

CAN GOD REJECT THE JEWISH PEOPLE?: ELIJAH ZVI SOLOVEITCHIK, SUPERSESSIONISM, AND MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT

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Writing about *Qol Qore* (“A Voice Calls”), Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik’s commentary on the synoptic Gospels, Shaul Magid offers the following assessment of this nineteenth-century attempt “to reconcile these two enemy sisters: the Church and the Synagogue”:¹

For many in the liberal camp in America [in the twentieth century], ecumenicism was on the rise, especially after World War II ... [The] premises of Soloveitchik’s commentary are dated and naïve in the way scholars today view the Talmud in relation to Jesus and nascent Christianity, but as the ecumenical spirit lives on as we move further into the twenty-first century, Soloveitchik’s project, dated as it may be, can

¹ Soloveitchik describes his project in these terms: see “The Commentaries,” in *The Bible, the Talmud, and the New Testament: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik’s Commentary to the Gospels*, ed. Shaul Magid, trans. Jordan Gayle Levy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 49.

serve as an interesting and welcome exegetical precursor to that sentiment.²

As a scholar of modern Jewish thought, I don't consider myself qualified to assess the historical accuracy of Soloveitchik's approach to the Talmud and early Christianity. However, I agree with Magid that *Qol Qore* anticipates "ecumenical" developments in contemporary religious thought, from attempts to repudiate the traditional accusation that Jews are responsible for Jesus's death to interpretive projects that cast the apostle Paul as a profoundly Jewish figure.³

Nevertheless, without denying *Qol Qore's* contemporary resonance, my goal is to explore a topic where there is more distance between Soloveitchik and some of his successors: the status of supersessionism, of the idea that the church has replaced the Jews as God's chosen people (sometimes also presented as the idea that the Jews' covenant with God has ended and that some special status or role that they once possessed has been transferred to the church).⁴ Appearing across classical Christian sources, this belief has undergone a reassessment over recent decades, with a growing number of Christian denominations and thinkers rejecting this doctrine and instead affirming that God's election of and covenant with the Jewish people remain in effect.

² Shaul Magid, "A Jew Who Loved Christianity as a Jew: The Strange Nineteenth-Century Orthodox Case of Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 16.2 (October 2025), 161-194, esp. 193-94.

³ On these issues in contemporary religious thought, see Clark Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville: Westminster, 1993), 35-37; John Gager, *The Jewish Lives of the Apostle Paul* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). For *Qol Qore* on these themes, see Soloveitchik, "The Commentaries," 81-82, 260, 263, 280.

⁴ While many of the figures and texts cited in the body of this essay and notes 5-11 below frame supersessionism as a doctrine that posits the church's replacement of the Jewish people as God's elect, others cast this doctrine as focusing on the abrogation of God's covenant with the Jewish people and that group's special role or status in history or God's plans (without explicitly invoking the notion of chosenness); still others focus on both God's election of, and God's covenant with, the Jewish people, taking these two to be closely linked. For one account of the relationship between election and covenant, see Scott Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel after Christendom: The Politics of Election* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 28-44.

In what follows, I will show that while Soloveitchik may not endorse supersessionism, he by no means offers a clear repudiation of this doctrine. Rather, he ascribes a supersessionist-like position to Jesus himself, grounding Jesus's posture in a commitment to spreading monotheism and "Talmudic method" of scriptural interpretation. Moreover, I will argue, this supersessionist-like reading of Jesus raises a series of challenging questions for my own field of Jewish thought. Do argumentative strategies common in modern Jewish philosophy open the door to supersessionist-like perspectives? Do key strands in modern Jewish thought *themselves* render supersessionism plausible? And perhaps more fundamentally, should this matter? Should those of us engaged in Jewish thought be concerned about links between supersessionism and our own work, or should the task of addressing this doctrine be left to Christian theology and communities?

Supersessionism and Soloveitchik

"Supersessionism" is a fraught and contested term, but a useful introduction appears in R. Kendall Soulen's influential *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*:

For most of the past two millennia, the church's posture toward the Jewish people has come to expression in the teaching known as supersessionism, also known as the theology of displacement. According to this teaching, God chose the Jewish people ... After Christ came, however, the special role of the Jewish people came to an end and its place was taken by the church, the new Israel.⁵

Casting supersessionism as a doctrine that takes the church to have replaced the Jews as God's chosen people, Soulen continues as follows:

In the decades since the Second World War ... some churches have concluded that the teaching that the church displaced the Jewish people

⁵ R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 1–2. Although I do not wish to overstate Soulen's influence, one indication of his work's significance is the fact that he is cited in most of the sources surveyed in notes 7–11 below.

in God's plan is wrong or at least seriously misleading ... To cite one example, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has declared: "Supersessionism maintains that because the Jews refused to receive Jesus as Messiah, they were cursed by God, are no longer in covenant with God, and that the church alone is the 'true Israel' ... The long and dolorous history of Christian imperialism, in which the church often justified anti-Jewish acts in the name of Jesus, finds its theological basis in this teaching ... This theory of supersessionism or replacement is harmful and in need of reconsideration ... God's covenants are not broken. 'God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew' (Rom. 11:2). The church has not 'replaced' the Jewish people."⁶

For some (although by no means all) Christians living after World War Two (and especially the Holocaust),⁷ supersessionism has come to be seen both as a theologically problematic claim about God unfaithfully abrogating past covenants and as a profoundly harmful source of anti-Jewish persecution.⁸

The literature about these developments is vast and encompasses many topics: the question of what a rejection of supersession entails for a wide range of issues, from Christology to the church's politics and self-understanding to the unity and interpretation of Scripture; the difference between supersessionism as a theological doctrine explicitly envisioning the replacement of the Jewish people and supersessionism as an unacknowledged commitment implicitly pervading biblical exegesis, liturgical practice, and other elements of Christian life; the extent to which rejections of supersessionism have (or have not) taken hold in Christian communities, as well as defenses of supersessionism by some theologians; and the degree to which some types of supersessionism (or

⁶ Soulen, *The God of Israel*, 2–3.

⁷ On the role of the Holocaust in motivating these developments, see, e.g., Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 1–2.

⁸ Additional factors have also been cited as contributing to worries about supersessionism, including shifting political circumstances and developments in biblical exegesis: see, e.g., Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel after Christendom*, 1; Bruce Marshall, "Christ and the Cultures: The Jewish People and Christian Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 88–89.

supersessionist-like views) may already be present in (or at least implied by) the New Testament itself, along with the question of whether all such commitments are necessarily pernicious.⁹ Nevertheless, even as supersessionism and its contours remain points of contention, it has become increasingly common for some Christian thinkers—and, indeed, for some Jewish thinkers in conversation with their Christian counterparts—to raise concerns about this belief, understood in the terms outlined above: as the idea that church has in some sense replaced the Jews, who had previously been God's chosen people and covenantal partner. For example, despite acknowledging disagreements about the implications that follow from rejecting supersessionism, the Christian theologian Bruce Marshall has written:

The theological point of departure for [the twentieth] century's critical reassessment of the church's relation to the Jewish people is the proposal, now commonly made, that Christians ought to share a wider range of beliefs with Jews than they have in the past, and one belief in particular: that the biological descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are permanently and irrevocably the elect people of God. Correlatively,

⁹ This is by no means an exhaustive list of issues explored by critics of supersessionism. On these topics (and others), see the works by Soulen, Bader-Saye, Ochs, and Marshall cited in notes 4–8 above, as well as, e.g., Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974); George Lindbeck, "What of the Future? A Christian Response," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al. (Boulder: Westview, 2000), 357–366; Marshall, "Israel," in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, ed. James Buckley and David Yeago (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 231–264; Ochs, "Judaism and Christian Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David Ford and Rachel Muers (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 645–662; Matthew Levering, "Aquinas and Supersessionism One More Time: A Response to Matthew A. Tapie's *Aquinas on Israel and the Church*," *Pro Ecclesia* 25 (2016): 395–412; Levering, "Israel," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Michael Allen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 62–68. It is worth noting that Levering is an example of a figure who frames supersessionism as being focused less on the issues emphasized by Soulen and others (namely, God's election of and covenant with the Jewish people) and more on the obsolescence of Judaism. Nevertheless, Levering also suggests that, understood properly, his view is "largely the same as Soulen's": see Levering, "Aquinas and Supersessionism," 398–399. I am grateful to an anonymous reader for suggesting that I refine and expand my discussion of supersessionism.

Christians ought to do away with a belief which their community has held for a long time, namely the conviction that the church has displaced Israel (that is, the Jewish people) as God's elect. Christians should reject, that is, their long-held supersessionist interpretation of their relationship to the Jewish people.¹⁰

Similarly, engaging both Marshall and Soulen (among others), the Jewish philosopher Peter Ochs has explored attempts to overcome supersessionism in recent Christian thought, presenting this idea as the "Christian belief that with the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, Israel's covenant with God was superseded and replaced by God's presence in the church as the body of Christ" (or "otherwise stated ... that God's love for the church replaced his love for Israel").¹¹

Living in the nineteenth century, Soloveitchik was of course unfamiliar with these doctrinal changes; indeed, supersessionism rarely appears explicitly in *Qol Qore*. Elements of this belief do surface, however, when he discusses Mark 12:1–11, which he reads—along with similar passages in Matthew 21 and Luke 20—as a parable presented by Jesus to the Pharisees:

A man planted a vineyard ... He gave it to vinedressers and went to faraway places. At the appointed time, he sent a servant to the vinedressers to take some of the produce from the vinedressers. They seized him, struck him, and sent him away empty-handed. Once more, he sent another servant to them, but ... they wounded his head and sent him away in disgrace. Once more, he sent another, but him they actually killed. They did the same to many others ... He still had an only son, whom he loved, and even him he finally sent to them, for he said, "They will be intimidated by my son." But those vinedressers said to one another, "This is the heir! Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!" They seized him and killed him and threw him outside the vineyard. Now what will the owner of the vineyard do? Will he not come and destroy those vinedressers and give the vineyard to others? Have you not read this scripture: "A stone the builders rejected has become the

¹⁰ Marshall, "Christ and the Cultures," 81.

¹¹ Ochs, *Another Reformation*, 1.

capstone. This was from YHWH; it is wonderful in our eyes" [Psalm 118:22–23]?¹²

This parable can be interpreted in diverse ways, but it has often been read in supersessionist terms. On this approach, the vinedressers are the Jews (or their leaders), the son is Jesus, and the former are punished for their rejection of the latter by being displaced—by having something special that they possess be given to “others.”¹³

Soloveitchik begins his commentary not by taking up Mark’s words themselves, but by quoting a passage from the Babylonian Talmud that he hopes will help readers “understand the essence of this parable.” Drawn from Pesahim 87a, this passage imagines God speaking with the biblical prophet Hosea about the prospect of rejecting the Jewish people. Instructing Hosea to marry a prostitute, God declares that just as the prophet would not be willing to “reject” this “wife of whoredom” and any “children of whoredom” she might bear, so too would God refuse to reject “Israel—who are children who belong to me, the children of my chosen ones.”¹⁴

Already, then, Soloveitchik is indicating that he takes the status of Israel’s relationship with God—an issue central to supersessionism—to be implicated in Mark 12. He elaborates:

¹² I follow the translation in *The Bible, the Talmud, and the New Testament*, 359.

¹³ See *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 84–85 (discussing the Mark version); Christopher Leighton, “Christian Theology after the Shoah,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, 38 (focusing on Matthew’s version). Some readers take the Matthew version to be supersessionist in a way that the Mark version is not, since the former adds a gloss that can be read as explicitly positing the replacement of the Jews by another people: “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom” (21:43, following the NRSV). See, e.g., Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel after Christendom*, 53; Lindbeck, “What of the Future?,” 359. Nevertheless, for our purposes, we need not explore the differences between the two Gospels’ renderings of this parable since, as we will see, Soloveitchik uses the version in Matthew (and, more precisely, the gloss in 21:43) to illuminate the version in Mark.

¹⁴ Soloveitchik, “The Commentaries,” 360.

Here [in Mark 12] Yeshua [Jesus] reprimands the Pharisees ...[:]
 “Consider reforming your erroneous views, and know that if you do not, God will substitute you for another nation who will encompass you” ... See Mattai 21:43, where, after the parable that we just read, Yeshua concludes: “Therefore I say to you that *the kingdom of God will be taken from you* and given to a nation who will produce its fruit.” In other words: All the nations will successively renounce idolatry in order to accept the worship of one God, and then they will become, instead of you, the people of God” ... What the Pharisees said in response to this is not spoken of here, but we can compensate for that through the Gospel of Luke (20:16), where we read, “When they heard this, they said, ‘May it never be!’” This is how I explain it: Undoubtedly, if the other peoples accept the unity of God, he will accept them as well, for God does not push anyone away (2 Samuel 14:14); but pushing Israel away, ceasing to regard them as his people—that, God will never do! And we have his word as a guarantee: *Thus declares YHWH: “When nature ceases to obey my laws, only then the nation of Israel will cease to be my people”* (Jeremiah 31:36).¹⁵

The background here is Soloveitchik’s view that New Testament phrases such as “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” refer to monotheism (in the sense of divine unity or oneness), and that Jesus’s mission was to proclaim this doctrine to the non-Jewish world—that Jesus “came to announce the kingdom of God, that is, to instill in a polytheistic society the belief in his unity,”¹⁶ that Jesus “had the specific goal of converting pagans to monotheism,”¹⁷ and that “YHWH chose him to teach the entire world about the unity of the Creator.”¹⁸ Soloveitchik’s commentary, in turn, draws on this idea to advance three interpretive claims about Mark 12.

Qol Qore’s first claim is that Jesus takes an emphasis on monotheism to entail the possibility that Jews might be rejected in favor of some other people. For Soloveitchik’s Jesus, if key segments of the Jewish people turn

¹⁵ Soloveitchik, “The Commentaries,” 362.

¹⁶ Soloveitchik, “The Commentaries,” 283.

¹⁷ Soloveitchik, “The Commentaries,” 327.

¹⁸ Soloveitchik, “The Commentaries,” 246.

out to hold “erroneous views,” then insofar as other “nations ... successively renounce idolatry in order to accept the worship of one God ... they will become, instead of you, the people of God.” If what’s ultimately important is an affirmation of monotheism, and if non-Jewish nations come to embrace this doctrine while Jews sink into theological confusion and fail to uphold divine unity, then Jews will lose any special status they once possessed, and this status will instead belong to non-Jewish groups more faithful to this core theological teaching. Soloveitchik thus takes Jesus to advance a supersessionist-like position. *Qol Qore’s* Jesus retains the key element of classical Christian supersessionism by continuing to envision the replacement of the Jews by others, but he also alters this doctrine by predicating the Jews’ displacement on their attitudes toward divine unity rather than their rejection of his own messianic status, as well as by identifying the group displacing the Jews as gentile adherents of monotheism in general rather than the Christian church in particular.¹⁹

Soloveitchik’s second point is that Jesus’s supersessionist-like posture is rejected by the Pharisees, who instead echo the talmudic passage cited above and insist that God will not abandon the Jewish people—who claim that “if the other people accept the unity of God, he will accept them as well,” but that “pushing Israel away, ceasing to regard them as his people—that, God will never do!” On this view, the spread of monotheism might result in additional nations entering into a relationship with God, but not in a displacement of the Jewish people. After all, the Pharisees reason, God’s “word” in Jeremiah 31 offers a “guarantee” against this prospect, promising that Israel will retain its status as long as the deity remains sovereign over “nature.”

Soloveitchik’s third point is that Jesus does not accept the Pharisees’ rejoinder:

¹⁹ My point is not that Soloveitchik himself has a term such as “supersessionism” in mind, but rather that he has Jesus present a position that we can recognize as supersessionist-like.

Yeshua replies to this response of the Pharisees: "Have you not read this scripture: *A stone the builders rejected has become the capstone?* (Psalm 118:22). The "builders," as a certain part of the Talmud says (BT Berakhot 64a), "are the Torah scholars, charged with *building* the house of Israel." Therefore, if you do not return to the correct path, all these peoples whom you disdain, and who will come to believe in the unity of God, will become, in your stead, the capstone of his house.²⁰

According to *Qol Qore*, when Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22 and its reference to "builders," he is invoking an interpretive tradition, preserved in the Talmud, that takes this term to refer to "scholars." More specifically, he adopts this reading of "builders" and applies it to the Pharisees, suggesting that Psalm 118 offers a message about the consequences of Pharisaic error—about how the persistence of errors among those scholars will lead to God's "house" acquiring a new "capstone" or central element.²¹ If the Pharisees "do not return to the correct path" as other "peoples ... come to believe in the unity of God," then those other nations "will become, in your stead, the capstone of his house": if the intellectual elite of the Jewish people remains mired in theological errors while other nations come to affirm monotheism, then there will no longer be a meaningful sense in which the Jewish nation possesses a special relationship with God, and that status will instead belong to gentile theists committed to this crucial belief in divine unity.²²

Soloveitchik's Jesus thus counters the Pharisees' biblical citation with one of his own. Indeed, *Qol Qore* continues, this is an example of Jesus's proximity to the rabbis of antiquity:

²⁰ Soloveitchik, "The Commentaries," 362.

²¹ On the term rendered as "capstone," see *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 85.

²² Soloveitchik's focus on Pharisaic error might seem to suggest that he reads Mark 12 as being exclusively about the replacement of the Pharisees—as a claim that if the Pharisees "do not return to the correct path," some other group will become "the capstone" or leaders of Israel. However, Soloveitchik's earlier comments make it clear that he is concerned not merely with the displacement of the Pharisees, but with the replacement of the Jewish people as a whole—that for him, the issue at stake in Mark 12 is the prospect of God "pushing Israel away, ceasing to regard them as his people," and other "nations" then becoming a new "people of God."

In speaking thus, Yeshua undoubtedly removes ever so slightly the literal meaning from this verse in Psalms. However, as I have already said, this is a Talmudic method and Yeshua himself was nothing else if not a Talmudist, except for the fact that he belonged to the Essene sect.²³

Elsewhere in *Qol Qore*, Soloveitchik casts rabbinic exegesis as an approach in which “every sage of the Talmud interpreted a command according to his own opinion, but ... strengthened his opinion with words from the written Torah,” even when “their opinion does not seem to match what is written in the Tanakh”—as an approach in which the rabbis support positions they already affirm with creative readings that go beyond the Bible’s plain sense.²⁴ His claim about Mark 12 is that its use of Psalm 118:22 fits into a broader pattern of Jesus enacting this rabbinic approach.²⁵ Even if Jesus “removes ever so slightly the literal meaning from this verse,” he does so in a manner that reflects a “Talmudic method,” linking an independently formulated view on the revocability of Jewish election—a view grounded in his approach to monotheism—to a verse about seemingly unrelated topics such as stones and builders. For *Qol Qore*, therefore, when Jesus adopts a supersessionist-like perspective, he does so not only on the basis of his valorization of monotheism, but also through his embrace of rabbinic hermeneutics. The former implies that a failure to uphold divine unity might result in Jews losing their elect status, and the latter offers a mode of exegesis that can provide biblical support for this idea.

I must admit that I am uncertain about what, precisely, Soloveitchik means to achieve here. I doubt that he is endorsing a supersessionist-like posture as *the* correct Jewish view. He takes Jesus to be speaking here as an “Essene” in opposition to the Pharisees, and *Qol Qore* repeatedly casts Jesus and the Essenes as adopting “extreme” positions rejected by the Pharisees and rabbinic Judaism:

²³ Soloveitchik, “The Commentaries,” 362.

²⁴ Soloveitchik, “The Commentaries,” 82–83.

²⁵ See also Soloveitchik, “The Commentaries,” 280, 292.

The Pharisees would say that in every single attribute, man must take the moderate path and not lean to any extreme ... What, then, is the limit to giving charity? The Torah says that every man must give a tenth of all his goods. The sages of the Talmud, who were Pharisees, said: "He who spends liberally (in generosity) should not give more than five percent, or else he may someday be in need" ... The Essenes would say that every single man needed to give everything he had to the poor and not leave anything for himself. And this is what Yeshua said: "If you desire to be complete, go sell your possessions and give to the poor" (Mattai 19:21), and so, too, in every other attribute. The Essenes said that ... man must practice every good attribute to the extreme.²⁶

If Soloveitchik has these themes in mind when he discusses Mark 12, he might be characterizing—and implicitly criticizing—the posture he ascribes to Jesus as another case of Essene extremism. That is, Soloveitchik might be contrasting what he sees as a more reasonable Pharisaic and rabbinic idea (that other nations might affirm monotheism *alongside* the Jews) with what he wants his readers to view as a more radical and problematic conviction (that other nations might actually *supersede* the Jews).

At the same time, *Qol Qore's* emphasis on the rabbinic background of Jesus's supersessionist-like position suggests an attempt to complicate any simple binary separating Jesus from Judaism on this issue. Even if Jesus's position is a case of Essene extremism, Soloveitchik's argument entails, it is extremism enabled by rabbinic hermeneutics: the Pharisees anticipate rabbinic *theological content* when they reject Israel's displacement, but Jesus employs rabbinic *interpretive methods* when he affirms that possibility.

As with many other elements of *Qol Qore*, a definitive account of Soloveitchik's goals may remain elusive. He might be targeting particular forms of anti-Jewish hostility among Christians. Even if Jews could

²⁶ Soloveitchik, "The Commentaries," 98–99. See also 112, 214, 326. As Magid observes, it was common in Soloveitchik's context to describe Jesus as an Essene: see 74n21, 85n37, 112n83. On the history of the idea that "Jesus either was an Essene or took Essene tenets into his own teaching," see Joan Taylor, *The Essenes, the Scrolls, and the Dead Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

someday be replaced, he might be suggesting, this replacement would have little to do with a rejection of Jesus's messianic or divine status, and anti-Jewish sentiment focused on that rejection lacks any theological basis. Soloveitchik might also be reminding Jewish readers of just how much is at stake in a commitment to monotheism. While the rabbis do not endorse a theology of displacement, he might be hinting, it is difficult to rule out the prospect that Jews might lose their elect status if they fail to uphold divine unity. Yet another possibility, raised by Magid, is that Soloveitchik is responding to specific figures in his own era—that he is using his discussion of this parable to highlight connections between rabbinic Judaism and Jesus's teachings, either with the goal of "chastising his fellow Jews ... who have made a categorical distinction between Judaism and Christianity," or with the aim of "responding to people ... who were trying to convert the Jews to Christianity."²⁷

However we assess these possibilities, the content of *Qol Qore's* reading is clear: Soloveitchik ascribes a supersessionist-like posture to Jesus, and Soloveitchik grounds this position in Jesus's emphasis on divine unity and acceptance of rabbinic hermeneutics. According to *Qol Qore*, Jesus declares that the Jewish people might be replaced by non-Jewish nations if it fails to uphold monotheism, and he draws on rabbinic modes of interpretation to read the Bible in a manner that supports this view.

Supersessionism and Jewish Thought

The theological distance between Soloveitchik and the figures discussed at the beginning of my essay is striking. While a growing number of contemporary Christians repudiate supersessionism, *Qol Qore* reimagines it. Instead of citing Paul to defend Jewish election and insist that "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew," Soloveitchik suggests that Jesus's monotheism and exegetical sensibilities point to a scenario in which that displacement might well occur.

²⁷ See Magid's discussion in Soloveitchik, "The Commentaries," 362–363n104.

I leave it to others to determine whether Soloveitchik's approach has consequences for contemporary Christianity. Rather, what interests me is the challenge that his reading of Jesus poses for my own field of Jewish thought.

Consider the commitments in which *Qol Qore* grounds Jesus's supersessionist-like posture, beginning with his emphasis on monotheism—and, more specifically, on the idea of a mission to proclaim monotheism to the non-Jewish world. While Magid links this notion to the medieval philosopher Maimonides,²⁸ it is also a central theme throughout modern Jewish thought, appearing across a wide range of figures with diverse conceptions of God.²⁹ One particularly influential example—albeit one that has been subject to considerable reassessment and critique in recent years³⁰—is a collection of thinkers who are sometimes grouped together as proponents of an approach known as “ethical monotheism.” Often associated with German Judaism, this term refers to arguments that “present Judaism as possessing a unique, irreplaceable, and unsurpassed standing with regard to all other religions,” and that do so by associating this tradition with a pure or correct form of monotheism possessing “vital relevance for modernity”—that seek to grant Judaism an indispensable role in modern life by claiming that this religion offers the world a conception of monotheism crucial for contemporary ethics and society.³¹ Perhaps the best-known exponent of this argumentative strategy is the neo-Kantian thinker Hermann Cohen, who insists that Judaism's “sole

²⁸ See Magid, “A Jew Who Loved Christianity as a Jew.”

²⁹ For example, while the proponents of “ethical monotheism” discussed below emphasize divine transcendence, the eastern European thinker Nachman Krochmal—who also posits a Jewish mission to spread monotheism—conceptualizes God not as a transcendent being, but as the totality of phenomena relating to human cognition and culture. See Nachman Krochmal, *Moreh Nevukhei Hazeman*, ed. Yehoyada Amir (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2010), 34–39.

³⁰ For some of these critiques, see Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 105–106; “There is No ‘Away’: Ecological Fact as Jewish Theological Problem,” *Religions* 13.4 (2022).

³¹ Robert Erlewine, “Samuel Hirsch, Hegel, and the Legacy of Ethical Monotheism,” *Harvard Theological Review* 113.1 (2020): 91. See also Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

foundation is the idea of the One God," and that "a scientifically reasoned ethics ... must be grounded in the idea of the One God":³²

Inasmuch as the One God is the God of all mankind, He cannot be the God of only one nation ... He can be the God only of a mankind that is united in morality. It is therefore incumbent upon us to gain recognition in the world for this one God. This is our world-historical task ... The dissemination and deepening of the idea of the One God, and its elaboration throughout the millennia—only this mission ... justifies and explains our continued existence as the creedal community of the One God.³³

Echoing *Qol Qore's* insistence that Jesus is charged with "converting pagans to monotheism" and chosen "to teach the entire world about the unity of the Creator," Cohen casts the Jewish people as possessing the "world-historical task" and "mission" of "gain[ing] recognition in the world for" the ethically vital notion of "the one God."³⁴

The second element that Soloveitchik takes to ground Jesus's posture—an embrace of rabbinic hermeneutics—also recurs across modern Jewish philosophy. Claims to draw on rabbinic interpretive methods figure prominently in the work of diverse contemporary thinkers, from feminist theologians who cite rabbinic midrash as a model for interpretations that imaginatively recover and elevate the experiences of biblical women³⁵ to practitioners of "textual reasoning" who explore Jewish modes of analysis and argumentation that differ from the thinking employed in North American and European academic disciplines.³⁶ Simi-

³² Hermann Cohen, "Religious Postulates," in *Reason and Hope*, ed. and trans. Eva Jospe (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1993), 44–46.

³³ Cohen, "Religious Postulates," 47–48.

³⁴ This is not to say that Soloveitchik and Cohen are identical. For example, while Soloveitchik's Jesus frames monotheism as encompassing divine unity and oneness, Cohen focuses on divine uniqueness. See Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 35–49.

³⁵ See, e.g., Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 53–56.

³⁶ See Ochs and Nancy Levene, ed., *Textual Reasonings* (London: SCM Press, 2002).

lar moves also appear among earlier figures such as the eighteenth-century thinker Moses Mendelssohn³⁷ and the nineteenth-century philosopher Nachman Krochmal, who—claiming to follow rabbinic exegetical methods in at least some cases—presents this hermeneutic as a means of articulating “good beliefs and opinions and every matter or story conducive to ethics and faith”.³⁸

The sages have the capacity to direct Scripture towards some end and desired benefit, so that it alludes to or offers instruction ... regarding some ethical teaching, opinion, or conception of a virtue ... Since it focuses only on character traits and ethical teachings that, in principle, are founded in the intellect and a pure heart, and since the benefit of *derash* [rabbinic readings that go beyond the Bible’s *peshat* or plain sense] is only to introduce the good teaching to the listener’s ear and serve as a reminder for him, the sages did not refrain from bringing forth these teachings from whatever portion of Scripture was present in whatever section occurred [to them].³⁹

Anticipating *Qol Qore*’s claim that “every sage ... interpreted a command according to his own opinion, but ... strengthened his opinion with words from the written Torah,” Krochmal understands rabbinic hermeneutics as an approach that utilizes features of the biblical text to convey theological or ethical content generated through prior reflection—that involves taking “teachings ... founded in the intellect and a pure heart” and “bringing

³⁷ See Edward Breuer, *The Limits of Enlightenment: Jews, Germans, and the Eighteenth-Century Study of Scripture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 177–222.

³⁸ Krochmal, *Moreh*, 238; translations largely follow my “Exegesis and Politics Between East and West: Nachman Krochmal, Moses Mendelssohn, and Modern Jewish Thought,” *Harvard Theological Review* 114.4 (2021): 508–535. While Krochmal suggests that one form of rabbinic interpretation (*midrash aggada*) is concerned with “ethics and faith,” he takes another form (*midrash halakha*) to focus on generating legal norms. On his use of such exegesis, see, e.g., *Moreh*, 239.

³⁹ Krochmal, *Moreh*, 239.

[them] forth ... from whatever portion of Scripture ... occurred" to an interpreter.⁴⁰

The challenge posed by *Qol Qore* now emerges. By claiming that Jesus envisions the replacement of the Jews because he valorizes monotheism and embraces rabbinic hermeneutics, Soloveitchik is doing more than simply reading a New Testament parable in supersessionist-like terms. Rather, whether or not he's aware of doing so, Soloveitchik is rooting a vision of Jewish displacement in argumentative strategies that pervade much of modern Jewish thought.⁴¹ Whatever his intentions may have been, then, his reading of Mark 12 forces us to ask whether key elements within modern Jewish philosophy lend support to supersessionist-like perspectives. When Jewish thinkers emphasize the centrality of monotheism and embrace rabbinic hermeneutics, are they laying the groundwork for the type of replacement theology articulated by Soloveitchik's Jesus? Once monotheism is taken to possess vital importance, is it unreasonable to connect its affirmation to the status of the Jewish people? Is it unreasonable to conclude that whatever standing Jews might have possessed or relationship with God Jews might have enjoyed, such status might be lost if that nation were no longer faithful to this essential belief—and, in fact, that this status could pass to gentile theists if they were to exhibit a deeper commitment to God and divine oneness? Moreover, once rabbinic hermeneutics are embraced as a means of creatively linking theological commitments to the Bible, is there any reason why this approach could not support a supersessionist-like vision? Is there any reason why this type of exegesis couldn't provide a monotheistically animated replacement theology with a collection of

⁴⁰ Here too, differences exist. For example, while Krochmal restricts the approach outlined here to the presentation of ethical and theological content (envisioning a different method for law), Soloveitchik does not clearly make this distinction.

⁴¹ While Soloveitchik could not have been aware of twentieth- and twenty-first-century examples of these argumentative strategies, we might suspect—or at least consider the possibility—that he was familiar with earlier instances of such claims (for instance, by Mendelssohn and Krochmal).

scriptural prooftexts? Simply put, do recurring moves in modern Jewish thought both elevate monotheism in a way that renders Jewish displacement conceivable and then compound the danger by endorsing a hermeneutic that might confer biblical legitimation on this idea?

Here too I am uncertain how to answer these questions. One possibility might be to conclude that *Qol Qore* reveals a genuine problem. On this view, if supersessionism has contributed to “Christian imperialism” and “justified anti-Jewish acts,” Jewish thinkers should be wary of inadvertently supporting a revised version of this doctrine at the very moment when some Christian communities are striving to overcome it. Perhaps, then, Jewish thinkers should address the supersessionist potential implicit in their own work—for instance, by reimagining the ways in which they link monotheism and Judaism, or by imposing constraints upon exegesis that mitigate against the prospect of lending biblical support to replacement theologies.

Yet this is not the only conceivable response to the questions outlined above. Even if supersessionism has been a source of anti-Jewish persecution, is it really the responsibility of Jewish thinkers to address this problem? If Jewish thinkers find merit in an argumentative strategy, should they shy away from that approach simply because of potential resonances with a Christian doctrine? At best, this would seem to be an example of what Magid elsewhere describes as being “bound by the Christian gaze”—of many modern Jews’ tendency to operate in a “defensive or apologetic mode” because of worries about Christianity, refusing to develop potentially fruitful ideas because they exhibit affinities with Christian beliefs.⁴² At worst, this might amount to a case of theological victim-blaming—of treating supersessionism and the anti-Jewish hostility it has inspired not as problems for which Christianity must take responsibility, but rather as consequences which Jews run the risk of bringing upon themselves because of their own theological choices.

⁴² See Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 11, 80, 169, 176; see also 4–5, 9, 34, 68, 108, 160. The notion of a “gaze” draws on Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Perhaps, then, Jewish thinkers should be untroubled by the supersessionist potential of their arguments. Perhaps Jewish thinkers should develop their views on monotheism and rabbinic exegesis without reference to possible ramifications for a theology of displacement, leaving struggles against problematic Christian teachings to members of the Christian church.

As noted above, I am not sure how to resolve these issues. Nevertheless, one of the many virtues of Magid's recovery of *Qol Qore* is that this neglected Hebrew voice from the past invites us to wrestle with such questions in the present. Do argumentative strategies common in modern Jewish philosophy open the door to supersessionist-like perspectives? Do key strands in modern Jewish thought themselves render supersessionism plausible? And should this matter? Should those of us in the field of Jewish thought be concerned about links between supersessionism and our own work, or should the task of addressing this doctrine be left to Christian theology and communities?