

MIRIAM GOLDSTEIN

A Judeo-Arabic Parody  
of the Life of Jesus

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Miriam Goldstein

A Judeo-Arabic Parody  
of the Life of Jesus

The *Toledot Yeshu* Helene Narrative

Mohr Siebeck

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## Chapter 1

### *Toledot Yeshu* – An Introduction

The polemical anti-Christian narrative *Toledot Yeshu* (henceforth, TY), is the earliest freestanding composition written by Jews in response to central tenets of Christianity. Composed in Aramaic at some point during late antiquity or the early Islamic period, the narrative is a subversive and parodical rendering of central aspects of the life of Jesus. The work circulated among Jews over a wide geographical span throughout the medieval and modern periods. TY existed in two major forms, a “short” version and a “long” version, and each version has numerous subtypes. The shorter narrative is called the “Pilate” narrative in scholarship, named after the governor who ruled at the time according to that narrative; the longer narrative is called the “Helene” narrative after the female ruler who features in it prominently.<sup>1</sup>

This narrative was, not surprisingly, popular among Jews living in Christian Europe, and a recent project has made available some seventy Hebrew manuscripts of the work that circulated in Europe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Perhaps somewhat less expected is the extensive Near Eastern attestation of the work during this period: Nearly thirty manuscripts in Hebrew and Aramaic deriving from the Near East were identified in the same Hebrew manuscript project.<sup>2</sup>

But even more surprising is the fact that numerous fragments of TY in Judeo-Arabic are preserved in manuscript collections originating in the Near East, both in the Cairo Genizah as well as in the Firkovich collection of the Russian National Library. The former, a trove preserved in a synagogue in Old Cairo, gained fame toward the end of the nineteenth century when its fragments were acquired and divided up among major libraries, most notably that of the University of Cambridge.<sup>3</sup> The Firkovich collection was gathered during the second

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<sup>1</sup> This categorization was initially formulated by Riccardo Di Segni, and these appellations have been adopted in recent research. See Riccardo Di Segni, *Il vangelo del ghetto* (Rome: Newton Compton, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> For the printed publication resulting from this project, see Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014). The internet version is accessible for registered users at <https://online.mohr.de/toledot> (accessed August 16, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> For detailed description of the gradual discovery and acquisition of this genizah, that of the Ben ‘Ezra synagogue in Old Cairo, see Rebecca J.W. Jefferson, *The Cairo Genizah and*

half of the nineteenth century by the learned, inspired and determined Karaite collector and community leader Abraham Firkovich (d. 1874), and is currently held at the Russian National Library. These TY fragments, originating in some twenty distinct manuscripts, represent copies of TY that circulated in Judeo-Arabic from the eleventh century until the sixteenth or seventeenth century, and are testimony to the interest in this work among the Jews of the Near East.

The Jews of the Near East during that period were living in a Muslim-ruled milieu, one that sanctioned the existence of non-Muslim religions such as Judaism and Christianity, and one that governed adherents of these “book religions” with a code of laws known as the *dhimma*, protecting their rights of worship, but at the same time anchoring them to a variety of social and communal limitations.<sup>4</sup> This multireligious environment, with its legal framework sanctioning a variety of religious beliefs and practices, contrasted greatly to life in Christian Europe, with its pressures to convert and its marked intolerance of Jewish practice.<sup>5</sup> It makes sense that Jews in Europe would have read, listened to, copied, and transmitted a work like TY. But why would the Jews of the Near East have been so interested in reading a parody of the life of Jesus?

This book is one way to tell the story of that interest. Its centerpiece is the Judeo-Arabic texts of the “Life Story of Jesus,” in particular the various renditions of the Helene narrative. Each manuscript text of that particular narrative is presented in the original Judeo-Arabic, accompanied by an annotated translation in English (chapters 6 and 8). Approximately half of these represent a single family of Judeo-Arabic texts that I refer to as the late Mediterranean Judeo-Arabic recension (LMJAR), and I devote a specialized introduction to this family of texts and its unique characteristics (chapter 7).

In the remainder of this chapter (chapter 1), I will set out the background of the formation and development of TY, for the first time including new research in Judeo-Arabic, discoveries that change the way the story of TY should be told. These new texts (introduced in chapter 2) will serve scholars of TY, as well as historians and literary historians of the Near East, and they will also raise fruitful questions for readers interested in the European attestation of TY. For readers not familiar with medieval Judeo-Arabic literature, I provide an introduction to this body of literature and how it developed over a period of more than a millennium, with specific focus on the TY texts represented over this time (chapters 3 and 4). Finally, I will also address a number of the major questions raised by this

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*the Age of Discovery in Egypt: The History and Provenance of a Jewish Archive* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> See on this, for example, Fred Astren, “Dhimma,” in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman A. Stillman (Leiden: Brill, 2010), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1878-9781-ejiw-all>.

<sup>5</sup> On this topic, see Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

extensive Near Eastern attestation of TY, most importantly, why this parodical narrative had such a long life in the Near East under Muslim rule (chapter 5).

In my study of the Judeo-Arabic versions of the TY Helene narrative, I focus on illuminating the broad picture of the development of TY, including the fundamental piece that has been missing until now – approximately a millennium of textual and narrative development among Arabic-speaking Jews, significantly predating the appearance of the TY Helene manuscripts preserved in Europe that have been the focus of research over the past decades. I also discuss the TY manuscripts in the wider literary and cultural context in which they play a role: Judeo-Arabic literature, as well as Mamluk and Ottoman literature. I compare the Judeo-Arabic versions of TY Helene to the Hebrew versions to some extent, in chapter 2 as well as in chapters 6 and 8 where the Judeo-Arabic texts are presented, but the majority of the comparative textual work is work for another project. Specific literary and theological analyses of the Judeo-Arabic texts presented in this work are mentioned here but not discussed in full, as they appear in earlier articles that I have published.

### 1. *An Anti-Passion Story: The Pilate Narrative*

The earliest evidence of the existence of the TY narrative, in the view of many researchers, is an anonymous work focused on the trial and execution of Jesus (henceforth referred to as Yeshu, in the context of the TY narrative). This early work was known as *Gzar dina de-Yeshu* (The sentencing of Yeshu).<sup>6</sup> Often referred to as the Pilate narrative after the ruler who sentenced Yeshu to death, this narrative of TY was originally composed in Aramaic. Scholars of the text have proposed widely varying dates of origin, ranging from the second century CE through the early Islamic period, although in recent years, consensus has centered around a view situating the work somewhere in late antiquity, or at the latest, around the time of the rise of Islam.<sup>7</sup>

The Pilate narrative of TY incorporates certain key elements from earlier traditions relating to Jesus. These include the echoes of talmudic allusions to the birth of Jesus, the incorporation of the “name” narrative of Jesus’ disciples from the Talmud, and finally, allusions to Jesus’ questionable student-teacher relation-

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<sup>6</sup> See Gideon Bohak, “Jesus the Magician in the ‘Pilate’ Recension of *Toledot Yeshu*,” in *Toledot Yeshu in Context*, ed. Daniel Barbu and Yaacov Deutsch (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 86.

<sup>7</sup> The most current overview of questions of dating, along with a summary and citations of earlier writing on the topic, is provided in Daniel Barbu and Yaacov Deutsch, “Reading *Toledot Yeshu* in Context,” in *Toledot Yeshu in Context*, ed. Daniel Barbu and Yaacov Deutsch (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 6.

ship with the sages, especially with Yehoshu‘a b. Perahya.<sup>8</sup> These traditional elements are shaped into a new freestanding narrative that follows Yesu from trial to execution. Yesu is arrested, interrogated, and put on trial; after attempting miracles such as the creation of a stone fetus in Caesar’s daughter, he is sentenced to death. He takes flight but is downed by a Jewish hero whose identity varies in the texts, and is in the end executed and buried, following which his body is dishonorably exhumed to be dragged through the streets.

In its aggressive tone and its incorporation of numerous texts from the Talmud that verge on polemic, this narrative likely emerged from a charged environment, although its exact location of origin is unclear. Willem Smelik and Michael Sokoloff have presented analyses locating the Aramaic of the narrative alternately in the Byzantine Levant or in Babylonia.<sup>9</sup> The narrative is anonymous, as were many Jewish texts from the period of late antiquity and the early Islamic period.<sup>10</sup>

The earliest surviving manuscripts of the Pilate narrative postdate even the most conservative and late estimates of the text’s composition by a number of centuries. These early documents consist of undated Aramaic manuscripts that are likely from the eleventh century, preserved in the collections of the Cairo Genizah. All told, five Aramaic manuscripts of the Pilate narrative are attested, likely dating between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries on the basis of their paleography. The first to focus on these manuscripts was William Horbury, in his dissertation completed in 1970, and since then, these Aramaic manuscripts have been studied by Yaacov Deutsch and Gideon Bohak and have been republished by Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer. Three Hebrew manuscript

<sup>8</sup> On the birth of Jesus, see BT Shabb. 104b (preserved only in uncensored versions of the Talmud). On the “name” narrative, see BT Sanh. 43a; see also Gideon Bohak, “A New Genizah Fragment of *Toledot Yesu* in Aramaic,” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 85 (2018): 647. On the student-teacher relationship, see BT Sanh. 107b and BT Sotah 47a. The full version of these episodes is preserved only in uncensored manuscript versions of the Talmud. For discussion of these and other descriptions of Jesus in the Talmud, as well as the censorship of such passages, see Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> See Willem F. Smelik, “The Aramaic Dialect(s) of the Toldot Yesu Fragments,” *Aramaic Studies* 7 (2009): 39–73; Michael Sokoloff, “The Date and Provenance of the Aramaic *Toledot Yesu* on the Basis of Aramaic Dialectology,” in *Toledot Yesu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited: A Princeton Conference*, ed. Peter Schäfer, Yaacov Deutsch, and Michael Meerson (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 13–26. See also the comments in Bohak, “Jesus the Magician in the ‘Pilate’ Recension of *Toledot Yesu*,” 89.

<sup>10</sup> Conceptions of composition and authorship among Jewish scholars underwent a transformation during the ninth and tenth centuries. A traditional and long-held emphasis on the oral transmission of knowledge and a tendency to anonymous or pseudonymous creation was replaced by a growing trend toward organized recorded compositions created by declared authors, for the most part in Judeo-Arabic. This gradual transition is aptly described in detail in Rina Drory, *The Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts at the Beginning of the Tenth Century*, [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me’uhad, 1988); Rina Drory, *Models and Contacts: Arabic Literature and Its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

fragments of the Pilate narrative have also been identified, likely dating to the thirteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

Judeo-Arabic manuscripts of the Pilate narrative are attested from a relatively early period as well, in collections originating in the Cairo Genizah. At least three manuscript fragments are attested as early as the eleventh century, and given the variety among them, it is likely that the narrative circulated even earlier. Gideon Bohak has carried out insightful comparative work among these early Pilate fragments, demonstrating clear textual connections between the Aramaic and the Judeo-Arabic fragments. The connections between the fragments are on the level of content – they share nearly identical plot elements in both languages and, more significantly, can be aligned on a detailed linguistic level. Some of the Judeo-Arabic Pilate fragments are linguistically dependent on the Aramaic fragments and were apparently translated from them. In contrast, no direct connection appears to exist between the Aramaic Pilate fragments and the Hebrew fragments.<sup>12</sup>

The circulation described above is a strictly Near Eastern one, entirely in Hebrew characters. The first European references to the Pilate narrative of TY originate in non-Jewish circles. This early medieval Christian testimony suggests that this TY narrative was circulating in southern France at least a century prior to its earliest manuscript attestation in the Near East (although even the latest estimates regarding the Middle Eastern origins of TY in Aramaic predate this European Christian testimony). The ninth-century bishop of Lyons, Agobard, references a number of traditions identified with TY in a letter, *De Judaicis superstitionibus* (On the Jewish superstitions), addressed to King Louis, which he authored with two of his fellow bishops during the first half of the

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<sup>11</sup> The Aramaic Pilate manuscripts are the following: Cambridge CUL T-S Misc. 35.87, Cambridge CUL T-S Misc. 35.88, New York JTS 2529.1, St. Petersburg RNL Evr. 105.9, Manchester Rylands B3791, and two fragments originating in the same manuscript, New York JTS 2529.2 and Cambridge CUL T-S Misc. 298.56. The Hebrew representatives of the Pilate narrative are a pair of fragments originating in the same manuscript copy (Paris Mosseri 1.81 and Cambridge CUL T-S NS 329.820) as well as New York JTS 8998, which includes two different versions of the Pilate narrative in Hebrew. For the most up-to-date listing and examination of these Pilate fragments, which corrects a number of earlier categorizations and datings, see Bohak, “New Genizah fragment.” Bohak also presents a comparison of the Judeo-Arabic and Aramaic fragments in Bohak, “Jesus the Magician in the ‘Pilate’ Recension of *Toledot Yeshu*.” Earlier studies include Yaacov Deutsch, “New Evidence of Early Versions of *Toledot Yeshu*,” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 69 (2000): 177–97; William Horbury, “A Critical Examination of the *Toledoth Yeshu*” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1970); Meerson and Schäfer, *Life Story of Jesus*, 2:49–64.

<sup>12</sup> See Bohak, “New Genizah Fragment.” This statement does not apply to the unique Byzantine manuscript, St. Petersburg RNL Evr. 1:274, discussed in the context of Aramaic fragments in Deutsch, “Early Versions of *Toledot Yeshu*.” Gideon Bohak is currently preparing a monograph devoted to the Pilate narrative of TY, in its Aramaic, Judeo-Arabic, and Hebrew forms.

ninth century.<sup>13</sup> Agobard's successor, Amulo, in his *Contra Judaeos*, completed in 847, references yet other Jewish traditions, pertaining to Jesus' exhumation after burial as well as to his birth. Relating to the means of transmission of these narratives, Agobard notes that Jews "read" (*legant, lectitant*) these works, but from his description, it seems likely that he heard of these traditions orally, and is not referring to a written version.<sup>14</sup> What is clear from the references of both Amulo and Agobard, though, is that the Pilate version of TY, created in the East some centuries earlier, was known to Christian scholars and churchmen, and presumably to Jews as well, by the ninth century in at least one European community on the western edges of the Mediterranean.

Later European evidence of the Pilate narrative surfaces in the works of Abner of Burgos, a learned Jew who converted, taking on the new name of Alfonso de Valladolid. Abner/Alfonso was a prolific writer both before and after his conversion; following his conversion in 1320, he composed a number of polemical works in Hebrew and Castilian, in which he cites directly from the Pilate as well as the Helene narrative.<sup>15</sup> These references can be found in his anti-Jewish composition *Moreh şedeq* or *Mostrador de justicia* (Teacher of righteousness), originally composed in Hebrew but surviving only in a later Castilian translation; the Castilian of the surviving text turns out to preserve these two narratives of TY. Abner also took up the claims of TY in his *Sefer milḥamot Adonai* (Book of the wars of the Lord), a work that appears to have been originally composed in Hebrew and translated into Castilian by Abner himself. While the *Sefer milḥamot* is lost, quotations from it have been preserved in later works, including in the response composed by Shem Tov ibn Shaprut in the 1380s, entitled *Even boḥan* (The touchstone).<sup>16</sup>

The citations from Agobard, Amulo, and Abner/Alfonso demonstrate, then, that the Pilate narrative of TY was known in Europe, and these references, especially in the case of Abner/Alfonso, preserve important textual witnesses. That said, not a single manuscript copy of the Pilate narrative has survived on that continent, and our only evidence of this TY narrative in its original languages is preserved in Near Eastern manuscript copies.

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<sup>13</sup> On this literary specimen, as well as the next, see the illuminating discussion in Peter Schäfer, "Agobard's and Amulo's *Toledot Yeshu*," in *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus") Revisited: A Princeton Conference*, ed. Peter Schäfer, Yaacov Deutsch, and Michael Meerson (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 27–48.

<sup>14</sup> *Patrologia Latina* 104, cols. 87B–D.

<sup>15</sup> See Ryan Szpiech, "The Book of Nestor the Priest and the *Toledot Yeshu* in the Polemics of Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid," in *Polemical and Exegetical Polarities in Medieval Jewish Literature: Studies in Honor of Daniel J. Lasker*, ed. Ehud Krinis et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 269–300.

<sup>16</sup> See Szpiech. Shem Tov's work is briefly discussed in Meerson and Schäfer, *Life Story of Jesus*, 1:12–14.

This Near Eastern attestation of the Pilate narrative, though, is not long-lived, and its presence in the Near East wanes steadily during the Mamluk period (1250–1517). Regarding Judeo-Arabic, the process is very clear: The manuscript evidence of this anti-passion narrative in Judeo-Arabic recedes toward the thirteenth century, and from the fourteenth century, it is completely absent from the manuscript record. In Hebrew, after the thirteenth century it is not the Pilate narrative itself that is apparent, but rather an amalgam, which appears to be some kind of combination of the Pilate and Helene narratives. This interesting rendition, whose genesis and development are not clear, is preserved in two Yemenite manuscripts, dating roughly to the seventeenth century and labeled “Early Yemenite” by Meerson and Schäfer.<sup>17</sup> Elements of the Pilate narrative combined with Helene elements are also preserved in a *sui generis* manuscript originating in Byzantium and dated to 1536 in its colophon.<sup>18</sup>

Why did the original and brief account of TY, a parody of the momentous events surrounding the end of Jesus’ life, fade to this extent? Manuscript evidence in Judeo-Arabic suggests that its near-extinction was caused by a textual development – the creation of an expanded account that was likely even more entertaining to Jewish readers and listeners in the Near East, and which seems to have taken the place of the Pilate version. This expanded narrative is known to modern researchers as the Helene narrative, and its first appearance is in Judeo-Arabic manuscripts.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The rendition labeled “Early Yemenite” is described in Meerson and Schäfer, *Life Story of Jesus*, 2:65–70. The dating and categorization of these manuscripts is as yet unclear, requiring further consideration.

<sup>18</sup> This is St. Petersburg RNL Evr. I:274. On this manuscript, see Deutsch, “Early Versions of Toledot Yeshu”; Meerson and Schäfer, *Life Story of Jesus*, 1:155–66.

<sup>19</sup> I have drawn these conclusions regarding the relationship between the two narratives on the basis of my perusal of the textual evidence available to me. A full consideration of the development of the Pilate and Helene narratives and their relationship to each other will be possible only after the publication of all textual witnesses. A similar opinion, holding the Helene narrative to be a development following the Pilate narrative, is held by Di Segni as well as by Meerson and Schäfer; see Di Segni, *Il vangelo del ghetto*, 218; Meerson and Schäfer, *Life Story of Jesus*, 1:30. However, they date the Helene version too late, in my opinion, because they take only Aramaic and Hebrew sources into account. A number of researchers have written recently proposing that the two versions developed in parallel; see Daniel Barbu, “The Textual Traditions of *Toledot Yeshu*” (Habilitationsschrift, University of Bern, 2019); William Horbury, “Titles and Origins of *Toledot Yeshu*,” in *Toledot Yeshu in Context*, ed. Daniel Barbu and Yaacov Deutsch (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 13–42; Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, “On Some Early Traditions in *Toledot Yeshu* and the Antiquity of the Helena Recension,” in *Toledot Yeshu in Context*, ed. Daniel Barbu and Yaacov Deutsch (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 43–58.

## 2. A Jewish “Infancy Gospel”: The Helene Narrative

The earliest evidence of a second and expanded TY narrative is revealed by Judeo-Arabic manuscripts that can be dated, on the basis of their script, to around the eleventh century. This expanded account adds a birth story to the narrative, as well as tales of Yeshu’s youth. It adds action elements in which the renegade Yeshu, accompanied by a substantial horde of followers – whose number varies, depending on the rendition – is pursued between the Galilee and Jerusalem. Like the Pilate narrative, it recounts the last days of Yeshu’s life – his execution and burial – in descriptions evidencing certain parallels with the shorter account. This expanded narrative concludes with counter-historical renditions of the “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity, in which Jewish secret agents are responsible for causing the followers of Yeshu to separate from the faithful Jews. The Helene account is named after the queen, an enigmatic figure, who it says ruled Judea during the time of Yeshu and who is in this version responsible for his sentencing.<sup>20</sup>

These eleventh-century Judeo-Arabic manuscripts of the Helene narrative of TY survive in very fragmentary form, and represent only a fraction of the elements of the complete narrative. One of these plot elements, however, adds crucial evidence to knowledge regarding the creation of the Helene narrative. The early manuscripts include the parodical birth narrative, a leitmotif of the Helene narrative, which has been asserted recently to be a medieval European creation.<sup>21</sup> The appearance of the TY birth narrative in these early Judeo-Arabic fragments demonstrates the existence of the Helene narrative quite early in the Near East, prior to European references to it, and predating by far the much later manuscript evidence of the Helene narrative on that continent.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the Judeo-Arabic Helene narrative was likely attested in the Near East at least a century or more prior to these early fragments.<sup>23</sup> One indicator of this early attestation is the multiplicity of versions already existing in Judeo-Arabic in the early fragments. Another is the appearance of TY-related themes in tenth-century literary creations in the Near East; specifically, anti-Chris-

<sup>20</sup> On the figure of Helene, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Polymorphic Helena: *Toledot Yeshu* as a Palimpsest of Religious Narratives and Identities,” in *Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited: A Princeton Conference*, ed. Peter Schäfer, Yaacov Deutsch, and Michael Meerson (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 247–82.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Meerson and Schäfer, *Life Story of Jesus*, 1:54.

<sup>22</sup> I discuss this early attestation of the birth narrative in the Near East and its significance in Miriam Goldstein, “Early Judeo-Arabic Birth Narratives in the Polemical Story ‘Life of Jesus’ (*Toledot Yeshu*),” *Harvard Theological Review* 113 (2020): 354–77.

<sup>23</sup> I have discussed this possibility at length elsewhere, and of necessity include only a brief survey of the evidence here. See Miriam Goldstein, “Jesus in Arabic, Jesus in Judeo-Arabic: The Origins of the Helene Version of the Jewish ‘Life of Jesus’ (*Toledot Yeshu*),” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 111 (2021): 83–104.

tian liturgical poetry in Hebrew employing epithets for Jesus and his mother as well as other elements of the TY Helene narrative, which were apparently commonly recognized.<sup>24</sup> Finally, the charged interreligious polemical environment of the first few Islamic centuries, as well as the multiplicity of Christian and Muslim stories about Jesus and his mother, contributed to create an atmosphere that would motivate the composition of a Jewish parody relating to these central cultural figures. The creation of an expanded Judeo-Arabic version treating Yeshu’s life as a whole, in addition to his last days as described in the Pilate narrative of TY, would have joined a number of other notable Judeo-Arabic works polemicizing against Christianity.<sup>25</sup>

Near Eastern manuscripts likely dating to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries reveal further elements of the Helene narrative in Judeo-Arabic. The fullest survival of the TY Helene narrative in Judeo-Arabic is in a manuscript that dates roughly to the thirteenth or fourteenth century (St. Petersburg RNL Evr.-Arab. I:3005). Numerous manuscripts are preserved following this period, and in this way, the Helene account of TY is well-attested in Judeo-Arabic manuscripts through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in a variety of Genizah collections. These manuscripts represent a number of different textual traditions, as will become apparent below. They cover approximately two-thirds of the work in its entirety, and I present them in a convenient chart, arranged by plot element, in appendix 1.

Some centuries after its initial attestation in the Near East in Judeo-Arabic, the Helene narrative of TY begins to make its appearance in Europe – initially in literary references and quotations. The thirteenth-century Dominican monk and scholar Ramon Martí (Raymond Martini) includes a direct quotation, in a Latin translation, of a rendition of the TY Helene narrative in his polemical tract *Pugio fidei* (Dagger of faith). This rendition does not include a birth narrative, but begins with a central element of the Helene narrative – Yeshu’s stealing the Ineffable Name from the Temple. Martí’s text ends with Yeshu’s execution.<sup>26</sup>

As noted above, the prolific philosopher turned polemicist Alfonso of Valladolid (Abner of Burgos), included excerpts of both narratives of TY in two works

<sup>24</sup> See Michael Rand, “An Anti-Christian Polemical *Piyyut* by Yosef ibn Avitur Employing Elements from *Toledot Yeshu*,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 7 (2013): 1–16.

<sup>25</sup> These include works that adopt a rough and insulting tone similar to that found in TY Helene: *al-Radd ‘alā al-naṣārā min ṭarīq al-qiyās* (The logical refutation of Christianity) as well as *Kitāb al-ḍarā’ā* (The book of urging on to attack), both by the ninth-century Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammaṣ. A third work by al-Muqammaṣ, his *‘Ishrūn maqāla* (Twenty chapters), includes more sober and rationally argued polemic against Christianity. On this variety of genres in Jewish polemic against Christianity see Daniel J. Lasker, “Popular Polemics and Philosophical Truth in the Medieval Jewish Critique of Christianity,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1999): 243–59.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of this polemical work in the context of TY, see Meerson and Schäfer, *Life Story of Jesus*, 1:10–12.

composed in the early thirteenth century. In the *Mostrador de justicia*, Abner/Alfonso evidences detailed knowledge of both narratives of TY, and clearly distinguishes between an Aramaic rendition and one in Hebrew, which were likely the Pilate and Helene narratives respectively.<sup>27</sup>

TY seems to have become more widely known in Europe in the fourteenth century, and is mentioned in passing in a number of polemical documents and compositions. An inquisitorial dossier from this period preserved in the archive of the Cathedral of Barcelona mentions the work, noting that Jews read “the book of the devil [i. e., TY] [...] in order to bring back those who dare to make themselves Christians” – apparently, to return *conversos* to Judaism.<sup>28</sup> In the fifteenth century, a full rendition of the Helene account of TY in Europe was published in Latin by Thomas Ebendorfer as part of a collection intended to expose a variety of Jewish anti-Christian compositions. Ebendorfer’s publication was the first time that the notorious conception story was given in full in Europe; Abner/Alfonso’s thirteenth-century rendition of both the Pilate and the Helene narratives had only paraphrased this element. Ebendorfer also included other elements of the TY narrative that were ostensibly viewed as problematic and had been omitted in earlier mentions of the work.<sup>29</sup>

These European references to TY including translated citations from it pre-date actual manuscripts of TY in Europe by a significant period. The earliest preserved European manuscripts of TY in Hebrew date to the late sixteenth century, and were copied in Italy. These earliest witnesses represent the Helene narrative alone, as I have noted above, and they are the oldest of a body of some thirty European manuscripts of TY in Hebrew, the majority of which date to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See Szpiech, “*The Book of Nestor the Priest and the Toledot Yeshu in the Polemics of Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid*,” 284–95, especially p. 289.

<sup>28</sup> The quotation is from the *Vida de Jesucrist* by the fourteenth-century Franciscan scholar Francesc Eiximenis, quoted in Paola Tartakoff, “The *Toledot Yeshu* and Jewish-Christian Conflict in the Medieval Crown of Aragon,” in *Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited: A Princeton Conference*, ed. Peter Schäfer, Yaacov Deutsch, and Michael Meerson (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 295–309.

<sup>29</sup> On this work, see Meerson and Schäfer, *Life Story of Jesus*, 1:14. On Abner/Alfonso’s awareness of the conception story, see the citations in Szpiech, “*The Book of Nestor the Priest and the Toledot Yeshu in the Polemics of Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid*,” 290–91. Szpiech cites manuscript versions of *Mostrador de justicia* as well as Mettman’s edition (Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994; 1996), clearly indicating awareness of the incendiary narrative: “Ca quando era Jhesu Christo de .XX. annos, començó a mostrar sus ssignos e sus miraglos ante las gentes, como lo cuenta el libro que es publicado entre los judios de fazienda de Jhesu, que diz que los judios peleauan con él quando amostraua rrazones de la Ley ante su maestro, e apusiéronle que merescia muerte por ello, e que se leuantó vno de los sabios, que dizen que auie nombre Rrabi Ssimon ben Satah, que les dixo que bien auie ueynte annos que uino a él Rrabi Yohanan, marido de Maria, e quel dixo que era concebida Maria en adulterio. E desde entonçe fluxo Jhesu de entre los sabios e ouo mester a fazer miraglos” (*Mostrador*, 211v/2:158–59).

<sup>30</sup> For a list and description of these manuscripts, see Meerson and Schäfer, *Life Story of*



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