

Early Judeo-Arabic Birth Narratives in the Polemical Story “Life of Jesus” (Toledot Yeshu)*

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■ Abstract

This is a first-time presentation of the initial section of the *Toledot Yeshu* (TY) narrative describing the birth and early life of Jesus in Judeo-Arabic, a text with important implications for current research on TY. First, the origin of the birth narrative has been debated in recent scholarship on the Hebrew versions of TY. The existence of this lengthy Judeo-Arabic birth narrative, preserved in two manuscripts belonging to the Russian National Library, as well as the identification of other, earlier Judeo-Arabic manuscript fragments that include the TY birth narrative, demonstrates that the birth narrative formed part of TY significantly earlier than has been previously suggested. Second, the narrative preserved in the Russian manuscripts also demonstrates the relevance of the Judeo-Arabic versions of TY for the understanding of the development of this protean work. Examination of their textual tradition reveals interesting connections with particular Hebrew versions of TY from Europe and can shed light on the question of how the work moved between East and West. Finally, this Judeo-Arabic version of TY is significant in its demonstration of a clever adaptation to its linguistic and cultural surroundings. It incorporates a lengthy introduction—the only one currently known in all of the TY literature—which is a literary tour de force employing contemporaneous Arabic style together with a well-known rabbinic dictum, thereby situating *Toledot*

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Yeshu simultaneously in its Islamic milieu and in Jewish textual and even ritual tradition. The discussion concludes with a transcription and translation of the birth narrative as preserved in these two Russian manuscripts.

■ Keywords

Toledot Yeshu, Judeo-Arabic, Firkovich collection, Jewish-Christian polemic, Cairo Genizah

■ Introduction

Toledot Yeshu (TY) is a satirical and polemical narrative composed by Jews and first attested in a brief Aramaic composition describing the trial and execution of Jesus. This narrative appears to be a product of Babylonian Jewish circles, and it was likely created at some time prior to the rise of Islam, or perhaps even during the early years of the Islamic expansion.¹ At some point during the transmission of the work, this brief and often legalistic narrative was expanded by the addition of an account of Jesus's birth, as well as additional sections relating to the history of the development of Christianity.² The early form of TY has been named the "Pilate" narrative and the expanded form that begins with Jesus's birth is known as the "Helene" version; these names were chosen on the basis of the ruler presiding over Jesus's trial in each.³

The development of TY in Judeo-Arabic was likely part of the broader Jewish linguistic transformation that followed the Islamic conquests. During the eighth and ninth centuries, if not earlier, Jewish communities in many parts of the Near East and North Africa underwent a gradual but steady process of Arabicization. By the tenth century, Jewish intellectual life in Judeo-Arabic was active and demonstrates constant contact with surrounding scholarship. The developing TY narrative, while it is a popular-level text, is likely a result of the same transformation.

¹ The conclusion that the language of TY is a Babylonian Aramaic dialect is presented in Michael Sokoloff, "The Date and Provenance of the Aramaic *Toledot Yeshu* on the Basis of Aramaic Dialectology," in *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus") Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (ed. Peter Schäfer, Yaacov Deutsch, and Michael Meerson; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011) 13–26. An alternate view is proposed by Willem Smelik, who posits that the composition was originally created in the Land of Israel, and that it was revised and developed in Babylonia; see "The Aramaic Dialect(s) of the Toldot Yeshu Fragments," *AS 7* (2009) 39–73. On Sokoloff's conclusion, it is important to keep in mind that a Babylonian Aramaic dialect would have been found in the Mesopotamian area known as the *Jazīra*, between the Tigris and Euphrates. This was an important area of Jewish-Christian interchange and is, in my opinion, a likely possibility for the area in which TY was initially created and circulated.

² The best and most recent introduction to this protean narrative is Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer, *"Toledot Yeshu": The Life Story of Jesus; Two Volumes and Database* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), <https://online.mohr.de/toledot>.

³ This categorization was proposed in Riccardo di Segni, *Il vangelo del ghetto* (Rome: Newton Compton, 1985). See also the categorization efforts, prior to di Segni as well as after his work, referred to in n. 21.

That is, while Judeo-Arabic versions of TY are first attested in the eleventh century, it is quite likely that the narrative circulated in that language even earlier.⁴ Interreligious debates and polemical literature are well attested in Arabic as early as the ninth century, and Jews participated in this interreligious dialogue. Polemics against Christianity are relatively numerous in this early period. The ninth-century Jewish author Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammaṣ, who had converted to Christianity for a period of time, authored two polemical works against Christianity with aggressive tones, one on a popular level as a set of questions (*al-Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā min Ṭarīq al-Qiyās*, “Logical Refutation of Christianity”), and one with a more scholarly historical approach (*Kitāb al-Darā’ah*, “The Book of Urging on to Attack”).⁵ It appears that this was also the period in which another popular-level and aggressive anti-Christian polemic, *Qiṣṣat Mujādalat al-Uṣquf*, “The Disputation of the Priest,” was composed.⁶ The similarly popular-level TY, then, would have satisfied the tastes of readers interested in these types of works. Further support for the possibility that Judeo-Arabic versions of TY were in existence in the Near East during this early period is provided by the existence of poetic material composed as early as the tenth century in Egypt, which includes narrative themes that likely originate in the Helene version of TY.⁷

TY is well attested in Judeo-Arabic in genizah material, that is, in European and American manuscript collections deriving from the Ben ‘Ezra synagogue in Old Cairo, as well as in the collections of the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg. Both versions of the story, the “Pilate” and the “Helene” versions, coexisted in relatively equal numbers in Judeo-Arabic until the thirteenth century, following which the longer narrative beginning with Jesus’s birth gained greater popularity. The greater popularity of the Helene version seems to have relatively quickly led to the near-complete disappearance of the original trial-execution narrative.⁸

The earliest renditions of the Helene narrative of TY are preserved in Judeo-Arabic; indeed, the story had a continuous existence in Arabic-speaking lands

⁴ See the overview of manuscript evidence in Miriam Goldstein, “Judeo-Arabic Versions of *Toledot Yeshu*,” *Ginzei Qedem* 6 (2010) 9*–42*. I reevaluate and in some cases revise my assessments of these manuscripts in my forthcoming monograph, which will include the texts and translations of all known Judeo-Arabic manuscripts of the Helene version of TY.

⁵ See Sarah Stroumsa, “Jewish Polemics against Islam and Christianity in the Light of Judaeo-Arabic Texts,” in *Judaeo-Arabic Studies: Proceedings of the Founding Conference of the Society for Judaeo-Arabic Studies* (ed. Norman Golb; Amsterdam: Psychology Press, 1997) 241–50, at 246–47. On al-Muqammaṣ, see Sarah Stroumsa, *Twenty Chapters: An Edition of the Judeo-Arabic Text* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2016).

⁶ See Daniel J. Lasker and Sarah Stroumsa, *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest: “Qiṣṣat Mujādalat al-Uṣquf” and “Sefer Nestor Ha-Komer”* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1996).

⁷ See the discussion of the *piyyut* by Yosef ibn Avitur, who spent most of his life in the East, in 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.

⁸ The apparent shift in popularity between the Pilate and Helene versions is evident from the Judeo-Arabic manuscript record and from textual preservation in Hebrew. Gideon Bohak is preparing an edition and translation of all of the Pilate versions, including the Judeo-Arabic.

beginning at least as early as the eleventh century and lasting well into the modern period. All known Hebrew manuscripts of the Helene version of TY in Hebrew likely postdate the seventeenth century, and for this reason the Judeo-Arabic manuscript versions, dating between the eleventh and the sixteenth century, are a crucial witness to the development and circulation of the narrative.⁹ The importance of the Judeo-Arabic versions also lies in the evidence they provide regarding the longevity of TY: given the narrative's origins in Aramaic in the Near East, TY seems to have had a continuous and unbroken existence in this region—albeit an existence whose development is not fully clear.

In the following, I present for the first time the birth and early life of Jesus (henceforth, Yeshu) as preserved in a Judeo-Arabic version of TY. I will focus on a relatively lengthy manuscript held in the collections of the Russian National Library in two separate but consecutive shelfmarks, RNL Evr.-Arab. II:1345 and RNL Evr.-Arab. I:3005 (henceforth, R3005).¹⁰ This manuscript is the most complete copy of Judeo-Arabic TY that I have found and likely dates to the fourteenth century. In my discussion, I will also make brief reference to a number of earlier Judeo-Arabic manuscripts that I have identified in other collections and which also preserve sections of the birth narrative.

The Judeo-Arabic text of R3005 makes a significant contribution to scholarship on the TY narrative; particularly, to recent discussions regarding when the birth narrative was added.¹¹ The existence of this lengthy Judeo-Arabic manuscript, and the other earlier fragments, makes it clear that this plot element formed part of the Helene narrative of TY earlier than has been previously suggested. Second, examination of these renditions of Yeshu's birth narrative demonstrates the intertwined nature of the Judeo-Arabic and the Hebrew renditions and can provide information relevant to the question of how TY moved between East and West. This section of this version of TY in Judeo-Arabic contains significant parallels with the Hebrew TY version known as Italian A, and I will discuss these parallels and their significance for the evolution of the TY narrative. Third, I will discuss the

⁹ See the discussion of dated Hebrew manuscripts in Meerson and Schäfer, "Toledot Yeshu": *The Life Story of Jesus*, 2:1. Debate continues regarding the undated manuscripts. One salient example is the TY manuscript originally thought to be one of the earliest Hebrew Helene versions, and which is included in a collection known as the "Strasbourg manuscript," MS Strasbourg BNU 3974. This undated manuscript was later dated to the eighteenth century in William Horbury, "The Strasbourg Text of the *Toledot*," in "Toledot Yeshu" *Revisited* (ed. Schäfer, Deutsch, and Meerson) 49–60. Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra has recently suggested a return to the earlier dating; see "On Some Early Traditions in *Toledot Yeshu* and the Antiquity of the Helena Recension," in "Toledot Yeshu" *in Context: The Jewish "Life of Jesus" in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern History* (ed. Daniel Barbu and Yaacov Deutsch; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming). I am grateful to Dr. Stökl Ben Ezra for sharing this article with me prior to its publication.

¹⁰ For ease of reference in what follows, I use the abbreviation "R3005" in order to refer to both shelfmarks of this Judeo-Arabic manuscript version, since the two fragments originated in the same full manuscript.

¹¹ See the sources cited below in nn. 14 and 16.

continuity of the textual tradition of this Judeo-Arabic version in later manuscripts originating in the Near East. I will conclude with an examination of the unique introduction found in this Judeo-Arabic textual tradition, a literary tour de force employing contemporaneous Arabic style together with a well-known rabbinic dictum. This introduction reflects its Islamic milieu, yet at the same time cleverly positions TY in Jewish literary and even ritual tradition.

In the final section of this essay, I present the text of the narrative of Yeshu's birth and early life history as it is preserved in R3005. As noted, this manuscript, likely dating to the fourteenth century, was preserved in two separate but consecutive shelfmarks in the collections of the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg and is one of some two dozen fragments of the Helene TY narrative that I have located in that and other genizah collections.¹² These two shelfmarks, RNL Evr.-Arab. II:1345 and RNL Evr.-Arab. I:3005, contain lengthy sections of the Helene narrative of TY and preserve many of the plot elements that are attested in later Hebrew versions. A large section from the middle of R3005 is missing; this lacuna extends from the section on Yeshu's stealing the ineffable name of God up to the section that includes his burial. R3005 takes up after this lacuna with the final section of Yeshu's burial and the later history of Christianity. The manuscript is missing what is likely to be one page at the end of the composition, so any concluding formulas or invectives against Christianity that might have been found in a colophon have been lost. In the discussion that follows, I will refer to plot elements of the TY narrative as they have been labeled in the Meerson-Schäfer volumes.¹³

■ Early Judeo-Arabic Attestation of the Birth Narrative

R3005, along with two other distinct Judeo-Arabic fragments, provides singularly important evidence demonstrating the existence of the TY birth narrative, as well as a number of characteristic linguistic usages associated with it, significantly earlier than has been previously claimed.

The question of the development of the TY birth narrative has been debated in current scholarship. In studies introducing their recent and valuable text edition of more than one hundred Hebrew and Aramaic versions of TY, Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer assert that the birth narrative was a relatively late addition to TY—definitely postdating the fourteenth century:

First, taking into account that Jesus' miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit and his virgin birth drew criticism since the earliest days of Christianity, one must wonder why it took so long for *Toledot Yeshu* to rewrite this part of Jesus' biography. Even if we date the first version of a coherent *Toledot Yeshu*

¹² I thank Dr. Edna Engel, of the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts at the National Library of Israel, for her assistance in assessing the approximate dating of the manuscripts discussed here.

¹³ See n. 2.

narrative at the 9th century (which is presumably too late), it still took about 500 years for the birth narrative to appear.¹⁴

Meerson and Schäfer posit there that the original TY narrative was composed in Babylonia and that in this location “far away from the centers of Jewish-Christian controversy,” the narrative was able to circulate for a surprisingly long period of time without a rewritten birth narrative.¹⁵ Daniel Stökl-Ben Ezra has challenged this assertion of a late origin for the birth narrative and argues for the antiquity of this section of the narrative, along with the entire Helene recension, dating certain segments of the latter as early as the period of late antiquity, prior to the Muslim conquests of the Near East.¹⁶

Another chronological issue that has been debated regarding the TY literature relates to the association of the epithet “bastard, son of the menstruant” with Yeshu; this epithet features prominently in pejorative medieval Jewish descriptions of Jesus and is also known from the Hebrew TY literature. The question of when this usage first appeared in TY narratives has been debated, with some scholars citing TY as the origin of this epithet, and dating it early, and others suggesting that the epithet appears in TY literature quite late, having originated in other works.¹⁷

Judeo-Arabic versions of TY preserved in genizah collections contribute important evidence on both questions—the emergence of the birth narrative and its emblematic usage of Yeshu’s epithet. The manuscript that I edit here, R3005, likely dates to the fourteenth century, and in this way already presents a challenge to the assertion of Meerson and Schäfer cited above. Yet the birth narrative can be traced significantly earlier in Judeo-Arabic. At least two early Judeo-Arabic manuscripts, MS JTSA ENA 32.5 and MS Cambridge University Library T-S NS 298.57, contain sections of the birth narrative of TY in classical Judeo-Arabic orthography, including the Hebrew epithet “bastard, son of the menstruant.”¹⁸ These two manuscripts can be dated on the basis of paleography and orthography to around the twelfth century, thus demonstrating that the Helene narrative of TY, including the birth story, existed at least this early in the Near East and in Judeo-Arabic. The existence of these two twelfth-century manuscripts containing the birth narrative, as well as a number of eleventh-century manuscripts containing other sections of the work,

¹⁴ Meerson and Schäfer, “*Toledot Yeshu*”: *The Life Story of Jesus*, 2:54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, “An Ancient List of Christian Festivals in *Toledot Yeshu*: Polemics as Indication for Interaction,” *HTR* 102 (2009) 481–96; and *idem*, “On Some Early Traditions” (see n. 9).

¹⁷ See the discussion in Yaacov Deutsch, “New Evidence of Early Versions of *Toledot Yeshu*,” *Tarbiz* 69 (2000) 177–97, at 181–82 (Hebrew).

¹⁸ In this way, the Judeo-Arabic evidence corroborates Gager and Ahuvia’s suggestion that the introduction of the element of the “son of the menstruant” to the TY literature followed soon upon the composition of tractate *Kallah* in Babylonia. This Judeo-Arabic evidence suggests favoring the earlier end of the period they cite (9th–12th centuries). See John G. Gager and Mika Ahuvia, “Some Notes on Jesus and His Parents: From the New Testament Gospels to the ‘*Toledot Yeshu*,’” in *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (ed. Ra’anana Boustani et al.; 2 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 2:997–1019, at 1010 n. 53.

strongly suggests that these Judeo-Arabic versions of TY were circulating in the Near East even earlier, especially in light of the flourishing tenth-century context of composition in Judeo-Arabic that I have described above. Evidence from other works also supports the early dating of the TY birth narrative: the poetic material from late tenth-century Egypt noted above specifically incorporates themes from the TY birth narrative, including the “bastard, son of the menstruant” epithet.¹⁹

The variety evident among these Judeo-Arabic attestations also supports a relatively early dating of the appearance of the birth narrative. The two early manuscripts containing sections of the birth narrative present very different formulations.²⁰ Not only are these two early manuscripts distinct from each other, but they both demonstrate contrasts to the wording and even the structure of the narrative found in the later manuscript presented here. That is to say, by the time that R3005 was copied, there were at least three different versions of the TY narrative of Yeshu’s early life in circulation. Not only was the TY birth narrative clearly already in existence by the twelfth century, but also the fact that it existed in a variety of forms attests to its health and vigor.

R3005 and other Judeo-Arabic manuscripts, then, provide important evidence regarding the existence of the birth narrative in TY literature significantly earlier than has been previously claimed. Furthermore, it seems quite likely that the origins of the Helene version of TY are to be sought in Judeo-Arabic. As I have described above, the Helene version of TY would have fit well in the literary and polemical atmosphere of other ninth-century Judeo-Arabic works, and manuscript attestation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries can be taken as an indication that the work had already been circulating for some time.

Beyond the specific question of the addition of the story’s infamous birth narrative, though, these Judeo-Arabic Helene manuscripts also contribute important information regarding broader questions related to TY in its circulation in other Jewish contexts. They call into question the categorization of versions of TY, and they bring to light a question that has hardly been asked, let alone answered: How was TY transmitted between communities, particularly between the Near East and Europe?

■ *Toledot Yeshu* between East and West

One very important recent contribution to the study of TY is the large-scale and comprehensive categorization of TY manuscripts in Aramaic and Hebrew. Building on the work of earlier scholars, beginning with Samuel Krauss, as well as valuable and pioneering categorization efforts, such as those of William Horbury and Riccardo di Segni, Meerson and Schäfer carried out a project in which they and

¹⁹ See the discussion by Michael Rand cited in n. 7.

²⁰ I edit and translate sections of these early manuscripts in my article “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.

their team classified more than one hundred Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts and fragments of TY into distinct versions divided according to manuscript text as well as by geographical origin. This project resulted in two volumes and an internet text site, which has provided a crucial textual basis for further research.²¹

With the addition of the Judeo-Arabic manuscripts to the panoply of voices within the TY literature, the value of this important work of categorization and divisions between versions now appears to be more circumscribed. This is because the textual tradition of TY in Judeo-Arabic cannot be suitably described by the categorizations that have been established over the past fifty years for manuscripts of TY in Hebrew. The majority of the Judeo-Arabic renditions attested in manuscript fragments do not consistently align with any particular version of Hebrew TY. Instead, the texts demonstrate parallels or similarities, depending on plot element, with a variety of different Hebrew versions of TY. At times, these parallels are fleeting, and at other times they are extended. These inconsistent parallels suggest that current schemes of categorization are relevant only for the specific subset of Hebrew versions and cannot be extrapolated to the TY literature as a whole, including, most importantly, the work's significant attestation in Judeo-Arabic and in Yiddish.

Yet the parallels that do exist between the Judeo-Arabic versions of TY and the Hebrew versions, despite their patchwork nature, also serve to emphasize a contrasting point. They provide important evidence that the Judeo-Arabic TY material is an integral part of a larger textual tradition that has not yet been fully comprehended, and they underscore the significance of the Judeo-Arabic manuscript tradition for understanding the development of the TY narrative.

This evidence comes to light upon the examination of R3005 in light of the Hebrew textual tradition of TY. In this particular case, relatively consistent parallels with one particular Hebrew version are apparent. Specifically, the Judeo-Arabic textual tradition preserved in it demonstrates numerous affinities with the Hebrew manuscript version known as Italian A. The similarity is evident on the microscopic level—chronological signposts in the composition, parallel narrative elements, and at times, parallel narrative formulations—as well as on the macroscopic level: a unique plot element that is found only in the Italian A traditions and in R3005 and Judeo-Arabic versions related to it. In what follows, I will present these textual connections, referring mainly to the sections that I have included in the appendix.

Both versions begin with chronological details locating the story in the time of “Tiberius Caesar” (*Ṭabarīnus Qaysar*) and “Herod” (*Horodus*), and specifically situating the night of Yeshu's conception “in the month of *Nisan* after the end of *Pesah*.” Further narrative details of the birth story and events from Yeshu's life have clear parallels with the Italian A tradition and are not shared with other Hebrew

²¹ The turn to critical scholarship on TY was set in motion largely by the 1902 publication of Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1902). Earlier stages of categorization of TY manuscripts can be found in the former, as well as in William Horbury, “A Critical Examination of the Toledoth Jesu” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1970), and di Segni, *Il vangelo del ghetto*. For the recent publication of Meerson and Schäfer, see n. 2.

renditions. One example is the inclusion of two specific details following the section in which Miriam's husband reports the incident to his rabbi ("Disclosure"): Yeshu is explicitly said to have been circumcised, and the rapist publicly brags about his act, while Miriam is explicitly stated to remain unknowing. These and other parallels between the Hebrew Italian A and the Judeo-Arabic of R3005 are not found in other Hebrew or Judeo-Arabic versions of the narrative.

Many specific numbers that play a role in the plot of TY, as well as their specific literary context, are identical in the Italian A versions and in R3005 and contrast to numbers included in other Hebrew versions. For example, after Yeshu's execution, the queen gives a "five day time limit" for the Jews to find his body in both Italian A and R3005; other Hebrew versions note a variety of other periods of time.²² Another example relates to the time period that passes between Yeshu's conception and the arrogant behavior that leads to the public revealing of the truth about his birth. These "thirty years" are explicitly mentioned in Italian A and R3005, in contrast to other Hebrew versions, and in both versions this mention is found at the beginning of the section "Heresies of Yeshu." This time period, of course, echoes the age at which Jesus began his ministry according to the New Testament (Lk 3:23) and may be implicit in other Hebrew versions as well, but the explicit mention of the passing of time and the parallel location are unique to these two renditions.

Within this section of narrative describing Yeshu's birth and early life, there appear certain textual segments unique to Italian A and R3005. One of these is a segment that bridges between the enumeration of Yeshu's "Heresies" and the scene called "Truth Revealed," in which the sages summon Miriam for questioning. Most versions move directly from the first plot element to the next, and indeed, this is the way the plot is structured. Yeshu's impertinent behavior in "Heresies" is the indicator that leads the rabbis to question his background by summoning his mother, in "Truth Revealed." Yet despite this already-existing and organic connection in most versions of TY, both Italian A and R3005 add a relatively lengthy section that recapitulates the events of the story up to that point, emphasizing the Jewish re-rendering of Yeshu's birth and the major polemical point of the narrative. In most of the Italian A manuscripts, the section appears as follows:²³

When the sages heard what the bastard said, all the sages immediately arose and gathered together and spoke about the rebellion and the rumors and the heresies that the bastard said. And they all agreed and said, "We are obligated to scrutinize and to investigate regarding him, who is his father and who is his mother and what is his family and what are his deeds, 'clarifying fully'

²² For example, Ashkenazi A: "a certain time"; Ashkenazi B: "a week's time," as well as "thirty days"; Late Yemenite A: "time"; Late Oriental: "three days and three nights." These data are my translations of the texts available online: Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus*, <https://online.mohr.de/toledot>.

²³ Ms. Leipzig BH 17, f. 3r, accessed at *ibid.*, and corrected against the original manuscript in digital format, available on the National Library of Israel website, [https://www.nli.org.il/en/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH002637792/NLI#\\$FL51027175](https://www.nli.org.il/en/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH002637792/NLI#$FL51027175). The translation is mine.

(Deut. 27:8) in order to discover the truth.” And this deed was revealed among all of the people and they said, “Thus we heard about his mother, that she whored against her husband, and the bastard, this villain, is the son of Yoḥanan the adulterer. And because of the shame, her husband fled, and has entirely disappeared.”

Surprisingly, in the Italian versions of TY, the name of the husband and the adulterer are transposed from what is found in all other TY versions. The hero becomes Yosef, and the villain becomes Yoḥanan. This surprising transposition of hero and villain in variant versions of a narrative, while not common, is attested in folktale traditions.²⁴ With the exception of this transposition, this section is presented quite similarly in the Judeo-Arabic of R3005.

When the students heard those words and the heresy that he explicitly uttered, they went and told the sages, and the sages asked about him and found out that he was a bastard and the son of a menstruant from the villain Yosef who came to his mother at night when she was in the *niddah*²⁵ period, and that the Righteous One fled and left her an *'agunah*²⁶ because he found out what had happened and went to Baghdad.

The additional transition material added to Italian A and R3005 is unnecessary to the plot; much of it is a repetition of what is already known to the audience. Not only that, it interferes with plot development, in that it presents material that is meant to surface later: if the sages already know that Yesu is “a bastard and the son of a menstruant,” then why do they need to summon his mother and ask her questions in the next section? Yet despite these plot-related inconsistencies, the addition of this section provides a major advantage. It is a highly useful polemical addition, in that it provides yet another iteration of one of the basic claims of the narrative, the subversion of the Christian account of Jesus’s birth.

These sections of the Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic versions are not related via translation. The two renditions are formulated differently and do not demonstrate word-for-word parallels. Nonetheless, the major units of content are identical, as is the clever use of dialogue between two groups: in Italian A, the sages and “the people”; and in R3005, the students and the sages and, implicitly, the people, who are likely present. Given that this additional segment appears only in Italian A and R3005, it is an important further indicator of a connection between these two renditions.

A final significant link between these two textual traditions is a section that appears toward the end of the Helene version of TY, following Yesu’s execution

²⁴ For example, in the figure of Reyhan in the popular Turkic epic of *Köroğlu/Göroğlı*. Reyhan appears as the enemy in a number of versions, yet features as an admired companion in others (Karl Reichl, email correspondence with author; with thanks to Prof. Reichl for his guidance on this question and for sharing unpublished material).

²⁵ A term referring to the separation between husband and wife according to Jewish law, which includes the days of menstruation, plus seven days following the end of menstruation.

²⁶ A wife abandoned with a writ of divorce (*get*).

and burial. This is the “Finding of the True Cross,” a legend that developed in Jerusalem around the fourth century and which is attested in three major versions and in a wide variety of Near Eastern and Christian languages. One of the notable features of the Judeo-Arabic TY version preserved in R3005 is the inclusion of a subversive rendition of this legend in its “Judas Cyriacus” version. This narrative unit is not preserved in R3005 itself; rather, it is found in the relatively late manuscript RNL Evr.-Arab. II:919, a member of the same Judeo-Arabic textual tradition of TY, as I will discuss below.²⁷ In the Hebrew versions of TY, the “True Cross” account appears only in the Italian A tradition. The inclusion of this story in their TY renditions, then, adds further evidence to the interdependence of R3005 and the textual tradition of Italian A.²⁸

Chronological and textual details and phrasing, then, as well as narrative units both short and long, demonstrate the connection between R3005 and the Italian A versions. This connection emphasizes that the Judeo-Arabic versions of TY are not an isolated branch of the TY narrative but rather an integral part of the development of its textual tradition. Moreover, given the close relationship between these particular Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic versions of TY, we can use a comparison of the textual tradition that they share to identify and trace textual issues.

■ Variant Versions of the Same Textual Tradition

Close comparison and analysis of the texts of these two related renditions of TY can shed light on the development of the version that they share. One example is an instance in which the earlier Judeo-Arabic manuscript presents a confusing rendition, which can be identified and understood upon comparison with the Hebrew Italian A version, preserved in a later manuscript.

This phenomenon occurs in the concluding section of the birth narrative, where Yeshu’s questionable conception comes to light. In this section, the sages call for Miriam and ask her a number of questions in an attempt to ascertain if, as they suspect, her son’s inappropriate behavior is indeed an indication of a problematic pedigree. This motif of the impertinent disciple is an ancient one that seems to have been found first—albeit relating to an anonymous figure—in the tractates *Kallah* and *Kallah Rabbati*, attributed to the eighth century.²⁹ This characterization of Jesus is a significant element in TY. Simply put, a student with the heady and apparently

²⁷ I examine this Judeo-Arabic account of the true cross in a forthcoming publication.

²⁸ The appearance of this legend in Hebrew versions of TY is noted in Witold Witakowski, “Ethiopic and Hebrew Versions of the Legend of the *Finding of the Holy Cross*,” *StPatr* 35 (2001) 527–35. Witakowski provides a brief discussion of the narrative sequence in TY, on the basis of the texts published by S. Krauss (see n. 21). A recent discussion of this account with respect to TY can be found in 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.

²⁹ See Michael Higger, *Masekhtot Kallah* (New York: Hotsa’at de-be Rabanan, 1936) 191–92.

sage-paralyzing combination of cleverness and disrespect that Yeshu demonstrates can be none other than a bastard.

The following conversation is the Judeo-Arabic version preserved in R3005.

ת'ם בעד ד'לך אלא ואלהכמים בעת'ו ורא אומהו וקאלו להא אנתי בנת ואו (!) מארה (!) ומן תכוני פקאלת להם אנא מן ד'ריית דווד המלך עאס פקאלו להא איש אסמך קאלת להם אסמי מרים ומא אסם ג'ווד פקאלת להם אסמהו יוחנן ואדי ת'לאת'ין סנה והו גאיב עני פי ארץ' בוגדאד ואנא למ ראתו

Then after that, the sages sent for his mother and said to her, “Are you a virgin or a married woman, and who are you?” She said to them, “I am of the seed of King David, peace be upon him.” And they said to her, “What is your name?” She said to them, “My name is Miriam.” “And what is your husband’s name?” She said to them, “His name is Yohanan, and lo, thirty years he has been gone in the region of Baghdad, and I have not seen him.”

In this version, the rabbis ask four questions, divided into three interchanges. Of these, the first is somewhat incongruous: The sages ask Miriam first whether she is married—literally, “Are you a girl or a woman,” meaning by this whether she is single or married.³⁰ They add a vague “who are you?” to this question. Miriam’s response does not provide an exact answer to the question: she states that she is “of the seed of King David,” and she does not respond regarding her marital status.

A close reading of the Italian A version reveals a list of questions that is strikingly similar to those found in R3005, but with a number of important differences.³¹

או שלחו כל החכמים בעד אמו ובאה לפניהם וישאלו לה בת מי את והיא אמרה ממשפחת דוד המלך וישאלו לה מה שמך ותאמר מרים ומי הוא בעליך אמרה זהו יוסף בן פאנדריא ואן הוא אמרה הוא כמו שלשים שנה שנפרד ממני ולא ראיתיו עד הנה

Then all the sages sent for his mother, and she came before them, and they asked her, “Whose daughter are you?” And she said, “From the family of King David.” And they asked her, “What is your name?” And she said, “Miriam.” “And who is your husband?” She said, “He is Joseph b. Panderia.”³² “And where is he?” She said, “Some thirty years ago he left me, and I have not seen him since then.”

As in R3005, the rabbis ask first about Miriam’s descent, then about her name, and then about her husband’s name. The majority of the Italian manuscripts include a fourth question, as appears above: the sages ask pointedly for the current location of Miriam’s husband. The Judeo-Arabic rendition is slightly different and includes only three questions, omitting the “where is he?” found in Italian A. The outcome of the questioning, however, is the same, for in R3005, Miriam responds to the third question by stating her husband’s name as well as volunteering information

³⁰ This usage is common even today in traditional Arabic-speaking societies. I observed this usage during my work with the Jewish community of Djerba, Tunisia, some fifteen years ago.

³¹ Ms. Leipzig BH 17, 3r-v. See n. 23 for electronic resources. The translation is mine.

³² On the surprising appearance of Joseph Panderia as Miriam’s husband in the Italian versions, see n. 24.

as to his whereabouts. It is notable that one Italian A manuscript, London Brit. Lib. Or. 10457 (f. 3v), also combines the third and fourth questions into a single unit in this way. Overall, this set of three or four similar questions is unique to the textual tradition of R3005 and the Italian A manuscripts, and the interchange between Miriam and the rabbis appears in quite different form in other Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic versions.³³

Awareness of the similar Hebrew formulation in the Italian A manuscripts highlights the incongruity in the Judeo-Arabic version between the first question and its answer and may even aid in reconstructing the textual development of this dialogue. In the Italian A version, the sages' first question is "Whose daughter are you?"; in this case, the answer, "I am of the seed/family of King David," follows quite logically. The Judeo-Arabic version preserves the answer regarding the family of King David, but presents a question that is no longer open-ended and instead offers a choice between one of two possibilities: "Are you a virgin or a married woman, and who are you?" Perhaps the original question in Judeo-Arabic was "Whose daughter are you?"—as appears in the Hebrew—and at a certain point, *bint*, "daughter," was reinterpreted as "single woman," and the question was reformulated to add a second option, "married woman." Once the first question had been changed, it was necessary to add an additional and secondary question in Judeo-Arabic ("And who are you?") in order to somehow accord with the required answer "of the family of King David."

It is clear, then, that these two renditions of the interchange between the rabbi(s) and Miriam are based on the same textual tradition. This tradition is represented in a variant form in the earlier Judeo-Arabic manuscript version of R3005. The exact mechanics of the transfer are not clear: It is not possible to say whether the Judeo-Arabic formulation of R3005 in this instance is the result of the confusion of an earlier Judeo-Arabic source or perhaps of a Hebrew source, such as that preserved in Italian A. Nor are there obvious signs that the Hebrew version of Italian A has a Judeo-Arabic precursor. Comparison between the two renditions, though, results in a better understanding of the development of the text. Given the apparently lengthy evolution of numerous TY texts over a long period of time—and, I would add, a wide geographical expanse—further comparison of Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew versions of TY is an important and desirable undertaking.³⁴

The textual tradition that I have explored above represents one branch of the Judeo-Arabic tradition, which is relatively well attested. This is clear from the existence of a number of other manuscript representatives as well, which circulated

³³ See n. 20.

³⁴ For views emphasizing the long chronological development of TY narratives, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Polymorphic Helena: *Toledot Yeshu* as a Palimpsest of Religious Narratives and Identities," in "*Toledot Yeshu*" Revisited (ed. Schäfer, Deutsch, and Meerson) 247–82, at 248–49; Hillel I. Newman, "The Death of Jesus in the *Toledot Yeshu* Literature," *JTS* 50 (1999) 59–79, at 59 and citing di Segni.

in the Near East in later centuries. I turn next to the description of this manuscript family.

■ A Manuscript Family

R3005 had an afterlife in the Judeo-Arabic tradition of TY, and it is the earliest representative of a particular version of the narrative that is preserved in at least four later manuscript copies.

The first is a manuscript preserved in the collections of the Russian National Library, RNL Evr.-Arab. II:919 (henceforth, R919). This manuscript contains four continuous folios and is written in semicursive Eastern script that likely dates to the sixteenth century. R919 follows the text of R3005 relatively closely, where the fragments overlap. Following this section of overlap, R919 provides a significant contribution to the manuscript tradition of TY in Judeo-Arabic, because it contains a lengthy section of the narrative beyond what is preserved in the earlier manuscript. It contains sections from the end of TY, well after Yeshu's execution, including the final separation between the Jews and Yeshu's followers, and is also the only witness in Judeo-Arabic preserving much of an account of the "True Cross," which is, as I have discussed above, an important link with the Hebrew tradition of Italian A.

The second manuscript is preserved in a single folio, RNL Evr.-Arab. II:1343. This folio preserves the beginning of the narrative: the preface, which is unique to this TY version and will be discussed below, and the beginning of the birth narrative. Its scribe was likely completing a missing first folio of another manuscript because the writing on the second page is spaced successively wider and wider till the bottom of the page. The script is one that is associated with Karaite circles and, given its conservative nature, can only be dated quite broadly, between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. The text in the fragment varies slightly from that preserved in RNL Evr.-Arab. II:1345 and R3005.

A third group of fragments derives from one manuscript; these are RNL Evr.-Arab. II:2550, RNL Evr.-Arab. I:3014, and RNL Evr.-Arab. II:1036. These fragments contain one folio, one folio, and six folios, respectively. They are written in a semicursive Eastern script that likely dates to the sixteenth century. They contain a nearly continuous section of the narrative, beginning with the section titled "Arrest," continuing through Yeshu's "Execution and Burial," and including the anti-Acts plot elements known as the "First Separation" and the "Final Separation."³⁵ These late manuscripts contain a version that is strikingly close to that of R3005, and they may have been copied directly from it.

The fourth of the TY copies that continues the R3005 textual tradition is preserved in three folios contained in two different manuscript shelfmarks; they appear to have been copied in the sixteenth or seventeenth century.³⁶ British

³⁵ I estimate that there is a single folio missing between RNL Evr.-Arab. II:2550 and RNL Evr.-Arab. I:3014.

³⁶ This is the dating provided by the British Library.

Library MS Or. 10435 (also known as Gaster 1328) is a compilation that includes TY in Judeo-Arabic together with a number of other biblically themed aggadot in Judeo-Arabic. TY is preserved in one folio (f. 18) that begins in the middle of the introduction and ends after a few lines of the birth narrative. This folio finds a direct continuation in folio 4 of a second shelfmark: JTSA MS ENA 1726 (also known as NY JTS 2455), which takes up the birth narrative until the description of Yeshu as a clever but disrespectful young student. A second noncontinuous folio of TY from this shelfmark (f. 5) includes part of the plot segment where Yeshu steals the ineffable name of God. These two folios were bound together with three pages of another anti-Christian polemical work in Hebrew, *Nestor hakkomer* (“The Polemic of Nestor the Priest”).³⁷

The manuscript family preserved in R3005 and these later fragments contains a unique element unattested in any other TY versions in any other language, to the best of my knowledge: a lengthy introductory section, with marked literary and cultural interest.

■ Arabic Preface and Rabbinic Homily

This Judeo-Arabic version of TY opens with a relatively lengthy preface, which combines a typical Arabic prefatory form with a rabbinic literary motif that enables a creative transition into the well-known beginning of the narrative. As I will show, this rabbinic motif was likely carefully chosen due to its particular literary context, which resonates with important themes present in TY.

This introductory material is found in two manuscripts that exhibit some degree of variation between them.³⁸ The following is the introduction according to RNL Evr.-Arab. II:1345, which is, as noted above, the first page of the manuscript that finds its continuation in RNL Evr.-Arab. I:3005:

Praised be God, the God of Israel, creator of the heavens and the earth in his power and greatness [who] destroyed the blaspheming tyrants and caused the beloved righteous to multiply. Master of masters, motivator of the heavenly forces, emancipator of captives, mover of clouds, ruler of rulers, the all-powerful and the staunch, the clear truth, crusher of the polytheists, humbler of the blasphemers, destroyer of the oppressors, annihilator of the wicked and protector of those close to him and the righteous, who saved the children of Israel from the Pharaohs, who are the Christian infidel people, and who gave them the cursed Jesus the Nazarene, and who caused them to follow him in severe blasphemy [due to] his great ignorance, and caused their leaders to perish by means of cursed counsel and caused them to worship wood and idols, and God, the blessed and exalted, caused him to perish within a

³⁷ The pages are parallel to the text found in Lasker and Stroumsa, *Polemic of Nestor*, 141–42. Inexplicably, the word “Karaites” is inscribed on the title page that includes Elkan Nathan Adler’s seal, apparently by one of the JTS librarians. I have not been able to locate any information regarding the acquisition of this compilation or its creation.

³⁸ See the description of RNL Evr.-Arab. II:1343 in the previous section.

short time because of his blasphemy and overstepping of bounds. And Israel suffered great difficulties on his account and they tried to return him [to the correct path], but they could not, because in our sources, every place where it is written *vayehi* indicates great difficulties, as it is said, “In the time (*vayehi biymey*) of Tiberius Caesar [and] his minister Herod . . .”

This introduction is a creative and even humorous combination of two distinct literary forms originating in different cultures and periods. The introduction is unexpected to a reader familiar only with the Hebrew versions of TY, which rarely contain any introductory material at all. When they do contain such material, it is quite brief. The Strasbourg manuscript, MS BNU 3974 (Héb. 48), which opens with the words “The beginning of the creation of Yeshu,” is the only Hebrew version that contains prefatory material that is longer than a few words and that is at all general; a number of Hebrew versions begin with chronological descriptions that serve to situate the story in its context.³⁹ The generalized preface form found in this Judeo-Arabic version, then, is likely unique in the TY literature. However, this prefatory form is not unique in the least in the Arabic-speaking milieu, where the use of introductions in a particular form was standard and expected from at least the end of the ninth century.⁴⁰

This Judeo-Arabic preface begins with the *ḥamdala*, or initial section of praise, which was the standard opening section for the classical Arabic preface. The *ḥamdala* praises God, usually via the opening phrase *al-ḥamdu li-llāhi*, “Praise to God,” a formula employed by adherents of all religions in the Islamicate milieu. In this Judeo-Arabic version, the opening phrase is a variant phrasing also well attested in prefaces, invoking the concept of blessing, “Blessed be God . . .,” and continuing with the type of description typical of Arabic prefaces.⁴¹ The introduction praises God generally for his subduing of blasphemers and oppressors and for favoring the faithful, Israel, as his beloved people over all others. This blessing and description use typical style in employing *sajʿ*, Arabic rhyming prose, a pre-Islamic form that reached a high point of popularity in the tenth century CE (third century AH), becoming a required style for nearly all forms of prose literature.⁴²

As is often the case in Arabic prefaces, this praise of God in the *ḥamdala* proves to relate directly to the subject of the composition that follows, in this case, the overcoming of a threat to the Jewish people. Following the general praise

³⁹ For example, the “Wagenseil” version; see Meerson and Schäfer, “*Toledot Yeshu*”: *The Life Story of Jesus* 1:286.

⁴⁰ The most comprehensive study on the Arabic preface remains Peter Freimark, “Das Vorwort als literarische Form in der arabischen Literatur” (PhD diss., Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, 1967).

⁴¹ Saʿadya Gaʿon (882–942), for example, begins many of his prefaces with this same “blessing” formulation. Other Jews employ the language of *ḥamdala*, as is found in the prefaces of the 11th-cent. Andalusian grammarian Jonah b. Janāh; see, for example, *The Book of Hebrew Roots: Edited with an Appendix; Containing Extracts from Other Hebrew-Arabic Dictionaries* (ed. Adolf Neubauer; Oxford: Clarendon, 1875; repr., Amsterdam: Philo, 1968).

⁴² T. Fahd, W. P. Heinrichs, and A. Ben Abdesslem, “*Sajʿ*,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, http://dx.doi.org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0959.

regarding God's subduing of the mighty and the oppressive, the introduction turns to specifically anti-Christian polemical themes, citing the salvation of Israel from the particular danger of the "Pharaohs, who are the Christian people." The preface explains that God saved Israel from Christian oppression by providing the Christians with the questionable leadership of Jesus, *Yešua' hannašeri*, who led them astray and thus away from the Jewish people. The preface adds a number of details regarding Jesus's actions as leader, likely anticipating the beginning of the parodical narrative focused on his life.

This preface, then, is in many ways a typical product of its Arabic-speaking surroundings. Yet, while the preface exhibits forms customary in Arabic, these forms soon give way to an identifiably rabbinic literary motif. This motif is employed in the transition from the conclusion of the preface to the beginning of the narrative. This transition is carried out via an allusion to a well-known rabbinic statement found in b. Meg. 10b. There, the rabbis cite the first verse of the book of Esther, "Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus," and comment:

R. Levi, or some say R. Jonathan, said: The following remark is a tradition handed down to us from the Men of the Great Assembly: wherever in the Scripture we find the term *vayehi*, it indicates [the approach of] trouble. Thus, "Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus" (Esth. 1:1)—there was Haman. "And it came to pass in the days when the Judges judged" (Ruth 1:1)—there was a famine.

The Talmud then relays a litany of examples, citing verse after verse beginning with *vayehi* along with the calamity that follows each one, including the story of the flood, the Tower of Babel, and more. In including this rabbinic statement in the preface, then, its composer explicitly links the TY narrative to this list of scriptural episodes. TY, of course, does not begin with *vayehi*, and it seems unlikely that this connection was made on the basis of literary evidence or on the basis of some Hebrew version available to an Arabic-speaking narrator or scribe. None of the known versions of TY, including those closest in phrasing to this beginning—the Italian A versions—actually begin with the Hebrew phrase that is supposedly quoted in this preface. Rather, the connection is thematic: This introduction establishes TY as another narrative in the biblical genre of suffering and deliverance as found in the book of Esther and a host of other biblical narratives. Positing such bold and creative connections between scriptural and nonscriptural sources would not have been foreign to Jewish audiences in the Near East, who, following the eleventh century, would have been familiar with a similar approach in the work of R. Nissim b. Jacob ibn Shāhīn, a rewriting of Talmudic narratives in the Arabic genre of "relief after adversity," and a medieval bestseller East and West.⁴³ Moreover, emphasizing

⁴³ R. Nissim b. Jacob ibn Shāhīn taught and wrote in Qairawan in the 11th cent.; this composition, *al-Faraj Ba'd al-Shidda*, or, in its Hebrew translation, *Ḥibbur yafeh min hayšu'ah*, is the most famous and well-preserved of his numerous works. See Naḥem Ilan, "Ibn Shāhīn, Nissim ben Jacob," *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/>

this thematic connection of adversity and salvation might even have suggested to its audience the aptness of the TY narrative to this regional Islamicate genre itself.

This preface, firmly grounded in its Near Eastern literary environment, also stands as further evidence of a broader Jewish communal tradition. As we have seen, the Judeo-Arabic preface expands the group of scriptural texts that are linked to the book of Esther in rabbinic writings, in order to include the extrabiblical and chronologically closer TY narrative. Significantly, in this way the preface gives explicit literary voice to an association that is implicit in the TY narrative itself, for, as has been recently noted, TY and the book of Esther share a number of salient parallels, even beyond the general motif of trouble and deliverance alluded to by the Judeo-Arabic preface. These include the element of threats by a ruler followed by communal fasts and periods of waiting and the facts that both can be read as parodical texts, that both begin with scenes centered on female figures and sexuality, and that both include, and in some cases end with, the execution of the enemy who has endangered the Jews.⁴⁴ When midrashim on Esther are included, further parallels come to light, as in the question of which tree on which to hang the wicked, a motif that is a notable and even perplexing plot element in TY and that also appears in midrashic sources on Esther.⁴⁵

Moreover, the link between TY and Esther is not limited to parallel literary motifs but is also performed in annual communal and ritual events. Jewish Purim rituals attested since late antiquity make pointed reference to Jesus via parody and satire much akin to the nature of TY itself. These included public readings of biting satires on Jesus, as well as the association of Jesus and Haman and the reenactments of an execution, whether by hanging or by crucifixion.⁴⁶ It seems, then, that in Jewish consciousness, the TY narrative could have been linked to the book of Esther, not only on the basis of literary parallels but also via lived ritual and experience. The expansion of the rabbinic homily in the Judeo-Arabic introduction to include TY as one of the calamity-to-salvation episodes likely resonated with both aspects.

The existence of this Judeo-Arabic preface to TY, then, reflects this ritual and theological context, and in this way contributes one more literary piece of evidence—a clever blend of contemporaneous Arabic literary culture with a

encyclopedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/ibn-shahin-nissim-ben-jacob-COM_0011110. See also Israel Moses Ta Shma, "Nissim ben Jacob ben Nissim ibn Shahin," *EncJud* 15:279–80.

⁴⁴ The parallels between Esther and TY are discussed at length in Sarit Kattan Gribetz, "Hanged and Crucified: The Book of Esther and *Toledot Yeshu*," in "*Toledot Yeshu*" *Revisited* (ed. Schäfer, Deutsch, and Meerson) 158–80, at 161–69.

⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, 162–63; and 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 135 and n. 11.

⁴⁶ The connection between Purim and anti-Christian rituals is discussed in Elliott S. Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). A thoughtful reevaluation of the evidence can be found in Kattan Gribetz, "Hanged and Crucified," 169–76.

traditional rabbinic dictum—to an already rich tapestry of connections linking Haman and Jesus and the book of Esther and *Toledot Yeshu* in its various forms.

■ Text and Translation

Examination of the well-attested tradition of *Toledot Yeshu* in the Near East, particularly in Judeo-Arabic, thus contributes significantly both to the growing understanding of the development of the TY narrative and to the understanding of unique aspects of its Near Eastern circulation. The introductory sections and birth narrative of TY in Judeo-Arabic provide early evidence of the existence of this plot element and are able to fix the origin of this plot element significantly earlier than has previously been thought. The Judeo-Arabic versions do not comprehensively parallel the known Hebrew versions of TY; indeed, they challenge the positing of neat categories for the TY literature as a whole. However, the version presented here is an important example that demonstrates an extended connection with a particular Hebrew TY tradition. Analysis of these two textual versions results in important specific conclusions about the development of TY, as well as broader implications for the circulation of the narrative between the Near East and Europe. Finally, the above analysis highlights a unique element of the Near Eastern TY, a creative and perceptive intertwining of contemporaneous literary devices with Jewish homiletical tradition. Continued examination of TY in Judeo-Arabic, then, has great potential to contribute to the nascent understanding of the development of the various TY versions and their circulation among Jewish communities near and far, as well as to the creation and function of uniquely adapted versions of the work among Arabic-speaking Jews.

I conclude with a transcription and translation of the section of the Judeo-Arabic text of the two manuscripts making up R3005, which underlies the majority of the discussion above. This section covers Yeshu's birth and early life, up to and including the plot element "Heresies of Yeshu." This text is composed in late Judeo-Arabic, and as such includes a significant degree of nonstandard orthography that is typical of this later period.⁴⁷ I have included minimal discussion of the linguistic features of the text, and I have generally refrained from marking the many nonstandard elements found in it with exclamation points, which would render the text close to unreadable. The characteristic linguistic and orthographic features of mid- to late Judeo-Arabic texts such as this one have been amply discussed in earlier linguistic analyses.⁴⁸ That said, I do mark letter interchanges, a scribal error

⁴⁷ I adopt here the terminology used in Geoffrey Khan, "Judeo-Arabic," in *Handbook of Jewish Languages* (ed. Aaron D. Rubin and Lily Kahn; Leiden: Brill, 2015) 22–63.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Joshua Blau, *A Grammar of Mediaeval Judaeo-Arabic* (2nd ed.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1995; Hebrew); Benjamin H. Hary, *Multiglossia in Judaeo-Arabic* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Rachel Hasson-Kenat, "New Manuscripts Written in Late Judaeo-Arabic from the Firkovitch Collection: Classification, Description and Sample Texts" (PhD diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2016; Hebrew); Geoffrey Khan, "A Linguistic Analysis of the Judaeo-Arabic of Late Genizah Documents and Its Comparison with Classical Judaeo-Arabic," *Sefunot* 20 (1991) 223–34 (Hebrew); Heikki

that recurs frequently in this manuscript. I have added full diacritical notation, supplementing the partial notation included by the scribe. For the sake of clarity and disambiguation, I have employed diacritical notation that is based on Classical Arabic orthography, even though it may not fully reflect the contemporaneous pronunciation of the numerous dialectal forms found in the manuscript.

<p>Praised be God, the God of Israel, creator of the heavens and the earth in his power and greatness [who]⁴⁹ destroyed the blaspheming tyrants and caused the beloved righteous to multiply. Master of masters, motivator of the heavenly forces, emancipator of captives, mover of clouds, ruler of rulers, the all-powerful and the staunch, the clear truth, crusher of the polytheists, humbler of the blasphemers, destroyer of the oppressors, annihilator of the wicked and protector of those close to him and the righteous,</p>	<p>(א1)⁵⁰ תבארך אללה ישראל ב'אלק אלסמאואת ואלאראצ'י בקודרתהי ועט'מתהי ואהלך אלג'באברה אלכאפרין ואכת'ר פי אלאחבאב אלצאלחין רב אלארבאב מסבב אלסבאב ומועתק אלארקבא (!) ומסייר אלסחאב סולטאן אלסלאטין אלטאיק אלאמין אלק אלמבין כאסר אלמושרכין וקאמי אלכאפרין ומוהלך אלט'אלמין ומביד אלטאלחין ותאפי' אלוליא ואלצאלחין</p>
<p>who saved the children of Israel from the Pharaohs, who are the Christian infidel people, and who gave them the cursed Jesus the Nazarene, and who caused them to follow him in severe blasphemy [due to] his great ignorance, and caused their leaders to perish by means of cursed counsel and caused them to worship wood and idols, and God, the blessed and exalted, caused him to perish within a short time because of his blasphemy and overstepping of bounds. And Israel suffered great difficulties on his account and they tried⁵¹ to return him [to the correct path], but he did not return,</p>	<p>אלד'י כ'לץ בני ישראל מן אלפראענא אלד'י הום קום אלנצארה אלכאפרין אלד'י אעטאהום אלמעול ישוע הנצרי ולמהום וראה פי אלכופר אלשדיד בג'הלו אלעט'ים ואתלף קאעדתהם באלשורה אלמלעונא ועבדהום אלכ'שב ואלאצנאם ואהלכה אללה ס'ת' פי אקל מן אלאיאם עלאשאן כופרו ותוגיו⁵² וקאסו מנהו ישראל שדאידי כת'יר ואראדו אנהם ירג'עוה ולא רג'ע</p>

Palva, “A 17th-18th Century Manuscript in Spoken Egyptian Arabic. Part Two: Linguistic Notes,” *Le Muséon* 121 (2008) 93–123.

⁴⁹ The original reads “and” ungrammatically; I translate in accordance with the intent of the parallel phrases.

⁵⁰ The text begins with RNL Ebr.-Arab. II:1345, 1r.

⁵¹ Lit., “they wanted them to return him.” I have expressed what I believe to be the intent of this somewhat unclear sentence.

⁵² Apparently, the intent is the Arabic طغى or طغيان, “exceeding proper bounds” or even “oppression.” The word is written with a *tav*, but interchange between ט and ת is well attested in later Judeo-Arabic texts. This lexical item is a fraught and negative theological term in Arabic. For example, it is used to describe the actions of the arch-idolator “Pharaoh” in Qur’an 20:43, in a chapter largely devoted to the description of Pharaoh’s idolatrous behavior. The use of the verb may even relate to the mention of “the Pharaohs” a line or two earlier in this Judeo-Arabic text.

<p>because in our sources, every place where it is written <i>vayehi</i> indicates great difficulties, as it is said, “In the time (<i>vayehi biymey</i>) of Tiberius Caesar [and] his minister Herod,” in those days, there was a man descended from David, peace be upon him, and his name was Yoḥanan, and he had a beautiful wife whose name was Miriam. Her husband was God-fearing and was a student of Rabbi Shim’on ben Shataḥ, peace be upon him. He had a villainous neighbor whose name was Yosef Pandera, and this villain was completely debauched, and never took his eyes off the women. And he cast his eye on this Yoḥanan’s wife, and it was the month of <i>Nisan</i> after the end of Passover.</p>	<p>לאן ענדנא כל מצ'ע אלד'י פיה ויהי יטהר לנא ען שדאיד כתי'ר מת'ל מא קאל ויהי בימי טברינוס קיסר הורודוס וזירו פי ד'יך אלאיאם וכאן ט'הר רג'ל מן נסל דוד המלך ע'ה' וכאן אסמהו יוחנן וכאן להו אמראה חסנת אלמנצ'ר ואסמהו מרים וכאן ג'וזהא כ'אוף מן תלאמיד' רבי שמעון בן שטח ע'אס' וכאן להו ג'אר רשע ואסמהו יוסף פנדירא וארשע כאן מפסוד קאוי וכאן דאמאי (!) עינו מא ישילהא מן אלנסא וחס עינו עלא ג'וזה יוחנן אלמד'כור וכאן פי חודש ניסן פי בעד כ'רוג' פסה</p>
<p>And this righteous man would go to the <i>yešibot</i> at night. So one of the nights, he arose to go to the <i>yešibah</i>, and he closed the door. And he [Yosef] slipped into the righteous man’s house and locked the door and the poor man did not know; he had gone to the <i>yešibah</i> as usual. And Miriam the wife of Yoḥanan was in the period of <i>niddah</i>, separated from her husband, and that villain came to her and wanted to have relations with her, and she cried out and said “I am impure; do not do this act with me!” And that cursed one did not consent to let her go, when he was having relations with her. And she thought that he was her husband because she did [not] know any [man] other than her husband, and she had never met this man who had relations with her.</p>	<p>וכאן ד'לך אלחסיד יקום ללישיבות פי אלליל פאם לילה מן אלליאלי לאג'ל מא יקום ללישיבה והו ביגלק⁵³ אלבאב אלא⁵⁴ ואנובק אלי בית אלחסיד וקפל אלבאב ולם ביעלם אלמסכין אראח⁵⁵ ללישיבה זי אלעאדה וכאנת מרים ג'וזה יוחנן פי אלגדה והי בעידה ען ג'וזהא וד'לך ארשע ג'א לענדהא ואראד אן יסתפעל⁵⁶ פיהא וכאנת תזעק ותקול אנה טמאי⁵⁷ ליס תפעל הד'א אלפעל מעי ולם רצ'י אלמלעון אן יפארקהא למא אסתפעאל (!) פיהא והי בתחסב אנהו ג'וזהא לאן הי בתעלם (!) אחדא גיר ג'וזהא ומא להא עלם בל'ך אלרג'ל אלד'י אסתפעל פיהא</p>

⁵³ The text continues here with RNL Eyr.-Arab. I:3005, 5r.

⁵⁴ This presentative usage is found in many dialects and often appears in the context of narratives and storytelling. See the folkloristic usage discussed in Hasson-Kenat, “New Manuscripts in Late Judaeo-Arabic,” 113. See also Blau, *Grammar*, 32; El-Said Badawi and Martin Hinds, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1986) 32.

⁵⁵ This does not reflect the well-known Judeo-Arabic phenomenon of the interchange of the verb forms I-IV, but rather is a feature of Cairene Judeo-Arabic; see Blau, *Grammar*, 77; Joshua Blau, *A Dictionary of Mediaeval Judaeo-Arabic Texts* (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 2006; Hebrew) 263b.

⁵⁶ This phrase, appearing here in the tenth form, is attested in this meaning in the first form in colloquial Egyptian Arabic. See Badawi and Hinds, *Egyptian Arabic*, 663.

⁵⁷ This usage seems to be found only in Judeo-Arabic texts that are highly influenced by Hebrew. See Blau, *Dictionary*, 408–9; Joshua Blau, “Arabic Lexicographical Miscellanies,” *JSS* 17 (1972) 173–90, at 177–79.

<p>And when morning came, that villain ran away, and after an hour, lo, the righteous man came from the <i>yešibah</i> and his wife said to him, “It can’t be that you committed that act with me.” And he said “What is the act that I committed with you?” And his wife said, “This evening you slept with me, while I was in the <i>niddah</i> period!” And when her husband heard that he said “God forbid!” that is—God forbid—and became silent. He left her and went to his rabbi, Rabbi Shim’on ben Shatah, peace be upon him, and told him about the incident that had happened to him.</p>	<p>פלמא צבח אלנהאר הרב ד'לך ארלג'ל ארשע ובעד סאעה אלא ואלחסיד ג'א מן אלישיבה פקאלת להו ג'ווחו ליס פעלת מעי הד'א אלפעל מעי (!) פקאל לאה (!) ג'ווחה איש הד'א אלפעל אלד'י פעלתו מעכי פקאלת להו ג'ווחו אללילה רקדת מעי ואנא פי אלנדה פלמא סמע ג'ווחה קאל חס ושלום יעני חאשא וכלא⁵⁸ ובאן סכת וכל'אהא ואראח לענד אלחכם בתאעו⁵⁹ ירבי שמעון בן שטח ע'ה' ואחכא להו אלמוג'רא אלד'י ג'רת להו</p>
<p>The sage Rabbi Shim’on ben Shatah, peace be upon him, said to him, “What will be? There are no witnesses. Rather, write it down for yourself, until I consider the situation and see what happens.” The righteous man said to Rabbi Shim’on ben Shatah, peace be upon him, “O Sage, I have stopped allowing her go to the ritual bath, and I have not had relations with her, until I consider the matter.” And due to the great grief that took over that righteous man, he could not tolerate staying in that town, so that righteous man fled to the city of Baghdad and settled there.</p>	<p>פקאל להו אלחכם רבי שמעון בן שטח ע'ה' איש יכון אלעמל עדים מא פי שי ואלא אכתבו ענדך למא ננצ'ור אלחאל כ'יף יכון אלעמל פקאל אלחסיד לרבי שמעון בן שטח ע'ה' יא חכם אנא למ בקית אכ'ליהא תנטבל⁶⁰ הד'א אלמטבל ולא בקית אנ'אמעאה למא ננצ'ור אל'אמר כ'יף אלחאל ומן כותר' אלקהר אלד'י אכדו ד'לך אלחסיד פמא תקשי⁶¹ אלבלד יקעד פיהא פהרב ד'לך אלחסיד אלי בלד בגדא וקעד פיהא</p>
<p>Afterwards, the news was heard in the town that Miriam the wife of the righteous man Yohanan was pregnant and was close to giving birth. And she gave birth to a child and named him Yeshua'. And she, the poor woman, had no idea; she thought only that he was from her actual husband. We're back to the story of that cursed one, Yosef Pandera, who is going around telling people what happened, the story that he fornicated with the woman, the righteous Yohanan's wife. And he told the people, “That boy who was born is my son.” And when the Jews heard that he was of Jewish stock, they circumcised him.</p>	<p>פבעד יא'אם אנסמע אלכ'בר פי אלבלד (כ"ב) באן מרים ג'ווח אלחסיד יוחנן אן חבלה וקרבת ללולאדה פולדת ולד ואסמתהו ישוע והיא⁶² אלמסכינה מא להא עלם מא בתחטב אלא אנהו מן ג'ווחה אלחקאני אחנא פי ד'ל מנעול יוסף פנדירא דאיר ביחכי ללנא אלד'י צאר מנהו מן קצ'יית אלד'י אזנא מע אל'אמרהא (!) ג'ווח אלחסיד יוחנן ובקא יקול ללנאס הד'א אלולד אלד'י אתאלד⁶³ הוא⁶⁴ אבני פלמא סמעו אליהוד אנהו מן בר ישראל פקמאו (!) עמלו לו מילה</p>

⁵⁸ חאשא וכלא

⁵⁹ There is an erasure prior to this word: בתעו is marked for erasure with lines over the letters.

⁶⁰ See Blau, *Dictionary*, 395.

⁶¹ Apparently, what is intended is something like what is found in a parallel rendering in RNL Evr.-Arab. II:1993, מא אשאק שי, “He could not tolerate.” See also n. 52.

⁶² Regarding this form, which is common in Judeo-Arabic, see Blau, *Grammar*, 57.

⁶³ The root *a.l.d.* attested here is a secondary formation of the root *w.l.d.* It appears here in the fifth form and is attested in the second form in Blau, *Dictionary*, 16.

⁶⁴ See n. 62.

<p>That boy grew older and went to school and turned out very clever and expert, and learned reading and writing better⁶⁵ than the children in the school, because the schoolchildren were considered to be nothing in comparison to him.</p>	<p>פכובר ד'אלך אלוּלד וּאראַה אלכּתאבּ וּבּקא חרִיף⁶⁶ שאַטר קוּי וּאתעלם⁶⁷ אלקראַה וּאלכּתאבּה אכּת'ר מן אלאולאד בתּוּע אלכּתאבּ לאַן אולאד אלכּתאבּ לם⁶⁸ כאּנוּ יונחּסבוּ קדאמוּ כּלא שׁי</p>
<p>Then thirty years later, the boy's age was (!).⁶⁹ And one day Rabbi Shim'on ben Shatah, peace be upon him, was in the market with two great sages, and the custom of the townfolk was to stand upright and bless the sage and to kiss his hands, and that cursed one did not rise before the sage and did not rise and honor him⁷⁰ like the other townfolk. And then after that, Yeshua' went to the "big house of study" in Tiberias where the judge Shim'on ben Shatah was, and one of the sages rose and said, "A person like that, who does not rise and honor our sage, that one is definitely a bastard," and another one stood up and said, "Yes, he's a bastard and the son of a menstruant." And when he came to them, they said to him, "You, do you not know how to read, because it's written in the Torah, anyone who does not rise and show honor to the sages or to Torah scholars, he deserves to be killed, and if you weren't a bastard and the son of a menstruant, you would not have sat without rising for the sage."</p>	<p>ת'ם בעד ת'לאַת'ן סנּה בּקא עומרהוּו אלוּלד (!) אלא וּיוּם מן אלאיאם כאּן רבי שמעון בן שטח ע'ה' פּי אלסוק ומעוּהוּ את'נין חכמים גדולים ועאדת אהל אלבלד יקומו עלי חילהם וּיתטאבוּ⁷¹ ללחכּם וּיקבלוּ איאדיה וּהד'א אלמעון (!) לם כאּן יקום ללחכּם ולא יעמל להו לא קימה ולא כּבוּד זי אהל אלבלד ת'ם בעד ד'לך אלא וּישוע כאּן ירוּח ללמדּרש אלכּביר אלד' פּי טבריא אלדפּי⁷² אדדיין רבי שמעון בן שטח ע'ה' פּאקאם ואחד מן אלחכּמים וּקאל רג'ל הד'א אלד'י לם יעמל קימה ולא כּבוּד ללחכּם בתּאענא ד'א לם בד מאהוּ ממזר פּאקם (!) ואחד אכ'ר וּקאל נעם אנהוּ ממזר וּבר נדה פּלמא ג'א לענדוּהום פּקאלוּ להו אנתה⁷³ מה (!) תּערף תּקרא לאַן מכתוב פּי אלתורה כּל מן לא יעמל קימה ולא כּבוּד ללחכּמים אוּ לבעלי תורה יתחק אקתל (א) וּולא אנת ממזר וּבר נדה לם קעדת בּלא עמליל קימה ללחכּם</p>

⁶⁵ Lit., "more."

⁶⁶ This meaning is attested in Badawi and Hinds, *Egyptian Arabic*, 199.

⁶⁷ This fifth-form verb is written with a prosthetic alef. See Blau, *Grammar*, 77.

⁶⁸ This sentence is composed with a double negative, lit., "The school children were not considered before him to be nothing."

⁶⁹ There is a word or phrase missing here, although Yeshu's age is clear from the context.

⁷⁰ Lit., "did not do 'rising and honoring.'" A Hebrew phrase, *qimah vekavod*, is used here and elsewhere in the text as a fixed paired expression; this pairing is not attested in Hebrew literature, to the best of my knowledge.

⁷¹ I have not found this verb form attested in dictionaries. This root appears in the second form with the meaning of "to praise (in the liturgy)" in Badawi and Hinds, *Egyptian Arabic*, 549. This phrase appears later in the narrative as well, in the phrase *ל'אצנאם (!) יטואבו* where it appears to mean "bow down to."

⁷² The intent of this phrase is *פיה אלד'י*, lit., "in which there was."

⁷³ On this form, see Blau, *Grammar*, 75.

<p>What did he respond to them and say? “You are the ones who are evil men and bastards, and you have no sense at all, and if you had sense, you would understand from me the few words⁷⁴ that I will say to you.” And they said to him, “What are they, the ‘few words’ that you want to say to us?” And he responded and said to them, “Who is wiser, Jethro or Moses? If you say ‘Jethro’ you annul the prophecies of Moses, about whom it is said ‘My servant Moses is not so; he is trusted in all My house’ (Num. 12:7). And also, if you say, ‘Moses,’ well, he took counsel with Jethro regarding the issue of the governors that he placed under his control, that is ‘the officers of hundreds and officers of fifties and officers of tens’ (Exod. 18:21). And he said to him, ‘If you don’t appoint those governors over the people of Israel, all of the responsibility will be yours alone.’ And he accepted that counsel from him.”</p>	<p>איש רד להם אלג'ואב וקאל להם אנתו אלי רשעים וממזרים ומא לכם עקאל בשי ולו כאן לכ[ם] עקל כונתו תפהמו מני ד'ל כלמתין אלד'י נקול לכום פקאלו להו איש הום אלכלמתין אלד'י תקול לנא פרד אלג'ואב וקאל להם מן הו אכת'ר חכם יתרו או משה פאן כאן תקולו יתרו פתבטלו נבואת משה אל אנקאל פי חקהו בכל ביתי נאמן הוא ואי'צ'א אן כאן תקולו משה ד'א אכ'ד' אלשוה⁷⁵ מן יתרו מן קצ'ית אלוכאם אל⁷⁶ חטהם מן תחת אידו בתוע שרי מאות שרי חמשים ושרי עשרות פי קאלו לו (!) לולא תחת ד'ל חוכאם אל⁷⁷ ישראל יבקא אלתעב כולו עליך ואכ'ד' מנו אלשוה</p>
<p>When the students heard those words and the heresy that he explicitly uttered, they went and told the sages, and the sages asked about him and found out that he was a bastard and the son of a menstruant from the villain Yosef who came to his mother at night when she was in the <i>niddah</i> period, and that the righteous man fled and left her an <i>'agunah</i> because he found out what had happened and went to Baghdad.</p>	<p>פלמה סמעו אלתלמידים ד'לך אלכאלם (!) ואלכפור (!) אלד'י קאלו מן פמהו פאראחו ואחכו ללחכמים פסאלו ענהו אלחכמים פוג'דו אנהו ממזר ובר נדה מן יוסף ארשע אלד'י ג'א פי אלליל עלי אומהו והי פי אלנדה ואלחטיד הרב וכל'אהא עגופה⁷⁸ (!) לאנהו עלם אלאמר ואראח לבוגדאד</p>

⁷⁴ Lit., “two words.”

⁷⁵ The intent is the term *شورى*, “counsel.”

⁷⁶ The intent is the colloquial relative pronoun *أَي*.

⁷⁷ The interchange of *'alā*, “over,” and *ilā*, “to,” is common; See Blau, *Grammar*, 115.

⁷⁸ The intent is apparently *עגונה*.