

Foreword
The Jewish ‘Life of Jesus’ (Toledot Yeshu)
in Early Modern Contexts: Case Studies

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The essays gathered here all concern the history, reception, and circulation of various versions of the Jewish ‘Life of Jesus’ (or *Toledot Yeshu*) in the early modern period (sixteenth to eighteenth century).¹ *Toledot Yeshu* is perhaps the most infamous retelling of the gospel narrative of the premodern era. While the texts may differ on several points, all versions agree on the essential facts: in no way can Jesus be considered a god, and his life and actions, far from being a pivotal moment in human history, are merely an example of deception, abuse, and treachery, worthy of opprobrium and scorn. The story is best described as a parody of the Gospels, or perhaps an ‘anti-gospel,’ in which the foundational narrative and basic tenets of Christianity become an opportunity for ridicule and laughter. Jesus himself, whose purportedly shameful origins are narrated in detail, is thus railed as an antihero, a disgruntled student of the rabbis who sought to gain recognition by performing magic and duping the crowds, claiming to be the Messiah foretold by the prophets, but ultimately unable to save himself.² *Toledot Yeshu* of course does not belong to the normative corpus of rabbinic Judaism. It was even rejected by many Jewish scholars, fearing that the story would only confirm the Jews’ enduring reputation as a hostile and blasphemous people.³

¹For a recent edition and translation, see MICHAEL MEERSON and PETER SCHÄFER, eds, *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), with the reservations offered by DANIEL STÖKL BEN EZRA’s review in *Asdival* 11 (2016): 226–30. Seminal studies on *Toledot Yeshu* include SAMUEL KRAUSS, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Calvary & Co., 1902); WILLIAM HORBURY, ‘A Critical Examination of the Toledoth Jeshu’ (PhD diss., Clare College, Cambridge, 1970); GÜNTHER SCHLICHTING, *Ein jüdisches Leben Jesu: die verschollene Toledot-Jeshu-Fassung Tam ü-Mu’ad* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1982); RICCARDO DI SEGNI, *Il vangelo del Ghetto. Le “storie di Gesù”: leggende e documenti della tradizione medievale ebraica* (Rome: Newton Compton, 1985); YAACOV DEUTSCH, ‘“Toledot Yeshu” in Christian Eyes’ (MA diss., Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1997). See also the studies gathered in PETER SCHÄFER, MICHAEL MEERSON, and YAACOV DEUTSCH, eds, *Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); DANIEL BARBU and YAACOV DEUTSCH, eds, *Toledot Yeshu in Context: The Jewish ‘Life of Jesus’ in Ancient, Medieval and Modern History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

² I borrow the expression ‘antihero’ from ALEXANDRA CUFFEL, ‘Between Epic Entertainment and Polemical Exegesis: Jesus as Antihero in *Toledot Yeshu*,’ in *Medieval Exegesis and Religious Difference: Commentary, Conflict, and Community in the Premodern Mediterranean*, ed. RYAN SZPIECH (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 155–70. On *Toledot Yeshu* as parody, see PHILIP ALEXANDER, ‘Jesus and His Mother in the Jewish Anti-Gospel (the *Toledot Yeshu*),’ in *Infancy Gospels: Stories and Identities*, eds CLAIRE CLIVAZ et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 588–616.

³ See DANIEL BARBU, ‘Some Remarks on the Jewish Life of Jesus (*Toledot Yeshu*) in Early Modern Europe,’ *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* 5, no. 1 (2019): 29–45.

Nevertheless, the story was undoubtedly very popular among medieval and early modern Jews, certainly also reflecting a widely shared view of Christianity, by contrast, as a deceitful religion. As a Jewish story on Jesus and the origins of Christianity, *Toledot Yesbu* in fact provided them with a corrective to the Christian story, a ‘counter-history,’ which also allowed them to contest the dominant Christian narrative and uphold their distinct identity in a dominantly Christian world.⁴

The scholarly treatment of *Toledot Yesbu* has often been devoted chiefly to questions of textual history. Such questions are doubtless fundamental, but they sometimes come at the cost of broader historical questions. The texts and manuscripts that have come down to us, as well as the rich body of sources reflective of the circulation and uses of the Jewish Jesus story, do more than just bear witness to a history of textual transmission. Each of these documents needs to be situated within its individual context if we are to understand what *Toledot Yesbu* was called to do at different times and in different places, and how it was received by both Jewish and Christian readers. ‘Reception’ here refers to more than the passive transmission of knowledge or texts; it is a way to also address the agency of a given tradition in a variety of contexts, to consider the various ways in which it was appropriated and used, politicised, by different actors for the purpose of asserting, modifying, or contesting ideas and structures. In each and every context it is thus necessary to ask who read and copied these texts, and more importantly, why, to what effect, in response to whom, and within what broader framework. How, when, and why does the Jewish story of Jesus—or fragments of that story—come to light in our documentation? How was it used (or abused) in specific historical and cultural contexts, either by Jews or crypto-Jews struggling to preserve their identity in a Christian world, or by Christians thinking about Judaism as part of their own theological tradition? How can the history of *Toledot Yesbu* illuminate the broader discourse on Jewish books and Jewish blasphemy or heresy in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period? What role did the story play in conversion or re-Judaisation processes? What can the sources under investigation in the current issue reveal about the circulation of ideas, exchanges across political and cultural realms, about religious conflicts and interactions, but also about the emotions of those who read or heard the story, about the fashioning of Jews and Christians as ‘emotional communities’ in various historical and geographical contexts?⁵

The essays gathered in this thematic section of *CROMOHS* precisely address these questions. While pursuing a similar research agenda as a previous collection of studies coedited with Yaacov Deutsch and published in 2020,⁶ these essays are more specifically devoted to the early modern contexts of *Toledot Yesbu*, a period

⁴ 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.

⁵ See DANIEL BARBU, ‘Feeling Jewish. Emotions, Identity, and the Jews’ Inverted Christmas,’ in *Feeling Exclusion. Religious Conflict, Exile and Emotions in Early Modern Europe*, eds GIOVANNI TARANTINO and CHARLES ZIKA (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 185–206, with further reference to Barbara Rosenwein’s notion of ‘emotional communities.’

⁶ BARBU and DEUTSCH, *Toledot Yesbu in Context*.

characterised by the dissemination of new versions of the narrative, increased circulation of manuscripts, translations into vernacular languages, and renewed interest—both on the Jewish and on the Christian side—in polemical and apologetic writings. The aim of this section is not to analyse the various versions of *Toledot Yeshu* in and for themselves, but rather to use this remarkable tradition as a guide to explore and problematise Jewish-Christian relations in the early modern world through a selection of circumscribed case studies. Certainly, more cases could have been examined, but our aim is to suggest new lines of inquiry rather than seek to exhaust the topic.

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