

# Toledot Yeshu in Context

Edited by  
DANIEL BARBU  
and YAACOV DEUTSCH

*Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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The Jewish “Life of Jesus” in Ancient,  
Medieval, and Modern History

Edited by

Daniel Barbu and Yaacov Deutsch

Mohr Siebeck

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Daniel Barbu  
Yaacov Deutsch



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## Introduction: Reading *Toledot Yeshu* in Context

DANIEL BARBU and YAACOV DEUTSCH

The *Jewish Life of Jesus* (*Toledot Yeshu*) provides one of the most extraordinary accounts of the beginnings of Christianity. The work presents Jesus as a child born of adulterous intercourse, a charlatan, and a false prophet who performed would-be miracles with his magical skills (either using the Ineffable Name of God or “magical books” imported from Egypt). He was rightfully captured and executed at the request of the rabbis. After his disciples declared him resurrected, his body was unearthed and dragged through the streets, while his followers were either forced into exile or massacred. Christianity itself appears in this astounding narrative as a religion invented by Jewish sages to separate the Jews from the furious heretics who continue to claim Jesus as their messiah and god.

The story understandably aroused the ire of anti-Jewish polemicists, delighted anti-clerical propagandists, and was viewed by Jewish scholars as a subject of embarrassment. In the eighteenth century, Voltaire claimed that *Toledot Yeshu*, however “extravagant,” was perhaps as ancient as the gospels, adding that it surely also preserved some form of historical truth.<sup>1</sup> Such a provocative claim was of course essentially an attack on the Church and Christian tradition, which Voltaire accused of having deformed the original message of Jesus, a “Galilean Socrates” posthumously made into a god. Yet it also reflected a well-established tradition among Christian scholars for whom this shocking account of Jesus’s life and prodigies could indeed be viewed as a testimony to the “truth” of the gospels, even if the latter had been corrupted by the “lies” and “blasphemies” of the reluctant Jews.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke*, in Voltaire, *Œuvres de 1766–1767* (ed. Jacqueline Marchand, Roland Mortier, John Renwick; Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation and Taylor Institution, 1987), 213–14 (chap. XI), and Daniel Barbu, “Voltaire and the *Toledot Yeshu*,” in *Infancy Gospels: Stories and Identities* (ed. Claire Clivaz, Andreas Dettwiler, Luc Devillers and Enrico Norelli; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 617–27.

<sup>2</sup> On the Christian reception of *Toledot Yeshu*, see Yaacov Deutsch, “*Toledot Yeshu*” in *Christian Eyes: Reception and Response to “Toledot Yeshu” in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period* (MA Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1997) [in Hebrew]; idem, “The Second Life of the Life of Jesus: Christian Reception of *Toledot Yeshu*,” in *Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (ed. Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson, and Yaacov Deutsch; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 283–95. See also William Horbury, “Petrus Galatinus and Jean Thenaud on the Talmud and the *Toledot Yeshu*,” in *Jewish Books and Their Readers: Aspects of the Intellectual Life of Christians and Jews in Early Modern Europe* (ed.

Obviously Voltaire was wrong, and no scholar today would seriously consider his claim that *Toledot Yeshu* is as old as (and perhaps more reliable than) the gospels: the work has little if anything to tell us about the “historical” Jesus and the origins of Christianity.

Building on both Jewish and Christian traditions and motifs (either canonical or apocryphal), the narrative can be seen as a parody or satire of the gospels, if not a “counter-history” of Christianity. But as such, we may ask, is it not also a true narrative? Where is the truth in such a story? Is a “counter-history” less true than the original story?

The question of truth was indeed central to Amos Funkenstein’s definition of the counter-historical genre.<sup>3</sup> “Counter-histories,” wrote Funkenstein, “form a specific genre of history” in which the adversaries’ most trusted sources are turned against them, their memory and history are appropriated and replaced with a new, supposedly more trustworthy narrative. Of course, Funkenstein’s discussion of counter-histories, which *Toledot Yeshu* served to illustrate, had a very different and more immediate aim, namely a critique of both Holocaust revisionism and the Zionist refusal to acknowledge any form of Palestinian identity.<sup>4</sup> In Funkenstein’s perspective, counter-histories implied the possibility of actually erasing the other’s memory. Such narratives thus primarily appeared as a discursive expression of power. The Christian construction of Christianity as the “true Israel” in antiquity, for instance, was for him another and no less vivid expression of “counter-history.”

This has led David Biale to nuance Funkenstein’s description of *Toledot Yeshu* as “counter-history.”<sup>5</sup> Biale underlined that counter-histories have very different meanings and implications when expressing the voice of a minority versus that of the majority. Works such as *Toledot Yeshu*, claimed Biale, function as a “literature of protest,” reflecting a subaltern tradition, “the assertive voice of an oppressed minority whose response to its condition was not passivity.” In bringing to light the “true” version of the story, *Toledot Yeshu* does not aim “to rob the Christians of their identity,” but rather “to reverse the sense of Jewish powerlessness in the face of Christian enmity” and reclaim a Jewish voice in the context of Christian hegemony.

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Scott Mandelbrote and Joanna Weinberg; Leiden: Brill, 2016), 125–50; Daniel Barbu, “Some Remarks on the Jewish Life of Jesus (*Toledot Yeshu*) in Early Modern Europe,” *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* 5 (2019): 29–45.

<sup>3</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 36–40; and see Daniel Barbu, “The Case about Jesus: (Counter-)History and Casuistry in *Toledot Yeshu*,” in *A Historical Approach to Casuistry: Norms and Exceptions in a Comparative Perspective* (ed. Carlo Ginzburg and Lucio Biasori; London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Funkenstein, *Perceptions*, 48–49.

<sup>5</sup> David Biale, “Counter-History and Jewish Polemics against Christianity: The *Sefer toldot yeshu* and the *Sefer zerubavel*,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (1999): 130–45, at 137.

The question we must ask, then, is not if there is any truth in a story like *Toledot Yeshu* – there is a kernel of truth in every story. It is: Who felt the need to express this particular truth? What does it tell us about those who wrote and told such a story, as well as those who read it, copied it, transformed it, and perhaps even enjoyed it? And conversely, about those who felt the need to revile it, attack it, or fear it? The history of *Toledot Yeshu* allows us to consider both sides of the mirror, depending on if we look at the work being used by Christian polemicists seeking to expose the “perfidy” of the Jews, or if we look at Jews poking fun at the dominant religion and thus resisting the Christian claim to have superseded the “ancient Law.”

*Toledot Yeshu* certainly has much to tell us about the ways in which Jews actively and creatively engaged with the Christian narrative in the premodern world and appropriated and subverted the foundational myth of Christianity. To be sure, the Jewish “Life of Jesus” can appear as an outrageous story, but it is also a story that reflects the greater anxieties and preoccupations of these communities among which it circulated, and their will to engage with Christian history and theology, even in the form of a burlesque parody of Christian history and theology. It is noteworthy that *Toledot Yeshu* was one of the most widespread pieces of Jewish historiography in the premodern world. The sheer number of manuscripts and printed editions (close to two hundred) in fact attest not only to its wide diffusion, but also to its long-standing popularity among Jews living in both Western Christendom and the Islamic Middle East. Doubtless such a popular narrative cannot be simply dismissed as outrageous and fanciful.

Because it was considered so outrageous, *Toledot Yeshu* also regularly appeared in Christian discussions of Jews and Judaism since the early Middle Ages. It seems to have sparked a form of fascination among Christian scholars, whether these sought to condemn or defend Jewish literature, when not simply trying to evince the rabbinic corruption of the “truth” of Christianity.

*Toledot Yeshu* thus has much light to shed on both Christian and Jewish history and on the mutual imaginings of both Jews and Christians throughout the centuries. The aim of this volume is to open the narrative to such an inquiry by seeking to question the role, function, and place of this narrative within its diverse historical and cultural contexts; in other words, to re-place *Toledot Yeshu* within its plural, Jewish and non-Jewish, contexts.

Since the beginning of modern scholarship on *Toledot Yeshu* (marked by Samuel Krauss’s 1902 monograph *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen*, itself here contextualized as a witness to the entanglements of Jewish scholars in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century German academy by Yonatan Moss), a recurring question surrounding this narrative pertains to its origins. While certain motifs we encounter in the story may be considered as old as Christianity

itself – for instance, the charge of adultery levelled against Mary – the date when these motifs would have been organized into some form of continuous composition, in late antiquity or the early Middle Ages, remains a vexing question. While a number of scholars, following Krauss, have suggested that the story must have existed in the fifth century (or earlier), others have contended that, as an autonomous work, *Toledot Yeshu* could not have been composed before the end of the Talmudic period, in the sixth or seventh century.<sup>6</sup> In light of the impressive diversity of the textual tradition, a further question is if it is at all possible to trace the different versions of *Toledot Yeshu* back to a single composition. Riccardo di Segni contended that the narrative resulted from a constant literary process of accumulation and re-elaboration, with not one but multiple original nuclei emerging and fusing over time.<sup>7</sup> This would also be the stance taken by Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer in their recent edition of the Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts of the narrative, where much attention is given to the history and development of each individual episode or “microform.”<sup>8</sup> In this view, different versions of *Toledot Yeshu* could have appeared at different points in time and have either evolved independently or intersected over the course of centuries, hence the many recensions known from the manuscripts.<sup>9</sup>

A number of contributions to this volume examine these questions and offer new views on the textual history of *Toledot Yeshu*. In particular, one of the views emerging from the studies gathered here is that the great diversity of versions

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<sup>6</sup> See William Horbury’s reflections on this question in this volume, as well as Daniel Barbu, “L’Évangile selon les Juifs: à propos de quelques témoignages anciens,” *Anabases* 28 (2018): 157–80. Horbury himself has strongly argued in favour of an ancient dating, see *A Critical Examination of the Toledoth Jeshu* (PhD diss., Cambridge University, Cambridge, 1971), 16 and *passim*, suggesting a dating in the third century. Cf. also Hillel I. Newman, “The Death of Jesus in the *Toledot Yeshu* Literature,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 50 (1999): 59–79; Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, “An Ancient List of Christian Festivals in *Toledot Yeshu*: Polemics as Indication for Interaction,” *Harvard Theological Review* 102 (2009): 481–96. Peter Schäfer dates the work to the late Talmudic period, for instance in his recent *Jüdische Polemik gegen Jesus und das Christentum* (Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 2017). Funkenstein, *Perceptions*, 39, also suggested the seventh century (with a question mark). For a dating to the early Abbasid period, see Eli Yassif, “*Toledot Yeshu*: Folk-Narrative as Polemics and Self Criticism,” in *Toledot Yeshu ... Revisited* (ed. Schäfer, Meerson, and Deutsch), 101–35, at 102–9.

<sup>7</sup> Riccardo di Segni, *Il Vangelo del Ghetto. Le ‘Storie di Gesù’: leggende e documenti della tradizione medievale ebraica* (Rome: Newton Compton, 1985), 216–21. See also John G. Gager, “Simon Peter, Founder of Christianity or Saviour of Israel?,” in *Toledot Yeshu ... Revisited* (ed. Schäfer, Meerson, and Deutsch), 221–45, at 236–41.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer, ed., *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014). See however the reservations of Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra in *Asdiwal* 11 (2016): 226–30 and in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1: 28–39, number no less than twenty-two distinct recensions. See previously Erich Bischoff, “Klassifizierung der Texte,” in Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Calvary & Co., 1902), 27–37; Riccardo di Segni, “La tradizione testuale delle *Toledoth Jeshu*: Manoscritti, edizioni a stampa, classificazione,” *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 50 (1984): 83–100; idem, *Il vangelo del Ghetto*, 29–42.

displayed in the extant manuscripts (most of which were in fact copied between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries) does not necessarily reflect the state of the work in earlier periods; and while some textual variation undoubtedly existed in the previous centuries (as would be expected), it is perhaps prudent not to project the diversity of the tradition as a whole too far into the past. Thus, for instance, Daniel Barbu and Yann Dahhaoui's discussion of the 1429 investigation of the Jews of Trévoux, which led to the discovery of a *Toledot Yeshu* manuscript, suggests that one version of the narrative, namely the so-called Strasbourg version (named after Ms. 3974 [héb. 48] of the Strasbourg University Library), circulated in the Latin West throughout the medieval period in almost "canonical" form.

Most versions of *Toledot Yeshu* can be divided using di Segni's classification. The latter identified two dominant textual families, which he named after the political ruler presiding over Jesus's trial in the narrative, i. e. "Pilate" or "Helena."<sup>10</sup> His distinction is followed by most contributors to the present volume, and indeed seems to best to describe the two main forms of the Jewish Jesus story as it would have circulated in the Middle Ages. In fact, these were still recognized by one medieval commentator (the Christian convert from Judaism Alfonso de Valladolid, formerly Abner of Burgos) as two distinct "books."<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly, the two traditions diverge substantially. The "Pilate" version presents us with a shorter narrative, focusing mainly on the trial and execution of Jesus, whereas the "Helena" tradition (of which the Strasbourg text is the best representative) typically includes an account of Jesus's conception and childhood and other well-known episodes, such as Jesus's theft of the Ineffable Name in the Jerusalem temple. As William Horbury argues here, the distinction between the two traditions may also be reflected in the different titles of the narrative, whether in the manuscripts themselves or in the secondary evidence. The "Pilate" version would have been widely diffused in the early Middle Ages, as evidenced by the writings of the ninth-century bishops of Lyon, Agobard and Amulo, and by Aramaic fragments from the Cairo Genizah. It seems, however, to have disappeared over the course of the Middle Ages, only to be rediscovered, along with the Cairo Genizah, in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> The "Helena" tradition is first attested at a somewhat later date, in the eleventh or twelfth century, as

<sup>10</sup> See the previous footnote. The third family, namely "Herod," is known only through the text published by Johann J. Huldreich (Ulrich) in 1705; on this version, see Adina Yoffie, "Observations on the Huldreich Manuscripts of the *Toledot Yeshu*," in *Toledot Yeshu ... Revisited* (ed. Schäfer, Meerson, and Deutsch), 61–77.

<sup>11</sup> See C. Sainz de la Maza, "El *Toledot Yeshu* castellano en el Maestro Alfonso de Valladolid," in *Actas II Congreso Internacional de la Asociación Hispánica de Literatura Medieval* (ed. Jose M. Lucia Megias, Paloma García Alonzo, Carmen Martín Daza; Alcalá: Universidad de Alcalá, 1992), vol. 2: 797–814.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Schäfer, "Abogard's and Amulo's *Toledot Yeshu*," in *Toledot Yeshu ... Revisited* (ed. Schäfer, Meerson, and Deutsch), 27–48.

witnessed by the Judeo-Arabic evidence discussed here by Alexandra Cuffel. William Horbury and Daniel Stöckl Ben Ezra both argue, however, that it can, in fact, be traced back to late antiquity. This view challenges the notion that the “Pilate” and “Helena” versions can be described as early and late, respectively. Indeed, it is most likely that both traditions circulated in parallel – and perhaps cross-pollinated, hence the existence of texts exhibiting features from both the “Pilate” and “Helena” traditions – until the “Pilate” tradition eventually disappeared.

The 2014 Meerson and Schäfer edition of *Toledot Yeshu* and accompanying online database recently opened a new phase in *Toledot Yeshu* research. One may, however, regret the choice not to include material in Jewish vernaculars, which might have modified some of the conclusions reached by the editors with regard to the textual history of the work, as noted by a number of contributors to this volume. Stöckl Ben Ezra thus underlines that a full picture of the textual history of *Toledot Yeshu* requires taking into account the Judeo-Arabic evidence, which among other things, contradicts Meerson and Schäfer’s view (following di Segni) that the conception narrative was composed and added to the story only after the thirteenth century.<sup>13</sup> The Yiddish manuscripts, too, which have hitherto received little scholarly attention, are in fact quite illuminating.<sup>14</sup> These allow us to trace the reception and dissemination of the narrative in early modern Europe, and showcase how different versions of the story could be freely combined by ingenuous scribes, giving birth to new and original versions. Thus, for instance, seems to be the case of the hybrid Yiddish text composed in the early eighteenth century by R. Leib ben Ozer of Amsterdam (in a manuscript in which the story of Jesus is intriguingly followed by that of Sabbatai Zvi), which is here discussed by Evi Michels and of which Claudia Rosenzweig here offers an edition and translation. It could be suggested that a number of other versions of the narrative, in particular the idiosyncratic Huldreich version or the so-called Slavic versions, widely diffused in the Ashkenazi world (both in Hebrew and Yiddish) starting in the eighteenth century, reflect similar processes of amalgamation. The different versions of the narrative thus witness the creativity of individual scribes, who could sometimes combine different sources, introduce new motifs, or rewrite entire episodes.

All in all, the textual history of *Toledot Yeshu* displays both remarkable conservatism (as evinced by the Strasbourg version), and, in parallel, a constant and

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<sup>13</sup> Miriam Goldstein is currently preparing monograph on the [Helena] Judeo-Arabic texts while Gideon Bohak is preparing a monograph on the [Pilate] Judeo-Arabic texts.

<sup>14</sup> See Michael Stanislawski, “A Preliminary Study of a Yiddish ‘Life of Jesus’ (*Toledot Yeshu*): JTS Ms. 2211,” in *Toledot Yeshu ... Revisited* (ed. Schäfer, Meerson, and Deutsch), 79–87; Evi Michels, “Jiddische Jesus-Polemiken (*Toledot Yeshu*),” *Jiddistik Mitteilungen* 57/58 (2017): 1–26. Cf. also Günter Schlichting, *Ein Jüdisches Leben Jesu : Die Verschollene Toledot-Jeschu-Fassung Tam û-Mû ‘ād* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1982), *passim*.

active process of expansion, transformation, and even hybridization. As such, it is necessary to consider not only questions of origins and text-criticism but also matters of transmission and reception. In other words, we need to turn from textual history to history *tout-court*; that is, try and situate the narrative and its different versions not only within a hypothetical original setting but also within the many contexts in which these versions were circulated, transmitted, and expanded. *Toledot Yeshu* is, in fact, as much an ancient tradition as it is a medieval and early modern text. It is pre-eminently a transhistorical narrative and it is only through its successive appropriations and re-appropriations that the work truly came to life and gained its meaning and significance.

The originality of the present volume lies in its effort to turn to these various historical and cultural contexts, and interrogate the readers of our texts – men and women, Jews, Christians, or Muslims – who, at different times and places and for different purposes, engaged with the narrative. If Voltaire, mentioned above, used the work as part of a critical discourse on the early history of Christianity, other Christian scholars before and after him certainly had very different intentions when discussing or quoting *Toledot Yeshu*. Some of them cited the narrative as evidence that the Jews unwillingly acknowledge that Jesus had performed miracles. Others used it as a proof of the “perfidy” of the traditional foes of Christianity. Thus, for instance, Martin Luther, who, as Stephen Burnett argues here, translated *Toledot Yeshu* into German to showcase the insanity of the rabbis and dismiss rabbinic literature as a whole, bluntly condemning any attempt to allow Jewish texts to service Christian theology.

We may similarly question the intent of the Jewish scribes and scholars who either copied or referred to the story. The copyist responsible for, say, one of the Aramaic fragments of *Toledot Yeshu* from the Cairo Genizah, certainly copied the story for a reason. We need not assume, however, that his aim was necessarily the same as that of later scribes, active in very different contexts. As argued here by Gideon Bohak, the Aramaic texts from the Cairo Genizah are in fact bound to a specific discourse on magic and to the concerns of early medieval Jews regarding the misuse of magic and “magical” books. The medieval kabbalists, by contrast, whose use of *Toledot Yeshu* is here surveyed by Jonatan Benarroch, focused on Jesus’s profanation of the Ineffable Name, reframing the story within a broader cosmological narrative in which the Christian Messiah is reinterpreted as an avatar of the primordial Serpent and typological adversary of God. By considering the “alternative chronology,” which appears in the Wagenseil version of *Toledot Yeshu* dating the life of Jesus to the rule of the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE), Gavin McDowell shows how the narrative, on the one hand, served to dismiss Christian accusations of blasphemy against the Talmud (by claiming that the work, in fact, did not refer to the Christian



Jesus but to a wholly different character), while on the other hand, allowed contesting Christian supersessionism by disconnecting the death of Jesus from the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. In each and every context, it is thus necessary to ask who read and copied the story, and more importantly, why.

More than simply attest to the textual history of the narrative, the different versions of *Toledot Yeshu* reflect the diversity of interests of the communities and readers they addressed.

*Toledot Yeshu* is most often described as a polemical narrative. To be sure, the story engages in a calculated effort to dispute the fundamental articles of the Christian creed. Thus, the conception story – Jesus was born after his mother was raped by a disreputable neighbour – rebuffs the claim that Jesus was the son of God born from an unsullied virgin. The description of his would-be miracles as mere magic tricks denies his alleged divine powers, while the account of his death, burial, and postmortem treatment strongly opposes the belief in Jesus’s resurrection and the very meaning of the crucifixion. As a matter of fact, the polemic effectiveness of *Toledot Yeshu*, this buoyant narrative spread to all corners of the premodern Jewish world, may in fact have been much deeper than that of many of the robust treatises of anti-Christian polemics composed by Jews throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period. And if the narrative favours mockery and wit over methodical argumentation, it is indeed a blatant attack against Christian dogma. But it is also much more than that! We must recall that however polemical, the primary audience of the story was in fact a Jewish, not a Christian one. *Toledot Yeshu* was also meant to entertain, to serve as a vehicle for self-criticism, to make sense of history, and impose upon its readers a certain understanding of religious norms and anomalies. As such, *Toledot Yeshu* is as much a story about Jesus and the origins of Christianity as it is a story, for instance, about authority, heresy, and magic. In that sense, for all its polemical content (in the eyes of some) or for all its fun and humor (to the ears of others), the work also carries a strong normative dimension.<sup>15</sup> Looking at the mothers in the manuscripts – the Emperor’s daughter who gives birth to a stone foetus in the “Pilate” texts, Mary and Queen Helena in the “Helena” tradition – Sarit Kattan Gribetz argues that these women each represent different conceptions of Christian origins, strongly contesting Christian triumphalism. But she also shows that, by “weaving” these female characters into the narrative in very different ways, the different versions of the story also reflect shifting ideas about sexuality and gender, and thus also shed light on the cultural world of the communities responsible for transmitting these texts.

What can the changes and variations attested in the manuscript tradition tell us about these communities, and about their time-bound worries, struggles, and

<sup>15</sup> So too Natalie E. Latteri, “Playing the Whore: Illicit Union and the Biblical Typology of Promiscuity in the *Toledot Yeshu* Tradition,” *Shofar* 33 (2015): 87–102; Barbu, “The Case about Jesus.”

ideas? What forms of interaction do they reflect with the surrounding environment and culture? What can we know about the ways in which the story circulated, about those who copied it and transmitted it? The colophons and notes preserved in some of the extant manuscripts, as well as the external evidence provided by, e. g. Christian scholars of Judaism, reveal much of the narrative's history and reception, as demonstrated by William Horbury in this volume. In addition to the numerous literary sources, both Jewish and Christian, reflective of the work's reception and circulation throughout the centuries, legal documents further illuminate the way *Toledot Yeshu* was preserved and transmitted among Jews in late medieval Christendom, often at the risk of being found guilty of sacrilege and blasphemy. The 1429 investigation against the Jews of Trévoux, accused of possessing blasphemous books, exposes the sorts of historical entanglements that could bring the work to the surface, while also evincing its circulation in a time for which we possess very little textual evidence. As argued by Daniel Barbu and Yann Dahhaoui, the Trévoux case shows, at the micro-historical level, how *Toledot Yeshu* could be instrumental for both Christian attempts to justify their interpretation of rabbinic Judaism as an "anti-Christian" religion and Jewish efforts at negotiating their place and identity vis-à-vis Christian hostility.

To be sure, the material contexts of the manuscripts can equally illuminate the broader history of *Toledot Yeshu*. In Trévoux, the narrative was apparently preserved in a small "booklet" hidden in the house of one of the leaders of the town's small Jewish community. But other examples certainly evince the specific circumstances in which the text was preserved, and maybe also how it was understood by those who used and preserved it.

*Toledot Yeshu* manuscripts often form part of larger collections of texts. In itself, this may tell us much about the function of the story, considering, for instance, if it is part of a collection of polemical works or of a collection of tales or fables (*ma'asyiot*). It is striking, for instance, that some Yemenite texts were in fact preserved in the margins of *Midrash ha-Gadol*, possibly as an additional gloss to the biblical verses pertaining to the "seducer" who entices his people to practice idolatry (Deut. 13:6–9), as noted by Jonathan Benarroch.<sup>16</sup> The *Tam u-Mu'ad* version edited by Günter Schlichting is likewise preceded by a citation of Deut. 18:20 ("Any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak, that prophet shall die"), suggesting that in the European context as well, the narrative could be interpreted as an exposition of biblical verses pertaining to religious deviance.<sup>17</sup> William Horbury has suggested that the narrative itself

<sup>16</sup> Jonatan Benarroch, "Son of an Israelite Woman and an Egyptian Man" – Jesus as the Blasphemer (Lev. 24:10–23): An Anti-Gospel Polemic in the Zohar," *Harvard Theological Review* 110 (2017): 100–24, as well as his contribution to the present volume.

<sup>17</sup> See Schlichting, *Ein Jüdisches Leben Jesu*: 52–53, and compare the eighteenth century Ms. St. Petersburg, IOM RAS, 244, fol. 1r.

could be viewed as a form of midrash, seeking to inquire and expose the real meaning of an authoritative text – with the particularity that the narrative is not commenting on the Jewish but on the Christian tradition.<sup>18</sup>

Other scholars have suggested treating the work as a medieval Hebrew novel or folktale, a genre that seems to develop from the earlier Midrashic literature.<sup>19</sup> And indeed the narrative does not shy away from sexual motifs or the wondrous feats of its protagonists or unexpected twists and turns, among other novelistic features. Here, Alexandra Cuffel underlines that, in its medieval Islamic context, *Toledot Yeshu* along with other similar works, was valued “as much for its entertainment value as its polemical content.”<sup>20</sup> These various readings showcase the need to consider *Toledot Yeshu* as a many-faced and complex narrative, which could have multiple layers of meaning if not altogether different purposes, depending on the context in which it was found, its audience, and its readership.

*Toledot Yeshu* has in recent years become the object of renewed scholarly interest. One may ask why. Certainly, there are a number of reasons for this regained curiosity, but in our view, this interest is very much deserved. In the past, Jewish scholars often considered it inappropriate to bring such texts into the light, while non-Jewish scholars might have refrained from studying them for fear of being accused of exposing an alleged Jewish “hatred” of Christianity and encouraging anti-Semitism. The situation today has changed and scholarship recognizes the need to contextualize and understand the more unpleasant aspects of the “connected histories” of Jews and Christians.<sup>21</sup> The past few decades have witnessed a shift in the historiography of Jewish–Christian relations. Scholars are now more attuned to the continuous exchanges, debates, and negotiations that define these relations, and to the constant labor of both Jews and Christians

<sup>18</sup> See William Horbury, “The *Toledot Yeshu* as Midrash,” in *Midrash Unbound: Transformations and Innovations* (ed. Michael Fishbane and Joanna Weinberg; Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013), 159–67.

<sup>19</sup> Eli Yassif, “Storytelling as Midrashic Discourse in the Middle Ages,” in *Midrash Unbound* (ed. Fishbane and Weinberg), 169–95. See also idem, “*Toledot Yeshu*: Folk-Narrative”; idem, “The Jewish Jesus Story,” *Tablet* (23 December 2016) [<https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/220567/the-jewish-jesus-story>]. In general see Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 343–51.

<sup>20</sup> See also Alexandra Cuffel, “Between Epic Entertainment and Polemical Exegesis: Jesus as Antihero in *Toledot Yeshu*,” in *Medieval Exegesis and Religious Difference: Commentary, Conflict, and Community in the Premodern Mediterranean* (ed. Ryan Szpiech; New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 155–70; Miriam Goldstein, “A Polemical Tale and its Function in the Jewish Communities of the Mediterranean and the Near East: *Toledot Yeshu* in Judeo-Arabic,” *Intellectual History of the Islamic World* 7 (2019): 192–227.

<sup>21</sup> For this expression, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (1997): 735–62.

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