

**Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer,  
Eds. and Trans.**  
***Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus***  
**Two Volumes and Database**  
**Vol. I: Introduction and Translation**  
**Vol. II: Critical Edition**  
***(Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 159)***  
**(Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), xvii + 716 pp.**

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The *Book of the Life of Jesus (Toledot Yeshu)* tells the story of Jesus from a Jewish, anti-Christian perspective, from his illegitimate birth through his various heretical acts to his disgraceful death. *Toledot Yeshu* does not reveal new details about the historical Jesus. Rather, the texts assembled in these volumes demonstrate how Jews who composed *Toledot Yeshu* approached traditions about Jesus over a long period of time, and the Christian responses to the Jewish approaches. Jews and Christians alike embraced this controversial work, with Jews largely reading it as a truthful account and Christians denouncing its subversive nature. Indeed, for centuries, some Ashkenazi Jews read *Toledot Yeshu* on Christmas Eve when Torah study was prohibited. The book's appeal extended well beyond Europe. While this edition focuses on the Hebrew and Aramaic versions—additional Yiddish, Judeo-Arabic, Ladino, and Judeo-Persian texts are mentioned but not considered—surviving texts originated in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Northern Italy, Eastern Europe, Russia, North Africa, Yemen, Bukhara, Baghdad, and even the United States (in a text copied in 1895).

This publication of *Toledot Yeshu* in two volumes along with an online database presents the results of the *Toledot Yeshu Project*, an international enterprise located at Princeton University and directed by Peter Schäfer and Michael Meerson and with the collaboration of Yaacov Deutsch, David Grossberg, Avigail Manekin, and Adina Yoffie. The project continues the work of Samuel Krauss, who first demonstrated the work's complex textual history (1902), as well as William Horbury (1970) and Ricardo Di Segni (1984). Analyzing 107 Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts, including some recently discovered texts, this edition puts this important and voluminous cluster of texts at the fingertips of those interested in Jewish-Christian relations and polemics. They can now turn to a critical edition

that conveniently bundles, analyzes, and presents the material in English and Hebrew.

Schäfer and Meerson divide the texts into three groups, each characterized by a narrative structure and organized according to a hypothetical chronology. The dynamic nature of *Toledot Yeshu* makes clear-cut classifications difficult. Group I, for example, is further subdivided into five versions, while groups II and III consist of seventeen different versions. The editors suggest that group I, a cluster of Aramaic texts, represents the earliest layer of the *Toledot Yeshu* versions. Like the later strata, this material probably evolved around a shared core of texts, but the fragmentary nature of the extant manuscripts does not disclose an identifiable narrative. Neither group II nor III, together containing over 100 manuscripts, can be assigned chronological priority, nor do they share episodes and characters. While group I can be read as something akin to folklore, which was likely intended to amuse the reader, groups II and III “can reasonably be considered as artifacts of a counter-history or Jewish-Christian polemics, in which exactly the same texts, episodes, and persons cherished by one [Christian] party are distorted by its [Jewish] opponent” (p. 35). These texts creatively undermined (often through mockery) New Testament narratives about Jesus and acquired new folkloristic layers with each generation of readers. The difference between the texts lies in the characters dominating the narrative. Group II is dominated by Queen Helene (Constantine the Great’s mother, anachronistically placed in the first century) while in group III, Jewish sages take the initiative.

The editors identify thirteen narrative units such as “Birth Narrative,” “Heresies and Crimes of Yeshu,” and “Stealing the Name” that appear in most texts, although not necessarily in the same sequence, and with considerable variations (pp. 28-124). Each core narrative is briefly identified and placed into its literary context. Main figures in the accounts are named, and different versions presented and analyzed. Anyone interested in, say, the execution of Jesus across the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition can find a careful comparative presentation of the events that considers various literary and legal influences, and even illustrations (p. 115). The reader can then turn to the English translations of all texts located in the latter part of Volume I, arranged according to their groups (pp. 127-372). The texts are divided into titled sections to facilitate the reader’s orientation. English footnotes to the translations contain a critical apparatus, literary sources, and important variants. The book concludes with indices of primary texts, subjects, and additional literary sources.

The first volume contains a number of introductory chapters. One chapter looks at *Toledot Yeshu* traditions in the Christian-Jewish encounter. Justin Martyr, Celsus, Origin, Tertullian, as well as the Talmud reflect narrative elements found in *Toledot Yeshu*, but the earliest reference to the work as a written text appears in Agobard of Lyon (c. 769-840) who possibly knew a version that had appeared in Babylonia a few years earlier. The first Latin translation appeared in Raymond Martin’s *Pugio Fidei* (c. 1280), a central anti-Jewish text of the Middle Ages. While the *Pugio* as a whole remained in manuscript form until 1651, the Latin version of *Toledot Yeshu* was printed already in 1470. Translated into German by

Martin Luther in 1543, the material reached its perhaps greatest popularity in the next two centuries. It was included in Wagenseil's *Tela ignea Satanae* (Fiery Darts of Satan). Enlightenment figures from Judah Briel to Voltaire and Moses Mendelssohn either discussed or included the text in their works. In 1824, the longest version of *Toledot Yeshu* appeared, *Tam u-Mu'ad*.

The second volume contains a critical edition of the Aramaic and Hebrew texts. The book opens with a list of all manuscripts, with brief descriptions and reproductions of the Aramaic and Hebrew manuscripts' opening lines (pp. 2-48). This is followed by the texts themselves, divided into the aforementioned groups and subgroups. The introduction for each group lists the texts, followed by a short description and synopsis of the contents for each text, and linguistic observations. In the case of subgroups that diverge considerably, the texts are presented synoptically in columns. The texts have titled sections that correspond to the online databases that facilitate the reader's access to the text.

The edition is accompanied by a very helpful online database that contains all 107 transcribed manuscripts. It is fully searchable, and allows the user to browse any number of manuscripts on separate screens.

There are two minor lacunas. For readers from outside the field, an introduction positioning the text within the Jewish-Christian encounter would have been useful. More surprising is the omission of some recent writings such as David Brodsky's work on *Massekhet Kallah* and *Kallah Rabbati*. Nonetheless, *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus* is indispensable for anyone interested in Jewish-Christian relations and the long reception history of ancient texts across religious and linguistic boundaries. This work will surely enable generations of scholars and students to tease out new nuances of this encounter.