

Some Remarks on *Toledot Yeshu* (*The Jewish Life of Jesus*) in Early Modern Europe

ABSTRACT

Toledot Yeshu (*The Jewish Life of Jesus*) is perhaps one of the most infamous retellings of the Gospel narrative of the pre-modern era. The present essay explores its reception and circulation among both Jews and Christians in the period before and after the first editions of the work, by J.C. Wagenseil in 1681 and J.J. Huldreich in 1705. The work was an object of fascination for early modern scholars of Judaism and was regularly invoked in discussions concerned with the Talmud and other Jewish books alleged to be blasphemous. For Jewish scholars, it was a source of embarrassment, although both the manuscript and the documentary evidence demonstrate that many Jews did view *Toledot Yeshu* as a culturally significant narrative, worthy of being transmitted. It is here suggested that *Toledot Yeshu*, with its direct and emotional cogency, combining history, humour and polemics, was indeed recognized by early modern Jews and crypto-Jews as a powerful story, through which they could articulate their identity.

KEYWORDS

Toledot Yeshu, Jesus, Polemics, Blasphemy, Reception

BIOGRAPHY

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WHAT IS TOLEDOT YESHU?

Toledot Yeshu (*The Jewish Life of Jesus*) is perhaps one of the most infamous retellings of the Gospel narrative of the pre-modern era.¹ It aroused the ire of anti-

1 I warmly thank Prof. William Horbury for his most valuable comments on this essay, as well as for a

Jewish polemicists, was a delight for anti-clerical propagandists and a subject of embarrassment for Jewish scholars. There is little doubt that the work – or rather different versions of the work – circulated throughout the early modern period, be it in writing or merely as hearsay. The text certainly has a longer history, yet most of the extant manuscripts were produced between the 16th and 19th centuries. Scholars have long debated whether *Toledot Yeshe* is an ancient or medieval work, but it is as much an antique tradition as it is a medieval and early modern text.² Whatever its origins, which remain somewhat obscure, the historical contexts in which the work was read, copied, transmitted, expanded and discussed (or disparaged) need to be considered, as well as the ways in which this ill-reputed yet widely popular narrative contributed to shaping both Jewish and Christian imaginations of Christian origins. Individual versions of the work and also the rich body of sources reflective of its circulation and reception do more than witness to a history of textual transmission; they also shed light on the cultural interactions that defined Jewish–Christian relations in the early modern world.³

Toledot Yeshe provides a “counter-history” of the life of Jesus and the origins of Christianity.⁴ The narrative has come down to us in a great variety of forms, and even the title under which it is most commonly known is not invariable.⁵ Building equally on Jewish and Christian traditions (both canonical and apocryphal), it offers a version of the story from an anti-Christian, polemical perspective. It thus presents Jesus as a mock prophet and a charlatan who per-

number of references he generously shared with me. All shortcomings are however mine. Further aspects of the early modern reception of *Toledot Yeshe* will be discussed in my book, forthcoming with Le Seuil.

On *Toledot Yeshe* see now Meerson/Schäfer 2014, with the reservations offered by Stökl Ben Ezra 2016. Other seminal studies include Krauss 1902; Horbury 1970; Schlichting 1982; Di Segni 1985. See also the essays gathered in Schäfer/Meerson/Deutsch 2011; Barbu/Deutsch, forthcoming.

2 See Horbury, forthcoming (b); Barbu 2018a.

3 I here use the notion of early modern Europe, as given in the title, in a somewhat flexible way, to cover a long period (c. 1400–1900) and allowing for some observations on the United States.

4 Funkenstein 1993; Biale 1999 and see below, section V.

5 Other titles include *Ma'ase Yeshe ha-Notsri* (*Story of Jesus the Nazarene*), *Gezarot Yeshe* (*Decrees of Jesus*), *Ma'ase Talui* (*Story of the Hanged One*). See the discussion in Horbury, forthcoming (b). Most of the extant texts can be divided into two main families, which for the sake of convenience I call the “Aramaic” and “Hebrew” *Toledot*-traditions – corresponding to Riccardo Di Segni’s “Pilate” and “Helena” groups respectively (Di Segni 1984, 1985, 29–42). While reflecting the presumed original languages of both traditions, my distinction is not simply linguistic, as texts from both traditions circulated in a number of other languages (e.g. Judeo-Arabic and Yiddish). The traditions doubtless co-existed for quite some time (with likely intersection and contamination) and were still recognized by one medieval commentator (Alfonso de Valladolid, previously Abner of Burgos) as two distinct “books”; see Barbu 2018b; Stökl Ben Ezra 2018. Yet the “Aramaic” tradition, widely diffused in the early Middle Ages, seems to have progressively disappeared in the following centuries. Most versions known to late medieval and early modern copyists and readers thus belong to the “Hebrew” tradition, which I therefore privilege in my summary of the work. For a different classification, see Meerson/Schäfer 2014, vol. 1, 28–39.

formed would-be miracles by resorting to “magic” (using either God’s ineffable name or “magical books” imported from Egypt), thus raising an army of gullible disciples. After a series of twists and turns worthy of a fantasy novel (including an aerial battle with Judas Iscariot), he is eventually captured by the rabbis, scourged in public and put to death. The story goes on to tell how his body was then summarily buried in a nearby garden until his disciples declared him resurrected, at which point it was unearthed, dragged through the streets and thrown into a cesspit – while his followers were exiled or massacred. Most versions of the narrative open with an account of Jesus’ conception, narrating how his mother committed adultery with a disreputable neighbour and, worse, while she was menstruating. The episode highlights Jesus’ double infamy: he is both an illegitimate and an impure child (*mamzer u-ben ha-niddah*) – and by extension, we may assume, so too Christianity is illegitimate and impure. The story often ends with the separation of Jews and Christians through the intervention of undercover rabbis whom the Christians know as Peter and Paul. They infiltrated the unruly crowd of Jesus’ disciples and provided them with the new laws and customs that would distinguish them from the Jews – de facto inventing a new and separate religion.⁶

CHRISTIAN READERS AND JEWISH SCRIBES

For Christian readers the story was understandably hard to take.⁷ The first editor of the work, the Altdorf professor of Oriental languages Johann Christoph Wagenseil, called it “the most impious and horrible thing ever committed to writing since the origins of man” and a “diabolical” book “defecated by the Devil”.⁸ Nevertheless, it also sparked a certain fascination, and as Wagenseil noted, Christian scholars had spared no effort in seeking to uncover this surreptitious book, which he himself eventually obtained “with much fatigue and at high cost”. In the previous centuries, Christian converts from Judaism had repeatedly referred to this “secret” booklet containing horrible blasphemies against Jesus and the Virgin; and medieval anti-Jewish polemicists, many of whom gained a second life in the age of print, mentioned this shameful story according to which the miracles of Christ had been performed with the ineffable name.⁹ By the time Wagenseil published the *Tela Ignea Satanae* (*Fiery Darts of Sa-*

6 On this story, see recently Gager/Stökl Ben Ezra 2015.

7 On the Christian reception of *Toledot Yeshe*, see Deutsch 1997, 2011; Horbury 2016 and forthcoming (a).

8 Wagenseil 1681, vol. 2, “Liber Toldos Jeschu,” 2, “Confutatio Libri Toldos Jeschu,” 1 [25], 8, 9, *passim*.

9 In particular the *Pharetra fidei contra Judeos super Talmuth*, which circulated widely in the late Middle Ages, first in manuscript and eventually in print; see Horbury, forthcoming (a), referring to Wolf 1715–1746, vol. 4, 567. I thank Prof. Horbury for having shared this reference with me. On the *Pharetra*, see Schreckenberger 1995, 335–36; Patschovsky 1992, 18–19; and Dahan 1999, who identifies Thibault

tan), in 1681, *Toledot Yeshu* had very much become an open secret, cited by no less than Martin Luther and frequently discussed by Christian Hebraists – even if mainly on the basis of extracts or summaries.¹⁰ Wagenseil’s edition was soon followed by another one, published in 1705 by the Swiss theologian Johann Jacob Huldreich. Both the Wagenseil and the Huldreich editions were widely cited and discussed in the 18th century. Thus the influential Protestant scholar and historian of the Jews Jacques Basnage sought to dispel the fear inspired by this and other “monstrous” works while noting that the narrative also preserved a kernel of truth “in the midst of its accumulation of fables and lies” – namely that Jesus had indeed performed miracles.¹¹ Or Voltaire, who went even further and, insisting on the work’s antiquity, claimed that *Toledot Yeshu*, however despicable, was perhaps more trustworthy than the canonical Gospels.¹² It comes as no surprise that in the wake of the Enlightenment, anti-Christian traditions such as *Toledot Yeshu* came to be appropriated by anti-clerical writers with a view to fostering their critique of religion and questioning the historical status of the biblical narrative.¹³

The subversive character of the narrative was fully recognized by those who copied and transmitted it. A number of manuscripts thus bear scribal indications that the work should be concealed lest Jews be exposed to the resentment of

of Sézanne as its author. The story was also known through Ramón Martí’s *Pugio fidei adversus Mauros et Judaeos* (1278), whose citations of the works were reproduced by Porchetus Salvaticus in the 14th century and Alfonso de Espina in the 15th century; Deutsch 2011, 289. The latter work was first printed in Strasbourg in 1471 and subsequently appeared in no fewer than seven editions between 1475 and 1525. Porchetus, whose *Victoria adversus impios Hebraeos* was printed in Paris in 1520, was the source of Martin Luther’s 1543 translation of the work. For further late medieval mentions of the work see Callsen/Knapp/Nieser/Pryzbilski 2003, 17–18. Petrus Niger, *Tractatus contra perfidos Judaeos de conditionibus veri Messiae* (1475) (quoted in Wolf 1715–1746, vol. 2, 1114, 1443, and see Deutsch 2011, 291), also provided the Hebrew name of the work (*Sefer Toldot Jehoschuah hanozeri*, i.e. *liber generationis Jesu*). Alfonso de Valladolid / Abner of Burgos and Thomas Ebendorfer cited the work in the 14th century and 15th century respectively, the latter even translating it into Latin, but their writings had only limited circulation; see the discussion in Barbu/Dahhaoui 2018. Knowledge of *Toledot Yeshu* also appears in a 1415 papal bull by Benedict XIII, *Etsi doctores gentium* (Simonsohn 1989, 593–602 [n. 538], at 595), whence it was cited by King Ferdinand I of Aragon in the wake of the disputation of Tortosa (cf. Feliu 1989, 243); and later in the ritual murder trials of Trent (1475) and Avila (1491), where Jews were accused of uttering blasphemies while staging the crucifixion and torturing a Christian child; see respectively Di Segni 1989 and Fita 1887, 88–89, with Horbury 1970, 69 and following.

10 Luther 1920, 573–648. For Luther, *Toledot Yeshu* showcased the absurdity of the rabbinic tradition as a whole, and as noted by Stephen Burnett, his attack was aimed as much at the dispersed Jewish communities of the imperial provinces as at rival theologians seeking to unearth theological riches from the Talmud and its medieval Jewish commentators, and thus flirting dangerously with “Judaism” (Burnett, forthcoming; cf. also Morgenstern 2016). See Kattermann 1938 on Luther’s use of Porchetus as well as von der Osten-Sacken 2002, sp. 184, n. 141 on his use of Anton Margaritha. I thank Prof. Burnett for his notes on this question. On Luther’s attitude towards the Jews, see now Nirenberg 2013, 246–269; Kaufmann 2018.

11 Basnage 1716, vol. 1, 14; vol. 5, 253–290, citation at 287.

12 See Barbu 2011.

13 See Wheeler and Foote 1885, with Lockshin 1993.

Christians. Thus in a manuscript copied around 1740, we read: “This booklet contains an orally transmitted tradition, from one person to another; it may be written, but not printed, due to our harsh exile. Beware of reading it before the youth, children, or lightheaded people and even more so before the uncircumcised who understand German.”¹⁴ One copyist asks his reader to forgive him his many errors as he wrote “in great haste and in the utmost secrecy”.¹⁵ For most of its history, especially after Jews came under increasing pressure in medieval Christendom from the 13th century on, *Toledot Yeshu* circulated somewhat undercover, as part of the Jews’ “hidden transcript” – to borrow James C. Scott’s words – that is as “a discourse that takes place ‘offstage’, (in principle) beyond direct observation by powerholders”, a discourse transmitted behind closed doors and voicing a critique of the dominant culture.¹⁶ This hidden transcript, which Scott claimed was inherent to every situation of social and political subordination, is what enables minority cultures to cope with this subordination and assert their own identity and social space, all the while resisting and challenging the dominant discourse. The problem arises, however, when the hidden transcript turns public. In 1429, a dozen Jews from the small town of Trévoux, on the border between France and Savoy, were interrogated after a copy of *Toledot Yeshu* was found in a Jewish home. Understandably, they all denied having any knowledge of the work except for the individual in whose house it had been found, who claimed that it had been copied a long time ago by a relative living far away and insisted that he had never shown it to anyone.¹⁷ Obviously no one wanted to be caught with this work, especially in a world in which Christian polemicists repeatedly accused Jews of conspiring against the church precisely by spreading secret “lies” and “blasphemies”.¹⁸ Even in the late 19th century, a Jewish publisher from New York could be thrown into jail under blasphemy charges for printing a Yiddish version of the work.¹⁹

14 Quoted from Deutsch 2011, 283. See further Krauss 1902, 10–11. The same warning appears in a number of manuscripts, as noted in Barbu/Dahhaoui 2018, n. 24.

15 Cf. Neubauer 1886, 405 (N° 2172), quoted by Horbury 1970, 8, n5.

16 Scott 1990, here at 4–5.

17 Loeb 1883; Barbu/Dahhaoui 2018.

18 The “secret” character of *Toledot Yeshu* was thus noted already in the 15th century by the Viennese cleric Thomas Ebendorfer; cf. Callsen/Knapp/Nieser/Pryzbilski 2003, 137. In general, see Carlebach 1996.

19 The case had been brought into court by the notorious Anthony Comstock. The publisher, Meyer Chinski, was arrested on 30 June 1897, released on bail and eventually acquitted on 6 January 1898. See *Record of Persons Arrested under the Auspices of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice*, vol. III, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, MSS34587; MMC-3288; *Twenty Fourth Annual Report of the Society for the Suppression of Vice* (New York, 18 January 1898), 22–23. I thank Amy Werbel for kindly sending me a copy of these documents. See also the Special Session court docket, 6 January 1898. A Yiddish account of the trial was published that year by Chinski’s lawyer, Solomon Rosenthal, under the title *Victory [Nizzahon] in Special Session*, with a full-fledged defence of the incriminated work, aiming to preserve Jews from the influence of Christian missionaries. The case, to which I intend to return in a

DISCLAIMING OR RECLAIMING THE TRADITION

Jewish scholars of the early *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the 19th-century “Science of Judaism”) explicitly disowned this ill-reputed work, calling it “tasteless” and “miserable”, a “spurious and mischievous” book, a “pile of dump in a dark corner of Jewish literature” or even an “invention of the anti-Semites”.²⁰ Only a few explicitly defended it as a reaction to Christian persecution or dared consider it “harmless” when compared to Christian attacks on Jews and Judaism.²¹ In the 18th century, Moses Mendelsohn had already firmly asserted (echoing Wagenseil) that *Toledot Yeschu* was “a miscarriage from the times of legends” and recognized as such by each and every Jew.²² And a little more than a century earlier, the Venetian rabbi Leone Modena had called it “a lie and a mockery”, adding that it was a disgrace for Jews to believe in such nonsense.²³ Obviously such dismissals also aimed to deflect accusations of blasphemy and the aura of scandal surrounding the narrative since the Middle Ages.

So, for example, Zalman Zvi of Aufhausen wrote his *Yudischer Theriak* (*Jewish Antidote*), published in 1615, as an “antidote” to the calumnies spread by a Christian convert from Judaism, Samuel Friederich Brenz, and roundly replied with regard to *Toledot Yeschu* that “in all his life [he had] never seen such a book”, accusing Brenz of having written it himself in order “to beat and slander us with it”.²⁴ And Josel of Rosheim, the Jewish delegate at the Habsburg court, in a letter of July 1543 addressed to the City Council of Strasbourg requested that Martin Luther’s book *Vom Schem Hamphoras und vom Geschlecht Christi* (*Of the Ineffable Name and the Generation of Christ*), which included a German translation of *Toledot Yeschu*, be prohibited on account of the violence the Reformer’s anti-Jewish slurs had already caused in a number of German cities.²⁵ Josel insisted that the Jews had little if any knowledge of the blasphemous story

future publication, was also mentioned in a number of contemporary newspapers; see e.g. the “New York Letter” in *The Jewish Chronicle* (19 November 1897). On Comstock and his campaign for public morality, see now Werbel 2018.

- 20 Graetz 1853–1870, vol. 10, 302, Steinschneider 1850, 409; Karpeles 1909, vol. 1, 325; Neubauer 1888, 81–82; Schechter 1900, 415; Porges 1902, 173; 177. Richard Gottheil (1897), commenting on the Chinski case (see above, n. 19), noted that he had “seldom read a viler production” (i.e. *Toledot Yeschu*) and hoped that the punishment meted out to its publisher would be “severe enough to deter him from ever attempting to write again in a similar strain”. For a discussion, see also Horbury, forthcoming (a), with reference also to earlier examples.
- 21 Jellinek 1877, vol. 6, x; Karpeles 1902, vol. 2, 165: “Die vielfach entstellenden Sagen, die die Grundlage dieser kleinen Schrift bilden, sind aber doch immer sehr harmlos den scharfen Angriffen gegenüber, die das Judentum schon in den Tagen der Kirchenväter erfahren hatte.”
- 22 Mendelssohn 1974, 362, and cf. Wagenseil 1681, “Confutatio Libri Toldos Jeschu,” 1 [25].
- 23 Modena 1960, 43 (III, 9). See Fishman 2003; Facchini, forthcoming.
- 24 See now Faierstein 2016, here at 48–49 (I, 7).
- 25 Fraenkel-Goldschmidt 2006, 398–417. See above, n. 10.

Luther referred to, which he himself knew only because a Christian friend, the Hebraist Wolfgang Capito, had shown him a manuscript of the work, which he had received along with other Hebrew books from Constantinople. Citing Capito's opinion that similar things were found in no other Jewish book, he argued that the work had likely been written "in ancient times" by some unknown author and hardly reflected the opinion of "the community as a whole".²⁶

Despite these claims, there is ample evidence that *Toledot Yeshu* did circulate among Jews, and that the latter did not regard it a peripheral tradition. As a matter of fact, early modern Jewish scribes were no less eager than Christian Hebraists to copy the work when they got hold of it – even if their purpose was obviously different. In certain cases, they could even turn to the printed editions. All the extant manuscripts of the Huldreich version, for instance, depend on the printed text, witnessing to the Jews' interest in reclaiming the narrative in contexts where original Hebrew manuscripts were perhaps difficult to find.²⁷ In the Netherlands, it seems the Huldreich and the Wagenseil *Toledot* texts were combined and translated into Yiddish along with whatever material was available in manuscript in order to produce a more coherent version of the story.²⁸ It was likely also from the Netherlands that the so-called Slavic or *Tam u-Muad* versions, which expanded on the earlier tradition and turned the story of Mary's adultery into full-fledged novel, started to spread.²⁹

Both the Netherlands and the Italian peninsula witness to an intense revival of polemical activity in the 17th and 18th centuries – presumably under the influence of Spanish and Portuguese Jews who had imported the longstanding Iberian tradition of engaging in fierce scriptural polemics with Christianity.³⁰ In

26 Fraenkel-Goldschmidt 2006, 411–413. That *Toledot Yeshu* was seen as apocryphal by the Jews themselves had been argued just a few years earlier by the Humanist scholar Johannes Reuchlin (1999, 29), referring to Paul of Burgos, *Scrutinium scripturarum* II, 6 (Burgos 1591, 384).

27 Meerson/Schäfer 2014, vol. 1, 25, vol. 2, 238–240; see Yoffie 2011. See especially Ms. Frankfurt-am-Main, Universitätsbibliothek, Heb 249 (dated 1812), f. 2r: "I already lost hope to find a (single) word written by our people concerning the story of Yeshu ha-Notsri, since all the nation is wandering in darkness, and there is no one who knows a thing about it, little or big, and who can testify against the Christians and against their numerous books full of all the virtues and greatness of Yeshu. But when my friend Greenberg returned from Leipzig, he showed me a copy from a booklet that he had found in the local library; the name of the book is 'The Generation of Yeshu ha-Notsri' I was very happy to find some (evidence), and I asked him to make a copy for me too. Thus, here is the book, published in the year 1705, and kept in the National Library of Leipzig under the number G336" (quoted in Meerson/Schäfer 2014, vol. 2, 240).

28 See Michels 2017 and forthcoming. This seems to have been the case for Leib ben Oser, whose Yiddish text of *Toledot Yeshu* is followed by a biography of Sabbatai Zvi and Yosef della Reina, as if to underline the link between the three pseudo-messianic figures. For an edition and translation of that text, see Rosenzweig, forthcoming. For the legend of Yosef della Reina as preserved in this manuscript, see now Baumgarten 2018.

29 Schlichting 1982.

30 For the Netherlands, see Popkin 1992, 1994. For Italy, see Lasker 1993; Horbury 1993. On Jewish anti-Christian polemics in early modern Italy, see the research project directed by Prof. Károly Dániel Dobos at the University of Budapest, <http://www.jcrpolemicsinitaly.at>.

Italy, the work was abridged and copied alongside medieval anti-Christian polemics or appended to new polemical writings such as Judah Briel's *Hassagot al sippure ha-sheluchim* (*Criticisms of the Writings of the Apostles*), apparently in order to illuminate the historical context of the Christian Gospels.³¹ In the German lands, *Toledot* manuscripts were perhaps more scarce, although recurring references to the narrative in the writings of Christians converts from Judaism suggest that it was widely known.³² An autograph manuscript preserved at the Bodleian Library, in Oxford, does show that despite his official rebuttals, Josel of Rosheim himself copied extracts of *Toledot Yeshu* – maybe from the Constantinople manuscript Capito had shown him – for the sake of transmitting this ancient “oral tradition” to future generations.³³

At the same time, the tradition also moved eastwards, following the movement of Jewish populations in the early modern era, as suggested by the significant number of manuscripts copied in eastern Europe, or even in the Caucasus, in the 18th and 19th centuries.³⁴ The best manuscript exemplar of the standard medieval version of the work, the so-called Strasbourg text of *Toledot Yeshu*, first published by Samuel Krauss in 1902, was copied in Eastern Galicia in the 17th or 18th century by a Karaite scribe, confirming that the narrative was a matter of interest for both Rabbanites and Karaite Jews.³⁵ It was via eastern Europe that the work eventually also reached the United States.³⁶

- 31 See the discussion in Horbury 1970: 153–169; Meerson/Schäfer 2014, vol. 2, 192–195. A third of the extant Hebrew manuscripts were produced in Italy; see Barbu, forthcoming.
- 32 Cf. Deutsch 1997; Carlebach 2006. Christian converts from Judaism describing the customs of their former coreligionists regularly claimed that the Jews recited *Toledot Yeshu* on the eve of Christmas as a way to instill a fear of Jesus among Jewish children. See the sources quoted in Shapiro 1999; and for an analysis, see also Scharbach 2013. The accusation first appears in Ebendorfer's prologue to his Latin translation of *Toledot Yeshu*; see Callsen/Knapp/Nieser/Pryzbilski 2003, 36–37.
- 33 Ms. Oxford, Bodleian, Opp. 712, f. 157a, with the following preamble, quoted in Fraenkel-Goldschmidt 2006, 412 and Carlebach 2006, 456: “This is the book of the judgment of Yeshu ben Pandira. Although it cannot be found in German lands, I copied it as a novelty, and who can blame me for this. It concerns what happened in ancient times and great things that our predecessors received by oral tradition. It is not fitting for me to write things that were not written or did not happen: I have not refrained from writing the truth in order that it should last for many days.”
- 34 For a list of manuscripts, see Meerson/Schäfer 2014, vol. 2, 1–48. A number of additional witnesses should, however, be added to that list. I thank Michael Krupp for sharing with me a list of the manuscripts in his possession.
- 35 Krauss 1902, 38–50. See now Meerson/Schäfer 2014, vol. 1, 167–184 (English) and vol. 2, 79–95 (Hebrew). On this manuscript, see Horbury 2011; Stöckl Ben Ezra, forthcoming. On the circulation of the Strasbourg version in the Middle Ages, see Barbu/Dahhaoui 2018. That polemical material circulated between the Karaite and Rabbanite communities in that context is further illustrated by Isaac of Troki's *Hizzuk Emunah*; see Miriam Benfatto's contribution in the present volume.
- 36 Cf. the case mentioned above, n. 19 and Schlichting 1982, 17–19. In addition to the two Brooklyn prints in Hebrew mentioned by Schlichting, I have found a copy of the Yiddish text published by Meyer Chinsky (1897?) under the title *Yeshu ha-Notzri, oder Yosef Pandre* in the library of the Centre for Jewish History, New York (YIVO Library, Main Stack Collection 000004708 a).

A POLEMICAL NARRATIVE AND ITS FUNCTIONS

It seems *Toledot Yeshu* did have an important role among early modern Jews. I have explored elsewhere the normative dimension of the narrative.³⁷ Even if outrageous to some, it was identified by others as an ancestral tradition shedding a different but doubtless more trustworthy light on the historical events that led to the birth of Christianity. The careful datings provided at the beginning of a number of versions, contesting those found in the Gospels, certainly witness to the historical preoccupations of the scribes who copied them. As noted by David Biale, counter-history is also a way to reclaim history, to argue that we possess the true narrative.³⁸ Even if they upturn the official story, counter-histories are no less true than the narratives they subvert; and the question is not so much whether the story is true but rather to whom it is true. And also: when, where and why? Truth is a matter of perspective, if not a matter of power. Counter-histories reflect the struggle between competing social groups, entangled in asymmetrical relations of power and thus possessing unequal authority to speak the truth and decide what counts as true and what does not. The wide dissemination of *Toledot Yeshu* and the constant process of embellishment, adaptation and interpretation that accompanied the reception and transmission of the narrative in the early modern period bear witness to the Jews' enduring need to have an answer to the Christian narrative of history – and to the place and role ascribed to Jews in that narrative – and to reinstate what they perceived as historical truth.

Ultimately, in relating how Christianity came into being, the narrative is saying something about what Jews are and what Christians are and what their respective places should be. Such a reading of history, providing a subversive account of Jesus' conception, miracles and resurrection, could only be viewed as polemical by its Christian readers. Yet this is only one side of the story, for *Toledot Yeshu* is as much a narrative about Jesus and the origins of Christianity as it is a story about adultery, magic, heresy, norm and anomaly. Beyond its polemical aspects, the story is also, if not primarily, a story that speaks to Jews as much as it answers Christians. And while *Toledot Yeshu* contributed to shaping Jewish perceptions of Christianity and allowed Jews to make sense of Christianity's founding narrative, it also provided Jews with a way to vent the pressure exerted by the dominant religion – inter alia through mockery and laughter.

It must be noted that however polemical, the story was also meant to entertain.³⁹ Thus, while in certain contexts the work was copied together with what

37 Barbu 2018b; see also Latteri 2015.

38 Biale 1999, 134–135.

39 So Cuffel 2015.

can properly be called anti-Christian polemics (such as, for instance, Profiat Duran's *Kelimat ha-Goyim* or the medieval *Nizzahon Yashan*), it could also be included in collections of tales (*ma'asyiot*) or alongside other popular and witty narratives such as *Alphabet of Ben Sira* or *Massekhet Purim*.⁴⁰ In the Netherlands, where Jews enjoyed somewhat more freedom to express their religious sentiments, Yiddish interpretations of *Toledot Yeshe* were perhaps even performed within the community. Evi Michels recently pointed to an 18th-century Yiddish manuscript dividing the narrative into a series of "acts" (*bedrijf*), while another is adorned with a frontispiece showing a stage curtain.⁴¹ Sarit Kattan Gribetz similarly wonders whether the story was not indeed read aloud or performed on specific occasions such as Easter or Christmas, as anti-Jewish authors often claimed, to vent communal anxieties and celebrate the demise of the evil Jesus⁴² – and perhaps also for the amusement (and edification) of Jewish children.

Toledot Yeshe is as playful as it is polemical. There is much to say about the role of humour and irony in the hidden transcript, and while humour is notoriously difficult to trace historically, many episodes in the extant *Toledot* tradition unequivocally function as gags.⁴³ Such is the case with the story of Jesus' conception, which narrates how Mary's neighbour Pandera was able to pass as her husband (or fiancé) and lie with her (in effect, rape her).⁴⁴ When Mary's husband returns and in his turn seeks to embrace his wife, she rebukes him, claiming they already had sex and leaving the husband perplexed. The scene and its witty dialogue are obviously closer to Boccaccio or the medieval fabliaux, full of wanton erotic jokes, than to solemn religious disputations, and as such were presumably meant to prompt the audience to laugh.⁴⁵

HUMOUR IN THE HULDREICH VERSION

The late medieval Huldreich version, which in many respects departs from the standard tradition, is punctuated by such humorous snippets.⁴⁶ Here Mary is described as an exceptionally beautiful woman who is locked up by her husband "lest the villains whore with her". Passing under her window, Pandera rescues her with a ladder and they run away to live in adultery. When he discovers his spurious origins, their son, Jesus, kills his father and tortures his mother before

40 See Yassif 2011; Horbury 2013. Note however that the evidence mainly comes from Oriental manuscripts.

41 Michels 2017 and forthcoming.

42 Kattan Gribetz 2011, 176–179, and see above, n. 32 for further references.

43 See the studies gathered in Classen 2010. In particular, see Sewell 2010.

44 Literary parallels are explored in Di Segni 1985; see further Barbu 2018 (b), 94, n80.

45 See however Sewell 2010 on humour in *Nizzahon Yashan*.

46 On the Huldreich text, see Yoffie 2011.

escaping to Galilee. There he starts gathering disciples, baptizing them with the mysterious “waters of Bolet”, which prevent their hair from growing, so that they can be recognized as “Jesus’ men” – an evident pun on the clerical tonsure. In the course of their adventures, Jesus and his closest disciples get lost in the desert. Starving and exhausted, they have to beg for water and bread. The people they come across mock the pretended wonder-maker who cannot “do a miracle to save [him]self and to find water”. A man asks Jesus to dance in exchange for some bread as well as his donkey – and Jesus complies. At every stage of his career, Jesus thus appears as a pitiable loser, eliciting more ridicule and scorn than admiration.

Consider the following episode, where Jesus, Peter and Judas eventually find a hostel in the middle of the desert and ask the hostess for food:

The landlady said, “I do not have anything but a roast goose.” Jesus took the goose, put it before them, and said, “This goose is not enough for three people. Let us go to sleep and the one who will dream a good dream shall eat the goose.” They lay, and at midnight Judas rose up and ate the goose. They rose up in the morning and Peter said, “I dreamed that I sat near the throne of the son of God Almighty.” And Jesus said, “I am the son of God Almighty, and I dreamed that you were sitting with me, and look, in my dream, I am better than (you in) yours, so the goose is mine to eat.” And Judas said, “I, in my dream, ate the goose.” Jesus looked for the goose and did not find it because Judas had eaten it.⁴⁷

It is difficult not to read this episode as a joke. Yet it aroused the ire of the pious editor of the text (i.e. Huldreich), who in all seriousness commented: “This fable is utterly inept and worthy of its [anonymous] author”, who thus turned the New Testament account of the feeding of the many into a “tasteless story in which it is figured that Jesus was not even able to quench the hunger of three men with a whole goose”.⁴⁸

CONCLUSION: REPLACING TOLEDOT YESHU IN ITS CONTEXTS

For all its mockery and wit, *Toledot Yeshu* does offer a serious attack on the Christian myth, and on the fundamental tenets of Christianity. Mockery is indeed a powerful form of polemic. The conception narrative thus rebuffs the claim that Jesus was the son of God born from an unsullied virgin. The description of his would-be miracles as mere magical tricks denies his alleged divine

47 Meerson/Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1, 312 (English) and vol. 2, 245–246 (Hebrew), and see the references in vol. 1: 38, 36n: the episode is inspired by the medieval *Gesta Romanorum*. Huldreich translates the “goose” (here written אַוּז) by *anserculus*, “gosling,” which would indeed make more sense in the context.

48 Huldreich 1705, 53–54, 1n.

powers, while the account of his death, burial and post-mortem treatment strongly contradicts the belief in Jesus' resurrection and the very meaning of the crucifixion. *Toledot Yeshu* does not only make fun of Jesus; it also offers a calculated response to Christian dogma. Despite both Jewish and Christian commentators calling it nonsensical twaddle, it seems that the narrative did allow Jews to articulate their identity through a powerful and effective anti-Christian discourse. Inquisitorial records from either the Italian peninsula or the Spanish provinces give us a glimpse of how much that discourse remained in force also in crypto-Jewish circles, and how the Jewish story of Jesus, along with other remnants of Jewish identity, continued to be shared among converso families even decades after their conversion.⁴⁹

The early modern contexts in which ancient or medieval traditions were copied and transmitted are not often given much consideration. Yet the early modern manuscripts in which they have come down to us are not merely witnesses to the textual history of a work; they are cultural artefacts that need to be replaced and understood within the context or contexts in which they were produced and consumed. The history of *Toledot Yeshu* can tell us much about these contexts, and, conversely, the historical contexts in which the narrative circulated can tell us much about its functions and uses and about its effects. *Toledot Yeshu* raises stimulating questions about the ways in which Jews, as a minority group in Western Christendom, perceived their cultural environment and actively challenged the foundational narrative of Christianity. *Toledot Yeshu* is quite different from the more sophisticated Jewish polemics circulating in late medieval and early modern Europe, such as Isaac Troki's *Hizzuk Emunah* (*Faith Strengthened*), which offered a detail and systematic critique of Christian sources and arguments.⁵⁰ Yet this narrative, with its direct and emotional cogency, and the role of this narrative in allowing Jews to preserve and uphold their identity in the face of Christian hegemony should not be underestimated – as its early modern readers doubtless recognized.

49 See Barbu, forthcoming. In some cases the narrative seems to have been used to try and convince Jews who had converted to Christianity to return their earlier faith; see Barbu 2018b, 83 and the references cited there. On *Toledot Yeshu* among conversos, see also Gutwirth 1996; Ben-Shalom 1999.

50 Popkin 2007; Benfatto 2018. The classical treatment of Jewish anti-Christian polemics is offered by Lasker 1977. On their influence in the early Enlightenment, see also Popkin 1992; Tarantino 2007, 95 and following, as well as the bibliography cited there.

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