

Marian Devotion and the Jewish Gospel (Toledot Yeshu) In Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam

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Yiddish Manuscripts of *Toledot Yeshu* in the Netherlands

While cataloguing Yiddish manuscripts from the Netherlands I noted the peculiarity of the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition and decided to consider the manuscripts of this Jewish life of Jesus in a distinct chapter.¹ Whereas the origins of this polemical narrative remain debated, its enduring popularity throughout the centuries is truly astonishing. The story of Jesus was constantly retold, with slight changes updating the general narrative and adapting it to new historical situations. The Yiddish texts from the Netherlands are all handwritten and were compiled from Hebrew texts. But the compilers also felt free to supplement their sources and alter and fit them to their current situation. So far, little attention has been given to the Yiddish versions of *Toledot Yeshu*. In an earlier study examining the oldest extant *Toledot Yeshu* manuscript from the Netherlands, produced in 1711, I sought to show a connection between the declining messianic movement generated by the seventeenth-century Jewish ‘messiah’ Sabbatai Zvi and this retelling of the life of Jesus.² In the same volume, Claudia Rosenzweig published a transcription of this manuscript, along with a translation and critical apparatus, making it available for further research.³ In another study, Rosenzweig also examined another early Yiddish manuscript of *Toledot Yeshu*, now held in the Russian State Library in Moscow.⁴ In an article published in 2011, Michael Stanislawski offered some preliminary remarks on a very long Yiddish version of the narrative, preserved in the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (JTS 2211), but which we can now confirm is also of Dutch origin.⁵ Furthermore, the text analysed by Stanislawski is also very similar to the one found in another Yiddish manuscript now

¹ EVI MICHELS, *Jiddische Handschriften der Niederlande* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 403–29.

² EVI MICHELS, ‘Yiddish *Toledot Yeshu* Manuscripts from the Netherlands,’ in *Toledot Yeshu in Context: The Jewish ‘Life of Jesus’ in Ancient, Medieval and Modern History*, eds DANIEL BARBU and YAACOV DEUTSCH (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 231–62.

³ CLAUDIA ROSENZWEIG, ‘The “History of the Life of Jesus” in a Yiddish Manuscript from the Eighteenth Century (Ms. Jerusalem, NLI, Heb. 8° 5622),’ in *Toledot Yeshu in Context*, eds BARBU and DEUTSCH, 263–315.

⁴ CLAUDIA ROSENZWEIG, ‘When Jesus Spoke Yiddish. Some Remarks on a Yiddish Manuscript of the “Toledot Yeshu” (Ms. Günzburg 1730),’ *Pardes* 21 (2015), 199–214.

⁵ MICHAEL STANISLAWSKI, ‘A Preliminary Study of a Yiddish “Life of Jesus,”’ in *Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited: A Princeton Conference*, eds PETER SCHÄFER, MICHAEL MEERSON, and YAACOV DEUTSCH (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 79–87.

held in the Ets Haim library in Amsterdam (EH 47 A 21). We are thus to assume that both manuscripts were produced using the same (Hebrew?) *Vorlage* or originated from a very close context.

In what follows, I will focus on these two particular manuscripts, JTS 2211 and EH 47 A 21, addressing their dependence on each other by looking at the chapters concerned with Mary. Indeed, both manuscripts divide the story into chapters concerned with *Yeshu* (Jesus) and chapters concerned with *Maryem* (Mary), perhaps so that each chapter could be read aloud on specific days. What is striking in these manuscripts and distinguishes them from other versions of *Toledot Yeshu* is indeed their emphasis on the figure of Mary. Both manuscripts either expand the episodes of the narrative dealing with Mary or include new ones.⁶ In particular, they include a story about Mary's death and burial which does not appear in any other known version of the narrative. Where could the authors of this text have obtained this story, and why did they think it important to tell it in Amsterdam in the mid-eighteenth century? Why was it added to the narrative, and what was its function in this specific context? Before I address these questions in more detail, a few general remarks on the genre and history of *Toledot Yeshu* are in order.

The Text Genre of *Toledot Yeshu*

The Jewish story of *Yeshu* (Jesus)⁷ dates back to the early Middle Ages and is well documented across several linguistic and cultural boundaries. In addition to the 107 Hebrew manuscripts listed by Peter Schäfer and Michael Meerson in their critical edition,⁸ the predominantly fragmentary Aramaic, considered to be the oldest (ninth or tenth century), at least twenty-one Judeo-Arabic,⁹ one Judeo-Persian, two Judeo-Spanish, and twenty-six Yiddish manuscripts¹⁰ have survived to this day. These were copied and used until the last century at least, if not up to the present day, and

⁶ On the figure of Mary in the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition, see SARIT KATTAN GRIBETZ, 'The Mothers in the Manuscripts: Gender, Motherhood, and Power in *Toledot Yeshu*,' in *Toledot Yeshu in Context*, eds. BARBU and DEUTSCH, 99–129, esp. 111–16.

⁷ The name ישו (*Yeshu*) is an abbreviated version of ישוע (Hebr. for 'Jesus'). As an acronym י"ש is also a curse ימח שמו וזכרו (meaning 'May his name and his memory be erased'). Although many manuscripts and printed editions use the title *Toledot Yeshu* ('Life of Yeshu') other titles, such as מנשה ישו ('Story of Yeshu') and גירות ישו ('Bad deeds of Yeshu') are also frequently attested; cf. WILLIAM HORBURY, 'Titles and Origins in *Toledot Yeshu*,' in *Toledot Yeshu in Context*, eds. BARBU and DEUTSCH, 13–42; DANIEL BARBU, 'Some Remarks on *Toledot Yeshu* (*The Jewish Life of Jesus*) in Early Modern Europe,' *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* 5, no. 1 (2019): 29–45, (30n5).

⁸ Cf. MICHAEL MEERSON and PETER SCHÄFER, eds, *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); PETER SCHÄFER, 'Introduction,' in *Toledot Yeshu ... Revisited*, eds SCHÄFER, MEERSON, and DEUTSCH, 1–11; SAMUEL KRAUSS, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen*, repr. (Berlin: S. Calvary & Co., 1902; Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1994); RICCARDO DI SEGNI, 'Due nuove fonti sulle *Toledoth Yeshu*,' *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 55, no. 1 (1989): 127–32; DI SEGNI, *Il vangelo del Ghetto. Le "storie di Gesù": leggende e documenti della tradizione medievale ebraica* (Rome: Newton Compton, 1985); DI SEGNI, 'La tradizione testuale delle "Toledòth Jéshu": manoscritti, edizioni a stampa, classificazione,' *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 50, no. 1–4 (1984): 84–100.

⁹ MIRIAM GOLDSTEIN, *A Judeo-Arabic Parody of the Life of Jesus: The Toledot Yeshu Helene Narrative* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

¹⁰ MICHELS, 'Yiddish *Toledot Yeshu* Manuscripts from the Netherlands,' 253–62.

sometimes read as entertainment during Jewish anti-Christmas celebrations.¹¹ A preliminary review of most of the extant manuscripts allows a rough classification into three main groups, named after the ruler presiding over Jesus's trial in the narrative (Pilate, Herod, or a queen named Helena). A more detailed classification proves difficult, since all variants of the story reflect a relatively free use of narrative styles and motifs. In their recent edition Meerson and Schäfer proposed subdividing the tradition into no fewer than fifteen distinct recensions.

The oldest complete Hebrew manuscript dates from ca. 1200 and was copied using oriental square script, meaning that it was most likely produced in the Middle East.¹² The Judeo-Arabic manuscripts, some of which date back to the eleventh century, also testify to an early tradition situated between Christianity and Islam.¹³ The versions of *Toledot Yesbu* that started circulating in the Western world in the Middle Ages provided 'counter-narratives'¹⁴ to the Christian tradition. Rather than fighting against the predominant Christian doctrine, they testify to the Jews' self-confidence and capacity for entertainment, despite their status as a demonised minority.¹⁵ On first reading, it is already noticeable that these texts presuppose a good knowledge of Christian doctrine for them to be understood. The New Testament is never quoted verbatim, but the most important episodes of Jesus's or his early disciples' life are easily recognised. As is well known, the New Testament, and other early Christian writings, quote many verses from the Old Testament as proof that Jesus was indeed the Messiah announced in biblical prophecies. This method, frequently found in the Gospel of Matthew, is also used extensively in the different versions of *Toledot Yesbu*, but in order to parody the Christian interpretation of Jesus and contest the notion that his messiahship can be grounded in the Hebrew Bible. In that sense, *Toledot Yesbu* differs

¹¹ See <https://www.yivo.org/JewishChristmas2021>. On this topic, see also MARC SHAPIRO, 'Torah Study on Christmas Eve,' *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (1999): 319–53; REBECCA SCHARBACH, 'The Ghost in the Privy: On the Origins of Nittel Nacht and Modes of Cultural Exchange,' *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2013): 340–73; DANIEL BARBU, 'Feeling Jewish. Emotions, Identity, and the Jews' Inverted Christmas,' in *Feeling Exclusion: Emotional Strategies and Burdens of Religious Discrimination and Displacement in Early Modern Europe*, eds GIOVANNI TARANTINO and CHARLES ZIKA (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 185–206.

¹² MEERSON and SCHÄFER, eds, *Toledot Yesbu*, vol. 2, 39.

¹³ Cf. MIRIAM GOLDSTEIN, 'Judeo-Arabic Versions of *Toledot Yesbu*,' *Ginze Qedem* 6 (2010): 9*–42*; GOLDSTEIN, 'Jesus in Arabic, Jesus in Judeo-Arabic: The Origins of the Helene Version of the Jewish "Life of Jesus" (*Toledot Yesbu*),' *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 111, no. 1 (2021): 83–104.

¹⁴ On the notion of 'counter-history,' see AMOS FUNKENSTEIN, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); with regard to *Toledot Yesbu* and other Jewish Polemics cf. DAVID BIALE, 'Counter-History and Jewish Polemics Against Christianity: The *Sefer toldot yesbu* and the *Sefer zerubavel*,' *Jewish Social Studies*, n.s., 6, no. 1 (1999): 130–45.

¹⁵ On the demonisation of Jews in the Middle Ages, see JOSHUA TRACHTENBERG, *The Devil and the Jews* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1984). I would like to thank Daniel Barbu for this reference. Humor in the *Toledot Yesbu* tradition has not sufficiently been examined, but see ALEXANDRA CUFFEL, 'Between Epic, Entertainment and Polemical Exegesis: Jesus as Antihero in *Toledot Yesbu*,' 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.

from other medieval Jewish polemical texts, such as *Nizzachon Vetus*¹⁶ or disputation narratives,¹⁷ which typically argue over the precise meaning of the scriptural verses used by Christians. In what follows, I will suggest that the Yiddish versions of the story circulating in Amsterdam in the eighteenth century not only served as polemic texts directed against Christians; they can also be read within the broader framework of Jewish parody and entertainment.

Toledot Yeshu in Western Europe up to the Eighteenth Century

It was difficult to preserve and pass on manuscripts of *Toledot Yeshu* in the Jewish communities of Western Europe up to the Reformation. Historical evidence consistently emphasises that Jews themselves had an interest in keeping these writings secret.¹⁸ It is thus not surprising that our earliest textual evidence in the European context was handed down by Christian clergymen and scholars, who were mainly interested in exposing Jewish beliefs as faulty and blasphemous. From their point of view, *Toledot Yeshu* essentially offered a false and defamatory portrayal of Jesus Christ. Yaacov Deutsch remarks that ‘*Toledot Yeshu* is a unique example of a Jewish text, insofar as the information about it in Christian sources is richer than the information in Jewish sources.’¹⁹ Indeed the oldest textual evidence about it is from the ninth century and comes from writings of the archbishops Agobard (796–840) and Amulo of Lyons (d. 852), who confirm the reception and circulation of the narrative in the Carolingian context. In his anti-Jewish writing, *De Judaicis superstitionibus* (ca. 827), Agobard quotes from a *Toledot Yeshu* narrative that predominantly recounts the end of Jesus’s life.²⁰ Amulo’s effort as Agobard’s successor to provide further textual material incriminating Jews seems to have reached its goal, as he indeed provided new narrative elements concerning the Jewish life of Jesus, such as the dragging of his corpse in the mud, or his birth from the illegitimate union of Mary and Joseph Pandera.²¹ The next evidence of the circulation of *Toledot Yeshu* in Europe is from the thirteenth century and is provided by the Dominican Raymundus Martini from Spain, who wrote against both Jews and Moors.²² Around 1420, the priest and theologian Thomas Ebendorfer, a

¹⁶ DAVID BERGER, ed., *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzachon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979).

¹⁷ SAMUEL KRAUSS, *The Jewish-Christian Controversy from the Earliest Times to 1789*, vol. 1, *History*, ed. WILLIAM HORBURY, rev. ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), chap. 2.

¹⁸ Cf. DANIEL BARBU and YANN DAHHAOUI, ‘The Secret Booklet from Germany: Circulation and Transmission of *Toledot Yeshu* at the Borders of the Empire,’ in *Toledot Yeshu in Context*, eds BARBU and DEUTSCH, 187–218.

¹⁹ YAACOV DEUTSCH, ‘The Second Life of the Life of Jesus,’ in *Toledot Yeshu ... Revisited*, eds SCHÄFER, MEERSON, and DEUTSCH, 283–95 (285); cf. his comprehensive study ‘“Toledot Yeshu” in Christian Eyes: Reception and Response to “Toledot Yeshu” in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period’ (MA diss.; Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1997 [Hebrew]).

²⁰ PETER SCHÄFER, ‘Agobard’s and Amulo’s *Toledot Yeshu*,’ in *Toledot Yeshu ... Revisited*, eds SCHÄFER, MEERSON, and DEUTSCH 27–48.

²¹ SCHÄFER, ‘Agobard’s and Amulo’s *Toledot Yeshu*,’ 46.

²² *Pugio fidei adversus Marinos et Judaeos*, see an English translation in MEERSON and SCHÄFER, eds, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1, 10–2.

professor at the young University of Vienna, obtained a previously unknown and detailed version of the polemical story, which he translated first into German and then into Latin with the help of a convert from Judaism.²³ The Hebrew and German preliminary versions of his translation are unfortunately no longer extant.²⁴ Martini's and Ebendorfer's texts represent the earliest testimony to the old Ashkenazic tradition, the so-called 'Strasbourg version,' as it closely corresponds with the Hebrew text provided by a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Hebrew manuscript now in the Strasbourg University library.²⁵ This tradition is closely related to the Yiddish texts from the Northern Netherlands. However, many parallels can also be found in Judeo-Arabic manuscripts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, confirming that we are dealing with a rather ancient and widespread tradition.²⁶ Ebendorfer's allows us to list the main episodes of the narrative:

- Miriam, the mother of Yeshu has a fiancé, Yochanan from the house of David. A wicked neighbour, Joseph Pandera, comes to Miriam while she is impure (i.e., she was menstruating). She conceives from him
- Yochanan leaves for Babylon and Miriam gives birth to Yeshu
- Yeshu grows up as a learned Jewish boy both wise and pious
- Through his insolent and disrespectful behaviour towards his teachers Yeshu reveals that he is a bastard and the son of a menstruating woman
- Miriam admits the sinful origins of her son. A ban is imposed on him
- Yeshu steals the holy name of God from the Jerusalem temple
- He performs miracles using the name and gathers disciples around him
- At the instigation of the Sanhedrin, he is summoned before Queen Helena to be judged as a seducer of the people. After a second trial, and with the help of an opponent appointed by the Sanhedrin, Yeshu is condemned, stoned, and hanged. He is then buried in a garden
- His body disappears
- Jews are in distress and must prove that Yeshu is not resurrected

²³ See BRIGITTA CALISEN et al., eds, *Das jüdische Leben Jesu. Toldot Jeschu. Die älteste lateinische Übersetzung in den Falsitates Judeorum von Thomas Ebendorfer* (Vienna: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2003). Ebendorfer's *Falsitates Judeorum* could also be dated later, in the 1450s, see MANUELA NIESNER, 'Einführung,' in *Das jüdische Leben Jesu*, eds CALISEN et al., 25–33; on the assistance of a convert, see also DEUTSCH, 'The Second Life,' 290.

²⁴ However, he sometimes added a German or Hebrew word in brackets when seeking to clarify the meaning of an expression.

²⁵ For the classification of this text, see MEERSON and SCHÄFER, eds, *Toledot Yesbu*, vol. 1, 14. The 'Strasbourg version' belongs to Meerson and Schäfer's Group II, and is labelled 'Ashkenazi A.' It is printed in MEERSON and SCHÄFER, eds, *Toledot Yesbu*, vol. 1, 167–84 (Eng.); vol. 2, 79–95 (Hebr.). On the Strasbourg manuscript, cf. WILLIAM HORBURY, 'The Strasbourg Text of the *Toledot*,' in *Toledot Yesbu ... Revisited*, eds SCHÄFER, MEERSON, and DEUTSCH, 49–60. On the date of this manuscript, cf. DANIEL STÖKL BEN EZRA, 'On Some Early Traditions in *Toledot Yesbu* and the Antiquity of the "Helena" Recension,' in *Toledot Yesbu in Context*, eds BARBU and DEUTSCH, 43–58. On further testimony of the circulation of the 'Strasbourg version' in the late Middle Ages, see BARBU and DAHHAOUI, 'The Secret Booklet from Germany.'

²⁶ GOLDSTEIN, 'Jesus in Arabic,' 88.

- It turns out that the gardener took Yeshu's body away from the grave site. Peace and quiet returns between Yeshu's followers and the Sanhedrin
- Apostles of Yeshu proclaim the Christian message in all corners of the world, and many Jews are seduced
- The rabbis are forced to intervene. They allow one of them to learn the holy name again, so that he will be able to convince the Christians that he was sent by Yeshu. He thus provides them with new laws and customs that will help distinguish them from the Jews
- The separation of the two religions is sealed and both coexist peacefully
- [Appendices about Nestorius and Peter]²⁷

The Jews themselves had no interest in publishing this narrative about Jesus Christ.²⁸ Thus, it is not surprising that the printed versions of the story preserved from the early modern period were all commissioned by Christians, and testify to the success of missionary efforts at converting the Jews, since converts often mediated the texts.²⁹ In 1520, the narrative transmitted by Raymundus Martini was printed for the first time in Paris, although in the writings of a Genoese Carthusian monk, Porchetus Salvaticus (d. ca. 1315), who had copied Martini's text. It was through Porchetus that it became accessible to Martin Luther who used it in his anti-Jewish tract *Vom Schem Hamephorasch und vom Geschlecht Christi* ('On the Ineffable Name and on the Lineage of Christ') in 1543.³⁰ Martini's (and Salvaticus's) text offered only a (short) variant of the larger *Toledot Yeshu* tradition, and later Christian scholars thus felt challenged to search for longer versions of the narrative and publish them in line with the new philological standards developed in the course of the seventeenth century. Thus, in 1681, the German Hebraist Johann Christoph Wagenseil produced a Hebrew edition along with a Latin translation and commentary of the narrative in his *Tela Ignea Satanae*³¹ ('Satan's Fiery Arrows'). In 1705, another version edited by Johann Jacob Ulrich ('Huldricus')³² was printed.

²⁷ Since both appendices are missing in the Yiddish manuscripts I discuss here, I do not provide any further information.

²⁸ DEUTSCH, 'The Second Life,' 283.

²⁹ BARBU, 'Some remarks,' 31–33, and see Yaacov Deutsch's contribution to this thematic section.

³⁰ Cf. STEPHEN BURNETT, 'Martin Luther, *Toledot Yeshu*, and "the Rabbis",' in *Toledot Yeshu in Context*, eds. BARBU and DEUTSCH, 219–30; MATTHIAS MORGENSTERN, *Martin Luther und die Kabbala* (Wiesbaden: Berlin University Press, 2017).

³¹ JOHANN CHRISTOPH WAGENSEIL, *Tela Ignea Satanae. Hoc est: Arcani et horribiles Judaeorum adversus Christum Deum, et Christianam religionem libri anecdotoi. Sunt vero: [...] Libellus Toldos Jeschu / Johann Christophorus Wagenseilius ex Europae Africaeque latebris erutos, in lucem protrusit [...]* (Altdorf, Joh. Henricus Schönnerstaedt, 1681). The text is printed in two columns, on the left the Hebrew original, on the right the Latin text. Wagenseil also offered a *confutatio* ('reply') to the text, refuting it. For the Wagenseil text, see MEERSON and SCHÄFER, eds, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1, 286–304 (Eng.) and vol. 2, 211–37 (Hebr.).

³² JOHANN JACOB ULRICH, ed., *Sefer Toledot Yeshua ha-Notsri / Historia Jeschuae Nazareni, à Judaeis blasphemè corrupta, ex Manuscripto hactenus inedito nunc demum edita, ac Versione et Notis [...] illustrata* (Leiden: Johannem du Vivie, Is. Severinum 1705). In Meerson and Schäfer's classification, both the Wagenseil and the Huldricus texts belong to Group III. For the Huldricus text, see MEERSON and SCHÄFER, eds, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1, 305–22 (Eng.) and vol. 2, 238–51 (Hebr.).

Mss. New York, JTSA 2211 and Amsterdam, EH 47 A 21

Yiddish texts of *Toledot Yesbu* can be traced from 1652 (the date of our earliest manuscript) onward.³³ As noted above, a trigger for the renewed diffusion of the narrative starting in the early eighteenth century may have been the controversy over the false messiah Sabbatai Zvi. In 1711, the Ashkenazi rabbi Leib ben Ozer produced a Yiddish version of *Toledot Yesbu* titled *Gzeyres Yesbu* using three Hebrew sources. The text is now bound into one and the same manuscript with the addition of ben Ozer's Yiddish biography of Sabbatai Zvi.³⁴ The sources he used differed in many respects and thus, the compiler sometimes included alternative versions of certain episodes, as he was not able to decide which was more 'truthful.'³⁵ One of his sources was likely of Sephardic origin, as many close parallels to ben Ozer can be found in a manuscript also copied in Amsterdam at the end of the seventeenth century, but by a Sephardic scribe, Zaddik Belinfante.³⁶

The two Yiddish manuscripts I examine below similarly attest to the copyist's knowledge of several Hebrew texts, further suggesting that many different versions of the story circulated in Amsterdam at that time. These two manuscripts from the middle of the eighteenth century are from the 'heyday' of the Yiddish *Toledot Yesbu* corpus. As mentioned, both also attracted attention due to their inclusion of otherwise unattested stories concerning Mary (Maryem, Miryem or Mirele in Yiddish), particularly the story of Mary's death and burial, which I will illuminate in more detail.

The first of these two manuscripts is now in the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (henceforth abbreviated *JTS*).³⁷ It has seventy-six foliated leaves and a title page, the reverse of which is blank, except for an Arabic numeral (5375) added later.³⁸ Preceding the title page is an additional leaf showing on its reverse an *ex libris* stamp from Mayer Sulzberger's library, as well as other numbers and notes referring to the auction catalogue *Mekor chaim*, Amsterdam 1907. Since an excerpt from Alexander Marx's catalogue of the Jewish Theological Seminary manuscripts was pasted at the bottom of this additional leaf, one can also find the latter's original description of the manuscript there. According to Marx's measurements, the manuscript is 25.8 × 18.4 cm (today's library information is slightly different, indicating 26.4 × 19 cm) and has twenty-four to twenty-six lines per page. The pages are numbered with Hebrew letters in the upper left corner and are further linked to each other by catchwords. The entire

³³ See the two lists of manuscripts provided in EVI MICHELS, 'Jiddische Jesus-Polemiken (*Toledot Yesbu*),' *Jiddistik-Mitteilungen* 57/58 (2017): 1–26 and MICHELS, 'Yiddish *Toledot Yesbu* from the Netherlands,' 252–62.

³⁴ Cf. MICHELS, *Jiddische Handschriften der Niederlande*, 293–99 (no. 71); MICHELS, 'Yiddish *Toledot Yesbu* from the Netherlands,' 234–39.

³⁵ Cf. ROSENZWEIG, 'The History of the "Life of Jesus",' 271–72.

³⁶ For Belinfante's text, see MEERSON and SCHÄFER, eds, *Toledot Yesbu*, vol. 1, 185–203 (Eng.) and vol. 2, 96–111 (Hebr.).

³⁷ ALEXANDER MARX, *Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Polemical Mss.* (unpublished typescript), 262 (no. 60).

³⁸ Whoever added this number caused later readers to misinterpret this as the date of the manuscript (5375 = 1615).

manuscript bears the running title *Toldes yeshe*.³⁹ Even though Marx described the handwriting as German cursive, it is in fact typically Dutch. Considering also the Dutch linguistic influence on the text, it should be dated to the eighteenth century and not, as Marx assumed, the seventeenth century. However, there is no dating on the title page or elsewhere.



Figure 1 (left). Ms. New York, J TSA 2211, Title page. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York.

The second manuscript I will discuss is now in Amsterdam in the Ets Haim library / Livraria Montezinos, where it bears the shelf mark Ms. EH 47 A 21 (henceforth abbreviated *EH*). It has seventy-two original leaves, again foliated with Hebrew letters. In addition to the foliation, the leaves are again joined at the end of each page by catchwords. The manuscript measures 25.3 × 18.2 cm and has twenty-four lines per page. Each page bears the running title *Toldes Yeshu*. The title page is preceded by a blank leaf, which served to protect the manuscript and was later glued to the book cover. After the title page, the reverse side of which is blank, there is another blank leaf. The following folios are numbered as noted above. At the end of the manuscript (fol. 67v), there is another blank leaf, although adorned with a frame, and an additional blank leaf, which, like the front one, served to protect the manuscript and was later glued to the back cover of the book. The book cover itself is made of parchment and is now soiled. The leaves and edges bear witness to the frequent use of the manuscript, as do the grease and water stains. This manuscript can also be dated by its writing, language, and style to the middle of the eighteenth century.⁴⁰

³⁹ The codicological description of the New York manuscript is based on the information provided by the JTS library catalogues.

⁴⁰ Cf. MICHELS, *Jiddische Handschriften der Niederlande*, 419–21 (no. 102).



Figure 2. Ms. Amsterdam, EH 47 A 21, Title page. Courtesy of the Library Ets Haim – Livraria Montezinos, Amsterdam.

In addition to these external similarities (tab. 1) both the *JTS* and *EH* manuscripts stand out as the most extensive Yiddish manuscripts of *Toledot Yesbu*. Both texts narrate the story at length, while also repeatedly addressing the reader or listener, referring either to what has already been narrated or to what is yet to be narrated, and making abundant use of direct speech. Both texts also sometimes indicate that there are variants to a particular episode, the scribe thus expressing his knowledge of different textual traditions and his wish to share this knowledge with the reader (without mentioning his sources). Most often, the scribe simply reports two existing variants, but sometimes he also weighs which variant, in his opinion, is to be considered the correct one.⁴¹ In both manuscripts, the scribe divided the long text into numerous ‘chapters’ (concerning, as already noted, either Jesus or Mary), which he calls ביטרייף (for the Dutch word *bedrijf*, i.e., ‘theatre act’). In the back, numbering is abandoned and both scribes added headlines to divide the sections. In fact, the two manuscripts are so similar that we can postulate very closely related production and reception milieus.

	Ms. JTS 2211	Ms. EH 47 A 21
Size	25.8 × 18.4 cm	25.3 × 18.2 cm
Folio pages	76	72
Lines per page	24–26	24
Title	<i>Toldes Yeshe</i>	<i>Tolde' Yeshe</i> , born in 3760
Running title	<i>Toldes Yeshe</i>	<i>Toldes Yeshe</i>

Table 1. Codicological elements showing the similarity of both manuscripts.

⁴¹ At present I cannot point out any further parallels beside the passages discussed below. A more detailed comparison of these texts, both with each other and with other Yiddish and Hebrew *Toledot Yesbu* texts from the Netherlands, needs further study.

Maryem the Impure Mother of Yeshu in JTS 2221 and EH 47 A 21

Maryem usually has a fixed place in the opening section of *Toledot Yeshu* narratives: the episodes dealing with Jesus's birth and adolescence. According to the story as we find it in *JTS*, Maryem⁴² opens her heart to her neighbour, Joseph Pandera, because she is not satisfied with her fiancé, Yochanan. She is described as sitting on her doorstep 'like a whore' (fol. 2r). She is very beautiful and attractive, and so is Pandera, who immediately falls in love with her. Since Maryem loves 'all worldly things and tournaments' (טורנירן, fol. 3r), unlike her pious fiancé, she answers positively to Pandera's desire. In *EH*, things are somewhat different: Maryem is called a whore (הור) only later in the story (fol. 6r) and she does not actively pursue her sexual misdemeanour. Pandera remains the active party and is indeed accused of having performed a shameful deed by sleeping with her (fol. 5r). Both manuscripts discuss several variants of the intercourse itself (the scribe indicating: 'the one writes' and 'the other writes'; see *JTS*, fol. 2r–3v; *EH*, fol. 3v–4v):

1. Maryem remained silent, thinking she was sleeping with Yochanan (who did not consider her impure state);
2. Maryem was touched from behind. Thinking it was Yochanan, she accused him of touching her despite the fact that she was impure;
3. Maryem deliberately slept with Pandera and was satisfied with her deed.

These different narrative strands are followed through in the description of Maryem's behaviour towards her fiancé, Yochanan. *EH* thus adapts the dialogue between Maryem and Yochanan, which he probably found in his sources (fol. 4v⁴³). Since Yochanan cannot prove that he did not sleep with Maryem, but knows for certain that the child is not his (even discussing the matter with his teacher, Shimon ben Shetach), he abandons her and leaves for Babylon. Maryem then gives birth to Yeshu, remaining silent about his true paternity. When the child grows up to become a clever and wise Talmudic student, her infamy is almost forgotten, and no one talks about it anymore. But Yeshu attracts attention because of his insolence and disrespect towards the men of the Sanhedrin. Maryem is thus summoned to testify about his origins (*JTS*, 'Second chapter of Mary,' fol. 10r–12v; *EH*, 'Second chapter of Yeshu,' fol. 8v–12r). In *EH*, the episode is expanded: Maryem at first keeps silent and lies, but eventually she tells the truth when confronted with Yochanan's teacher, Shimon ben Shetach. In the same manuscript, her speech also changes, and she starts to speak insolently and impudently in front of the Sanhedrin, admitting that she continued to live unchastely with Pandera even after Yeshu's conception (fol. 12r). Yeshu himself then wants to learn the truth

⁴² When citing the Yiddish text, I use the Yiddish names *Maryem* for Mary and *Yeshu* for Jesus.

⁴³ In all likelihood, a text very similar to Meerson and Schäfer's 'Ashkenazi A' recension (see note 25 above).

about his birth, thus he tortures his mother and makes her talk (*JTS*, fol. 13r–v; *EH*, fol. 13v). After the truth is revealed, he orders her to say that he was in fact born ‘from her forehead’ (*JTS*, fol. 14r; *EH*, fol. 14r).⁴⁴ Indeed, later in the story, when Yeshu is summoned before the Sanhedrin, Maryem stands up for him, claiming that he was born from her forehead and that she is still a virgin (*JTS*, ‘Third chapter of Mary,’ fol. 31v; *EH*, ‘Fourth chapter of Mary,’ fol. 29v). *EH* somewhat embellishes this image of Maryem as a virgin, associating her with the prophetess Miriam (Exod. 15:20) and calling her the ‘mother of all women and maidens’ (*EH*, fol. 29v).

These two Yiddish manuscripts provide further information regarding the involvement of Mary in the story. Thus, while Yeshu is held in prison in the city of Tiberias, Maryem once again sets out to help her son. She gathers a crowd and makes such a great clamour while lamenting before the Sanhedrin, that Yeshu is eventually released. In *JTS*, the crowd (חברותה; fol. 39v) is referred to as ‘men, women, and children’ (מאנין אז ווייבר און קליין געזינד), but the text also mentions an armed mob (חיל; רעגימענט; fol. 39v–40r) of sinners (פשעים) and villains (פריצים), as well as the Apostles (תשמידים).⁴⁵ This mob attacks the Sanhedrin and pelts it with stones. The tumult is such that ‘one brother contends against another’ (fol. 40r). *EH* leaves things to the imagination of the listener or reader and only mentions a quarrel (מחלקות; fol. 36r).

As noted by Sarit Kattan Gribetz, there are different approaches to Mary’s culpability with respect to her son’s career in the various versions of *Toledot Yeshu*.⁴⁶ Some texts depict Mary as a pious and innocent woman, who was tricked into or forced to have sexual intercourse while she was impure. Others depict her as assuming a more active role, fooling her fiancé and indeed behaving ‘like a whore.’⁴⁷ Our two manuscripts make it clear from the beginning that her behaviour can be variously interpreted, and the compilers thus note that, while some say that she was chaste, pious, and virtuous, others claim that she was ‘good for nothing all her life’ (*JTS*; fol. 1v). In *EH*, Maryem is also said to have enticed other young women to believe in Jesus, even becoming a model for them (fol. 1v). These two aspects of Mary are explained as her being initially pious and chaste, then eventually changing her conduct (fol. 1v).

Maryem’s Death and Burial

The story of Maryem’s death and burial appears in both Yiddish manuscripts after the account of Jesus’s death and before the so-called ‘Anti-Acts’ narrative, which is found also in other manuscripts and provides a parody of the Apostles’ story and the establishment of the early Church. In order to analyse this episode in more detail, I

⁴⁴ I found this literal description of the virgin birth only in these manuscripts of *Toledot Yeshu*.

⁴⁵ תשמידים is a pun on Jesus’s students, combining the words תלמידים (‘students’) and שמו (‘to convert’).

⁴⁶ KATTAN GRIBETZ, ‘The Mothers in the Manuscripts,’ 111–16.

⁴⁷ 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 Seventeenth Birthday*, ed. RAANAN S. BOUSTAN (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 997–1019, esp. 1008–16.

provide it here in Yiddish and English, following the text of both manuscripts. Words written in Ashkenazic square script are set in bold letters. In the manuscripts dots were set to separate sentences and half-sentences, but not in the way we are used to setting them today.

תלדות ישי
(Ms. JTS 2211)

תולדו' ישי שנת ג' אלפים ושבע מאות ושישים
(Ms. EH 47 A 21)

/62r/ **איצונדר** ווערט איר געפֿינדן דיא פיגור פֿון מרים

/54r/ **איצונדר** דר וועקט זיך ווידר איין אנדרה גזירה איבר דען (ישי) מיט זיינה מוטר מרים

נון דער מוטר פון (ישי) האט אלז גוואר ווארן וויא עש איז צו גיגאנגן מיט דען (ישי) אונ' וויא ער האט איין סוף אין גנומן /62v/ וויא אובן גשריבן שטיט. דא האט זיא פֿר גרושי שרעק איין בריונג⁴⁸ גיקראגין. און איז קראנק גווארן מיט איין גר גרושי בילעמרינג.⁴⁹ אזו איז זיא גלעגן עטליכה טעג אונ' איז גפייגרט אבר אין אירי קרענק האט זי **צוואה** גילאזין ווען זי שטערבן ווערט. דען זאלן אלי דיא זעלבגן דיא אן אירי געטליך קינד האבן מאמן גוועזן. דיא זאל איר איין **מצבה** זעצין פֿר איין זכרון. אונ' דיא זעלבגה ווערן אך אזו וואל גלערינט זיין דש זיא ווערן ווישן וואש זיא אויף דיא מצבה זעצין ווערן. דש איז אירי צוואה גוועזן אנדרשט ניט:

ויהי אונ' עש וואר דז דיא מוטר פֿון דען (ישי) זעלבש גהערט האט דז איר זון (ישי) אזו איין גר שלעכטה סוף האט נון אין גנומן אז וויא איך אובן גשריבן הב אזו איז זיא פֿר גר גרשי שרעק קראנק גווארן אונ' איז עטליכי [טעג] אזו קראנק גלעגן אונ' איז גפייגרט אונ' אין אירי קרענק וויא זיא גלעגן האט אזו האט זיא צוואה גטאן ווען זיא זעלט שטערבן אזו זאלן אלי דיא זעלביגה דיא אן אירי זון (ישי) האבן מאמן גוועזן אונ' דיא זיך אן דען (ישי) האבן גיהעפֿט דיא זאלן ניט נאך לאזן אונ' ניט פֿר געשין אונ' זאלן איר איין מצבה זעצן אויף אירי קבר פֿר איין גדעכטנוס. אונ' דר בייא האט זיא גזאגט דז זיא וואל ווערן ווישן וואש זיא ווערן אויף דיא מצבה זעצן. אזו איז דיא מרים נאך עטליכה טעג גפייגרט מיט גר גרושי /54v/ פֿר שטאנט. אונ' זיא האט ניט אנדרשט אז גיבעטן אן דיא חברותה דיא זיך אן דען (ישי) ביהעפֿט האבן בייא זיין לעבן דז זיא זיך ניט זולן אפקערן פון (ישי) אל איז ער טוט דען איך ווייש ניט בעשר אודר ער ווערט אייך וואל גלערינט האבן זיינה גזעץ. אונ' דז איז איין גבעט אן אייך אלי פֿר געשט ניט אום אן מיר איין מצבה צו זעצן:

וויא דיא מרים נון טואיט וואר איז דז גשריבן ווארן פֿון בית לחם דארך דז גאנץ לאנד ירושלים. דז דיא היילוגה מוטר מרים פייגר איז אונ' וויא זיא אזו איין צוואה גלאזן האט אום איין מצבה. זא זיינה גיקומן צו לופֿין זער פֿיל פֿון דיא פשעים אונ' השמידים דיא אן דען (ישי) האבן מאמן גוועזן. אזו וואל מאכן אז ווייבר אונ' קליין גזינד אונ' זיינה אלי גלאפֿין בייא דז קבר דיא מרים אום איר צו ביקלאגין. אך אום מיט איינים איין העסבעט צו מאכן איבר איר. אונ' איבר איר היילוגר זון (ישי) אונ' אירי מעשים אונ' (ישי) זיינה מעשים צו פֿר ציילן. אך אום אירי צוואה נאך צו קומן דיא זיא האט נאך גלאזן. דען זיא האבן זיך טון פֿר איר פֿעריכטן ווען זיא זעלכש ניט נאך קומן.

נאך דיא עטליכי טג אז זיא פייגר וואר איז דז גשריבן גווארן פֿון **בית לחם** ביז דארך דז גנצי לאנד (ירושלים). אזו איז דז גהערט ווארן בייא דיא פשעים דיא זיך האבן בייא זיין לעבן אן דען (ישי) גיהעפֿט. אזו זיינה זיא גלייך גצאגן נאך בית לחם נאך דז קבר פֿון (מרים) אים אן דיא (מרים) דארטין צו ביקלאגן אויף איר קבר. אונ' זיא האבן זיך פֿאר גנומן אום מיט איינים איין העס בעט צו מאכן אויף דאש קבר פֿון (מרים) און פֿר (ישי) מיט איינים. אין דיא צייט אז זיא זיינה גקומן נאך בית לחם זיין דארטין גוועזן פֿיל ווייבש בילדר דיא אך (מרים) האט מטמה גוועזן בייא איר לעבן אונ' האבן פֿר ווארט דיא צוואה פֿון (מרים) אום נאך צו קומן וואש זיא האט צוואה גלאזן.

⁴⁸ From the Dutch *beroering*.

⁴⁹ From the Dutch *belemmering*.

וויא דיא פשעים האבן אן מרים איין מצבה טון זעצין
וויא ווייטר שטיט

האבין זיך פֿר גאדירט דרייא טג
לנג זער פֿיל פֿון דיא פשעים. ענטליך האבן דיא
פֿריינט אין דיא צייט איין מצבה קלאר גמאכט פֿר דיא
מרים. אונ' איינר פֿון דיא אפוסטלי האט אויף גיבן דיא
פסוק אז דיא תורה אום אויף דיא מצבה צו זעצין.
וישכב מרים במקום ההוא והנה סלם מצב ארצה.
וראשו מגיע השמימה. והנה מלאכי אלקים עלים
וירדים בו. דז איז טייטש אונ' דיא מרים רואיט אויף
דיא פלאטץ. אונ' איין לייטר דז שטיט פֿון דר ערד ביז
אן דען הימל. אונ' נון גיין ענגלין ארויף אונ' ארונטר.
אונ' ווייטר האבן זיא אירי **הבל** אונ' **שבח** אוף דיא
מצבה גזעצט:

דיא האבן דיא סנהדרין גהערט פֿון דיא מצבה
וויא דיא פושעים האבן אן דיא מרים אזו איין מצבה
טון זעצין. אונ' דר צו מיט אזו איין שבח אז וויא אובן
גשריבן איז. זא האבן דיא סנהדרין גלייך גשיקט אירי
שמשים מיט זער פֿיל מאנשאפֿט מיט אורדר פֿון דיא
הילנות המלכה. אונ' האבן דיא מצבה דר נידר גריסן.
אונ' אין פֿיל שטיק צו בראכין אונ' דר בייא איז איין
ביפֿעל אזו גאנגן מיט אורדר פֿון די מלכה. אל דער
זלבגר דער זיך ווערט ווייטר אונטר שטין אום ווידר דוא
איין מצבה צו זעצין אויף דז קבר פֿון מרים דר זאל אין
דיא מאכט זיין פֿון דיא סנהדרין. אונ' דיא זעלין אן
קיינס טערפֿין פֿר שונין:

נון דיא פשעים פֿון דען (ישי) דיא האבן זיך בייא אננדר
גמאכט אונ' זיינה דיא צוואה נאך גיקומן אונ' האבן אן
(מרים) איין מצבה גזעצט.
אונ' האבן דיא היילגה פסוק אויז אונזר תורה דא אויף
גזעצט. **וישכב מרים במקום ההוא והנה סלם מצב ארצה**
וראשו מגיע השמימה והנה מלאכי אלקי' עולם וירדים
בו.

דז האבן ווידר דיא סנהדרים גהערט וויא אלי דיא פשעים
ופריצים האבן אן דיא (מרים) אזו איין מצבה טון זעצין. אזו
זיינה זיא גלייך גיגאנגן אונ' האבן גשיקט אירי שמשים
אום דיא מצבה נידר צו ריישן וויא אן גלייך אן שטונד
גשעהן איז.
אונ' נאך מער זיא האבן דר בייא אזו גריכט בייא דיא
הילנות המלכה דז זיא האבן מיט גיקראגן זער פֿיל רייקום
אום אן דיא שמשים צו העלפֿן דר ווארטן דז דיא פשעים
אזו גר פֿיל גוועזן זיין אנדרשט העטן דיא פשעים אן דיא
שמשים אום אירי לעבן גיבראכט. /55r/ אונ' דר בייא
האבן דיא סנהדרין נאך מער אזו גריכט בייא דיא הלנו'
המלכה דז זיא ווייטר האט אורדר גיגעבן אן דיא רייקום דז
דער הופמן זאל אזו רופֿן דז אל דער ערשטר דער זיך דר
וועגן ווערט אום ווידר אויף דיא זעלבגה פלאטץ איין מצבה
ווידר צו זעצין דער זעלבגר זאלן דיא סנהדרין מעגן מיט
טאן נאך אירי וואל גפֿאלין אונ' קיינר זאל ווערן פֿר שונט.
אונ' זאל ניקס טערפֿין אין ברענגן. אונ' דר בייא האבן דיא
סנהדרין לאזן דז קבר אין רייצן דז גר ניקש איז צו זעהן
גוועזן וואו איין קבר גוועזן איז:

Now you will find the figure of Maryem / fol. 62r/

When Maryem found out everything that had happened to her son Yeshu, the end he had met /fol. 62v/ (as written above), she was shocked and confused. She became sick and was heavily paralysed. She lay like that for several days and died. But at [that time], as she lay sick and paralysed, she made a will in case she should die: all who have found faith in her divine child should raise a tombstone in memory of her. And anyone doing this would be instructed, so that they would know what to put on the tombstone. That was her will and nothing else.

When Mother Maryem was dead, [letters] were written from Bethlehem to the whole land of Jerusalem, [saying] that the Holy Mother Mary had died and that she had left a will regarding her tombstone. Thus, many of the apostates and lost ones, who believed in Yeshu, came running around, men and also women and children. They all came to Maryem's grave to mourn her, and to give a funeral oration about her and her holy son Yeshu, and to tell about her deeds and the deeds of Yeshu, and to obey the will that she had left behind. Because they were afraid of her should they not follow this.

How the followers of Yeshu set the gravestone, as written above

/fol. 63r/ Thus, many of the apostates gathered for three days. Finally, when it was time, these friends placed the tombstone for Maryem. And one of the Apostles had the verse from the Torah written on the stone: 'And Mary rests in this place and behold, a ladder stood on the earth and its upper end reached up to heaven. And behold, angels ascended and descended on it.' And furthermore, they

Now a new bad deed starting from Yeshu and Maryem /fol. 54r/

And it was so: When Maryem heard that her son Yeshu had come to such a bad end, as I have written above, she fell ill and was in great fright. She lay sick [in bed] for several days before she passed away. While she was lying down in her sickness, she made a will in case she should die, that all who believed in her son Yeshu and had followed him should not be negligent [in their faith] and not forget [her], and that they should set a tombstone on her grave in remembrance of her. And to this she added that they would know well what they should write on the tombstone. Thus, Maryem passed away after several days with a very clear /fol. 54v/ mind. And she did not do anything else but ask the flock that had united behind her son Yeshu in his lifetime not to turn away from Yeshu only because he was dead. 'For I know that otherwise, he would have taught you his laws! And this is my commandment to you: Do not forget to set a tombstone for me!'

After a few days she died, and [letters] were written from Bethlehem throughout the whole land of Jerusalem.

Thus, the wicked also heard the news [of her passing], those who had joined her son Yeshu during his lifetime. They immediately went to Bethlehem, to Mary's tomb, to mourn her there, on her tomb. And they planned to make a funeral oration at her tomb for her and at the same time for her son Yeshu.

At the time they came to Bethlehem, there were many women there whom Maryem had incited to impurity in her lifetime. These had kept Maryem's will in order to [be able to] comply with it. The wicked joined them to fulfil the will and set a tombstone for Maryem. On it they inscribed a passage from the Holy Torah, *va-yishkev maryem 'be-*

engraved their wanton deeds and praises on the tombstone.

*makom ba-hu sulam matsev artso ve-rosbo magiya ha-shamima ve-bine malakhe elohim olam veyirdim bo.*⁵⁰

[The men] of the Sanhedrin heard about the tombstone that the apostates had placed for Maryem with much eulogy, as written above. So, the men of the Sanhedrin immediately sent their servants with many strong men at the behest of Queen Helena. They tore down the tombstone and broke it into many pieces. At the same time, there was an order by the queen that everyone who dared erect a tombstone on the grave of Maryem should be handed over to the Sanhedrin. And these [men] did not spare anyone.

The Sanhedrin heard that the apostates and scoundrels had set a tombstone for Maryem. Immediately they sent their synagogue attendants to pull the tombstone down, and this was done immediately, in the same hour. Moreover, they informed Queen Helena, and she gave them armed men, since the apostates were so many. Otherwise, the apostates would have taken the synagogue attendants' lives. /Fol. 55r/ Also, the Sanhedrin arranged with Queen Helena for a herald (הופמן, literally 'courtier') to proclaim that whoever would set a tombstone (on Maryem's grave) again would be at the mercy of the Sanhedrin and that the Sanhedrin could act with them as it wished. No one would be spared, and petitions would be denied. In the meantime, the Sanhedrin had the tomb destroyed so that nothing could be seen in the place where the tomb had previously been.

In both manuscripts this story about Mary's entombment constitutes an additional narrative module. The headings *Itsunder wert ir gefinden di figur fun Maryem* ('Now you will find the figure of Mary,' *JTS*, fol. 62v) and *Itsunder der vekt zikh vider ayn ander gzeyre iber den yeshe mit zayne muter Maryem* ('Now there arises another bad deed (גזירה) literally: 'decree') concerning Yeshu and his mother Maryem,' *EH*, fol. 54r) interrupt the broader narrative and are not tied to the preceding text. Only the word 'again' in *EH* seems to refer to the other episodes 'concerning Maryem' earlier in the narrative.

JTS divides the episode into two sections while *EH* has only one: Maryem became ill after the death of her son and therefore made a will. She ordered the faithful followers of her son to set a tombstone over her grave. She died and the news quickly spread. Many came to her funeral to mourn her and deliver a funeral oration (העסבעט in Hebrew, הספד in Yiddish), recounting her good deeds and those of her son. The second section in *JTS* and the remaining text of *EH* 7 deal with the setting up of the tombstone, citing the inscription that was engraved on the monument. The Sanhedrin then had the tombstone torn down and forbade anyone to erect a new one in the same place. *EH* tightens the story by adding that now it was impossible to see that anyone had ever been buried there.

⁵⁰ The passage quoting Gen. 28:12 is cited in Hebrew, although the name of Mary replaces that of Jacob: '[In a dream he saw] a ladder, which rested on the ground with its top reaching to heaven, and angels of God were going up and down on it' (I quote from *The Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha* [Oxford: Oxford University Press; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996]).

The two manuscripts offer a slightly different text and set their own emphasis. The linguistic freedom of both narrators is clear when considering the use of specifically Dutch-Yiddish expressions. Here, as in other places, small details point to the individual creativity of the scribe, but also shed light on the context of the manuscripts. *JTS* mentions that apostates (פּשעִים) and the Apostles (תּשמיִדים) were present at Maryem's funeral, and both groups were divided into men, women and children (קליין גיזנד⁵¹), while *EH* highlights the presence of women (ווייבש בילדר) whom Mary had enticed to live impurely during her lifetime (דיא אר [מרים] האט מטמה גוועזן) (בייא איר לעבן, fol. 54v). *JTS* is more detailed in its description of the tombstone, as, not only does it provide the biblical quotation from Genesis 28:12 (in Hebrew followed by a Yiddish translation), it adds that all present also wrote down their merits and demerits (הבל אונ' שבח). In both texts, the apostates (פּשעִים) seem particularly violent when defending the tombstone. Thus *JTS* (fol. 63r) indicates that it took 'many strong men' (זער פֿיל מאנשאפֿט) to drive them out. In *EH* (fol. 54r), the violent nature of Jesus's followers is emphasised through reference to the support of Queen Helena, without whose help 'the servants [of the Sanhedrin] would have lost their lives.'

Maryem's Death in a Hebrew Text of *Toledot Yeshu*

Of all the extant *Toledot Yeshu* texts, only the so-called Huldricus version preserves a story about Mary's death which can be compared to the one found in our two Yiddish manuscripts.⁵² Of the Hebrew text and Latin translation published by Johann Jacob Ulrich (Huldricus) in 1705, we only know that it was based on a manuscript provided by a Jew known to the editor.⁵³ It is most likely a compilation of several versions that are no longer extant. Adina Yoffie points out the differences in this particular text from other versions of *Toledot Yeshu*.⁵⁴ She dates the origins of this particular version to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, but assumes that many episodes of the narrative must date back to the Middle Ages (probably the twelfth century).⁵⁵ Maryem's death and burial are recounted somewhat later in the Huldricus text, in the context of the 'Anti-Acts' narrative, almost at the end of the whole story. Here we read the following:

In those days, Mary, the mother of Jesus, died. King (Herod) ordered her to be buried under the tree where her son had been hanged, as well as the brothers of Jesus and his sisters, whom the king ordered to be hanged. And they hanged them and wrote on the tombstone, 'Here the children of fornication (Hos 2:6) were hanged, and their mother was buried beside them. Shame on them!' But some villains (פּריציִים) from Jesus's family came and stole the tombstone and put another in its place, on which they wrote, 'Behold, a ladder is set up on the earth with its top reaching the heavens, and the angels of God are ascending (Gen. 28:12). The mother of the

⁵¹ The Yiddish term *klayn gezind* could include the house servants as well, see also *JTS*, fol. 39v and 62v.

⁵² On this episode in the 'Huldricus,' see KATTAN GRIEBETZ, 'The Mothers in the Manuscripts,' 116–18.

⁵³ Cf. ADINA M. YOFFIE, 'Observations on the Huldreich Manuscripts of the *Toledot Yeshu*,' in *Toledot Yeshu ... Revisited*, eds SCHÄFER, MEERSON, and DEUTSCH, 61–77(63).

⁵⁴ YOFFIE, 'Observations on the Huldreich Manuscripts,' 62.

⁵⁵ YOFFIE, 'Observations on the Huldreich Manuscripts,' 68.

children rejoices. Praise the Lord! (Ps. 113:9).’ When the king heard what the villains (פּרִיצִים) had done, he ordered to demolish the tombstone, and he killed about 100 relatives of Jesus.⁵⁶

Unlike the Yiddish manuscripts, the ‘Huldricus’ makes no mention of Mary’s testament. Instead, it mentions the fate of Yeshu’s siblings, who are hanged after their mother’s death and buried alongside her under the very same tree upon which Jesus himself had been hanged. Here, we also learn of two tombstones, one set up by Herod and one set up by the ‘villains’ in Jesus’s family. The tombstone set up by the latter bears the same inscription we find in our Yiddish sources, namely a quotation from Genesis 28:12 and a verse from the Psalms. The inscription describes the destruction of the monuments and also the killing of Yeshu’s entire family. As in the New Testament, there is no mention of Joseph (or any other biological father) in the post-Easter context.⁵⁷ King Herod is the sole commander, and it is he who orders all the executions. The men from the Sanhedrin are absent. Only when the first tombstone is erected does the text refer to an unspecified collective.

Before returning to our Yiddish texts, we need to turn to Christian narratives on the death of Mary, anti-Jewish narratives attested in various forms (oral traditions, but also liturgical practices, pilgrimages, church iconography) to which we can in fact trace the material found in the Jewish story.

The Dormition of Mary in the Christian Tradition

Mary’s role and function within the Christian tradition is clear: she is, from the very beginning, part of the divine plan for the salvation of humanity. She is the one who gives birth to the Messiah and Son of God. According to the Council of Ephesus in 431, a decisive moment in the crystallisation of a number of Christological themes and dogmas most Christian confessions still agree on today, Mary is the ‘God-bearer’ (θεοτόκος), the woman chosen by God for His incarnation. Jesus Christ is thus described as ‘true man and true God,’ united through his mother’s pure body to the inseparable and indistinguishable Unity (ὁμοούσιος).⁵⁸ As a ‘god-bearer’ Mary remains a pure virgin until her death. According to a well-established Christian legend, her own death was announced to her twenty-two years after Jesus’s passing by the archangel Gabriel, holding a palm branch from paradise in his hand.⁵⁹ Mary’s last wishes were to have the Apostles surrounding her when she died and to be spared the horrors of hell

⁵⁶ I quote the translation from MEERSON and SCHÄFER, eds, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1, 320; see vol. 2, 250 for the original Hebrew. One of the oldest Yiddish manuscripts of *Toledot Yeshu* probably bears witness to the Huldricus text; cf. ROSENZWEIG, ‘When Jesus Spoke Yiddish.’

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the absence of Jesus’s father in *Toledot Yeshu*, see GAGER and AHUVIA, ‘Some notes,’ 998–1004.

⁵⁸ WILFRIED HÄRLE, *Outline of Christian Doctrine: An Evangelical Dogmatics*, trans. RUTH YULE, trans. and ed. NICOLAS SAGOVSKY (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 289. This was again formulated at the Council of Chalcedon (451) as a Christological dogma. See STEPHEN J. SHOEMAKER, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 256–77, which shows that the rising cult of the Marian dormition and assumption paralleled debates on the Chalcedonic dogma, and perhaps also aimed to refute that dogma.

⁵⁹ A summary of several variants of this legend is provided in CHRISTA SCHAFFER, *Aufgenommen in den Himmel* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1985), 9–37.

through Gabriel's blessing. She withdrew and prayed in order to overcome her fear of death, entrusting herself to the care of Christ. When she returned home⁶⁰ and lay down to die, the Apostles were carried by clouds (cf. Heb 12:1) or angels, surrounding her as she breathed her last breath.⁶¹ Christ himself is present to take her soul immediately into his hands. He disappears into heaven with Mary's soul, surrounded by a host of angels.

The story of Mary's entombment varies more.⁶² Most ancient sources, however, suggest that Peter and Paul carried her bier to the grave, while John preceded them holding the angel's palm branch. Choirs of angels accompanied the procession, singing hymns along with the Apostles. Yet Jews interrupted and disturbed the procession (a point to which I will return). After three days, Mary was laid in an empty tomb. Following her assumption to heaven, only her garments remained and were preserved as relics.⁶³ Christ then reunited Mary's body with her resurrected soul and established her as the Queen of Heaven.

From early on, the figure of Mary allowed pagan influences to enter the Christian tradition. Many popular ideas and beliefs, sometimes even contradictory ones, could coexist with the orthodox Christian doctrine.⁶⁴ The legend of Mary has come down to us by way of several late ancient and early medieval pseudepigrapha, but also through doxologies and homilies circulating both in the East and in the West in oral or written form. Ritual practices related to the worship of Mary also varied greatly. For a long time, both Ephesus and the garden of Gethsemane, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, were remembered as the site of her passing. The original date commemorating Mary's Assumption was January 18. It was emperor Mauritius (582–602) who was responsible for unifying the various traditions and who decided to set the date to August 15, the day on which the Assumption is still celebrated today.⁶⁵ In the High Middle Ages, August 15 became an occasion for large and elaborate pilgrimages to sanctuary churches and cathedrals.⁶⁶ I suggest that these Christian traditions surrounding the

⁶⁰ We read that Mary was then living in the house of the Apostle John, to whom she had entrusted Jesus on the cross (cf. John 19:27).

⁶¹ In the older Byzantine versions of the story, the twelve Apostles are often accompanied by Paul, the patriarchs, and Mary's virgin friends, cf. SCHAFFER, *Aufgenommen in den Himmel*, 83.

⁶² SCHAFFER, *Aufgenommen in den Himmel*, 33.

⁶³ Other variants mention the whereabouts of Mary's corpse in the heart of earth, where it awaits Judgment Day; cf. SCHAFFER, *Aufgenommen in den Himmel*, 33.

⁶⁴ See HEINER GROTE, 'Maria / Marienfrömmigkeit II,' in *Theologische Realenzyklopedie*, 36 vols., vol. 22 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1992) 119–37; MARY B. CUNNINGHAM, 'The Life of the Theotokos by Epiphanius of Kallistratos: A Monastic Approach to an Apocryphal Story,' in *The Reception of the Virgin in Byzantium. Marian Narratives in Texts and Images*, eds THOMAS ARENTZEN and MARY B. CUNNINGHAM (Cambridge: University Press, 2019), 309–323 (319).

⁶⁵ Since that time, Marian celebrations and large processions have been held in Rome on both August 15 and September 8, the day of Mary's birth; cf. GROTE, 'Maria / Marienfrömmigkeit II,' 126; E. PERETTO, 'Feasts of Mary,' in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. ANGELO DI BERARDINO, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 718–19.

⁶⁶ ANNETTE WEBER, "'... Maria die ist juden veind.'" Antijüdische Mariendarstellungen in der Kunst des 13.–15. Jahrhunderts,' in *Maria. Tochter Zion? Mariologie, Marienfrömmigkeit und Judenfeindschaft*, eds JOHANNES HEIL and RAINER KAMPLING (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001), 69–112 (82).

death of Mary (and the associated rituals) illuminate the background of the Jewish story we find in our Yiddish manuscripts of *Toledot Yeshu*. However, there is one episode in the medieval Christian narratives which probably deserves closer attention.

An Anti-Jewish Episode in the *Transitus Mariae*

One of the most important textual traditions on the Assumption of Mary is the *De Transitu Beatae Mariae Virginis* ('The ascending of the Blessed Virgin Mary'), a pseudepigraphic work written in the fourth century.⁶⁷ Numerous Latin manuscripts attest to the great importance of this narrative, originally written in Greek, but which encountered wide circulation in the Western Latin world. Transmitted by Gregory of Tours (538–594), the *Transitus Mariae* found its way into several French and German monasteries where, from the twelfth century onwards, a strong tradition of Marian devotion was starting to take hold. Eventually, the *Transitus Mariae* narrative also began to circulate in vernacular languages.⁶⁸ Jacobus of Voragine (1230–1298) knew the story when he composed his widely read *Legenda Aurea*. He arranged the various legends concerning the Christian saints and Mary according to days of the year and associated festivals. The story of Mary's Assumption is found in the 119th chapter of the *Legenda*, corresponding to August 15.⁶⁹ The story provided by Jacobus of Voragine and the earlier witnesses of the *Transitus Mariae* includes an episode involving 'infidels' and 'sacrilegious' people, obviously Jews, interrupting Mary's entombment.⁷⁰ I quote this passage from Peter Schäfer's translation of the *Transitus*:

When the high priest of the Jews—who was the priest of that year in his turn—saw the wretched funeral couch and the disciples of the Lord singing with exultation around the bier, filled with anger and wrath he said: 'Behold the tabernacles of he who threw us and our whole people into disorder, what sort of glory has she received?' And saying these things, he wanted to overturn the funeral couch and bring it down to the ground. And at once both his hands dried up from the very elbows and they clung to the bier. Then, while the apostles were carrying around the bier, part of him was hanging and [the other] part was clinging to the funeral couch, and he was tortured by the harsh punishment, while the apostles were walking about with exultation and singing praises to the Lord. The angels who were in the clouds struck the crowd [of the Jews], who had gone out of the city, with blindness. Then the high priest, who was clinging to the bier began to shout and say: 'I beseech you, Saint Peter, do not despise me in so urgent a moment as this! Remember when the door servant accused you, it was I who spoke well on your behalf. Rather, now I beg you to have pity on me before the Lord.' Then Peter said to him: 'We [apostles] have no power to make alterations in the world, but if you believe in God and in him, whom

⁶⁷ MONIKA HAIBACH-REINISCH, ed., *Ein neuer 'Transitus Mariae' des Pseudo Melito. Textkritische Ausgabe und Darlegung der Bedeutung dieser ursprünglicheren Fassung für Apokryphenforschung und lateinische und deutsche Dichtung des Mittelalters* (Rome: Pontificia Academia Mariana Internationalis, 1962).

⁶⁸ HAIBACH-REINISCH, *Transitus Mariae*, 17 and chap. 3, 201–309. ANNETTE WEBER mentions public theatre plays showing this anti-Jewish legend on stage in the High Middle Ages, "'Maria die ist juden veind'", 80.

⁶⁹ JACOBUS DE VORAGINE, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. WILLIAM GRANGER RYAN, with an introduction by EAMON DUFFY (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 463–83. On the relationship of Jacobus's text with his source, see HAIBACH-REINISCH, *Transitus Mariae*, 184–200.

⁷⁰ On anti-Jewish tropes in earlier Marian traditions, see STEPHEN J. SHOEMAKER, "'Let Us Go and Burn Her Body': The Image of the Jews in the Early Dormition Traditions," *Church History* 68, no. 4 (1999): 775–823.

that [woman] carried [in her womb], Jesus Christ, our Lord, [then] your hands will be released from the bier.’ He answered him: ‘Is there anything that we do not believe? But what shall we do? Since the enemy of the human race completely blinded our hearts, so that we may not confess the wondrous deeds of God, especially when we ourselves have cursed Christ, shouting: “His blood is upon us and upon our sons.” And the stain of so great a sin clung to us.’ Peter responded to him: ‘This curse will harm those who have continued in their unbelief, but mercy will not be denied to those who turn to the Lord.’

When Peter caused the bier to stand still, the high priest said: ‘I believe in the Son of God, whom that [woman] carried in her womb, Jesus Christ, our Lord.’ And at once his hands were freed from the bier, but his forearms were withered and the punishment did not leave him [completely]. Then Peter said to him: ‘Approaching the body, kiss the funeral couch and say: “I believe in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord, whom that woman carried in her womb, and she remained a virgin after the birth”.’ When he had done thus, he instantly returned to health. And he began to praise God magnificently and to bear witness of Mary from the books of the Old Testament, namely that she is the Temple of God, that even the apostles wept with joy and admiration.⁷¹

The high priest now inflamed by his Christian faith subsequently touches the eyes of some Jews with a palm branch. As a result, those who profess their faith in Jesus regain sight, while those who remain ‘obstinate’ die. In her study of the Byzantine-Oriental and Western descriptions of the Assumption of Mary, Christa Schaffer shows that this so-called ‘Jephonias scene’ (from the name given to the high priest in many versions of the narrative) was represented in Christian iconography, especially in the beginning of the twelfth century.⁷² Annette Weber, for her part, has suggested analysing these pictorial representations as they relate to contemporary anti-Jewish agitation.⁷³ Several wall paintings and glass windows from that period (e.g., in Chartres and Freiburg) show scenes inspired by the *Transitus* tradition, suggesting an anti-Jewish polemic. We can furthermore note that many other anti-Jewish narratives, besides the story of Mary’s resurrection, soon become associated with the Holy Virgin in the late medieval context.⁷⁴ What interests us here is of course the fact that Jews play an important role in the Christian traditions narrating the death and burial of Mary.

Genesis 28:12 and the Gateway to Heaven as a *Typos*

The quotation of Genesis 28:12, which appears in both our Yiddish manuscripts from Amsterdam and the Huldricus version of *Toledot Yesbu*, is linked in a particular sense to the Christian tradition. Taken from the biblical story of the patriarch Jacob, this quotation was not chosen arbitrarily. Indeed, I would argue that it echoes Christian interpretations of the Assumption of Mary.⁷⁵ Already in early Christian homilies in

⁷¹ PETER SCHÄFER, *Mirror of His Beauty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 174–75 (and chap. 9 in general). For a critical edition of the Latin text, see HAIBACH-REINISCH, *Transitus Mariae*, 80–83.

⁷² CHRISTA SCHAFFER, *Koimesis. Der Heimgang Mariens. Das Entschlafungsbild in seiner Abhängigkeit von Legende und Theologie* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1985), 81–83; on earlier texts, see SHOEMAKER, ‘Let Us Go and Burn Her Body,’ 799. In some sources, the high priest is named ‘Reuben’ or ‘Zephaniah’; see ORA LIMOR, ‘Mary and the Jews: Story, Controversy and Testimony,’ *Historiein* 6 (2006): 55–71 (60).

⁷³ WEBER, “...Maria die ist juden veind”; 80–2.

⁷⁴ SCHÄFER, *Mirror of Her Beauty*, 191–209.

⁷⁵ This connection was already noted in KATTAN GRIBETZ, ‘The Mothers in the Manuscripts’, 118no6.

both Greek and Latin, the stairway to heaven mentioned in Genesis 28:12 could serve as an image (*typos*) for the mother of God, explaining in particular her salvific function for faithful Christians. Mary, who found the doors of heaven open while she was asleep, and thus experienced death and resurrection while on earth, surrounded by the Apostles, and in heaven, surrounded by angels, could herself be interpreted as a stairway to heaven for those who believe in her son Jesus Christ. As is well known, passages from the Old Testament were generally interpreted by late ancient and early medieval Christian writers in relation to the events of the New Testament: every *typos* found in the Old Testament was taken to have a counterpart (or *anti-typos*) in the Gospels. Indeed, according to the Christian tradition, only the side-by-side reading of both the Old and New Testaments provides a true understanding of either text.⁷⁶

In his first homily on the *Koimesis*, for instance, the Byzantine theologian John of Damascus (b. ca. 650) wrote:

I had nearly forgotten Jacob's ladder. Is it not evident to everyone that it prefigured thee, and is not the type easily recognized? Just as Jacob saw the ladder bringing together heaven and earth, and on it angels coming down and going up, and the truly strong and invulnerable God wrestling mystically with himself, so art thou placed between us, and art become the ladder of God's intercourse with us, of Him who took upon Himself our weakness, uniting us to Himself, and enabling man to see God. Thou hast brought together what was parted. Hence angels descended to Him, ministering to Him as their God and Lord, and men, adopting the life of angels, are carried up to heaven.⁷⁷

The Virgin Mary also served as a model for the various virgins mentioned in the pastoral letters of the New Testament (e.g. 1 Cor 7:25–28; Acts 21:9), but also for many young, married women who embraced Christianity.⁷⁸ It is thus not entirely surprising that the motif of a stairway to heaven shows up in one of the four visions of Perpetua, martyred—along with her slave, Felicitas—by Septimius Severus on March 7, 203.⁷⁹ According to the *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, Perpetua foresaw her death in a vision in which the ladder appeared:

⁷⁶ Cf. BRITTA STRENGE, 'Typos; Typologie,' *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, eds JOACHIM RITTER, KARLFRIED GRÜNDER, and GOTTFRIED GABRIEL, 13 vols., vol. 10 (Basel: Schwabe, 1998), 1587–94; PHILIPPE BORGEAUD: 'Antijudaïsme et théorie des figures: plagiat par anticipation, vol de langage at histoire des religions,' *ASDIWAL. Revue genevoise d'anthropologie et d'histoire des religions*, 11 (2016): 33–46.

⁷⁷ I quote from the English translation provided by the Internet Medieval Sourcebook of the Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies, New York, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/johndamascus-komesis.asp>. See also JOSÉ MARÍA SALVADOR GONZÁLES, 'La doctrina de San Juan Damascenon sobre la muerte y la ascensión de María al cielo, y su posible influencia e las correspondientes iconografías medievales,' *Eikón Imago* 6, no. 2 (2017): 139–68; FRANCESCA DELL'ACQUA, 'Mary as "Scala Caelestris" in Eighth- and Ninth-Century Italy,' in *The Reception of the Virgin*, eds ARENTZEN and CUNNINGHAM, 235–56 (250–51 on John of Damascus).

⁷⁸ MARIA MARITANO, 'Mary,' in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. ANGELO DI BERARDINO, 3 vols., vol. 2, 714–18 (715).

⁷⁹ ROSEMARY RADER, 'Perpetua,' in *A Lost Tradition. Women Writers of the Early Church*, eds PATRICIA WILSON-KASTNER et al. (Washington: University Press of America, 1981), 1–32. On Mary as an exemplum of asceticism in the monastic tradition, see CUNNINGHAM, 'The Life of the Theotokos,' 310, 323.

There was a bronze ladder⁸⁰ of extraordinary height reaching up to heaven, but it was so narrow that only one person could ascend at a time. Every conceivable kind of iron weapon was attached to the sides of the ladder: swords, lances, hooks, and daggers. If anyone climbed up carelessly or without looking upwards, he would be mangled as the flesh adhered to the weapons. Crouching directly beneath the ladder was a monstrous dragon who threatened those climbing up and tried to frighten them from ascent. Saturus went up first [...] When he reached the top of the ladder, he turned to me and said, 'Perpetua, I'm waiting for you, but be careful not to be bitten by the dragon.' I told him that in the name of Jesus Christ the dragon could not harm me. At this the dragon slowly lowered its head as though afraid of me. Using its head as the first step, I began my ascent.⁸¹

For virgins of Christ, the ladder, or staircase,⁸² served as an image of the ascent towards the sphere of the divine. In Perpetua's visions, the image also evoked consolation and the hope to be able to endure martyrdom. In later hymnologies, such as Notker Balbulus's (840–912) *De sanctis Virginibus* ('On the Holy Virgins'), the ascent on the ladder can also be described as a 'moment of danger.' As noted by F. R. Gahbauer, 'Love for Christ or love of Christ paved the way for the virgins over the ladder to heaven, sharply guarded by the dragon.'⁸³ Another hymn preserved by the Ethiopian Church and attributed to Queen Helena of Ethiopia, translated into Latin under the title *Helenaethiopia Reginae Quae Feruntur Preces et Carmina*, praises Mary and describes her as a golden ladder on which angels can climb up and down. Mary is the ladder directing the prayers of the saints towards heaven: *O Virgo! Tu facta es precationum scala et gradus orationis* ('O Virgin! You have become the ladder of devotions and the steps of prayers').⁸⁴

We can note that the biblical text relating the story of Jacob's ladder also had a fixed place in the Roman Catholic Mass, and was included in the vespers of Marian holidays. Genesis 28:10–17 is thus the first passage read in the liturgical sequence of biblical texts on August 15. The same passage also found its way into the liturgy of the other Marian festivals, when believers are required to fear God and direct their gaze (as Jacob did) towards the 'gate of heaven,' which now stands open before them.⁸⁵

***Toledot Yeshu* as a Counter-Narrative to Marian Traditions**

We can observe many parallels between these Christian traditions and the story of Mary as it is found in our two Yiddish manuscripts of *Toledot Yeshu*. In both the Jewish and the Christian stories, Christians and Jews are present when Mary dies and is buried.

⁸⁰ Some texts mention 'a golden ladder'; cf. FERDINAND R. GAHBAUER, 'Die Jakobsleiter, ein aussagenreiches Motiv der Väterliteratur,' *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 9, no. 2 (2006): 247–78 (269).

⁸¹ Cited from RADER, 'Perpetua', 21.

⁸² HANS JOCHEN BOECKER, *1. Mose 25, 12–37, 1. Züricher Kommentare 1,3* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1992), 60: 'Es handelt sich [...] um ein aus massiven Steinen errichtetes Bauwerk' ('It is a matter of a structure built of solid stones').

⁸³ GAHBAUER, 'Jakobsleiter', 269.

⁸⁴ GAHBAUER, 'Jakobsleiter', 272.

⁸⁵ See KLAUS GAMBER, 'Die ältesten Messformulare für Maria Verkündigung. Ein kleines Kapitel frühmittelalterlicher Sakramentargeschichte,' *Sacris erudiri* 29 (1986): 121–50; KLAUS GAMBER, *Sacramentorum. Weitere Studien zur Geschichte des Messbuches und der frühen Liturgie* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1984), 68–91.

In *Toledot Yeshu*, the Christian ‘others’ are described as ‘apostates’ (פּשעים), ‘scoundrels’ (פּריצים), or ‘scholars of the false Christian belief’ (תּשמידים). In the Christian narrative, the Apostles and the Jews, represented by the Jewish high priest Jephonias, appear as earthly figures, in contrast to the heavenly figures represented by the angels and Christ. In the Huldricus version of *Toledot Yeshu*, family relations also play an important role in delineating Mary’s identity. In both the Jewish and the Christian narratives, Mary does not die suddenly but is aware of her impending death. In the Yiddish texts she falls ill and decides to make a will. In the Christian legend, it is the angel Gabriel who announces her death. The episode thus closes the circle of her life as, according to the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:28), it was Gabriel who also announced to Mary that she would conceive the Son of God. It is her closeness to her son, whom she has carried in her virgin body, which allows her to ask to be spared the torments of hell. In the Yiddish manuscripts, by contrast, Maryem suffers various illnesses, and her death is described as a ‘perishing’ (גפייגרט; *JTS*, fol. 62v; *EH*, fol. 54r), a term associated with impurity and commonly used for the death of animals. The Jewish story thus similarly implies a circle: Maryem conceived in impurity and died an impure death.

Both the Jewish and the Christian story also imply a funerary ritual, with close relatives and fellow believers. Ms. EH 47 A 21 emphasises that as she lay sick, Maryem exhorted Yeshu’s followers to hold fast to their faith. According to the Christian legend, most conspicuously in Christian iconography, Mary dies surrounded by the Apostles. Peter, representing the Church, appears at her bedhead and leans towards her. Mary herself serves as a typological embodiment of the Church in that context. By her breast is John, Christ’s ‘favourite disciple’ (John 13:23); at the foot of her bed is Paul, ‘the least of the Apostles’ (1 Cor 15:9), humbly kissing her feet. In our Yiddish manuscripts, by contrast, Maryem is not mourned. Rather, her death is proclaimed all round and becomes a source of joy.⁸⁶ In the Huldricus version, all the members of Yeshu’s family and some hundred more people belonging to this circle meet the same fate as Mary,⁸⁷ just like the Jews in the ‘Jephonias scene,’ recorded in the Christian legend, who do not agree to convert. All these narratives describe a reversal of circumstances, reminiscent of the story recounted in the biblical Book of Esther (a point to which we shall return). In the Jewish tradition, the erection of a tombstone is usually separated from the burial itself, taking place at a later time. For the family of the departed, this provides another opportunity to come together and ritually remember the loved one and his or her deeds.⁸⁸ In the Jewish story of Maryem,

⁸⁶ Here, as in many other places, *Toledot Yeshu* is likely influenced by the biblical book of Esther, suggesting that the narrative was perhaps also read or could be linked to the Jewish festival of Purim. On the parallels, see Sarit KATTAN-GRIBETZ, ‘Hanged and Crucified: The Book of Esther and *Toledot Yeshu*,’ in *Toledot Yeshu ... Revisited*, eds SCHÄFER, MEERSON, and DEUTSCH, 159–80. On *Toledot Yeshu* as a work of entertainment perhaps used in the carnivalesque context of Purim, see below.

⁸⁷ Probably a play on the expressions ‘brothers [and sisters]’ in the New Testament Pauline epistles; for the execution of family members, cf. Est 9:7–10.

⁸⁸ Usually, a tombstone is set after one year on the first *yortsayt*. I would like to thank Nathanja Hüttenmeister for her assistance regarding the setting of tombstones in the Ashkenazic context.

however, everything seems to be done in haste. *JTS* thus notes that only ‘three days’ after her passing, the followers of Maryem had to ready a tombstone (fol. 63r). This short time span echoes the Christian story of Christ’s and Mary’s empty tombs.

The parodic function of the biblical epitaph mentioned in the Jewish story is also illuminated by the Christian traditions discussed above. The use of Genesis 28:12 in the context of the Marian liturgy can be contrasted in our *Toledot Yesbu* manuscripts with the destruction of the tombstone bearing the same words. I would further suggest that the citation of this verse in this context not only refers to its use in the Marian vespers, but also, and more broadly, to the theological interpretation of the *Assumptio Mariae* as the very moment when Mary’s soul is received by Jesus Christ, and she is established as the Queen of Heaven (*Regina Caeli*). Mary’s soteriological significance as a divine intercessor or *mediatrix* between heaven and earth is rooted in the Christian understanding of Jacob’s ladder. We can identify several levels of interpretation in the Jewish narration of the destruction of Maryem’s tombstone, an event which occurs with the support of the secular powers. We must first bear in mind Jewish burial practices, in which the preservation of tombs plays an important role (I shall return to this below). The yearly commemoration (in Yiddish *yortsayt*), which is the reason for Maryem’s request for a tombstone to be erected on her grave, is no longer possible once the grave has been destroyed. Her descendants, or those who have faith in her son, will no longer find her grave, and her memory will thus be annihilated (as prescribed by Exod. 17:14 and Deut. 25:19). Things are even clearer in the Huldricus, which underlines that what needed to be destroyed was not merely a gravestone, but a stone ‘bearing this inscription,’ implying that both Mary’s memorial and the Christian interpretations of Jacob’s ladder had to be erased.⁸⁹

Genesis 28 is far more than just a *typos* for the Assumption of Mary. The entire Jacob story contains a series of important statements regarding the divine promise, central to both the Christian and Jewish traditions. Standing at the top of the ladder, God speaks to Jacob in his dream:

I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and Isaac’s God; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt be spread abroad toward the west, and toward the east, and toward the north, and toward the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. And behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee whithersoever thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land. For I will not leave thee, until I do all that I have promised thee (Gen. 28:13–4).

In the Jewish account of the destruction of Maryem’s tombstone, the Christian interpretation of God’s promise, referring to the Church and repeatedly asserted by the dominant Christian culture, is nullified. According to the biblical text, Jacob, Rebecca’s beloved but younger son gained the birthright of his older twin Esau, and

⁸⁹ Note that there is another ‘ladder’ in the ‘Huldricus’. In the conception story, the wicked Joseph Pandera uses a ladder to enter Mary’s house and commit adultery with her. This ladder invites us to consider a whole horizon of parodic humour on Marian devotion and Christian dogma in the *Toledot Yesbu* tradition; cf. KATAN GRIEBETZ, ‘Mothers in the Manuscripts,’ 118.

the latter was forced to serve him (Gen. 25:23). In the New Testament, the Jews are not explicitly equated with Esau, but Jacob, the bearer of promise, is already interpreted as prefiguring Christ and those who believe in him (Rom 9:10–3; Heb 12:14–6). This did allow room for the Jews, who had lost the Covenant, to be interpreted as the heirs of Esau.⁹⁰ Even if Paul still understood the story as an invitation to non-Jews to take part in the divine promise, while nonetheless considering the Covenant valid for Jews, in subsequent centuries, most Christian writers interpreted the contrast of Jacob and Esau in binary terms: salvation or disaster. The Jews were now subjected to the Christian order and were deemed a hated and excluded ‘other.’⁹¹ The significance of a counter-story like *Toledot Yeshu* in this context is obvious enough. This is a story whose aim is, as noted by David Biale, ‘to reverse the sense of Jewish powerlessness in the face of Christian enmity by arguing that the Jews really control Christian history after all.’⁹² The same strategy is also evinced in the Jewish use and subversion of Marian legends as attested in our Yiddish manuscripts. There could, however, be other reasons for telling stories about Mary.

An Updated Story for Amsterdam Ashkenazim

To some extent, the account of Mary’s death and burial in our manuscripts also reflects the burial rituals and practices common among Jews in eighteenth-century Amsterdam. Death, followed by the rituals of farewell, mourning and the funeral was obviously a familiar experience, as were the norms and traditions framing these rituals.⁹³ In the context in which our manuscripts were written, the poor and lonely received a collective burial with the help of the community, as their death also had to be ritually mourned.⁹⁴ Avriel Bar-Levav has shown how, in the Northern Netherlands, especially in the early modern period, instructions for mourning rituals were made widely available through printed booklets and edification literature.⁹⁵ Thus, for instance, the *Sefer ha-Hayyim* (‘Book of Life’) was composed in around 1703 by Shimon

⁹⁰ See ISRAEL YUVAL, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 13–14.

⁹¹ YUVAL, *Two Nations in Your Womb*, 3–20 (13–14); HANNE TRAUTNER-KROMANN, ‘From “Jacob or Esau?” to “Has the Messiah Come?” Controversies Between Jews and Christians As Reflected in Bible Exegesis,’ in *Zutot. Perspectives on Jewish Culture 2*, eds. SHLOMO BERGER et al. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002): 95–101.

⁹² DAVID BIALE, ‘Counter history,’ 136.

⁹³ See for example DANIEL SPERBER, *The Jewish Life Cycle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2008), part 2: ‘Death,’ 357–609. On *Toledot Yeshu* as a casuistic narrative which could be ‘updated’ in relation to concrete historical situations, see DANIEL BARBU, ‘The Case about Jesus: (Counter-)History and Casuistry in *Toledot Yeshu*,’ in *A Historical Approach to Casuistry*, eds CARLO GINZBURG and LUCIO BIASIORI (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 65–97.

⁹⁴ Cf. JUDITH BUTLER, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

⁹⁵ AVRIEL BAR-LEVAV, ‘Ritualisation of Jewish Life and Death in the Early Modern Period,’ *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 47, no. 1 (2002): 69–82; BAR-LEVAV, ‘The Amsterdam Way of Death: R. Shimon Frankfurt’s *Sefer ha-Hayyim* (the Book of Life), 1703,’ in *The Religious Cultures of Dutch Jewry*, eds YOSEPH KAPLAN and DAN MICHMAN (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 100–23; HERMAN POLLACK, *Jewish Folkways in Germanic Lands (1648–1806). Studies in Aspects of Daily Life* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 40–9.

Frankfurter and circulated in both Hebrew and Yiddish.⁹⁶ It explains the meanings of even the smallest movements, prayers, and customs. These rituals served to structure the period in which mourners were exposed to perplexity, despair, and fear. Members of funeral brotherhoods, men and women, were there for each other in both life and death.⁹⁷ They regularly prayed together and took care of the funerary rituals of fellow members.⁹⁸ The grieving community first ordered a time of fasting and prayers, followed by farewell ceremonies for the deceased.⁹⁹ Ethical wills are attested already in the Middle Ages. In Amsterdam, they were common among both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews.¹⁰⁰ Also, a eulogy (Hebrew **תּוֹסֵף**) was necessary to fulfil the commandment to ‘love thy neighbour as thyself.’ The eulogy usually took place in front of the coffin, in a public space or in the cemetery.¹⁰¹ All these rituals and customs are reflected in the story of Maryem’s death and burial as we find it in our two Yiddish manuscripts.

Initially, we can assume that the inclusion of this story in the *Toledot Yesbu* narrative originates from a time and place when Marian devotion and pilgrimages still characterised Christian public life. In the Middle Ages, stories about Mary, as we have seen, were common among Christians, and prayers addressing the Holy Virgin were a daily practice. This was no longer the case in the Northern Netherlands in the eighteenth century, where most of the population was Protestant. In that context, the figure of Mary had undergone a thorough reinterpretation: while not denying her importance as the mother of God, Protestants rejected her salvific function.¹⁰² Stories

⁹⁶ Cf. YESHAYAHU VINOGRAD, ed., *Thesaurus of the Hebrew Book*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Places of Print* (Jerusalem: The Institute for Computerized Bibliography, 1993), 111. The book was printed thirty-nine times (sic!); MIRJAM GUTSCHOW lists two prints from Amsterdam 1703 and 1716, in *Inventory of Yiddish Publications from the Netherlands* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 47 (no. 149) and 62 (no. 210). See also AVRIEL BAR-LEVAV, ‘The Concept of Death in Sefer ha-Khayim (The Book of Life) by Shimon Frankfurt’ (PhD diss., University of Jerusalem [ha-universita ha-ivrit] 1997 [Hebr.]).

⁹⁷ For the history of the *Hevra Kadisha* (‘Holy brotherhood’), its origins and development in early modern times, see SYLVIE ANNE GOLDBERG, ‘Hevra Kaddisha,’ in *Enzyklopädie jüdischer Geschichte und Kultur*, ed. DAN DINER 7 vols., vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2012), 36–9.

⁹⁸ Cf. EVI MICHELS, ‘Caring for the Dying and the Dead,’ in ‘Yiddish Manuscripts from the Netherlands: Written for Women and Written for Men,’ *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2019): 258–81 (268–71).

⁹⁹ These rituals also require a *minyan* (ten Jewish men), which is provided by the *Hevra Kadisha*, cf. BAR-LEVAV, ‘The Amsterdam Way,’ 112–13; BAR-LEVAV, ‘Jewish Attitudes towards Death: A Society Between Time, Space and Texts,’ in *Death in Jewish Life. Burial and Mourning Customs Among Jews of Europe and Nearby Communities*, eds STEFAN C. REIF, ANDREAS LEHNARDT, and AVRIEL BAR-LEVAV (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 3–15.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. TIRTSAH LEVIE BERNFELD, ‘Religious Life among Portuguese Women in Amsterdam’s Golden Age,’ in *The Religious Cultures of Dutch Jewry*, eds KAPLAN and MICHMAN (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 57–99 (84–89). The Ets Haim library in Amsterdam has a manuscript written by Isaac Cohen Belinfante in 1765 that includes several eulogies on famous Jewish individuals, including Yomtov Lipman Heller, Samuel Aboab, Saul Levie Morteira, and others (Ms. EH 47 E 34).

¹⁰¹ MEIR YDIT, ‘Hesped,’ in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 16 vols., vol. 8 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972) 429–30.

¹⁰² HÄRLE, *Outline of Christian Doctrine*, 353–54, note 61; see also the chapter ‘Luther and the Protestant Critique of Mary,’ in MIRI RUBIN, *Mother of God. A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 367–76.

about her birth and childhood, and legends about her death and ascension to heaven were characterised as untrue, lies or ‘false belief.’

Our two manuscripts probably only provide us with a glimpse of the narrative treasure trove from which enlightened Ashkenazim living in Amsterdam could draw when rewriting the story of Jesus and early Christianity. It is likely that only a fraction of all the *Toledot Yesbu* manuscripts circulating in that context have come down to us. As noted above, we know that Leib ben Ozer, for instance, made use of three different Hebrew manuscripts when writing his own version of the story in Yiddish. Although none of the extant Hebrew manuscripts from Amsterdam tells the story of Mary’s death and burial, we can speculate that other texts circulating at the time did.¹⁰³ The question of origins, however, does not really explain why two Yiddish scribes addressing a Yiddish-speaking audience decided to include the story of Mary’s death in the narrative. What resonance could the story have had in that context?

The confessional situation of the Northern Netherlands in the eighteenth century may possibly offer an answer to this complex question. Amsterdam was a place where questions of religious differentiation and self-understanding were discussed extensively, and where each religious community had its own way of creating demarcation.¹⁰⁴ Polemics against Mary had an obvious anti-Catholic tone and could perhaps be shared by both Jews and Protestants. But more complex delineations were also possible. The presence of various Protestant denominations in the Northern Netherlands in the eighteenth century also allowed Jewish-Christian relations to be renegotiated.¹⁰⁵ Political influence and economic prosperity created the conditions for thinking about religious equality, and Jews, in particular, sought to redefine their place within the broader society of that time. The Jewish story could thus perhaps be understood in relation to Protestant polemics against Mary and her alleged salvation function. Can the deliberate inclusion of that story in our manuscripts reflect a joke shared by Jews and Protestants alike, mocking traditions about Mary and her representation by Catholics as a (quasi) divine redeemer? The question of laughter and humour leads us to another significant aspect of *Toledot Yesbu* texts in general, and our two Yiddish manuscripts in particular.

Parody, Entertainment and Laughter

According to the *Shulhan Aruk*, the sixteenth-century authoritative code of Jewish law, entertainment and laughter are required during the celebration of Purim. Following

¹⁰³ Pace YOFFIE, ‘Observations on the Huldreich Manuscript,’ 67; CLAUDIA ROSENZWEIG, who examined a Yiddish Huldreich manuscript, assumes an earlier written tradition for this particular recension, that is, independent of the printed text; see ROSENZWEIG, ‘When Jesus spoke Yiddish,’ 213–14.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. BENJAMIN J. KAPLAN, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), chap. 9 and 10; on Sephardic women transmitting a converso culture and participating in religious discourse in Amsterdam, see LEVIE BERNFELD, ‘Religious Life among Portuguese Women,’ 92.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. JONATHAN ISRAEL, *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall. 1477–1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 662–69 (on Johannes Coccejus).

the Fast of Esther on 13 Adar, Jews are forbidden to fast. They must eat, drink, and be merry.¹⁰⁶ Purim commemorates the near extermination of the Jews of Persia in ancient times because of their cultural religious distinctiveness, as told in the biblical Book of Esther (Est 3:8). The holiday was an important festival for the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, who were sometimes subjected to similar attacks. In the Christian context, the story of Esther could also serve to denounce Christian persecution and reject Christian claims of supremacy.¹⁰⁷ A number of rabbinic homilies (*midrashim*), as well as liturgical songs and prayers recited in the context of Purim point to the festive practices linked to this holiday, particularly carnivalesque traditions, including parody, staged rituals, and theatre plays. The development of Jewish parodies in the context of Purim celebrations certainly illuminates the background of a text genre like *Toledot Yeshu*.¹⁰⁸ The Esther story also refers to an evil character, Haman, the Persian vizir and archenemy of the Jews, who, in a Christian environment, could easily be interpreted as a Christian villain. This fictional character thus came to serve as a screen on which Jews could project Christian enmity in specific historical situations.

In fact, many Jewish parodies and polemics composed essentially by Sephardi Jews in eighteenth-century Amsterdam are preserved today in the Ets Haim library.¹⁰⁹ Among these, we can mention David Raphael Polido's *Testament of Haman and Funeral Service for Haman, the Son of Hammedatha*, a text copied and printed several times in the first half of the eighteenth century. Polido's original manuscript, dated to 1703, is part of the library collection, which also contains a copy from The Hague (dated 1885), testifying to the continuing interest in this parody in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century.¹¹⁰ In the polemical narrative, we find an episode reminiscent of the story of Mary's burial in our Yiddish manuscripts of *Toledot Yeshu*:

Haman lingers in prison awaiting his execution. In the meantime, he calls his family to him and reads his will. In his will, he parodies Jacob's blessing of his sons (Gen. 49) as well as the 10 Commandments. Haman admonishes his children to live peacefully among themselves and to unite in hatred toward Jews. They are also to have no pity for the poor, to refrain from any helpfulness, for poor relief is profitless. They are to threaten their creditors with violence if the latter harass them, but they are not to give their debtors any peace if the latter cannot pay

¹⁰⁶ See PHILIP GOODMAN, ed., *The Purim Anthology* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988) 148–50.

¹⁰⁷ ELLIOTT HOROWITZ, *Reckless Rites. Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), esp. chap. 4: 'The Eternal Haman.'

¹⁰⁸ Cf. KATTAN GRIBETZ, 'Hanged and Crucified,' 160–61.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. LAJB FUKS and RENA FUKS-MANSFELD, *Hebrew and Judaic Manuscripts in Amsterdam Public Collections*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Catalogue of the Manuscripts of Ets Haim / Libreria Montezinos, Sephardic Community of Amsterdam* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 91–132.

¹¹⁰ Ms. EH 47 E 49, cf. FUKS and FUKS-MANSFELD, *Catalogue of the Manuscripts of Ets Haim*, 164–65 (no. 307); for the copy of 1885 see 165 (no. 308). The parody was printed in Livorno 1703 with the title פּוֹרְיִם זְכוּת פּוֹרְיִם ('Commemoration of Purim'). As ISRAEL DAVIDSON writes, the text was included in collections of other parodic texts and reprinted repeatedly, cf. *Parody in Jewish Literature* (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1907), 196. On the Livorno 1703 print, see VINOGRAD, *Thesaurus of the Hebrew Book*, 2 vols., vol. 2, 379.

immediately. Finally, he urges his descendants not to take anything from the poor, for they have little worth stealing.¹¹¹

It is likely that the story of Mary would have been associated with this story about Haman in the audience's imagination, assuming, that is, that Jews were familiar with both texts.

Conclusions

I would like to conclude by returning to the question of the unusual structure of our two Yiddish manuscripts of *Toledot Yesbu*, namely their division into theatrical 'acts.' Both scribes deliberately used this term to establish a proximity with the world of theatre, perhaps reflecting the general enthusiasm aroused by theatre plays in the eighteenth century, but perhaps also suggesting a link to the Purim celebrations. Read in this light, we can imagine that the scribes responsible for these manuscripts viewed the text as potentially providing good entertainment, a sort of 'Curtain up!' moment on the history of Christianity. We can perhaps also detect a certain touch of exoticism in the story of Mary's death and burial, taking up elements of well-known Catholic legends about Mary as stage material for Purim entertainment, thus bringing them to life in the imagination of the audience—perhaps confirming that, in the Baroque period, Catholicism did indeed have an 'aesthetic appeal, no Protestant confession could match,' to quote Benjamin Kaplan.¹¹² Even though Mary and Marian devotion did not play a role in the public and visible religiosity of the Northern Netherlands in the eighteenth century, this was nevertheless a strong marker of difference between Catholics and Protestants, and the latter were most likely aware of traditions upheld by the former.

The narrative elaboration on Mary's burial we find in our manuscripts may have been appealing in many ways: it drew from ancient Christian legends about Mary whose anti-Jewish bias had not been forgotten; it offered a commentary on contemporary burial practices; and it could enhance the entertaining character of the story of Jesus by alluding to other popular stories and parodies recited or staged in the context of Purim, such as the story of Haman's will. Perhaps we need to imagine the audience for a moment, those men, women, and children, gathered together listening to the story and laughing, enjoying hearing the series of episodes over a couple of merry, cheer-filled days, celebrating how the enemies of the Jews had been vanquished, and their memory erased. The story of Jesus, but also that of his mother, Mary, could certainly entertain both Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews established in Amsterdam in the eighteenth century. The latter had fled the Iberian Peninsula, where they had been forced to convert, before finding refuge in the Netherlands and returning to their faith; the former had arrived from Poland or Ukraine, fleeing the Cossack riots and massacres, seeking asylum in Amsterdam. The updated retelling of familiar material found in our two manuscripts correlated with contemporary questions and criticisms

¹¹¹ See DAVIDSON, *Parody in Jewish Literature*, 48–49.

¹¹² KAPLAN, *Divided by Faith*, 267.

of Christian dogma and practices, while intra-Jewish differences, for their part, could be diluted by the shared laughter prompted by listening to the story of Mary and Jesus retold as a cabaret 'on stage.'