

# HOW NICE: ON R. ELIJAH ZVI SOLOVEITCHIK AND CHRISTIANITY

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When scholars eventually form the canon of twenty-first-century Jewish religious thought, Shaul Magid will have a prominent place in it. There is no one else who quite so doggedly analyzes Jewish religious identities. His most recent book, *The Necessity of Exile*, is a powerful argument that a robust Judaism does not need Zionism and, indeed, might be theologically more coherent without it. But people like Magid who want to set these new paths for later thinkers need a traditional past. No one wants to be first, after all. The first person to set out a new vision of how to perform an identity is a heretic; the twentieth is fully within the tent, pulling on a minority strand of a robustly multifaceted tradition. Indeed, most of Magid's scholarship is best read, in my view, as the construction of a canon that enables him to place himself at the back of a long line of figures who re-thought, from multiple askew angles, what it means to be religiously Jewish.

That canon includes R. Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik (1805–1881). When I first heard from Magid, about a decade ago, about the existence of *Qol Qore*, Soloveitchik's commentary on the New Testament Gospels (with only the commentaries on Matthew and Mark remaining extant), it

seemed like an interesting new spin on Magid's continual efforts to find people who rethink what religious Judaism is. The very existence of *Qol Qore* is counterintuitive. What Jewish figure wants to write a commentary on the Gospels? The standard story of Orthodox Judaism's relationship to Christianity, is typically one about the *distance* between the two. We see this in the customary haredi refusal to conceptualize Christianity, the open disdain for it in R. Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), and the anger at it in the work of his son R. Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891–1982), as well as the ambivalence about Christianity found in Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik's great-great-grandnephew R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik's classic essay "Confrontation" (1964), which imagined Jewish-Christian relations as a kind of uneasy cooperation in the secular sphere, with both Jewish and Christian leaders worrying more about secularism's possible supersessionism of monotheistic religious traditions than about each other. (Much of this twentieth-century story, and some of the twenty-first-century story, has now been excellently narrated and conceptualized in Karma Ben Johanan's *Jacob's Younger Brother*.<sup>1</sup>)

By writing commentaries on the Gospels, R. Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik—and from here on out when I use "Soloveitchik," I refer to this Soloveitchik—refused to keep his distance. Indeed, in Shaul Magid's essay in this issue of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*, Magid describes Soloveitchik as "enamored" of Christianity. And according to Magid, he did so in a way that threatens our contemporary customary belief that Judaism and Christianity are radically different traditions. For Magid, Soloveitchik is "ecumenical," because he believed that "Judaism and Christianity do not stand in contradiction to one another."<sup>2</sup>

I think Magid is wrong on all these points.

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<sup>1</sup> Karma Ben Johanan, *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Shaul Magid, "A Jew Who Loved Christianity as a Jew: The Strange Nineteenth-Century Orthodox Case of Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 16.2 (October 2025), 161–194.

But if I'm going to argue that Soloveitchik was someone who coheres with the disdain for, or ambivalence toward, Christianity found in later Orthodox Jewish leaders, I should admit that it is quite possible that the arguments that follow say more about me than about Magid or Soloveitchik. I customarily do not talk about my own biography or identity in my scholarly writing, but in this context, it may be appropriate for me to do so. I became a baptized Catholic as a tween, having been earlier raised with no religious identity or practice whatsoever. In my twenties, I began preparations to convert to Judaism, only to stop when I heard from my relatives in Prague that my mother's ancestors were Czech Jews. But their story is likely not true, and I am now an atheist. So my commitment to the Jewish tradition is only an intellectual one, a commitment to Jewish philosophical and theological traditions of reasoning. Yet, just as I was in my twenties, I remain someone who is decidedly *not* enamored of Christianity; I intensely wish that my baptism had never occurred, or that I could simply rinse it off. Nonetheless, even if my autobiography may be motoring the follow paragraphs, I do think that a reading against Magid's "ecumenical" reading of Soloveitchik's *Qol Qore* is close to the surface of the text, and even close to the surface of Magid's own excellent commentary in the English translation of *Qol Qore* that appeared in 2019 under the title *The Bible, the Talmud, and the New Testament*. (Frustratingly, Magid's commentary appears only in footnotes that the University of Pennsylvania Press rendered in type that is simply too small. His notes are often more interesting than Soloveitchik's own text!) I reconstruct that reading in the rest of my essay here.

In his preface, Soloveitchik makes demands on both his Jewish and Christian readers. Christian readers ("you Christians, my brothers") are to acknowledge that the Talmud contains a positive record of Jesus of Nazareth and is also "a monument beyond all comparison of jurisprudence, profundity, and judicial ingenuity."<sup>3</sup> The demand to Jewish readers, however, is not a parallel one. Jews are not to acknowledge

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<sup>3</sup> Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud, and the New Testament*, ed. Shaul Magid and trans. Jordan Gayle Levy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 57, 58.

any excellence “beyond all comparison” of the Gospels, as Christians are to do with the Talmud. Rather, Soloveitchik claims that the Talmud has perhaps only a *limited* appreciation of the New Testament. When the Talmud acknowledges the New Testament, it “proves that it [the New Testament] accepts the good and the truth wherever it encounters them.”<sup>4</sup> That last clause, “wherever it encounters them,” is odd. Why is it there? Are there supposed to be places where the New Testament *fails* to encounter the good and the true, or encounters things *other* than the good and the true? The syntax of Soloveitchik’s sentence allows for those possibilities. Is he here suggesting that Jewish readers of the New Testament have to sift through the text and taxonomize certain utterances in the Gospels as good and true, and other utterances as neither (even if Christians were to insist that they are good and true)? And if so, how might such a sifting be part of Soloveitchik’s stated goal in writing a commentary that, after this demand to Jews to appreciate the New Testament, quotes b. Sukkot 53b in the Talmud to bolster the claim that the greatest aim of all is to “reconcile humanity”?

I know that scholars who are in the habit of writing paragraphs that contain a series of questions run the risk of being vague and boring. So I should say what the point of these questions is. No one is going to argue against the aim of reconciling humanity. But there are at least two possible strategies for reconciling groups that claim to disagree with each other. One is to show that they do not really disagree. That strategy is in line with Magid’s “ecumenical” reading of Soloveitchik. But the other strategy is for one group to show another group (or more than one) *how it is mistaken*, so that it might fall into line with the better, truer group. That strategy—which might be described as hierarchical and pedagogical (since a teacher has power *over* students)—coheres with my own reading of Soloveitchik. His preface, taken on its own, does not give us any criterion for preferring one of these reconciliation strategies over the other. There is nothing sufficiently explicit. But the second seems to me to be

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<sup>4</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 56.

more likely, since there are several hints of an *asymmetry* between Christians and Jews in Soloveitchik's text.

I have already pointed this out by showing how Soloveitchik, in his preface, asked more of his Christian readers than of his Jewish ones. That asymmetry reappears in his commentary to the opening of the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Using Mishnaic passages that implicitly date the life of the Jewish authority Yehoshua b. Perahya to the beginning of the first century BCE, Soloveitchik claims that famous passages in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Sanhedrin 107b, b. Sotah 47a) about Yehoshua calling "Jesus the Nazarene" a "wicked student" cannot possibly be about the Jesus of the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> As a result, Christians who think that the Talmud has negative things to say about *that* Jesus, who lived in the first century CE, are mistaken. A positive reference to Jesus of Nazareth in the Babylonian Talmud—in a story credited to R. Eliezer in which Jesus says wise and pleasing things to Eliezer (b. Avodah Zarah 17a)—is a reference to a Jesus of Nazareth who actually lived in the first century CE, because that is when R. Eliezer lived. Therefore, for Soloveitchik, that Jesus of Nazareth is the same as the Jesus of the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> Fair enough. But this is the least interesting part of this section of Soloveitchik's commentary. At the end of that section, he states that "it is incumbent upon anyone who loves truth and peace, especially those who teach and lead the many, to inform their Christian brothers that they are mistaken in this matter."<sup>7</sup> Why does Soloveitchik not explicitly address his Christian readers here, as he had earlier done in the preface, instead of the vague

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<sup>5</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 74. See also Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 34–37; partly because Jesus does not appear in earlier versions of these stories that appear in the Palestinian Talmud, Schäfer reads these stories in the Babylonian Talmud as an anachronistic projection into the past that coheres with other statements about Jesus made in the Babylonian Talmud.

<sup>6</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 77.

<sup>7</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 78. "This matter" seems to refer to the general claim that "nowhere in the Talmud is anything evil spoken about" Jesus of Nazareth (77). Soloveitchik here also mentions that Jews cannot be taken as Christ-killers, because they had no authority to kill under the Roman Empire, a claim that he will expand on in his commentary on Matthew 27:2.

“anyone”? Don’t some of them count as truth- and peace-lovers? Or do all Christians need assistance from Jews, who are the only truth- and peace-lovers whom Soloveitchik imagines here? The syntax does not explicitly include or exclude Christians from the category of those who love truth and peace, but it is easy to read “anyone who loves truth and peace” as referring to a Jew, who is to teach a Christian how to read the Talmud. Indeed, Magid takes this interpretive strategy in his own commentary: “It is noteworthy that Soloveitchik is imploring his Jewish readers to inform Christians that they are mistaken.”<sup>8</sup>

It is true that this asymmetry between Jewish and Christian readers is absent for much of *Qol Qore*. Often Soloveitchik will simply intersperse Talmudic quotes between various verses of the New Testament in order to show the commonality between the Talmud and the New Testament, especially during the sections of the commentary that are devoted to the Sermon on the Mount. And in places where contemporary readers might want Soloveitchik to say something about Christian supersessionism—for example, the scene in Matthew 27:25 when Jewish leaders apparently accept their and their descendants’ being cursed by God for voicing a preference for having Jesus of Nazareth killed over Barabbas—Soloveitchik is simply silent.<sup>9</sup> Soloveitchik does assert in a comment on Matthew 27:2, on the basis of Talmudic evidence (b. Avodah Zarah 8b), that “under the rule of the Romans, [Jews] did not have the right to judge and enforce the death penalty.”<sup>10</sup> But nowhere in his commentary on this chapter does Soloveitchik make explicit what is implicit: that the New Testament is therefore here giving a potted version of history, and thus misses the truth.

That is not to say, however, that Soloveitchik tamps down any and all criticism of the New Testament and its words in *Qol Qore*, censoring

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<sup>8</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 78n25.

<sup>9</sup> Famously, in Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*, two Catholic villagers in Chelmno in 1977 cite this verse to explain why the Holocaust occurred. See Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Acclaimed Holocaust Film* (New York: Da Capo, 1995), 89–90.

<sup>10</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 260.

himself in order to make Judaism and Christianity seem alike. As Magid correctly states in his essay in this issue of *JTR*, Soloveitchik offers a kind of “Maimonidean Jesus.” For Magid, that means that Jesus’s role is to “teach people the fundamental lesson of Judaism: the unity of the Creator”; indeed, it is this account of a Jewish Jesus that makes it possible for Magid to understand Soloveitchik as endorsing a view in which Judaism and Christianity “express the same core value of unity expressed in different forms.”<sup>11</sup> But I struggle to see how that sameness would cohere with a *Maimonidean* Jesus. If Soloveitchik’s Jesus were truly Maimonidean, then it must have been part of a polemic against the non-Maimonidean Jesus who is commonly imagined in Christian communities, one who is not just a teacher, but the only son of God and the redeemer of humanity. Why should one say this? It seems to me to be productive to go to *The Guide to the Perplexed*, which Magid finds to be subtly present in part of Soloveitchik’s commentary.<sup>12</sup> There, Maimonides gave an account of divine unity which is part and parcel of a broader anti-Christian account:

If you aspire ... to gain certainty that God is truly one—so truly as to be utterly incomposite and indivisible in every way—you must realize that He has no proper attributes of any sort. Just as He cannot be a body, He cannot have attributes. One who believes that He is one but has multiple attributes calls Him one verbally but mentally believes Him many. This is like Christians saying, ‘He is one but three and the three are one.’<sup>13</sup>

Here, Maimonides draws together an account of God’s radical unity (“truly one,” an essence without any attributes/accidents/properties and therefore “incomposite”), God’s being other than a body (since physical things have both essences and attributes), and *Christianity getting this*

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<sup>11</sup> Magid, “A Jew Who Loved Christianity,” 186.

<sup>12</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 91n49. See also the Maimonidean resonances of Soloveitchik’s claim that “through it [the spirit of humankind], we recognize the existence of the Creator, blessed be His name, and we know that He is not corporeal and that we cannot perceive His essence” (92).

<sup>13</sup> Moses Maimonides, *The Guide to the Perplexed: A New Translation*, trans. Lenn E. Goodman and Phillip I. Lieberman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024), 83 [1.50].

*wrong* because it denies God's oneness (not only in its belief in the Trinity, but even in the claim that God became flesh, a body with attributes just like any other physical thing).

Soloveitchik continued this Maimonidean opposition to any privilege of embodiment or materiality. Truth, for him, is found only outside of the physical realm. This principle suffuses Soloveitchik's praise of certain Christian texts, in which their ordinary signification is reversed, and his rejection of a typical Christian account of who Jesus of Nazareth was. In his commentary on Matthew 4:4, Soloveitchik goes on a long tangent on the dichotomy between body and soul/spirit, beginning with a simple statement of the dichotomy: "I have already written and clarified that every man is composed of a body and a soul. The nature of the body is to go after what the eyes see and give in to the thoughts of the heart, and the nature of the soul is to elevate itself and all its intention only to please its Maker in deed and in word. ... The body and the soul are truly in opposition to each other at every moment."<sup>14</sup> Soloveitchik's proof-text here is the classic statement of this dichotomy in Galatians 5:17. Paul used this dichotomy to express Christian supersessionism—"if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law" (5:18). But Soloveitchik reversed the stakes of the dichotomy through his Maimonidean spin on the text: "Every man who always follows his spirit and not the desires of his flesh, his spirit will conquer his flesh, and such a man will be called a son of God."<sup>15</sup> Here, Soloveitchik is offering some other possibility for Christian existence besides one in which, in order to be one of God's sheep, a Christian must believe in one person, Jesus of Nazareth, as *the* son of God.

This is not just wishful thinking on my part. Soloveitchik has a New Testament proof-text, and it is Revelations 21:7: "the one who conquers will inherit these things [that is, the "new heaven and new earth" of 21:1], and I will be his God and he will be my son." By expanding the possibility of "conquering" to *anyone* who privileges the spirit over the body—to

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<sup>14</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 90.

<sup>15</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 90.



anyone who genuinely acknowledges God's oneness in a Maimonidean understanding of divine unity—Soloveitchik is here being a kind of *Jewish* supersessionist. The person who successfully lives in accordance with the Pauline dichotomy of spirit over body is already a son of God. No other son of God is necessary. There need be no one called "*the* son of God," in whom belief might be salvific. The person who leaves the law behind as modern Christians do—in the name of a belief in a singular person who was *the* son of God and coextensive with the other two persons of the Trinity—ironically *cannot possibly* become a son of God, for the person who believes in the Trinity does not truly believe in God's oneness. Maimonides taught us that much.

Does this mean that Soloveitchik believed that only Jews could inherit the new heaven and the new earth? Not necessarily. But it does mean that if Christians are to partake of the divine promise, that they need to transform how they see themselves as Christians, learn some things about their own sacred texts, and learn them from outsiders such as Soloveitchik. Jews might also need to change, but they do not need to transform themselves as Christians do. They only need to transform their understanding of what the New Testament actually says.

Soloveitchik repeatedly emphasizes that when Jesus of Nazareth is described as a son of God, it is not an exclusive claim, and/or it comes from someone besides Jesus himself and therefore may not be necessarily trustworthy. When Satan challenges Jesus to turn stone into bread if he indeed is God's son (the Greek here has no definite article, therefore implying that many can be sons of God) in Matthew 4, Soloveitchik can freely indulge his Maimonidean reading.<sup>16</sup> When the voice from heaven in Matthew 3:17 describes Jesus as "my beloved Son," this is simply a statement of Jesus's acting "in accordance with his spirit" (even though the Greek for "my beloved Son" has a definite article here, *ho huios mou ho agapētos*, possibly implying that Jesus is God's only son).<sup>17</sup> The same occurs at Jesus's transfiguration in Matthew 17:5; a voice describes Jesus

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<sup>16</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 92.

<sup>17</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 88.

as “my beloved Son,” and Soloveitchik calls the reader back to what he had written earlier about Matthew 4.<sup>18</sup> When men in a boat see Jesus walk on water on the Sea of Galilee and say “surely you are God’s son” (Matt. 14:33), Soloveitchik once again refers his readers back to his commentary on Matthew 4.<sup>19</sup> The same occurs when the centurion calls Jesus “God’s son” at Matthew 27:54.<sup>20</sup>

Soloveitchik is not reading the text of the New Testament against the grain, with the possible exception of his commentary on Matthew 3:17 and Matthew 17:5, two verses that suggest a kind of exclusiveness to Jesus’s sonship on account of the definite article in those verses. But certainly his Christian readers *assume* a kind of exclusiveness—that God had only one son—and this is something that Soloveitchik intends to disrupt. The same intent to disrupt occurs in Soloveitchik’s treatment of Jesus’s exchange with the high priest Caiaphas in Matthew 26:63–64. Caiaphas demands that Jesus “tell us if you are the Christ, the son of God [*ho huios tou theou*].” Jesus’ response is “You have said it,” and it is easy for Christian readers of the New Testament to interpret that as an acceptance of the charge. Yet Soloveitchik insists that Jesus is denying the title of Messiah/Christ here and in the following chapter (27:11) when Jesus makes the same reply (“you have said it”) to Pontius Pilate’s question to Jesus as to whether he is the king of the Jews. Soloveitchik assumes that Jesus is refusing Pontius Pilate with those words—Jesus, for him, cannot possibly be the Davidic Messiah of a kingly lineage—and so he also assumes that Jesus denies Caiaphas here: “We cannot interpret this [‘you have said it’] to mean ‘I am who you say I am.’”<sup>21</sup> For Christian readers of Soloveitchik who had been taught that there could only have been one son of God, Soloveitchik’s interpretive strategy would have been puzzling at best.

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<sup>18</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 202.

<sup>19</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 191.

<sup>20</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 265.

<sup>21</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 258.

However, in a note, Magid rightly doubts how easy Soloveitchik's interpretive path might have been through these thickets of whether Jesus saw himself as the exclusive son of God or not; in other words, Magid shows us how hard it was for Soloveitchik to sustain this portrait of a Maimonidean Jesus. When Soloveitchik, in commenting on Matthew 26:64, asserts that "you have said it" and "I am who you say I am" are not synonymous phrases, Magid adds the following:

But see Mark 14:61–62, where Jesus does accept this title: "Once more, the high priest asked him and said to him, 'Are you the *mashiah*, the son of the blessed one?' Yeshua said, '*I am he*, and you will see the son of man sitting to the right of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.'" <sup>22</sup>

Magid is correct to raise this point. Even more surprisingly, the fact that Jesus of Nazareth accepts the title of "the son of the blessed one [*ho huios tou eulogētou*]," and thereby that of Messiah, passes by Soloveitchik's commentary on this section of the Gospel of Mark *without* Soloveitchik making any serious note of it.<sup>23</sup> All that Soloveitchik notes is that "son of the blessed One" means "righteous," as he had noted in various sections of his commentary to the Gospel of Matthew where he remarked that "son of God" language also referred to righteousness.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, as Magid implies, what should matter to us here is the issue of whether God has more than one son or not. The standard Christian assumes that God has only one son, even if the text of the New Testament allows for more possibilities in places (by using "son of God" without the definite article); Soloveitchik's Maimonidean reader, whether Jewish or Christian, imagines that God has an indefinitely large number of sons, including all who privilege the spirit over the flesh. Soloveitchik here seems to be ignoring the elephant in the room, as Magid notes.

Still, Soloveitchik is not quite hiding from his readers here. In this section of his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, he reminds them that when Caiaphas tells the other members of the Sanhedrin that they have

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<sup>22</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 258n255.

<sup>23</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 381.

<sup>24</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud.*, 101, 113, 268, 270.

heard Jesus's blasphemy, Soloveitchik had addressed this issue in his commentary on the parallel scene in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>25</sup> Why would Caiaphas have understood Jesus's response as blasphemous, whether he accepted the title of Messiah/Christ or not? Because when Jesus said that the high priest would see the son of man seated at the right hand of the (divine) power, the high priest "interpreted it in its plain meaning that the Holy One, blessed be he, really has a right hand and attributes corporeality—God forbid—to YHWH."<sup>26</sup> It is unclear whether Soloveitchik took Caiaphas's plain-sense interpretation to be accurate, or whether he took it as a misinterpretation of Jesus's words. Soloveitchik does not openly say here that Caiaphas took at the surface level what he ought to have taken metaphorically or symbolically. Even more surprisingly, Soloveitchik does not at this point offer his readers any other possible interpretation of Jesus's words, even though there are other places in *Qol Qore* where Soloveitchik mentions Talmudic passages that cite clearly metaphorical talk of God's right hand in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Isa. 62:8 at b. Nazir 3b, or Ps. 110:1 at b. Nedarim 32b).<sup>27</sup> So it is certainly possible that Soloveitchik saw Caiaphas as justified in taking the intent of Jesus's words to be their plain meaning.

But if that is the case, what kind of man could Jesus have been in Soloveitchik's eyes? If he indeed ascribed corporeality to God, then how could he have been a *real* son of God, someone who valued spirit over flesh? Soloveitchik's Maimonidean reading of Jesus is threatened by Jesus's response to Caiaphas, taken in its plain sense. It therefore needs to be neutralized or dismissed. Yet in the absence of any explicit reinterpretation by Soloveitchik of what Jesus must have intended to say, or what Caiaphas must have misunderstood, we have no evidence that Soloveitchik wanted to neutralize Jesus's response to Caiaphas by making it more Maimonidean. Instead, we contemporary readers of Soloveitchik

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<sup>25</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 381.

<sup>26</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 259.

<sup>27</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 110, 231.

are on more solid ground thinking that Soloveitchik is dismissing Jesus here. In failing to comment extensively on Mark 14:61–62, Soloveitchik was signaling that Jesus fell short of the religious bar that Maimonides had set in the *Guide*.

In *Qol Qore*, Jews need not change themselves. Christians, however, *must* transform their understanding of who Jesus of Nazareth was, and their own Christian identities, in order to allow that many people can be sons of God. In addition, given Soloveitchik's notable disinterest in commenting on Mark 14:61–62, Christians (along with Jews) *might* justifiably conclude that Jesus was less spiritually advanced than a Maimonides-loving Jewish person. In other words, he wasn't all that special. Messiah shmessiah. In Soloveitchik's commentary on Matthew 24:3, when Jesus's disciples ask him what "the sign of your coming (*to semeion tēs sēs parousias*)" might be, Soloveitchik deflates the entire story. Imagining a more clear version of the disciples' question, Soloveitchik writes "we [disciples] can see that your purpose of coming to the world was only to instill in the hearts of all those who come into the world the belief in the unity of the Creator, blessed be his name."<sup>28</sup> However, this is a purpose of any spiritual teacher's life, Soloveitchik's (or Magid's, or to give a Christian example, Rowan Williams's) no less than Jesus's. And if the disciples wanted to know when the Messiah would come, Jesus warned them against such a desire in Soloveitchik's clever re-parsing of Matthew 24:5. The verse is customarily read as Jesus saying the following: "For many will come in my name, saying 'I am the Messiah,' and they will mislead many." Here, it is the false messiah who claims to be the Messiah. Soloveitchik, however, reads it as Jesus speaking thus: "For many will come in my name, saying that I [Jesus of Nazareth] am the Messiah, and they will mislead many." The reinterpretation is legitimate—there are no quotation marks in the original Greek, after all—and as a result, Soloveitchik is able to read Jesus once again as denying his messianic status: Jesus "told them [the disciples] that many would come in his name

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<sup>28</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 239.

claiming that he was the Messiah, and by this they will mislead many.”<sup>29</sup> If this is how Christians are to understand the New Testament, then their transformation will be significant, and difficult. Humanity will likely not be reconciled, because Christians just keep *getting it wrong*.

I have tried to show here that *Qol Qore* is a subtle yet fierce work of Jewish disputation of Christianity, contrary to Magid’s “ecumenical” reading of the text. Where Soloveitchik’s love of Christianity might be found is tough for me to see. And if Jesus did ascribe corporeality to YHWH, then Soloveitchik’s love of Jesus becomes nigh impossible to reconstruct. If, at the end of a reading of *Qol Qore*, a reader might think that Judaism and Christianity are not in tension with one another, it is only because Christianity has gone through such a transfiguration that it is no longer recognizable to Soloveitchik’s Christian readers.

How might one understand Soloveitchik’s vision of Jewish-Christian relations? To be completely ahistorical, I confess that reading *Qol Qore* reminded me of nothing more than the favorite joke of my late fiancé, Daniel Casey, who intensely loved stories that made fun of White Southern U.S. culture from within. Indeed, it is likely that he told Magid this joke when Magid was my teacher at Rice University in the 1995–96 academic year. This joke has many variants, but this is the one that I remember Dan telling. He had quite the drawl, but viciously exaggerated it when telling this joke. Readers should affect their campiest Scarlett O’Hara voices.

One Southern belle is visiting another at her home, and they are sitting on the porch, drinking some iced tea. The second belle turns to the first and says, “You see all this land that goes out to the horizon? My daddy left this to me when he passed away.” The first sips her tea quietly, and says “How nice.”

The second belle then says, “You see all the livestock in the barn over yonder? My daddy left that to me as well!” The first belle takes another sip of her tea and says “How nice.”

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<sup>29</sup> Soloveitchik, *The Bible, the Talmud*, 240.

The second belle continues: "And you see this beautiful house here, and the car in the driveway? My daddy left all this to me too!" Once again, the first belle takes a sip of her tea. "How nice."

At this point, the second belle turns to the first and kindly yet acidly asks, "Tell me—what did your daddy leave you?"

The first belle responds, "Oh, we didn't have very much. But my daddy did send me to a very elegant finishing school. There, I learned to say 'how nice,' instead of 'fuck you.'"

At its surface, this joke is a story of a rich woman lording her monetary and social capital over that of an alleged friend in order to make her feel lesser, in which the friend responds in the only way she knows how—politely signaling that her politesse is anything but polite. But the joke need not remain within Southern culture, or to the case of a poorer belle showing the emptiness of a richer one. It is adaptable to any situation in which a minority group is constrained in its relation with a majority, feeling pressure to appreciate the alleged wisdom of the majority but somehow finding the room to signal that it does not appreciate the dominant culture at all. I am tempted to read many, many cases of Jewish-Christian dialogue—not just *Qol Qore*, but also Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* and Hermann Cohen's *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*—according to the paradigm of this joke, so that an overt acculturation to Christian values might show the utter disdain underneath.

R. Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik is definitely my kind of Southern belle, and I take *Qol Qore* to be an essential part of any elegant finishing school in Jewish thought. And since I have tried to show my own readers that my interpretation of *Qol Qore* is driven by Magid's own grappling with Soloveitchik's text in his notes, I hope that I might count Magid as my kind of Southern belle too. He is someone who, like the poorer belle of the story, continually shows us new ways of performing an identity that we had long thought we knew inside and out.