

{70} BOOK REVIEW

Talmud and the New Testament

“Kol Kore or the Talmud and the New Testament”

By: Eliyahu Zvi Levi Soloveichik.

A new Hebrew edition published by the Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies and Research, Jerusalem 1985.

Revised and supplied with notes by J. Bar-Isaiah, and with an introduction by G. Ekeroth.

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More than one hundred years ago Eliyahu Zvi Levi Soloveichik (of the famous line of Lithuanian Rabbis) published a Hebrew translation of the Gospel of Matthew, together with an introduction and a commentary. The book was given the title *Kol Kore*, to be understood as a “summons” with biblical connotations – literally, “a voice crying” (Is. 40:3; Mt. 3:2). Its purpose was to present and interpret the Gospel, the life of Jesus and His message using the background of rabbinic sources. This work of Eliyahu Z. L. Soloveichik has recently been republished by the Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies and Research, and the pseudonymous J. Bar-Isaiah has served as editor of the new edition. This review will briefly touch upon the personal background of Eliyahu Z. L. Soloveichik and upon the new edition of *Kol Kore*, and then will focus upon Soloveichik’s approach to the New Testament and to the person of Jesus.

Eliyahu Soloveichik

The publishers of the new edition of *Kol Kore* do not make any effort to communicate anything about the author, Eliyahu Z. L. Soloveichik (i.e. Elias Soloweczyk). He is only mentioned as a “rabbinic scholar.” That he was learned and well-read cannot be doubted. In 1846, for example, he published the first book of Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* in German, and the influence of the Rambam can also be traced in *Kol Kore*. Soloveichik was born around the year 1800 in Kovno, Lithuania and belonged to the renowned Lithuanian rabbinic family of that name. A family tree appears in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Vol. XV: 127ff.). He died at a relatively advanced age in the late 1870’s. In a future article we hope to present more details about Soloveichik.

The new edition of *Kol Kore*

In the new edition of this work the text has been somewhat modernized to make it more accessible to a modern Hebrew audience. Although this is a perfectly legitimate modification, the book’s value {71} as a research resource is thereby diminished.

The editor of the new edition notes that most of the changes in the text have been made in Soloveichik's introduction and commentary. However, it can be observed that mistakes and typographical errors in the original translation of the Gospel have also been corrected. Similarly, grammatical and linguistic improvements have been made. In this new edition the text has been fully vocalized. Furthermore, the editor has supplied the new edition with critical notes. It appears, according to the notes on p. 208, that in some places the editor does not fully agree with the author's original intent.

Earlier editions of *Kol Kore*.

In the Hebrew-English introduction to the new edition of *Kol Kore* G. Ekeroth says, "This present volume was first published over a hundred years ago in Hebrew, French, Polish, German and English." To my knowledge the book was not published in English; at least I have not found anything to verify this claim. As a point of clarification, the book was published in the following order: French edition, Paris 1870; reprinted, Paris 1875 (in 1875 a similar French translation and commentary on the Gospel of Mark was published in Paris); German edition, Leipzig 1877; Polish edition, Paris 1879; and finally, the Hebrew edition appeared, printed in Paris and published in 1879. Evidently the French edition is based on a Hebrew manuscript, existing prior to 1870.

"As far as we can determine," continues Ekeroth, "the author published these editions himself." If it is meant that Soloveichik in the beginning had no organization behind him, Ekeroth is mistaken. The Polish-born "Comte" Kavier Branicki, to whom the various editions have been dedicated, financed the publishing of the book. Moreover, Soloveichik, in his book on Mark, openly tells about his condition of life and poverty in Paris in the 1870's and about the formation of "*une petite societe*," so that he could fully dedicate himself to the work while supporting his family. Altogether twenty persons, Jews as well as Christians, are mentioned by name when he describes this society.

The Hebrew translation of Matthew's Gospel

I will not evaluate at this time the value of the Hebrew translation or discuss its prototype. The publishers, however, are correct when they state, "The value of the work is not in the clarity or beauty of the Hebrew translation of Matthew." The editor suggests that Soloveichik himself made the translation. In the new series *Traductions Hebraiques des Euangiles* (See *Mishkan* vol. 1, pp. 62-65) Jean Carmignac also listed Soloveichik among the translators of the New Testament into Hebrew (vol. 1, p. VIII). Soloveichik, though, did not make his own translation. Apart from printing errors, his translation is identical with the translation published by the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews in 1838. Providing a new Hebrew translation of the Gospel, therefore, is not the primary motivation for this edition. Evaluating the book, Ekeroth continues, "it is in the evaluation of the life of Jesus by a rabbinical scholar who was able to see the Jewishness of Jesus in a very remarkable way."

A tool for further study

The publishers of the new edition do not hide the fact that the book is *not* “a great confirmation of the Christian faith and doctrines... It is a source, a tool for further study by both scholar and serious layman.” However, it is also pointed out by Ekeroth that “the author’s original motivation ... is an attempt to bring peace and understanding between Judaism and Christianity.” {72} Ekeroth continues, “We don’t have evidence that his objective was realized to any great degree during his lifetime. In view of the great progress that has been made in recent years in dialogue between Jews and Christians, at least at the academic level, it is possible that the book was written, ‘for such a time as this.’” This hope, I believe, will show itself to be a grand illusion. To wit, it is not enough to stress the Jewishness of Jesus, if the Jewish Jesus competes with and conquers the uniqueness of Jesus, who was according to all sources a Jew indeed.

Every book which improves the understanding between Judaism and Christianity should be welcomed, as well as every book which gives us a better understanding of the Jewishness of Jesus. Certainly in *Kol Kore* there are details which deserve consideration and reflection. The author is learned and well-versed in rabbinic literature, and has also tried from his perspective to penetrate into the New Testament. Soloveichik is of the opinion that all books in the New Testament were originally written in Hebrew (p. 56). As a proof that the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Hebrew, he brings the word-play Yeshua-Yoshia found in Matt. 1:21 (as an aside he always uses Jesus’ historically correct Hebrew name Yeshua, never Yeshu). He finds another proof in Matt. 26:17: referring to Exodus 11:15, he thinks that the phrase refers to the day *before* Passover. Matthew, writing in Hebrew, used the word *rishon* here with this meaning (cf. Job 15:7). This usage, according to Soloveichik, was misunderstood by the Greek translator.

The New Testament authors – Talmudists?

The authors of the New Testament were nearly all Jews. Most of them belonged to the party of the Pharisees and were, according to the author, Talmudists (*ba’alei Talmud*). They used similar methods of interpretation and modifications as did other Jewish Talmudists (cf. the commentary on Matt. 7:14; 8:17). Jesus Himself and His followers, however, belonged to the party (*kat*) of the Essenes, as explained in the commentary on Matt. 2:1 and 19:19. A longer explanation about the relationship between the Pharisees and the Essenes is given by the author in his commentary on Matt. 5:3.

Furthermore, Soloveichik asserts that nothing negative is said about Jesus of Nazareth in the Talmud. Thus, the passages speaking negatively about *Yeshu* in the Talmud are interpreted as referring to another person. This interpretation, already found in the Middle Ages, still has its spokesmen. Personally, I doubt that the solution is that easy. The author discusses the problem in the commentary on Matt. 2:1. Interestingly, in his book on Mark (1875), Soloveichik uses the Talmudic passages as a counterproof against those who claimed that Jesus never lived (p. XII).

In spite of his good intentions, I do not believe that the author has succeeded in achieving his purposes. His aim was not only to interpret the New Testament using the background of his intimate knowledge of the rabbinic sources, but also to *prove* that the New Testament is in full

agreement with the Talmud. He does not hide his opinion that all other interpreters have been mistaken.

Jesus – a tzaddik?

What, then, is the picture of Jesus which Soloveichik presents? This becomes clear from the way he deals with Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. For Soloveichik Jesus is *one* Messiah, not *the* Messiah; he is *a* son of God, not *the* Son of God. In the Talmud he finds sources supporting the belief that God wanted to make Hezekiah a Messiah but chose not to do that. In a similar way, Soloveichik finds that Peter in Matt. 16:16 does the {73} same as the Talmudists: Hezekiah's righteousness was so great that the Talmudists felt that He ought to be looked upon as Messiah; similarly, Peter felt that Jesus was such a great *tzaddik* that He ought to be called Messiah and son of God.

In Soloveichik's overall view there is no real difference between Jesus as Son of God and man as son of God. This becomes clear from his commentary on the temptation story (Matt. 4). Soloveichik believes that Jesus had a vision wherein He thought that He had been in the wilderness forty days. But, according to the author, the vision lasted only for one or two hours. As does every man, Jesus had a body, soul and spirit. Then referring to Paul's words that the flesh lusts against the spirit and the Spirit against the flesh (Gal. 5:17), he states that he whose spirit overcomes the lust of the flesh can be called a son of God. Understood in this way, the designation "son of God" has no supernatural significance. Only by neglecting all the passages in the New Testament wherein it is claimed that men can become children of God by believing in the unique Son of God, can Soloveichik reach this conclusion. In addition Soloveichik must deny that Jesus called people to believe in Himself. This too is explicitly claimed in his commentary.

In dealing with the birth narrative (Matt. 1:18) and the conception by the Holy Spirit, Soloveichik presents two opinions: the first is his claim that there is nothing new under the sun; the second deals with a literal interpretation. He claims that his own opinion can be supported from John 10:34-36.

In his introduction to the chapter on Messiah (pp. 42-50) he clearly states his view: referring among others to Maimonides, he expresses his opinion that the Messiah is not of divine nature. Messiah has to be a man like every other man: he shall eat and drink, marry, beget sons and daughters and die. Hereafter, in demonstrating that the New Testament is in accordance with this view, he only quotes passages which talk about the Second Coming (Matt. 24:13; Mark 13:32; Acts 1:6). By utilizing such a selective hermeneutic it is not difficult to bring the New Testament into line with the Talmud.

As an example of how Soloveichik interprets other central New Testament passages, I limit myself to the following two cases from the end of the Gospel.

1. *The Last Supper* (Matt. 26:26-28). When Jesus says that the bread is His body and the wine His blood, the meaning is only that Jesus eats and drinks the last supper together with His disciples. The death of Jesus is, therefore, not a unique, atoning death.

2. *The Great Commission* (Matt. 28:1720). Here Soloveichik summarizes his view on the mission of Jesus. Jesus' main tasks were to reaffirm the Mosaic Law and the principles of God's oneness, the eternity of the soul and eternal rewards and punishments. Soloveichik maintains that the resurrection of Jesus was not a bodily resurrection. As Rabbi Nachman after his death appeared to Rabba in a dream (*Mo'ed Katan* 28a), so Jesus after His death appeared to His disciples in a similar way, to teach them about the eternity of the soul.

The author's commentary on Jesus' commission to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit reveals that he misunderstands the Christian belief. Three things must be learned, he states: (1) the belief in the Father as the one God; (2) as Jesus was righteous (*a tzaddik*), everyone who is like Him can be called son of God; and (3) the belief in prophetic inspiration, meaning that the soul of man is a part of the Divine and therefore cannot die. "And this is the basis of the whole Law." With this remark he ends his commentary.

{74} The quest for the Jesus of the New Testament.

For one who shows respect for the New Testament record, it is not easy to express an uncritical enthusiasm for the book. Soloveichik once dreamed about a *dat olamit*, a universal religion, as seen in a Jewish source from 1931; in this dream he was certainly not alone. Others dreamed it together with him and supported him in his work. In this dream Jesus was a prophet. Without any serious discussion of the complexity of the matter, Soloveichik simply states that such was decided at a church council in Jerusalem in 338 (cf. Matt. 11:6; 13:57). Many others, both Jews and Christians, have up to our own time pictured Jesus as a great Jewish prophet and tried to give Him a place among the great sons of Israel.

The question remains, "Was Jesus only *one* prophet among other prophets, only *one* messiah among other messiahs, only *one* son of God among other sons of God?" Naturally this is a question which involves faith. But going back to the New Testament sources, which sources Soloveichik claims that he alone has understood correctly, there should be no doubt that the New Testament authors give Jesus a totally different role than that claimed by Soloveichik.

Against this backdrop it is legitimate to raise the question as to whether *Kol Kore* is an acceptable "summons" to Hebrew-speaking Jews today, and whether the book can be used as an evangelistic tool. If it cannot (though of course it is legitimate to publish books for other purposes), this does not mean that it should not have been republished. From the point of view of research, the book is of interest. Details and observations may be found which may be of help for New Testament research. Nevertheless, I have grave doubts as to whether the book contributes to a greater understanding between Jews and Christians today, for it does not give a reliable New Testament picture about Jesus.

Every man of good will who has eyes with which to read may, regardless of his belief, object to how Soloveichik deals with New Testament sources, and may perhaps also object to some of his treatment of Rabbinic sources. When all is said and done, it is better to agree to disagree than to try to fabricate an agreement on untenable grounds. If the New Testament picture of Jesus must be the foundation for the evaluation of what is Christian belief, then the significance of Jesus cannot be reduced in the way Soloveichik does. He does challenge us, though, by claiming that Christians generally have too little knowledge of the Talmud and that Jews generally have too little

knowledge of the New Testament. This challenge should not go unheeded; nevertheless, other answers than those given by Soloveichik are needed.