One Thousand Years and a Year: The Significance of *Toledot Yeshu* in Judeo-Arabic

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The brief parodical narrative *Toledot Yeshu* (TY) has a distinguished pedigree: it is likely the first anti-Christian polemical work composed by Jews. It is a parodical description of the life and death of Jesus, as well as, in many versions, a satire on the ensuing history of Christianity and a subversive rendition of the parting of the ways between Christianity and Judaism. The work has been quite long-lived: it was first composed somewhere in the Levant or Babylonia in Aramaic, some time before the rise of Islam. It was copied continuously throughout the medieval period in the Near East and in Europe alike, and was printed in a variety of versions in a variety of locales up till nearly the present day. TY had an extremely wide geographical span, as demonstrated by its attestation in numerous languages, including Aramaic, Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, Yiddish and Catalan. This polemical parody, then, enjoyed more than a millennium of reading and use: it deserves its fame and indeed, its notoriety, not only because of its birthright, but also because of its longevity and its spread across farflung Jewish communities.

Recent years have witnessed increased interest in TY. One milestone, and an event that motivated further interest, was the organization of an international conference with published proceedings, held at Princeton University.¹ Two of the conference’s organizers,

¹ “Toledot Yeshu Revisited”; November 15-17, 2009. The conference proceedings, including many but not all of the papers given at the conference, was published as Yaacov Deutsch, Michael Meerson, and Peter Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus") Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).
Peter Schaefer and Michael Meerson, also headed a large-scale textual project, which produced two volumes focused on the Hebrew and Aramaic texts of TY, including texts, translations and studies. Since then at least one other conference has been held on the topic of this work, also with proceedings to be published. Numerous scholars have become interested in the work, and this ancient polemic has become a bestseller in research venues and publications even as its use and reading by laypeople in Jewish communities has waned.

A recent discovery revealed the significant attestation of TY in Judeo-Arabic, demonstrating the formerly unknown importance and relevance of the work for Arabic-speaking Jewish communities. Judeo-Arabic renditions of TY are preserved in twenty-one fragments identified to date, dating between what is likely as early as the eleventh century, and spanning up to what seems to be the sixteenth or seventeenth century, on the basis of paleographical analysis in the absence of colophons. My current project is an edition, translation and study of the Judeo-Arabic fragments of one of the two major versions of this fundamental polemical work, known as the “Helene” version.

In the following pages, I will detail the current state of research on TY and will set forth the contribution of these Judeo-Arabic fragments to the growing body of knowledge on TY. They promise to provide a significant contribution to outstanding questions regarding

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3 This conference was held at Bern University: The Jewish Life of Jesus (Toledoth Yeshu) in Context: Jewish-Christian Polemics in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern History (June 29-July 1, 2015).

the development of TY and perhaps even the trajectory of its transmission across disparate geographical locations.

Introduction and state of research

TY was likely composed in the pre-Islamic Jewish milieu: scholars have placed the origin of the work as early as the third century CE and as late as the seventh century CE or even later. The location where TY was first composed is unclear: it originated somewhere in the Aramaic-speaking areas of the East, but where exactly, is not certain. On the basis of the Aramaic of the earliest Genizah manuscripts of TY, Babylonia has been suggested as an origin.

The oldest manuscripts of TY were found in the Cairo Genizah and date, at the earliest, to the tenth century. These manuscripts contain a minimalist narrative, including only the trial and death of Jesus. This version is thought by many to be the earliest and original version of Toledot Yeshu and is named the “Pilate” version after the ruler who sentences Jesus to death. This version is preserved in Aramaic fragments and Judeo-Arabic fragments. It is attested in a number of exceptional cases in Hebrew manuscripts from the early modern period; I will discuss these cases below.

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5 Maximalists who hold that the composition existed as early as the third century include William Horbury, "A Critical Examination of the Toledoth Yeshu" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1971). Krauss dated the composition to the fifth century in Samuel Krauss, Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1902), 246–47. Scholars who date the composition to the seventh century or later note that the earliest preserved reference to TY is found in the ninth-century account of Agobard, bishop of Lyons (d. 840).


7 Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer, Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus: Two Volumes and Database (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), Vol. II, 49-78. Prof. Gideon Bohak of Tel Aviv University is currently preparing an edition of the “Pilate” fragments.
A major development in the work becomes apparent in manuscript fragments in Judeo-Arabic dating to around the eleventh or twelfth century. These fragments attest to a new version of TY, only partially parallel to the “Pilate” version. This version, called the “Helene” version, includes a detailed narrative of the birth and youth of Jesus and has a number of points of similarity with the trial sections that open the Pilate version. The Helene version adds a significant amount of narrative material following Jesus’ death in fantastic episodes relating to the early history of Christianity.

Prior to the discovery of manuscripts in Judeo-Arabic, the Helene version was attested only in relatively late manuscript versions. These comprised Hebrew renditions, all estimated to post-date the sixteenth century. Notwithstanding the absence of manuscript evidence, it was nonetheless surmised that the Helene version existed earlier. This hypothesis was sustained on the basis of indirect attestations in anti-Jewish polemical works that date somewhat earlier, such as Raymond Martin’s thirteenth-century polemical compilation of Jewish books, Pugio Fidei, which includes a Latin translation of TY in the Helene version, as well as Thomas Ebendorfer’s early fifteenth-century composition with similar purpose, Falsitates Judeorum, which also includes a Latin translation of TY.

In this way, the discovery of sections of the Helene version in Judeo-Arabic dating as early as the eleventh century allows the confirmation of the hypothesis of the textual existence of the Helene version in the early Middle Ages. These manuscripts are an invaluable piece of tangible evidence for a period of transmission which was previously nearly entirely unattested.

The examination of the Judeo-Arabic manuscript versions of TY is a recent contribution to a growing body of research on this composition. Interest in TY, of course, goes back to the
medieval period. Prior to the late nineteenth century, attention to TY took two major forms: Jews transmitted the composition internally, while Christians sought to expose the offensive narrative.\(^8\) Scholarly attention to TY began in the late nineteenth century, first with Samuel Krauss’ 1902 study where he presented a number of Hebrew texts of the work and most importantly, classified them into types.\(^9\) Following Krauss’ work, there appeared a number of important publications during the twentieth century, including a doctorate by William Horbury, who edited the Aramaic versions as well, a study by R. di Segni, and a number of other articles.\(^10\) In the early 2000s, Y. Deutsch devoted his masters’ thesis to an edition and study of an important Hebrew manuscript of TY that was previously unstudied.\(^11\) The study of TY has experienced continuous growth since the early 2000s, mainly based on activities mentioned above centered at Princeton University: a conference in 2009, and the publication of a conference volume as well as a print and internet version of all major Hebrew texts, some translations and a volume including a number of studies of the themes included in the composition.

**Judeo-Arabic TY**

I first became aware of TY in Judeo-Arabic during my research in the early 2000s cataloguing the manuscripts of the Firkovich collection of the Russian National Library in


\(^9\) Krauss, _Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen_.


St Petersburg. Harkavy, the librarian of this collection in the first decades of the twentieth century, had created a handlist of the Firkovich collection of manuscripts that were under his care, and I was able to identify TY fragments among those that he had classified as related to Jewish-Christian polemic. Following this, I identified further fragments in other major Genizah collections, including Cambridge and JTS. As noted above, Judeo-Arabic renditions of TY are preserved in twenty-one fragments identified to date, and on the basis of paleographical analysis they appear to date between the eleventh century and the sixteenth or seventeenth century.

Given this manuscript dating, between the eleventh and the seventeenth centuries, the first major contribution of the Judeo-Arabic TY versions relates to the development of the two major different versions of the text. The importance of the Judeo-Arabic versions to this question is pointed up by a quote from the recent Schaefer-Meerson edition:

“After that [The mention of TY in the late ninth century by Amulo, Bishop of Lyons] for the following four hundred years, one can hardly point to any significant textual witness of *Toledot Yeshu*, apart from the very first mention of its title, *Tolada de Yeshu*, by Ephraim of Bonn in the 12th century.”

This chronological gap in the record is a significant one, since it is the period in which the Helene version seems to have appeared.

Following the discovery of the Judeo-Arabic fragments of TY, this statement is entirely untenable. The ample representation of the work in Judeo-Arabic texts dating to the

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12 I will not refer in this discussion to a third version known as the “Huldreich” version which is much more sparingly attested. On it, see Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, Vol. 1, 17.

eleventh – fourteenth centuries aptly fill the lacuna noted by Schaefer and Meerson. This attestation of TY during a period of three hundred years that was previously unattested is of great significance for the history of the versions of TY. Currently, although it is known that there are two distinct versions of the work, the relationship between the Pilate narrative and the Helene narrative is far from clear. The following is what can more or less be stated with certainty regarding the existence and development of the two versions.

The earliest fragments of TY are in Aramaic and represent only the Pilate version. This version begins with Jesus’ trial and ends with Jesus’ death. The title of this composition was actually not Toledot Yeshu, but rather Gzar Dina d-Yeshu.14

Early fragments of the Pilate version can also be found in Judeo-Arabic. Five relatively early fragments from the Cairo Genizah, likely dating between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, contain large portions of the Pilate narrative. G. Bohak has ascertained that three of these can create a twelve-page continuous narrative; he is editing these fragments together with the Aramaic and Hebrew fragments of the Pilate narrative.

The earliest manuscript documenting the Helene version of TY is likely a Judeo-Arabic fragment that can be dated roughly to the late eleventh or early twelfth century. This fragment, ENA 3317.21, includes sections from the middle of the composition prior to Jesus’ trial. At least three other Helene manuscript fragments date between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.

This manuscript evidence, then, suggests that between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the Pilate and Helene versions coexisted, largely in equal numbers, in Judeo-
Arabic. Following the thirteenth century, the Pilate version in Judeo-Arabic disappears nearly entirely and the Judeo-Arabic Helene version remains and flourishes, likely with narrative additions throughout the centuries. At least eleven fragments containing the Helene version in Judeo-Arabic that date to the fourteenth century and later are attested; I am not aware of any other Pilate fragments in Judeo-Arabic that date beyond the thirteenth century.

The Hebrew recensions of TY present a picture similar to what is apparent in Judeo-Arabic. The majority of the Hebrew manuscripts of TY post-date the sixteenth century, and they contain the Helene version for the most part, with two interesting and illuminating exceptions that I will discuss further below.

The Judeo-Arabic versions of TY, then, are the sole evidence of a transition period in which the two versions of the work coexisted, before the Helene version emerged victorious as the dominant TY narrative. The late date of surviving Hebrew manuscripts means that this period, if it was at one time attested, is now literally invisible, and only the manuscript evidence in Judeo-Arabic in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries reveals the period of symbiosis of the versions. While European evidence of TY leaves a large gap between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, as noted in the quote above from Meerson/Schaefer, the Judeo-Arabic versions complete exactly this period, and more than that, document a period in which the two versions of the work seem to have been nearly equally represented.

Familiarity with this period of symbiosis of the versions in Judeo-Arabic and the gradual victory of the Helene version can explain a number of findings regarding the circulation of TY in Hebrew in Europe.
First, it can now be suggested with greater confidence that the versions of TY went through a period of coexistence in the medieval period in Europe, perhaps during the same time as in the Arabic-speaking lands. One example that can now be highlighted as further demonstration of this coexistence is the fourteenth-century Even Bohan, where Shemtov ibn Shaprut responds to the polemics of the Christian convert Alfonso of Valladolid (Abner of Burgos). Alfonso had included two excerpts of TY in his polemical work, which ibn Shaprut renders in full; these two excerpts correspond to each version in turn. During the fourteenth century in Europe, then, both versions of TY were attested and were considered worthy of rendering by Alfonso in his polemic. Manuscripts post-dating the sixteenth century no longer preserve this variation; only the Helene version is attested.

Second, the demonstration that one version gave way to another can explain an interesting exception to Helene-centered manuscript findings in Hebrew. This exception is the existence of cross-pollinated versions of the story, combining both versions. In them, the Helene birth story, including Jesus’ illegitimate birth, his inappropriate behavior in the yeshiva, and his execution of miracles of various types, are appended to the Pilate main narrative. This cross-pollinated version is represented in a Byzantine manuscript, which provides a relatively long narrative, and in one of the Yemenite recensions, which is relatively abbreviated.15

These cross-pollinated versions offer a clue to the predomination of the Helene version over the Pilate version – it was simply a better and more interesting story. In most cases, the Helene version simply won out entirely. But in other cases, the cross-pollinated ones,

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15 I plan to devote a separate study to the Yemenite transmission of TY in Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew.
a halfway solution appeared, in which the spicy details of the Helene introductory sections were simply appended to the already existing Pilate narrative.

The second major contribution of the Judeo-Arabic versions will relate to the transmission and content of the work. Not every element of the two narratives is extant in Judeo-Arabic. As is the situation with the Aramaic fragments, the Judeo-Arabic fragments do not preserve – even when combined artificially – a complete text of either major version of TY. Yet even in fragmentary form, they are able to shed significant light on current research questions related to both versions of the work.

The significant observation is that the Judeo-Arabic fragments contain a wide variety of textual versions. Any particular element of the narrative can be represented by two, three or even four different renderings. These versions, and their permutations to create entire sections of narrative, are incompatible with the categories of text set out in the Schaefer-Meerson volumes. Further consideration of the Judeo-Arabic versions in comparison with the Hebrew versions documented already will likely lead to a reconsideration of those categorizations as well as, hopefully, to a better understanding of the relationship between the Hebrew and the Judeo-Arabic versions of TY.

The third major contribution of the Judeo-Arabic fragments will relate to their usage in their Arabic-speaking communities. TY was, as is known, not the only anti-Christian polemic existing in the Arabic-speaking milieu; it was read or listened to alongside other polemical narratives and compositions such as *Qissat Mujadalat al-Usquf* as well as anti-Christian polemical discussions by al-Qirqisani and Sa‘adya Gaon.16 Examination of the

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language of the manuscripts and their style will hopefully provide a picture of the specific function of TY in these communities. The manuscript fragments demonstrate a familiar progression in terms of the language and orthography of Judeo-Arabic. Earlier fragments are characterized by a relatively classical form of Judeo-Arabic both in syntax as well as in orthography; later fragments demonstrate a non-standard orthography as well as significant dialectal, usually Egyptian, usage. Fluctuations between spoken forms and classical forms may provide a clue to performance or public readings in Arabic-speaking Jewish communities.

A fourth but far from last contribution is that Judeo-Arabic TY provides a view of a text that continued to be transmitted and develop in the Arabic-speaking milieu well into the twentieth century. Its continued existence in Judeo-Arabic provides a view of a living tradition of text that is not paralleled in other textual transmissions of the work, and which I plan to develop in upcoming research.

In conclusion, the discovery of the relatively broad attestation of Toledot Yeshu in Judeo-Arabic suggests promising conclusions regarding the development of the composition as a whole. It furthermore raises a slew of additional questions and directions of research, which can shed light on the transmission of the work between Jewish communities in distant locales, the function of the work in Arabic-speaking communities and the textual tradition of the work. I plan to turn to these questions and others in future studies as I continue research on the composition.

The Qissa has been published and discussed in Daniel J Lasker and Sarah Stroumsa, The Polemic of Nestor the Priest: Qissat Mujādalat Al-Uṣquf and Sefer Nestor Ha-Komer (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, 1996).