

Christians or Jews? Early Transylvanian Sabbatarianism (1580–1621).

By Réka Tímea Újlaki-Nagy. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022. 292 pp.

An intense debate about the nature of God took place in Transylvania during the middle decades of the sixteenth century. Within an emerging Antitrinitarian movement, domestic voices and exiles living in Transylvania advocated a range of positions about how to worship the one true God. One key matter of disagreement concerned the question of whether adoration of Christ was required of the faithful. These debates were conducted in the context of nascent Antitrinitarian communities, most notably in Kolozsvár (today Cluj-Napoca, Romania). The ambition of those involved was not merely to establish an Antitrinitarian church as an institution in Transylvania but to revive Christianity on the basis of accurate Biblical teaching, while some sought to explore how Antitrinitarian Christianity might be reconciled with other monotheistic religions.

Újlaki-Nagy's excellent study focuses on one of the outcomes of these debates in the religious tradition known as Sabbatarianism. Újlaki-Nagy analyses this religious tradition from within and recaptures Sabbatarian beliefs and worship practices. This is no easy task, given the impact of centuries of persecution of Sabbatarians. Expelled from the Unitarian church, Sabbatarians were the targets of state persecution in the 1630s. The Reformed church supported this campaign against Sabbatarians and also sought to take advantage of this opportunity to undermine their rivals in the Unitarian church. Sabbatarian communities endured imprisonment, loss of property, and forced conversion. Reduced to a small remnant in some isolated villages, Sabbatarians were later targeted by the Habsburg authorities in the mid-eighteenth century, with soldiers and monks sent into Sabbatarian villages to force further conversions. A remaining Sabbatarian community survived in the village of Bözödújfalú (today Bezidu Nou, Romania) until the 1860s, when many converted to Judaism in the wake of the emancipation of Jews. In 1944, Sabbatarian-Jews were taken from their homes in Bözödújfalú to the ghetto in Marosvásárhely (today Târgu Mureş, Romania). Some people were released on the grounds that they were not of Jewish descent. This reversal was partly thanks to available scholarship on Sabbatarians which had been completed in the 1880s by the Neolog rabbi of Pest, Sámuel Kohn. Újlaki-Nagy notes that, even while in the Marosvásárhely ghetto, Sabbatarian-Jews were asked by others who were curious about their identity (“Hát maguk zsidók,” or “so are you Jewish?”) (p.253).

Újlaki-Nagy's inquiry focuses on the beliefs and religious practices of early Sabbatarian communities. The author begins by establishing the origins of the Sabbatarian movement in the confessional politics of the 1560s and 1570s. Antitrinitarian preachers claimed legal protection under the terms of the 1568 diet decision in favor of ministers who preached the Gospel according to their understanding of it. However, an Antitrinitarian church was not specifically named in Transylvanian laws on religious rights until 1595 (when it was described as "Arian"). A law against doctrinal innovation had been passed in 1571 with the aim of preventing the spread of non-adorantism within the Antitrinitarian community. However, this law failed to prevent ongoing debate about the nature and authority of Christ. Notably, Matthias Vehe-Glirius (educated at Heidelberg) came to teach in Kolozsvár, although he was soon expelled by the council. The leadership of the Antitrinitarian church after Ferenc Dávid's death supported a clear adorantist theology. Sabbatarians and other non-adorantists were able to remain under the umbrella of the Unitarian church until they were formally expelled in 1606. By that time, Sabbatarianism had taken root in communities on the lands of András Eőssi (who was influenced by the ideas of Vehe-Glirius), and Eőssi then transferred his lands and legacy to Simon Péchi in 1598.

Újlaki-Nagy's work is one of reconstruction of this persecuted religious tradition that adopted many Jewish practices. Újlaki-Nagy acknowledges the limits of what can be pieced together about early Transylvanian Sabbatarianism, and the author treads carefully where needed to avoid speculative commentary. The key surviving sources used by Újlaki-Nagy are manuscript collections (largely copies) of songs and prayers. There are three surviving collections of songs written before the 1620s with nine further collections copied after this period. Újlaki-Nagy focuses on about 90 songs from available manuscript sources which were likely written towards the end of the sixteenth century. Clear themes about the religious ideas prevailing within Sabbatarian communities emerge from these songs. Újlaki-Nagy highlights that Sabbatarians were convinced of the inspired and perfect character of the Old Testament. Moses was the ultimate figure of authority, and other Scriptural writings were seen by Sabbatarians through the lens of Mosaic teaching. The figure of Christ was identified as the expected Messiah, born to human parents and not to be adored in worship. Christ's death was not required for the benefit of the faithful. Sabbatarians viewed obedience to Mosaic law as the pathway to salvation, and they awaited a physical millennial kingdom.

Újlaki-Nagy explores the results of these beliefs in Sabbatarian openness to Jewish ritual practices. The balance of adoption and adaptation of Jewish ritual

amid some retention of Christian ritual goes to the heart of the complex character of early Sabbatarianism. Old Testament feasts inspired the structure and themes of Sabbatarian song collections. Celebrating Jewish feasts was not the result of Sabbatarians wanting to be similar to Jews. As Újlaki-Nagy argues, this was rather an expression of Sabbatarian desire “to be part of the covenant of the law, as they believed this to be the only way to salvation” (p.191). The number of songs written for the Sabbath suggests that was the day when meetings and services were held. Manuscript collections include songs to be sung to celebrate the new moon. There were songs for Passover which spoke to the hope of an anticipated messianic kingdom and songs of forgiveness and repentance to be sung on the Day of Atonement. These surviving songs offer evidence about Sabbatarian purity laws concerning the consumption of meat, the importance of fasting, and ritual bathing for women. Újlaki-Nagy emphasizes the importance of worship practices and ritual in sustaining Sabbatarian identity. The author concludes that “we find a rather strong rejection of the Christian ritual heritage on the one hand and an occasionally clumsy but nonetheless intense openness towards Jewish traditions” (p.236).

Early Sabbatarians did not conceive of themselves as “Judaizers,” a term used as a slur by their opponents. Sabbatarians looked to Jews as having knowledge of God that was essential for understanding the Scriptures. The failure of Jews to recognize Jesus as the Messiah was viewed by Sabbatarians as an error. However, Sabbatarians viewed Trinitarian Christians as having sinned by embracing idolatry. This Trinitarian mistake had contributed to the failure of Jews to recognize Jesus as Messiah. As they became part of the camp of Israel, Sabbatarians could contribute to overcoming this Jewish misunderstanding about Jesus as Messiah in advance of an expected messianic kingdom. Újlaki-Nagy’s clear analysis of complex sources draws out the context in which Sabbatarian ideas developed as well as the internal dynamics of this religious tradition in Transylvania. In the 1980s, the Ceaușescu regime decided to build a reservoir, and this led to the deliberate flooding of Bözödújfalú (a decision no doubt influenced by anti-Hungarian sentiment). The impact was that the last redoubt of Sabbatarianism was eradicated from the Transylvanian landscape. Újlaki-Nagy’s work has done great service in recovering and exploring the ideas and religious practices once followed in this lost Sabbatarian village.

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