcting for the fact that Jesus does not speak in John 10:24.)

God will help him do good as he desires. In accordance with his good actions, he also comes to understand hidden and esoteric matters and even to know matters of the future, and this is the matter of the holy spirit.

[b'] Thus said *Tana debe Eliyahu* that "every human being, whether a Jew or Gentile [...] upon each one, the holy spirit rests [according to their actions]."

[d] We will discuss this further, at length, in the appropriate place.⁴¹

III.a. Structure and Homiletical Method

The opening sentence [a] signals that the central aim of Soloveitchik's comment on Matthew 1:20 is to explain the meaning of the concept represented by the term "*ruah hakodesh*," a term he thinks neither Christians nor Jews properly understand. The closing promise of future elaboration on this topic is unusual for *Kol Kore*, indicating the importance of this particular topic for Soloveitchik. The structure of the comment showcases Soloveitchik's traditional homiletical style. His analysis centers on a concise midrashic statement about the holy spirit pulled out of its original context (*Tana debe Eliyahu*). This midrashic statement is then explicated by way of a mystical homily on a seemingly unrelated biblical verse, which is tied back to the midrash at the end of the comment.⁴²

III.b. The Meritocratic Principle of the Holy Spirit in *Tana debe Eliyahu*

The centerpiece of Soloveitchik's explanation of the holy spirit is a passage [b] from *Tana debe Eliyahu*, a midrashic corpus that scholars date

⁴¹ Soloveitchik, *Kol Kore*, 69. The first half of paragraph [c], the exegesis on Deuteronomy 32:9, is missing from the Levy translation in Magid, *The Bible* (69). Since these sentences appear in all editions published in Soloveitchik's lifetime (in Hebrew and in translation) as well as in the 1985 reprinting of the Hebrew, the omission appears to be an error.

⁴² This homiletical style bears some similarities to the *Petihta* (Proem) described in Joseph Heinemann, "The Proem in the Aggadic Midrashim," in Heinemann and Noy, eds., *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature* (Jerusalem, 1971).

around the 10th century,⁴³ but which was traditionally understood as an early rabbinic collection of statements attributed to Elijah the prophet himself.⁴⁴ The statement Soloveitchik cites — “...[W]hether a Jew or a Gentile, a man or a woman, a male or female slave — the holy spirit rests on a person in accordance with one’s actions”⁴⁵ — articulates a basic meritocratic vision of the holy spirit: that any person, regardless of creed, sex, or class, can receive the holy spirit, on the sole basis of their meritorious actions.⁴⁶

The midrash names three sorts of distinctions among persons that might have been wrongly assumed to impact reception of the holy spirit: between Jews and Gentiles, between men and women, and between free persons and slaves. In the original context of the midrash (which Soloveitchik does not provide), the most pressing concern is the distinction between men and women, as the statement arises in a discussion of Deborah the prophetess and her reception of the holy spirit.⁴⁷ Although Matthew 1:18–20 is also a context in which a woman is

⁴³ For recent scholarship on the dating and content of *Tana debe Eliyahu*, see Lennart Lehmhaus, “‘Blessed Be He, Who Remembered the Earlier Deeds and Overlooks the Later’: Prayer, Benedictions, and Liturgy in the New Rhetorical Garb of Late Midrashic Traditions,” in W. David Nelson and Rivka Ulmer, eds. *Proceedings of the Midrash Section, Society of Biblical Literature*, vol. 6 (Piscataway: Gorgias, 2015), 95–140; Lennart Lehmhaus, “‘Were Not Understanding and Knowledge Given to You from Heaven?’ Minimal Judaism and the Unlearned ‘Other’ in *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19 (2012), 230–258. See also the recent monograph by Constanza Cordoni, *Seder Eliyahu: A Narratological Reading* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018). I thank Eliav Grossman for these references.

⁴⁴ This traditional chronology is based on a reference in Talmud Bavli Ketubot 106a to a collection of statements from Elijah the prophet himself, called “*Tana debe Eliyahu*,” which many authoritative medieval sources identified with the midrash by the same name. See Wilhelm Bacher and Schulim Ochser, “*Tanna Debe Eliyahu*,” *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906).

⁴⁵ *Tana debe Eliyahu* (*Seder Eliyahu Rabba*) 9. See the critical edition edited by Meir Friedmann: M. Friedmann, ed., *Seder Eliyahu Rabba and Seder Eliyahu Zuta (Tanna d’be Eliyahu)*. Second edition. (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrman, 1960), 48–49.

⁴⁶ Strikingly, no mention is made of the midrash’s similarity to Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Jesus Christ.”

⁴⁷ The midrash appears in a commentary on Judges 4:1. According to the midrash, when Deborah became a prophetess and judge in Israel, she had been chosen over a qualified male

imbued with the holy spirit, Soloveitchik does not seem interested in this aspect of the midrash. Of the distinctions among persons that the midrash downplays, it is the one between Jews and Gentiles (or at least Christians) that is explicitly important for Soloveitchik.⁴⁸

Soloveitchik takes the statement from *Tana debe Eliyahu* to encompass, with some explication, the true Jewish (and Christian) doctrine of the holy spirit.⁴⁹ The statement explicitly addresses the matter of who can receive the holy spirit (any human being) and on what basis they can receive it (their good actions). In the next part of Soloveitchik's comment, he uses traditional exegetical tools to draw further information out of the midrash—a sense of how the holy spirit operates and what it bestows on a person.

III.c. Jewish Mystical Doctrines in Soloveitchik's Holy Spirit

Although the existence of *ruah hakodesh* and its accessibility (at least to some) is a commonplace and uncontroversial concept within traditional Judaism, it is important to note that a deep examination of how it actually

contender, Phineas son of Eleazar (famously of Numbers 25:7–13, but who also reappears in Judges 20:28). To resolve its incredulity over the preference for a woman over a man to receive the holy spirit, the midrash offers its meritocratic principle. The implied superiority of the actions of Deborah over those of Phineas subtly casts the famed zealotry of the latter in a negative light.

⁴⁸ This focus may also make sense in terms of the broader context of *Tana debe Eliyahu*, a corpus that emphasizes reconciliations across ideological and cultural divides, particularly divisions between rabbis and *amei ha'arets* (commoners) and divisions between rabbis and proto-Karaites (I thank Eliav Grossman for this insight). This cannot but be speculative given the limited evidence, but one wonders whether Elijah Soloveitchik, who identified with the conciliatory project of his biblical namesake, may have had a particular appreciation of *Tana debe Eliyahu*, which he likely attributed to Elijah the prophet, following the traditional chronology.

⁴⁹ Interestingly, Soloveitchik's sense that this midrash was central to the Jewish understanding of the holy spirit was shared by his younger contemporary, the philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), who later described this midrash as “the peak of the monotheistic meaning of the holy spirit.” See Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), 107–108.

works—how divine inspiration or knowledge or spirit enters into a human mind or body—approaches thorny theological questions about the point of intersection or overlap between the divine and the human, and whether such a point can exist at all within strict monotheism. Concerns about the risks of such inquiries feature prominently in Jewish philosophical reflection, from the medieval discourses of Saadia Gaon and Maimonides to the work of modern thinkers.⁵⁰ Many Jewish thinkers considered the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit to be an example of the risks of such discourse, as they understood it to posit a separate divine entity to bridge the gap between the divine and the human.

As a careful student of Maimonides, Soloveitchik was undoubtedly aware of the theological challenges of holy spirit discourse for Jews, especially any attempt to square Jewish and Christian conceptions of the holy spirit with one another.⁵¹ At the same time, he came from a world with a more flexible theological lexicon with respect to the language and metaphors it could use to describe the divine-human relationship, including the holy spirit.⁵² Mystical and kabbalistic concepts and traditions infused the worldview of his grandfather and the Volozhin Yeshiva, even as the Yeshiva was known as a central institution of Misnagdism (opposition to Hasidism), often incorrectly associated with a general anti-mysticism; and even as the Yeshiva was associated with particular deference to the halakhic authority of Maimonides. Indeed, deference to

⁵⁰ See Adam Afterman's work on Jewish conceptions of the holy spirit in different eras, with attention to the theological concerns addressed in the Middle Ages by Saadia Gaon and Maimonides (Afterman, "Rise of the Holy Spirit," 221, and references therein; Afterman, "Moses Maimonides on the Holy Spirit") and the modern concerns expressed by Hermann Cohen and others (Afterman, "*And They Shall Be One Flesh*": *On the Language of Mystical Union in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 14–16).

⁵¹ On Soloveitchik's debt to Maimonides, see Magid, "Introduction," *The Bible*, 25–30.

⁵² On the prominence of the holy spirit in the work of influential early modern kabbalists such as Moses Cordovero, Elijah de Vidas, Isaac Luria, and Hayim Vital, see Afterman, "Rise of the Holy Spirit," 229ff., and references therein.

Maimonides coexisted comfortably with Jewish mysticism and mystical ideas about the holy spirit in 18th- and 19th-century Eastern Europe.⁵³

The midrashic statement from *Tana debe Eliyahu* with which Soloveitchik begins his account of the holy spirit featured prominently in discussions of the holy spirit in early modern and modern Jewish thought emerging from kabbalistic traditions. Consider, for example, *Sefer Ha-Brit* by Pinhas Hurwitz, a 1797 monograph on science and ethics, presented as a commentary on a 16th-century work of Lurianic mystical thought by Hayim Vital.⁵⁴ Wildly popular among a diverse array of Jews in Soloveitchik's lifetime, *Sefer Ha-Brit* framed its scientific and ethical project in terms of the quest to achieve true knowledge by means of the holy spirit, repeatedly citing the midrashic statement from *Tana debe Eliyahu* throughout the work, thus presenting the statement as *the* central source for Jewish conceptions of the holy spirit.⁵⁵

The discussion of the holy spirit in *Kol Kore* clearly partakes in a broader tradition of Jewish thought on this subject that includes *Sefer Ha-Brit*, but Soloveitchik's idiosyncratic explanation of the midrash in *Tana debe Eliyahu* is developed by weaving in other strands of that tradition, as evidenced in the continuation of his commentary on Matthew 1:20. "Toward understanding this [midrash]" [c] he turns to Deuteronomy 32:9, a biblical verse that is, at face value, completely unrelated to the midrash; indeed, this verse does not feature at all in Hurwitz's extensive use of the same midrash. As mentioned above it is completely standard within certain strains of traditional homiletics to introduce a seemingly unrelated verse toward explicating another source. Deuteronomy 32:9 states, "For God's portion [*helek*; literally: part] is His people; Jacob is the rope [*hevel*] of His possession," and readers well-versed in the central works of early

⁵³ A prime example is the *Tanya*, the magnum opus of Shneur Zalman of Lyady, founder of Habad Hasidism.

⁵⁴ On Pinhas Hurwitz and the reception of *Sefer Ha-Brit*, see David B. Ruderman, *A Best-Selling Hebrew Book of the Modern Era: The Book of the Covenant of Pinhas Hurwitz and Its Remarkable Legacy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).

⁵⁵ See Hurwitz, *Sefer Ha-Brit* (Vilna, 1814): "Hakdama," 1a; "Divrei Emet," 41b ff.

modern Jewish mysticism would recognize Soloveitchik's reliance on a common reading of the verse within that tradition, in which God's people is literally a part (*helek*) of God, insofar as their souls are connected to God by means of a mystical rope or cord (*hevel*).

A *locus classicus* of this notion is found in *Reishit Hokhma* (*Beginning of Wisdom*), the magnum opus of 16th-century mystic Elijah de Vidas (1518–1587). Expounding upon the same verse from Deuteronomy, Vidas describes the soul as “hewn from God” (a “part” of God). The soul persists in its existence due to a continuous connection with God by means of a cord (*hevel*), whose one end was held firmly by God in the upper realm, while the other end was fixed within the human body: “The existence [*metsiut*] of the soul [*neshama*] drops downward [*meshulsholet*] from above to below like this rope.”⁵⁶ Vidas gives special attention to the same midrash from *Tana debe Eliyahu* that Soloveitchik emphasized in his commentary. Although Vidas does not cite the midrash in the immediate vicinity of his discussion of the mystical rope, it appears both in the introduction to *Reishit Hokhma* and toward the conclusion of “Gate of Love,” the section in which his discussion of the rope appears.⁵⁷ Vidas's work was highly influential both among popular Jewish audiences and among intellectual elites who came after him.⁵⁸

The mystical rope played a significant role in the thought of Soloveitchik's grandfather, Hayim of Volozhin. Indeed, when Soloveitchik writes about the mystical rope, he cribs language (without attribution) from Hayim Volozhin's *Nefesh Ha-Hayim*, a treatise on the

⁵⁶ See Elijah de Vidas, *Reshit Hokhma*, Hayim Yosef Waldman, ed. (3 vols.; Jerusalem: H.Y. Waldman, 1984) vol. 1, 386–387 (quote on 387): “Gate of Love,” ch. 3, paras. 5–8. For discussion, see Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2005), 42–44.

⁵⁷ de Vidas, *Reshit Hokhma*, “Author's Introduction,” 9, and “Gate of Love,” ch. 11, para. 91, 647.

⁵⁸ Explications of Deuteronomy 32:9 that rely on a similar understanding of the mystical rope connecting God and the human (Jewish) soul appear in Isaiah Horowitz (1555–1630), *Shenei Luhot HaBerit*; Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745–1812), *Tanya* (*Iggeret HaTeshuva*, ch. 5); Hayim ibn Attar (1696–1743), *Ohr HaHayim* (commentary on Deuteronomy 32:9 and Leviticus 26:12); and, as I discuss below, Hayim of Volozhin (1749–1821), *Nefesh HaHayim*.

nature of God and the human soul, aimed at promoting self-perfection. This can be seen clearly when the two texts are placed side by side:

<i>Nefesh Ha-Hayim</i> ⁵⁹	<i>Kol Kore</i> ⁶⁰
[W]ith a properly complete human being, his essence is fixed in the supernal realm in the supernal source of his soul. It then descends through thousands of myriads of worlds until its lower end enters into man's physical body in the lower realms. This is the meaning of "A part of God is His people, Jacob is the rope of His possession": that his essence is <u>tied and fixed to the supernal realms, literally "a part of God (YHVH)", as it were, from which it descends like a dangling cord until it reaches the human body</u> [1]. And all of his earthly <u>deeds (מעשיו)</u> impact to arouse his source in the supernal realms, <u>just as when one shakes a cord at its lower end it sends a wave up the cord which also shakes its upper end</u> [2].⁶¹	It is written, "A part of God is His people; Jacob is the rope of His possession." This means both the soul of the Jew and the soul of every single human being is <u>tied and fixed in the supernal realm, literally "a part of God," as it were, and it descends like a dangling cord until it reaches the human body</u> [1] and like an actual cord, <u>when one shakes a cord at its lower end</u> then of necessity it <u>also shakes its upper end</u> [2]. So it is with every human being. If every person adjusts his <u>deeds (מעשיו)</u>, speech, and thoughts all toward the good...

⁵⁹ See Avinoam Frankel's bilingual edition of the *Nefesh Ha-Hayim*, from which this translation is drawn (with some minor changes): Frankel, *Nefesh Ha-Tzimtzum: Rabbi Chaim Volozhin's Nefesh HaChaim with translation and commentary* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2015), 138–141.

⁶⁰ *Kol Kore*, 69.

⁶¹ Underlined words and phrases are nearly identical between the two texts, as follows:

[1] *Nefesh Ha-Hayim*: קשור ונטוע למעלה חלק הו"ה ממש כביכול ומשתלשל כחבל עד בואה לגוף האדם

[1] *Kol Kore*: קשור ונטוע למעלה חלק ה' ממש כביכול, ומשתלשל כחבל עד בואה לגוף האדם

[2] *Nefesh Ha-Hayim*: שאם ינענע קצהו התחתון... מתעורר ומתנועע גם ראש קצהו העליון

[2] *Kol Kore*: אם ינענע קצה התחתון... ינענע גם ראש העליון

In Soloveitchik's version of this doctrine, the "soul of the human being" refers to all human beings universally, including "the soul of the Jew and the soul of every single human being." This is quite significant, as the tradition drawing on Deuteronomy 32:9 typically focuses on the Jewish soul's special connection to God through the commandments and Jewish election more broadly. Soloveitchik is notably unconstrained by the particularism that identifies "God's people" as Jacob or Israel, or by the native Jewish mystical context of the doctrine. He does not explain how he makes this move, and it is unclear whether this is hermeneutical sleight of hand or whether he understood a universal application as a genuine interpretive possibility within Jewish mystical interpretations of Deuteronomy 32,⁶² or within his grandfather's own reflections on this topic. Perhaps he saw this as the only way to reconcile the universal teaching regarding the holy spirit in the passage from *Tana debe Eliyahu*, which he took to be an authoritative rabbinic source, with this Jewish mystical tradition regarding the holy spirit.

Soloveitchik's unique application of kabbalistic exegesis of Deuteronomy 32:9 toward a universal understanding of human attainment of the holy spirit ought to be understood in the context of intellectual precedents for "moral cosmopolitanism" within Jewish mystical thought, such as the aforementioned *Sefer Ha-Brit* of Pinhas Hurwitz.⁶³ As we have seen, Hurwitz made much of the midrashic statement from *Tana debe Eliyahu* in his discussion of the holy spirit, but his account, unlike Soloveitchik's, made no reference to Deuteronomy 32 or to traditions concerning the mystical rope connecting God and human beings. Nevertheless, Hurwitz offers a strikingly universal vision of humanity in the final section of the work, "Ahavat Re'im" (Love of

⁶² It is worth noting that verse 9, on God's relationship to Israel, follows on the heels of verse 8, which refers to God's relationship with all nations of the world.

⁶³ On "the moral cosmopolitanism of Pinhas Hurwitz," see the chapter with this title in Ruderman, *A Best-Selling Hebrew Book* (Ch. 5). Ruderman's account acknowledges that this aspect of *Sefer Ha-Brit* coexists with a robust particularism that animates other parts of the work, and also contextualizes Hurwitz's Jewish cosmopolitanism within a broader intellectual history.

Neighbors), where he describes the interconnectedness of all *human* beings using language that, perhaps unwittingly, evokes this tradition: "The obligation to love neighbors [*ahavat re'im*] applies to every human being... for all human beings are interdependent and interconnected, tied to one another as the strands of a cord [*shalshelet*] are interwoven such that they become one rope [*hevel*]..."⁶⁴ While Soloveitchik was undoubtedly familiar with *Sefer Ha-Brit*, the question of a direct intellectual debt is equivocal. Nevertheless, this example situates Soloveitchik's idiosyncratic account of the holy spirit within a broader recovery of forms of moral universalism within Jewish mystical thought, spun from a diverse array of available threads.

Soloveitchik concludes: "If every person adjusts his deeds, speech, and thoughts all toward the good, then he will draw the holy spirit from God to himself." Attaining the holy spirit, as Soloveitchik describes it here, is tantamount to attaining two powers: (1) the power or capacity to accomplish one's (good) goals ("God will help him do good as he desires"), and (2) superior knowledge ("he also comes to understand hidden and esoteric matters and even to know matters of the future").⁶⁵

In *Nefesh Ha-Hayim*, these distinct manifestations of the holy spirit (actualizing good deeds; achieving knowledge) are associated with careful distinctions between three Hebrew terms (i.e., *nefesh*, *ruah*, *neshama*) to represent aspects of the soul which govern, in turn, three distinct capacities (deeds, speech, thoughts). No such complex and detailed account of the human soul is found in *Kol Kore*, an omission that makes sense both in terms of the genre of commentary and the intended audience, but which leaves questions regarding the extent to which he may have subscribed fully to Rabbi Hayim's system or drawn selectively

⁶⁴ Hurwitz, *Sefer Ha-Brit* (Vilna 1817) "Ahavat Re'im," 75b.

⁶⁵ Soloveitchik seems indebted, to some degree, to Maimonides' discussions in the *Guide of the Perplexed* concerning the effects of the divine overflow where a human who has engaged in self-perfection and especially in the perfection of his mind will achieve both esoteric knowledge and the capacity to achieve goals. See the discussion of Maimonides on the Holy Spirit in Afterman, "Moses Maimonides on the Holy Spirit."

from it in a less systematically rigorous manner. I return to the question of Soloveitchik's anthropology in Part V, below.

III.d. The Holy Spirit, the Dove, and the People Israel: Soloveitchik's Cross-References to the Commentary on Matthew 1:20

The importance of Soloveitchik's discussion of the holy spirit is reflected in his promise at the end of his commentary on Matthew 1:20 [d] to "speak on this [topic] more at length in the appropriate place." Indeed, he explicitly refers back to his commentary on Matthew 1:20 in two other places. An examination of these further reveals Soloveitchik's debt to his grandfather's teachings in the context of his understanding of the holy spirit.

In his commentary on the words of John the Baptist calling everyone to repentance and warning, "he that cometh after me... shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matt. 3:11), Soloveitchik explains the distinction between those who will be "baptized" by the holy spirit and those by fire as a distinction based on the actions of each individual: "The one who is righteous will merit the holy spirit, and the one who does not improve his actions will be purged by fire."⁶⁶ He then refers directly to his previous discussion of the holy spirit:

As I wrote on Matthew 1:20, if a person follows the guidance of the spirit rather than the appetites of the body, his spirit will be tied firmly to the point of origin from which it is hewn in order to be able to draw in holiness from above. This is like a dove, to which an individual is likened, as it says in the midrash: Israel is compared to a dove. Just as the dove only mates with its one partner, so Israel only turns to the one God.⁶⁷

Soloveitchik relies again on the image of the cord that links the human being to the divine, which is connected to the ability to receive the holy spirit, if one follows virtue ("the guidance of the spirit") rather than vice ("appetites of the body"). His reference to the midrashic analogy between

⁶⁶ *Kol Kore*, 87–8.

⁶⁷ *Kol Kore*, 88. Soloveitchik does not provide a reference for the midrash he cites, but it comes from *Shir Hashirim Rabba* 1:15 (and 4:1).

Israel and the dove is difficult to understand in this context. A consideration of this comment in light of Soloveitchik's debt to his grandfather's teachings may help explain the obscure reference.

Soloveitchik's comments arise in the context of a New Testament discussion of repentance, and they bear striking similarities to a sermon on repentance delivered by his grandfather, shortly before Rosh Hashana, during Soloveitchik's childhood in Volozhin.⁶⁸ Discussing the verse "God gives strength to His people" (Ps. 29:11), Hayim of Volozhin evoked the image of the rope connecting the earthly human being to the heavens above, citing both the exegesis of Deuteronomy 32:9 and language that would later appear in *Nefesh Ha-Hayim*, "when the bottom end of the cord is shaken, then the fixed upper end also shakes."⁶⁹ He cautioned that the power of this connection between the human and the divine can work not only positively, when we are virtuous, but also negatively, whereby bad deeds can cause the cord to break, severing the divine-human connection and harming the lower world. He then praised Israel for its willingness to suffer in order to rectify this situation, as evidenced by the midrashic analogy between Israel and the dove: "[The rabbis] stated in a midrash that Israel is compared to a dove. Just as a dove gives up its own life to be slaughtered, so Israel sticks out its neck and accepts death, to sanctify God's name."⁷⁰

The similarities between this part of Rabbi Hayim's sermon and Soloveitchik's comment on Matthew 3:11 are remarkable: The context in both cases is a discussion of repentance. Both sources refer to the teaching about the divine-human connection, based in mystical exegesis of Deuteronomy 32:9, in order to describe the positive effects of good behavior as well as the negative consequences of bad behavior. Finally,

⁶⁸ The 1812 sermon was first published in 1872 as "The Sermon of Rabbi Hayim, Our Teacher" in *Sefer Neima Kedosha* (Vilna, 5632 [1872]), 18b–24b. A corrected version was published in Dov Eliach, *Kol Hakatuv LeHayim* (Jerusalem, 1987). My citations are from the text reprinted in Fraenkel, *Nefesh Ha-Tzimtzum* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2015), vol. 2, 542–601.

⁶⁹ Fraenkel, *Nefesh*, 574–575.

⁷⁰ Fraenkel, *Nefesh*, 574–575. The cited midrash is from *Shir Hashirim Rabba* 1:15 (and 4:1).

both sources refer to the same midrash (*Shir Hashirim Rabba* 1:15) about the analogy between Israel and the dove by way of explicating this idea. This midrash offers a list of ways in which Israel resembles a dove, and in the published version of Rabbi Hayim's sermon, he refers to a different item (willingness to accept martyrdom) from the one Soloveitchik mentions in *Kol Kore* (monogamy/monotheism). Although the 1812 sermon was first published in 1872, after Soloveitchik wrote his commentary on Matthew, he may have remembered the sermon from his childhood or had access to it in manuscripts in circulation among affiliates of the Yeshiva. It seems clear that the grandson drew upon these ideas from his childhood in Eastern Europe, half a century later as an old man in London, when he penned his commentary on the New Testament seeking to reconcile Judaism and Christianity through resonances in sacred texts across the two traditions.

This discussion sheds light on Soloveitchik's commentary on Mark 1:10, the other place where he refers explicitly to his discussion of the holy spirit from Matthew 1. The context in Mark refers to the encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist, a parallel source to Matthew 3. The verse reads, "And straightway coming up out of the water, he [John] saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon [Jesus]." We do not have access to Soloveitchik's Hebrew version of the commentary or the New Testament verses, since the commentary on Mark only survives in French translation. There, the term "the Spirit" is rendered "the Holy Spirit [*le Saint-Esprit*]" in both the verse and the commentary.⁷¹ Thus, in *Kol Kore*, the verse reads: "... and the Holy Spirit, like a dove, was descending upon him." Soloveitchik comments on this verse as follows:

"And the Holy Spirit"—I explained in the first volume (Matt 1:20) that one must listen to the holy spirit, and I cited the beautiful words of *Tana debe Eliyahu* establishing that this divine inspiration can fall on any

⁷¹ See Soloweczyk, *Kol Kore ... Évangile de Marc*, 10. Contemporary printings of the Hebrew New Testament (1830s–1860s) render the term simply *ha-ruah* (the spirit) rather than *ruah hakodesh* (the holy spirit), although in the parallel verse in Luke 3:22, it is the *Holy Spirit* that descends on Jesus like a dove.

human being, even a Gentile, even a slave.⁷² In this way the spirit of Jesus—his personal intellect—after raising itself up to God and in their communication having drawn out the secret of the highest truths, in essence descended back down to earth and revealed those truths to Jesus, as it does to whoever is worthy of it.

“Like a dove”—an allusion to Israel who, as the Talmud says (BT Shabbat 130a), is compared to a dove by the Psalmist (Psalm 64:18). [The Talmud states,] “As the dove is protected by its wings ... so the nation of Israel is protected by its commandments [*par sa loi*].”⁷³

In his comment about the holy spirit, Soloveitchik refers back to key elements of his discussion on Matthew 1:20. He emphasizes the lesson from the midrash in *Tana debe Eliyahu* that the holy spirit (here described as “divine inspiration”⁷⁴) “can fall on any human being.” He does not mention the divine-human cord, although the verse from Mark has its own vertical image to describe the divine-human connection established by the holy spirit. Instead of the metaphor of a rope, a metaphorical dove descends from heaven directly onto the human being. After the preceding discussion, we are somewhat prepared for Soloveitchik’s opaque comment on the image of the dove. Once again he evokes the rabbinic tradition of an analogy between Israel and the dove, although here he does not cite the midrash his grandfather had also cited, but a Talmudic source on the same theme. In his comment on the holy spirit, he focuses on the epistemic benefits of the holy spirit—access to “the secret of the highest truths.” His reference to *Tana debe Eliyahu* omits mention of the midrash’s core thesis, that this benefit is the result of good actions. But he alludes to the importance of actions in his comment on the metaphor of the dove

⁷² Soloveitchik omits reference to the midrash’s claim that “even a woman” can receive the holy spirit.

⁷³ Magid, *The Bible*, 281. This is Levy’s translation with a few minor adaptations and one significant correction (see note below).

⁷⁴ This phrase appears in French (1875) and is identical in English translation (2019). Since the original Hebrew commentary on Mark is lost, we unfortunately do not know the exact Hebrew phrase this translates.

when he notes that Israel is protected by its observance of the commandments.⁷⁵ Although in his comment on Matthew 1:20, Soloveitchik focused on the universal human being and described good actions in more generic and universal moral terms, here it becomes clear that he thinks that Jews attain the holy spirit, at least in part, through the actions of observing the commandments.

IV. Reconstructing Soloveitchik on Conception by the Holy Spirit in Matthew

In his commentary on Matthew 1:20, Soloveitchik never circles back to the verses themselves to show how his discussion might explain Mary's conception by means of the holy spirit. Nevertheless, a plausible reconstruction of a Soloveitchikean reading of Matthew 1:18–20 may be possible. In his comment on 1:18, he had described the debate between literalists and allegorists, with a disclaimer that he was unfit to intervene on the dispute. He then indicated that the resolution to the controversy might be found in “the words Jesus himself said in John 10:24.” Since Jesus does not speak in that verse, I suspect Soloveitchik was referring to Jesus's response, in 10:25, to the request, in 10:24, for proof that he was the messiah.⁷⁶ Jesus's statement there, “the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me” (John 10:25), bears similarities to the passage from *Tana debe Eliyahu* where God calls heaven and earth to bear

⁷⁵ Levy's 2019 English translation renders the French “sa loi” as “its Torah” (“so Israel is protected by its Torah”; Magid, *The Bible*, 281). It is likely, however, that the lost Hebrew original, which quotes directly from the Talmud, used the Talmud's term “*mitzvot*” (“commandments; laws”). While “Torah” can refer to the commandments, it is also a broader term. The reference to *mitzvot*, specifically, is important here, because it showcases Soloveitchik's view that according to true Christian doctrine, Israel remained forever bound by the covenant of Sinai to observe the commandments.

⁷⁶ In Soloveitchik's Hebrew, the reference is to John 10:24. In the English (~1868) and French (1870) translations (95 and 154, respectively), the reference is cited as John 10:34, where Jesus refers to Psalms 82:6. The 1875 second edition of the French translation omits any reference to a particular verse (157–158); but the 1877 German translation, based on the 1870 French translation, follows that text's reference to 10:34. Since the Hebrew text was published after those translations, it may reflect that the originally intended verse was John 10:25.

witness that it is on the basis of one's works alone that the holy spirit is attained.

Thus, Jesus was a man whose good works bore witness (John 10:25) to the fact that he had merited the holy spirit on the basis of these good actions (*Tana debe Eliyahu*). Reading this into Matthew 1:18–20, Mary becomes a woman who conceived and bore a child worthy of the holy spirit, as a result of her own attainment of the holy spirit, through her own good works. In the pietistic worldview of Ashkenazi Jews in which Soloveitchik was raised, the highest aim of a pious woman would be to conceive and bear children distinguished by excellent character and actions.⁷⁷ Soloveitchik may have understood Mary in this light. If the holy spirit can be understood as the capacity to achieve one's highest aim, Mary's highest aim might have been understood as the desire to bear an excellent son, worthy of the holy spirit in his own right.

This interpretation fits well with a midrashic tradition Soloveitchik likely knew, ascribing the merit for the births of two figures infused with the holy spirit to the good deeds of their mother or grandmother. "Because Jocheved feared God, God brought forth Moses from her ... And as for Miriam [who also feared God], Bezalel emerged from her."⁷⁸ The midrash refers to the traditional Jewish identification of the Egyptian midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh out of fear of God (Exod. 1:17) as Jocheved and Miriam, and relies on an ancient Jewish tradition that Bezalel was the grandson of Miriam.⁷⁹ Moses, whose access to divine knowledge was unparalleled (Num. 12:6–8), and Bezalel, the craftsman of the Tabernacle whom God "filled with the divine spirit [*ruah Elohim*], with wisdom,

⁷⁷ An emblematic expression of this worldview can be seen in the seventeenth-century work of Jewish feminine piety *Menekes Rivka* (Prague, 1609) by Rivka bas Meir Tiktiner (d. 1605). See Frauke von Rohden, ed., and Samuel Spinner, trans., *Meneket Rivkah: A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women by Rivkah bat Meir* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 91–93.

⁷⁸ *Exodus Rabba* 1.

⁷⁹ This tradition is attested as early as Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, III.iv. See William Whiston, trans., *Josephus: Complete Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1960), 71.

understanding, and knowledge" (Exod. 31:3), both emerged from women characterized by righteous actions, as a result of these actions. Soloveitchik, who read the New Testament in Hebrew, where Mary was called Miriam, may have understood Mary as a latter-day Miriam, conceiving a child with qualities akin to those of Bezalel (and Moses) on the basis of her good actions. At the very least, this is a plausible reading of Matthew 1:18–20 in light of Soloveitchik's expressed ideas, as well as norms and textual traditions with which he was surely familiar.

Of course, such a reading may have satisfied Jewish readers but was unlikely to appeal to their Christian counterparts. Normalizing conception by the holy spirit effectively denied the unique divine origins of Christ. Scholars have made a similar point about a related Jewish mystical tradition, the Zoharic description of a special function of the holy spirit on the Sabbath as "the additional soul as well as the vitality through which man impregnates his wife and thereby conceives a holy son."⁸⁰ Different from the midrashic tradition, in the Zohar the woman who bears the holy child is a passive conduit of the holy spirit of her husband and son, whereas in my reconstructed reading of Soloveitchik on Mary, the woman is active and worthy of the holy spirit in her own right. Still, both accounts may be seen as undermining Christianity, as scholars have suggested that the Zoharic tradition implies "that Jesus being conceived by the holy spirit is not unique, but rather within Jewish religious life any Jew can be imbued with the holy spirit in utero."⁸¹ Soloveitchik's aim was not to undermine Christianity (nor was this necessarily the aim of this Zoharic tradition), but to make sense of it within the history of Judaism. In the case of Matthew 1:18–20, it may have been impossible to achieve the latter goal without the former as an inevitable if unintended consequence.

⁸⁰ This description of the Zoharic tradition is from Adam Afterman, "Rise of the Holy Spirit," 224 (and citations there).

⁸¹ See Afterman, "Rise of the Holy Spirit," 225, for this quotation, as well as other potential anti-Christian claims implied by the Zohar's account. Afterman also provides a bibliography of scholarly sources that discuss this in relation to Christianity (224n24).

V. Anthropology of the Holy Spirit and Sociology of the Jewish-Christian Encounter

One of the more fascinating parts of Soloveitchik's *Kol Kore* is his lengthy introduction to the project, published at the beginning of its first volume, the commentary on Matthew. Structured around Maimonides' thirteen principles of Jewish faith, this introduction is a crucial source for Soloveitchik's philosophy and worldview, written in lengthy and expansive prose, in contrast with the brevity of expression in the commentary itself.⁸² The introduction extends over fifty-eight pages in Hebrew,⁸³ roughly a third of the length of the commentary itself (188 pages),⁸⁴ and is divided into sixteen chapters. Thirteen of these chapters take up Maimonides' principles, marshalling evidence from both the New Testament and the Talmud to prove that Judaism and Christianity agree on these thirteen principles of faith. One of these sections bears on my discussion of Soloveitchik on the holy spirit.

In chapter 8, Soloveitchik discusses Maimonides' seventh principle, namely the belief in the veracity and ultimate superiority of the prophecy of Moses. In explaining the superiority of Mosaic prophecy, Soloveitchik offers a brief account of the human being in general, following the contours of the Maimonidean anthropology in which humans are divided into three categories: the righteous (*zaddik*), the wicked (*rasha*), and the in-between (*benoni*), with the vast majority of persons falling into the latter division.⁸⁵ Soloveitchik describes this division in terms of the image of a

⁸² Soloveitchik's Introduction, which appears in every 19th-century edition of *Kol Kore* on Matthew, was unfortunately not included in the new English translation (Magid, ed., *The Bible*). A 19th-century translation survives in the failed ~1868 English edition, which ends abruptly at a later point in the work.

⁸³ *Kol Kore*, 4–62.

⁸⁴ *Kol Kore*, 64–252.

⁸⁵ See Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 3:1, and chapter 4 of *Eight Chapters*. Maimonides draws on an earlier rabbinic tradition (see, e.g., Talmud Yerushalmi Rosh Hashanah 1:3). Soloveitchik seems to be indebted to modern elaborations on this concept, e.g., Shneur Zalman of Lyady, *Likkutei Amarim*, ch. 14ff.

rope that pulls the individual in vertical directions—upward toward virtue or downward toward vice. The uniqueness of the Mosaic prophecy is explained by the fact that Moses never felt the pull of vice but was always virtuous. The majority of human beings, however, are pulled *both* in the direction of virtue and in the direction of vice, with the result that they must constantly expend effort to remain on the path of goodness, in order to “attain the level of the holy spirit [*ruah hakodesh*].”⁸⁶

A version of this image is familiar from Soloveitchik’s account of the holy spirit in his commentaries, discussed above. Perhaps what most distinguishes Soloveitchik’s discussion in the Introduction is its vivid description of how challenging—indeed, almost impossible—it is to be good and to act in the ways that we desire to act. In the Introduction, he describes the pulls in the direction of virtue and vice in terms of a dualism between the powers of the soul and the powers of embodiment. In his comment on Matthew 1:20, he encouraged each person to follow the path of virtue and to strengthen the upward portion of the rope of divine-human connection; but he takes pains, in the Introduction, to describe the plight of the average human being who desires the good. He laments that “the fire of conflict is always burning between the soul and the body.”⁸⁷ Pulled in two opposing directions, the human being feels like he is being torn apart. “Logically, it seems like the human being should not be able to exist even for a moment, for the [power of the] soul ... pulls ever higher, and the [power of the] body ... pulls ever lower, such that they should of necessity pull apart from one another.”⁸⁸

This tragic description of the human condition is mediated by Soloveitchik’s insistence that the human being must find a way to reconcile body and soul because God “decreed” that the two “must go together hand in hand.”⁸⁹ Since “we are forced” to live as one complete

⁸⁶ *Kol Kore*, 23–24.

⁸⁷ *Kol Kore*, 25.

⁸⁸ *Kol Kore*, 24.

⁸⁹ Soloveitchik does not cite a rabbinic source here, but he may be indebted to traditions in *Leviticus Rabba* described in Burton Visotzky, “The Priest’s Daughter and the Thief in the

being comprised of two such distinct components, we must find a path to peaceful coexistence and reconciliation within ourselves. The only path forward for the human being who “would be whole” is to live a life of constant moral striving and working with constant vigilance “to reach the level of the holy spirit (*ruah hakodesh*).”⁹⁰

The language Soloveitchik uses here to describe the struggle within the individual human being is strikingly similar to language he uses elsewhere about the motivation for his entire project—that is, the need to find a path toward coexistence and reconciliation among Jews and Christians. In the very first section of his Introduction, he explained that the reason he wrote *Kol Kore*, even though he knew he would be spurned by Jews and Christians alike, was because desperate times called for courageous risks in the service of reconciliation. Like the raging fire within each human being, he wrote, “a great inferno raged” among God’s children, “whose blazing tongue burned ever larger until the conflagration threatened to divide the people” against one another.⁹¹ Like body and soul needed to learn to walk “hand in hand” while also pursuing the highest ideals of the individual, so Jews and Christians needed to walk “hand in hand” and come to recognize that “one God created us all; we all share one Father,”⁹² in order to pursue religious life and practice within their own religious traditions, and in pursuit of the common good.

Conclusion: Ambivalent Reception, Neglect, and Recovery

Soloveitchik returned to London in 1880, having successfully launched his project from Paris after its initial failure to launch from London. Although the project was sufficiently well received to allow for the publication of the Commentary on Matthew in French, German, and

Orchard: The Soul of Midrash Leviticus Rabbah,” Snyder, Brown, and Wiles (eds.), *Putting Body and Soul Together: Essays in Honor of Robin Scroggs* (Trinity Press, 1997), 165–171.

⁹⁰ *Kol Kore*, 23–24.

⁹¹ *Kol Kore*, 5.

⁹² *Kol Kore*, 5. (This is an allusion to Malachi 2:10).

Polish translations and in Hebrew—and even a second French edition—as well as a first edition of the French translation of the Commentary on Mark, still the project failed to gain traction.

Christians and Jews alike saw his project as hopelessly naïve. In London's *Jewish Herald*, the newspaper of the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Among the Jews, a contemporary Christian missionary offered the following assessment: "The object of the writer is, from his point of view, generous in the interests of peace and brotherhood, ... but he has undertaken a hopeless task."⁹³ A similar assessment, but from a Jewish perspective, was offered by a reviewer in a London-based Jewish weekly, the *Jewish World*: "The book speaks much for the erudition and amiability of Mr. Elie Soloweyczkyk, but we doubt much whether any substantial good will be its outcome."⁹⁴

Remarkably, both the Christian reviewer in the *Jewish Herald* and the Jewish reviewer in *The Jewish World* understood Soloveitchik's work as a step, however small, toward Christianity. For the missionary, Soloveitchik's interest in the New Testament was a great success story for the Society, proving "missionary efforts reach not only the poor wanderer, but are felt, also, among the leaders and learned of the Jewish people."⁹⁵ The Jewish review, although friendly, concluded as follows: "For our own part, we make no advances toward Christianity, and are contented to maintain the ground that we have occupied for ages past under the blessing of the One Sole God."⁹⁶

Although he never stopped living an Orthodox lifestyle and tried to justify his approach within recognized rabbinic precedent, Soloveitchik came to be perceived as an apostate in his community of origin.⁹⁷ His

⁹³ Miller, "A Remarkable Book," 21–23.

⁹⁴ "Reviews," *The Jewish World* no. 92 (13 November 1874), 3.

⁹⁵ Miller, "A Remarkable Book," 21–23.

⁹⁶ "Reviews," *The Jewish World* no. 92 (13 November 1874), 3.

⁹⁷ See David Matityahu Lipman, *The Jews of Kovno and Slobodka 1400–1850*, vol. I [Hebrew] (Kidan: Mowshowitz and Cohen, 1934), 152; a copy of this page is printed in Hyman, *Essay*, 9.

name was excised from the record of his famous family.⁹⁸ If he was remembered at all, he likely served as a cautionary tale for Orthodox Jews who might engage in dialogue with Christians.⁹⁹

One might have expected Soloveitchik's work to meet a better fate among Jewish scholars of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (academic Jewish studies), a flourishing discipline by the 1860s and '70s, which gave significant attention to the relationship between rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps ironically, Soloveitchik was too traditional and theological a thinker, and his hermeneutical method too steeped in traditional modes of commentary associated with the Lithuanian yeshiva. A contemporary Jewish scholar assessed his book as one "without new scientific results, which also betrays ... a certain bias of the author, which ... impedes rigorous scientific discipline. ... [I]t has not advanced science,

⁹⁸ See Hyman, *Essay*, 8–12. Hyman's monograph was compiled with the help of Jacob I. Dienstag (1912–2008), longtime head librarian at Yeshiva University, who had an abiding interest in this forgotten member of the Soloveitchik family; see his reference to Soloveitchik in Dienstag, "Contributions of Lithuanian Scholars to Literature on the 'Yad Ha-Hazaka' [Mishneh Torah]" [Hebrew], in Moshe Hizkuni-Starkman, ed., *Hesed Le-Avraham: Avraham Golomb Jubilee Volume* (Yiddish; Los Angeles: Golomb Jubilee Committee, 1970), 481–482. Dienstag reported to Hyman that "once, when in the company of men who were knowledgeable regarding the great sages of Lithuania, [I] asked them about our Soloveitchik, and they diverted the conversation to other topics; they did not want to discuss him" (Essay, 11). Magid (*The Bible*, 4) refers to this story but mixes up the protagonists, confusing Dienstag, whose bibliographic prowess was responsible for uncovering many of the historical attestations to Soloveitchik's obscure life, with his interlocutors who avoided the subject.

⁹⁹ This may help explain the approach to interreligious dialogue of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, descendent of Elijah Soloveitchik's brother, expressed in an American context in the era of Vatican II. Joseph B. Soloveitchik strictly prohibited discussion of theology or doctrine but allowed discussion of common public interests. See Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," *Tradition* 6, no. 2 (1964).

¹⁰⁰ See Susannah Heschel, "Jews and Christianity," in Mitchell Hart and Tony Michels, eds., *Cambridge History of Judaism, Vol. 8: The Modern World, 1815–2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1063–1092.

and it is least of all suited to create the ground on which Judaism and Christianity might find a spiritual reconciliation."¹⁰¹

Nevertheless, Soloveitchik's work was never fully forgotten. In his lifetime, his reception among French and Belgian Jews and Christians had been more promising than his English reception,¹⁰² allowing for the preservation of his project in particular instances in the pages and footnotes of isolated books over the course of the century after his death, and its reemergence and recovery thereafter.

Soloveitchik's *Kol Kore* entered—and Soloveitchik left—the world just before a dramatic rise in political and academic antisemitism would spread across Europe in the 1880s and beyond, especially impacting Jews in the Pale of Settlement, where Soloveitchik was born and raised. One wonders whether these developments might have deepened his resolve to pursue forms of reconciliation across seemingly unbridgeable divides or whether he might have joined the ranks of those who saw his project as impossibly naïve. Taking a longer view, it is noteworthy that Soloveitchik's work was remembered in the 1960s in the lead-up to and aftermath of the Second Vatican Council,¹⁰³ a watershed moment in Chris-

¹⁰¹ Adolf Brüll, "Recensionen," in Nahum Brüll, ed., *Jahrbücher für Geschichte und Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Wilhelm Erras, 1877), 184.

¹⁰² This is attested by material evidence: the survival of the French translations of *Kol Kore* (Mark and both editions of Matthew) and the one surviving Hebrew edition housed at the Alliance Israélite Universelle. Without the relative success of Soloveitchik's reception in France, his work might have been lost to history. On positive reception among Belgian Jews, see Jean-Philippe Schreiber, "Le rapport du judaïsme belge au modèle français (XIX^e siècle)" *Archives Juives* 51, no. 1 (2018), 13–34. An 1874 review attests to positive reception within French Protestant Christian Circles: Alfred Gary, "Livres Nouveaux," *La Renaissance: revue de la semaine politique, religieuse, philosophique et littéraire* (20 June 1874). I thank Ynon Wygoda for both references.

¹⁰³ In 1960, Robert Aron described Soloveitchik as an exemplar of the phenomenon of Jewish writers writing on the New Testament and its relationship to Judaism "ever since the beginning of the nineteenth century." He compares this to the more recent scholarship of Reverend Joseph Bonsirven (1880–1958), a Catholic scholar whose work was significant in preparations for Vatican II. (See Aron, *Les Années Obscures de Jésus* (Grasset, 1960); *Jesus of Nazareth: The Hidden Years* [New York: William Morrow, 1962], 219ff.) Aron's extensive citation from Soloveitchik's *Kol Kore* was later reproduced in an influential 1966 textbook on ecumenical translation, in the spirit of Vatican II. See *La Maison-Dieu: Cahiers de Pastorale*

tian-Jewish relations that would have been unimaginable in Soloveitchik's lifetime and in the decades following his death.

The contemporary recovery of Soloveitchik's life and work comes at a time of deep division and polarization in human communities throughout the world, where "the fire of conflict rages" everywhere, both figuratively and literally. Efforts toward mutual understanding strike many as hopelessly naïve, even dangerous. 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.

Liturgique (Service national de la pastorale liturgique et sacramentelle, 1966), 39–40. I thank Ynon Wygoda for this reference.