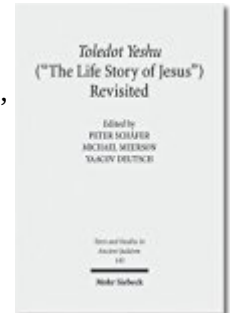


Michael Meerson Peter Schäfer, Yaacov Deutsch, eds.. *Toledot Yeshu* ("The Life Story of Jesus") *Revisited*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011. 316 pp. EUR 99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-16-150948-3.



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Toldoth Yeshu is a notorious text or tradition that circulated among Jews for over a millennium. Its notoriety stems from its reception among Christian ecclesiastics to whom it was a blasphemous denial of their beliefs and sacred texts about Jesus. The bully usually controls the rhythm of the encounter. An unbiased reading of the text, however, elicits little that was not part of the intra-Christian polemics of the anti-Nicaean and post-Nicaean controversies, supplemented in some renditions by Late Antique Talmudic and later Christian-Jewish polemics of the Islamic periods.

One must be impressed by the quality of the papers and the rapidity of publication of the international seminar organized by Peter Schäfer at Princeton in November 2009. The coterie of assembled scholars represented the cutting edge of research that has appeared since the 1902 seminal study, still invaluable, of Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (The Life of Jesus [Toldoth Yeshu] from Jewish Sources), summarized by Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* in

Herbert Danby's English translation (1925; reprint 1989). Schäfer's *Toldoth Yeshu* (hereafter TY) project plans to edit, translate, and comment on all surviving sources of this tradition with a synoptic edition of the mss and a supplementary CD. The volume under review contains selected revised papers from the seminar and conference that summarize the current status of TY research.

The conference papers cover three areas: the manuscripts, tradition, the broader cultural context, and the reception history of TY. While Riccardo Di Segni organized the classification of manuscripts decades ago, the question of the origins of the Genizah Aramaic fragments of TY has not yet been resolved. Michael Sokoloff reexamines William Smelik's claim of a third-to-fourth-century Palestinian provenance and argues rather for a Jewish Babylonian and Targumic Aramaic tradition from the middle of the first millennium CE. Peter Schäfer revisits ninth-century France and the evidence of Agobard and Amulo, possibly the first clear mention of the TY that conforms to the Latin manuscripts and perhaps the

first literary recensions of the Aramaic TY. Agobard's summary of Jewish beliefs shows a familiarity with a number of rabbinic traditions and resembles the Genizah Aramaic fragments sufficiently, though it lacks parts of that tradition and differs in others. Schäfer's critique of modern scholarship on Agobard places the bishop's letter in a broader political context.

There is no discussion of the Spanish origin of the Jews at Louis the Pius's court which may illuminate the provenance of Agobard's sources. Nor do we find in any of the papers a discussion of the interpolations in *Sepher Yosippon* on the origins of Christianity that David Flusser identified as dating to the eleventh century in his seminal edition (1978) and commentary in volume 2 (1980) of that edition.[1] There are other parodic anti-Christian tales in *Sepher Yosippon*, for example, the seduction of Paulina; however, that tale is an expansion of Josephus that the author of *Sepher Yosippon* found already well adumbrated in his major source, Pseudo-Hegesippus.

William Horbury revisits the Strasbourg text of the TY, the best-known and -studied by modern scholars, most critically by Horbury, who also stresses the Karaite transmission of this text, which he argues is "identical ... to lost texts ... current in Spain and France in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries" (p. 54). He also points out similarities with the Aramaic fragments, that is, of the fourth to fifth centuries, that he translated in his seminal PhD dissertation.

Adina Yoffe examines the Holdrich manuscripts of TY and their relationship to the earliest Hebrew manuscripts and the Aramaic fragments in light of the Slavic elements. She argues for a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century dating for its earliest synthesis based on a variety of sources (in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish) that resulted in a well-written text that Holdrich published in 1705. Michael Stanislawski describes the Yiddish versions of TY and the "Ashkenazation" of the process of the early modern period.

Pierluigi Piovanelli compares the TY with the Ethiopic version of the *Book of the Cock*, a latter fifth-century Greek Christian text probably from the Jerusalem area. He connects the TY (pre-ninth century) and the *Book of the Cock* with the Gospel of Judas (pre-180 CE) as part of the fourth-through sixth-century project of Christian response to Jewish and Judeo-Christian oral tradition and written or oral stories that Krauss had suggested was a product of the Nazoreans of Beroa, near Aleppo.

Eli Yassif takes the text in a new direction, cogently reminding researchers that the TY is first and foremost a long narrative in Hebrew, most likely from eight-century Babylonia (compare *Sefer Yosippon* and *Sefer Hayashar* of tenth- and eleventh-century southern Italy). Hence it stems from a new cultural context as "a full autonomous story independent of any literary context" (p. 104). Yassif compares his *Toldoth Ben Sira* with TY as influenced by the *majlis* convocations in Baghdad. He also discusses parallels in *The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior* and the Qur'an *sura* "Mary." Both Hebrew texts, he argues, are a "seething satire of messianism" written as (subversive) parodies by young Babylonian yeshivah students (p. 108). He suggests that TY then should be studied as a *Volksbuch*, offering both a critique of scholarship on the book to date and a paean to folklore as a comprehensive discipline to understand TY. Thus he argues for a great narrative effort in TY aimed at the masses to dismantle Jesus' charisma by exposing the source of his power, namely the theft of the Ineffable Name by which he was ultimately defeated.

Philip Alexander expands the Muslim context and places TY within the competition of Muslim and Christian Gospels with Judaism. In the process he provides a valuable introduction to Muslim readings of Jesus and Mary. Miriam Goldstein's informative paper at the workshop on "Judeo-Arabic Versions of *Toldoth Yeshu*" was published in volume 6 of *Ginze Kedem* (2010) and

hopefully will be used in the broader project of publishing the text of TY.

Sarit Gribetz explores the echoes of the Book of Esther in the TY traditions, especially the comparison of Haman and Jesus, which was commonly recalled at Purim (or Christmas or Easter) and may have been read as a *megillah*. In her feminist and folklorist exploration Galit Hasan-Rokem examines the many and ambiguous manifestations of Helena along with an illuminating theoretical discussion of genre, contact zones, and Scandinavian “ecotype.” Helena, she posits, represents an amalgam of Queen Helena of Adiabene, Helena Augustus of the fourth century, Simon Magus’s marginalized Helena, and perhaps Homer’s Helen of Troy—all reflecting “an encoding of the palimpsest Jerusalem ... to subvert unanimous (Jewish and Christian) statements of ownership” (p. 281) against the historic realities of the Christian-Muslim vicissitudes and “oscillating between belief systems and political identities” (p. 282).

Michael Meerson provides insightful analysis of the strange particulars in the TY with illuminating commentary, for example, the cabbage stalk on which Jesus was crucified—on a *furca* (fork!), the cabbage conundrum, and water burial, that explains the origin of these features inherited by later authors. (From another perspective Michael Glatzer related to this reviewer in the name of his clever student that the cabbage belongs to the family *Cruciferae*, hamavin yavin.) Ora Limor and Israel Yuval write a brief on *Judas* Iscariot restored to honor as a savior of Judaism in TY. In the process they explore medieval folklore and the antagonism to Judas as the archetype of *Judaism*. John Gager explores the role of Peter as the Jewish agent who masterminded the separation of Christianity from Judaism and became the *payyeta* par excellence of rabbinic Judaism.

Yaakov Deutsch expands on his seminal studies of the Christian reception of TY in post-Renaissance times by rehearsing the pre-fifteenth-century references to TY in mainly Christian and some

Jewish sources to suggest its “relatively late origin,” that is, the ninth century at the earliest. He notes that the earliest and longest receipt from the text is that of Raimondus Martinus (ca. 1280). Contemporary to R. M.’s citation is the thirteenth-century reference in Ephraim ben Shimshon’s Bible commentary. And finally, Paola Tartakoff reveals the background of TY as ammunition in the Jewish-Christian conflict within medieval Aragon as preserved in an Inquisition file of the fifteenth century relating to the events of 1341.

In sum, this is an important collection of papers reflecting the stimulating atmosphere and discussions at the workshop and illuminating but not resolving the problems on the TY corpus of texts and their impact on Jewish-Christian relations in late medieval and early modern times. These and other questions may be resolved through the results of the larger project now in progress.

Note

[1]. The most recent examination of this interpolation is by Joshua Holo, “Byzantine-Jewish Ethnography: A Consideration of the *Sefer Yosippon* in light of Gershon Cohen’s ‘Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought’” in *Jews in Byzantium. Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, ed. Robert Bonfil et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 923-949.

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