

## Afterword

### *The Changing Fortunes of Toledot Yeshu Research*

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This thematic section thanks to Daniel Barbu brings together a number of new studies on various aspects of the ‘Jewish Life of Jesus’ or *Toledot Yeshu*. In addition to the intrinsic value of the individual contributions, it offers an opportunity for more general considerations. Indeed, *Toledot Yeshu* is an excellent example of a topic which is not only interesting in itself but also worth considering in terms of the history of research on the subject.

Research on *Toledot Yeshu* is not new but has recently encountered a remarkable revival. In this regard, I wish to offer a personal testimony. In the early 1980s, Alfonso M. Di Nola, a historian of religions and anthropologist who was editing a series of texts on religion and magic with Newton Compton at the time, invited me to write a popular book on the topic in Italian.<sup>1</sup> Before that, I knew nothing about *Toledot Yeshu*. I was asked to provide a translation of the narrative and a short introductory essay, in a volume of a hundred pages or so. As I got further into the subject, I became aware of several problems: first, the delicacy of the subject matter, which would not be ‘palatable’ (as I was told) to the Christian public; second, the state of the research, which had almost come to a halt following the publication of Samuel Krauss’s 1902 seminal monograph *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (with the exception of a few later studies in particular on the Aramaic fragments discovered in the Cairo Genizah).<sup>2</sup> William Horbury’s 1970 dissertation on the subject was unfortunately not published and inaccessible to me at that time.<sup>3</sup> I quickly realised that there in fact existed innumerable manuscripts and versions, as yet unknown and unpublished, scattered in various libraries—a veritable treasure trove! This meant that the only way to avoid publishing a book that would merely repeat what had already been done and might also be offensive for certain audiences was to back it up with up-to-date research and a solid critical approach. The planned volume was now triple the length originally agreed on, leading to lengthy discussions with the publisher. The research itself was

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<sup>1</sup> RICCARDO DI SEGNI, *Il vangelo del Ghetto. Le “storie di Gesù”: leggende e documenti della tradizione medievale ebraica* (Roma: Newton Compton, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> SAMUEL KRAUSS, *Das Leben Jesu Nach Jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Calvary & Co., 1902); followed by KRAUSS, ‘Fragments araméens du *Toldot Yéschou*,’ *Revue des études Juives* 62 (1911): 126–30; KRAUSS, ‘Neuere Ansichten Über „Toldoth Jeschu”’, *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 76 (n.s. 40), no. 6 (1932): 586–603; KRAUSS, ‘Une nouvelle recension hébraïque du *Toldot Yéshû*,’ *Revue des études juives* 103 (1938): 65–90.

<sup>3</sup> WILLIAM HORBURY, ‘A Critical Examination of the *Toledoth Yeshu*’ (PhD diss., Clare College, Cambridge, 1970).

not easy either, despite the willingness of many libraries to provide reproductions of the texts. Some libraries, in what was then the Soviet Union, politely refused, citing ‘technical issues.’ Nevertheless, the work resulted in a rich list of manuscripts and printed editions that allowed me to make a new classification of texts (still quite widely used today) and identify a number of problems that remained to be solved. One of the episodes of the narrative to which I devoted most research was the account of Jesus’s conception and birth. I sought to place the episode, in which Mary appears as the unsuspecting victim of a lustful impostor, in the long history of a well-established literary motif from mythology to recreational literature, that of the adulterer in disguise.<sup>4</sup>

When my book was published in 1985, it encountered a rather unhappy fate. It was promptly (and discreetly) removed from bookstores, briefly sold among leftover stock, and then taken out of print altogether. In the following years, a copy could occasionally be found on second-hand bookstalls here and there. The book and research to which I had devoted so much time had stalled (except for a brief later study on a text found in a Spanish inquisitorial trial).<sup>5</sup> For me, *Toledot Yesbu* had become a thing of the past, as it seemed to be for the world of research in general, except for a few rare and valuable contributions by Gunter Schlichting, Hillel I. Newman and Yaacov Deutsch.<sup>6</sup>

Yet to my great surprise, some twenty years later there was a sudden resurgence of interest in the issue, in large part due to the efforts of Peter Schäffer, at the time professor of Judaic Studies at Princeton University. Schäffer launched the idea of a synoptic critical edition of all the known *Toledot Yesbu* manuscripts and coordinated a research project involving an international group of scholars, each approaching the narrative from a different viewpoint.<sup>7</sup> In the wake of this revival, new studies were published, international conferences organised, scholars working on the topic connected through the web, and important classes and seminars devoted to *Toledot Yesbu* research were held in universities, notably in Israel, Switzerland and France.<sup>8</sup>

Various goals can be identified in this ongoing research on *Toledot Yesbu*, calling for interventions by specialists from very different fields. These goals are: 1) to further

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<sup>4</sup> DI SEGNI, *Il vangelo del Ghetto*, 113–32.

<sup>5</sup> RICCARDO DI SEGNI, ‘Due nuovi fonti sulle *Toledoth Yesbu*,’ *Rassegna mensile di Israel* 55, no. 1 (1989): 127–32.

<sup>6</sup> GÜNTER SCHLICHTING, *Ein Jüdisches Leben Jesu: Die Verschollene Toledot-Jeschu-Fassung* Tam û-Mû ‘ād (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1982); HILLEL I. NEWMAN, ‘The Death of Jesus in the *Toledot Yesbu* Literature,’ *Journal of Theological Studies* 50, no. 1 (1999): 59–79; YAACOV DEUTSCH, ‘New Evidence of Early Versions of *Toldot Yesbu*,’ *Tarbiz* 69 (2000): 177–97.

<sup>7</sup> The edition has been published as MICHAEL MEERSON and PETER SCHÄFER, eds, *Toledot Yesbu: The Life Story of Jesus*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); see also the studies gathered in PETER SCHÄFER, MICHAEL MEERSON, and YAACOV DEUTSCH, eds, *Toledot Yesbu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> See for instance the volume published by DANIEL BARBU and YAACOV DEUTSCH, *Toledot Yesbu in Context: The Jewish ‘Life of Jesus’ in Ancient, Medieval and Modern History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020) in the wake of a conference held at the University of Bern in 2015.

expand the search for new sources and the list of manuscripts, as well as indirect and/or partial testimonies deriving from inquisitorial trials; 2) to carry out linguistic studies, particularly on the Aramaic sources; 3) to examine versions in languages other than Hebrew, ranging from Arabic (allowing Miriam Goldstein in particular to show that many aspects of the narrative in later Hebrew manuscripts appeared much earlier than previously thought),<sup>9</sup> to Yiddish and Ladino; 4) to make an in-depth analysis of the features of individual manuscripts or versions of the narrative; 5) to analyse their relations with Christian apocrypha; 6) to study the circulation of the texts, and their apologetic and polemical use; 7) to study their reception among Christians, from Agobard in the ninth century to Luther in the sixteenth, to name just two; 8) to explore the relations with motifs and themes found in ancient and medieval rabbinic commentaries (*midrashim*) as well as in the kabbalistic tradition; 9) and to carry out gender studies, notably exploring the role of women in the various versions of the narrative.<sup>10</sup>

The role of this latest collection of studies should be seen as a valuable new piece to add to a line of critical historical research that seemed to have ended but has now vividly returned to life. The essays gathered here encompass many of the objectives identified above but stand out, in particular, in their attempt to contextualise and historicise specific versions of the narrative, bridging linguistic traditions, exploring the reception and circulation of *Toledot* manuscripts, and relating them to the broader social worlds which gave them their meaning and significance. Because of the long history, the diversity of texts and the contexts that this tradition invites us to consider, but also—beyond the rationality of philological and historical inquiry—because of its strong affective dimension, the subject matter lends itself well to such interdisciplinary research. Hence, it allows us to unfold a never-ending drama, that of the troubled relations between Christians and Jews, the figure of Jesus ambiguously representing both their interconnectedness and their distance.

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<sup>9</sup> MIRIAM GOLDSTEIN, 'Judeo-Arabic Versions of *Toledoth Yeshu*,' *Ginzei Qedem* 6 (2010): 9–42; GOLDSTEIN, 'Early Judeo-Arabic Birth Narratives in the Polemical Story "Life of Jesus" (*Toledot Yeshu*),' *Harvard Theological Review* 113, no. 3 (July 2020): 354–77; and now her edition of the Arabic manuscripts of the 'Helena' recension: *A Judeo-Arabic Parody of the Life of Jesus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> 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; see also JOHN G. GAGER and MIKA AHUVIA, 'Some Notes on Jesus and His Parents from the New Testament Gospels to the *Toledot Yeshu*,' in *Envisioning Judaism. Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, eds RA'ANAN S. BOUSTAN et al., 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), vol. 2, 997–1017; NATALIE E. LATIERI, 'Playing the Whore: Illicit Union and the Biblical Typology of Promiscuity in the *Toledot Yeshu* Tradition,' *Shofar* 33, no. 2 (2015): 87–102; DANIEL BARBU, 'The Case About Jesus: (Counter-) History and Casuistry in *Toledot Yeshu*,' in *A Historical Approach to Casuistry: Norms and Exceptions in a Comparative Perspective*, eds CARLO GINZBURG and LUCIO BIASIORI (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 65–98.