

EARLY MODERN WORKSHOP: Jewish History Resources

Volume 13: History of Emotions/Emotions in History, Fordham University, New York, August 23-24, 2016

**“When Miriam heard Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah’s words she became very scared”:
Emotions in the Conception Narrative of a Judaeo-Arabic Version of *Toledot Yeshu***
Sarit Kattan Gribetz, Fordham University

Introduction

In 826 C.E., Agobard, bishop of Lyon, published a treatise entitled *De Judaicis superstitionibus*, detailing and ridiculing the ‘superstitions’ of the Jews. Within his missive, Agobard describes the tales that the Jews tell about Jesus. The details Agobard recounts make clear that the bishop is referring to a medieval Jewish parody of the story of Jesus’ life, known as *Toledot Yeshu* (Life of Jesus), composed in Aramaic sometime before the second half of the eighth century and later translated into Hebrew. Agobard’s successor, Amulo, also quotes *Toledot Yeshu* in his theological treatise of 846, *Contra Iudaeos*, and the Catalan Dominican Ramón Martí cites long passages of *Toledot Yeshu* in Latin and Hebrew in his anti-Jewish polemic *Pugio fidei* in 1278. The inquisitorial dossier of a Jewish convert named Pere in the fourteenth-century Crown of Aragon recounts another version of the text along with vivid descriptions of how this story of Jesus’ life was told in the kitchen of a Jewish home in the Aragonese village of La Almunia de Doña Godina to try to re-Judaize the recent apostate. The text of *Toledot Yeshu* is found in a seventeenth-century prayer book from Yemen, and, in addition to Aramaic and Hebrew, manuscripts of the text are preserved in Judaeo-Arabic, Judaeo-Persian, Ladino, Yiddish, and other languages.

Toledot Yeshu tells the story of Jesus’ life in a biting, vulgar tone. It was a text composed and used by Jews as an anti-Christian polemic, and as an internal document to bolster the faith of fellow Jews, oftentimes those who found themselves drawn in some way to Christianity and who needed encouragement not to stray from Judaism. There is no single uniform text; each manuscript tells a different version of the story – some with slight variations, others with drastic differences in tone, style, and plot. Some manuscripts begin with a birth narrative; others do not include a birth narrative but function, instead, as a satirical retelling of the Passion. Eventually, a subversive rereading of the book of Acts was appended to the end of the narrative in some manuscripts.

The basic story unfolds as follows: Born to a mother out of wedlock (and likely raped by a Roman soldier or a jealous neighbor), Yeshu grows into a precocious Jewish boy who gets himself in trouble in the rabbinic study house for his irreverence and lack of respect for rabbinic hierarchy. The authorities kick him out of the study house when they uncover the truth about his questionable birth. In many manuscripts, Yeshu breaks into the temple and steals the secret Ineffable Name (he writes it on a slip of paper, cuts his flesh, slips it in, and escapes from the temple with the magical formula inside). He then performs miracles – animating clay birds, healings the sick, and so on – and gains a following of disciples and other earnest Jews smitten by his charisma and magical feats. Other Jews, still suspicious of Yeshu, go to the imperial authorities (sometimes Tiberius Caesar, sometimes Queen Helena) and request that they subdue Yeshu and his growing movement because it poses a threat to their community. Yeshu is subjected to a series of tests, in which his miraculous powers are investigated. At some point, Yeshu uses the magical powers acquired through the ineffable name to fly into the sky. His nemesis, Yehudah (Judas), who has also stolen the ineffable name on the “pious” Jews’ behalf, flies up to meet Yeshu and they engage in a dramatic aerial battle, which ends when Yehudah urinates or defiles Yeshu. At this point, Yeshu falls to the ground and his true nature – a thief and a charlatan – is revealed. The imperial authorities sentence him to death and crucifixion. No trees are willing to serve as the site of crucifixion, and so Yeshu is further degraded by crucifixion on a cabbage stalk in the garden of another “Yehudah,” and his body is subsequently stolen or washed away by rainwater. When his followers arrive to pay their respects, they falsely believe that Yeshu has been resurrected. And so the story of Yeshu’s life ends. In some manuscripts we learn of later Christian history as well, in a segment that details how Paul serves as a rabbinic double-agent tasked with finalizing the “parting of the ways” between Jews and Christians.

Manuscript

Below, I have prepared a preliminary transcription and translation of the opening passages of a Judaeo-Arabic manuscript of Toledot Yeshu owned by Princeton University Library [Princeton Hebrew MS. 18, fol. 1r-9v / C0932].

The selected passage recounts the story of Yeshu’s conception and birth as well as the discovery of his father’s identity by the sages. To my knowledge, it is one of only two complete Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts of Toledot Yeshu (in addition to about 20 fragments). The manuscript is written in eastern script that dates to the 16th century. It belongs to the Group II manuscripts according to the Schäfer/Meerson manuscript groupings. It is most similar to Strasbourg BnU 3974 and JTS 1491, but it diverges

enough from both of these manuscripts that it represents a different version of the story rather than a translation of either the Strasbourg or JTS manuscripts. There are also specific similarities with Jerusalem Benayahu 25.4, though the Benayahu is clearly later.

Questions about the Text

Toledot Yeshu is a satire, polemic or counter-history that appeals not only (or even primarily) to rational argumentation, but also (and especially) to its audiences' emotions and is designed to evoke an affective response. That is, the story was effective in part because of its affective impact on its audiences – it aroused ridicule of Christians by Jews who tried to persuade others to return to Judaism, angered Christian authorities when they discovered the text in Jewish homes, swayed inquisitorial judges to exact harsh punishments on those accused of reading it, and played a comforting role for Jews when they felt especially vulnerable as Jewish minorities in Christian – and perhaps also Islamic – societies. Deviations from the expected narrative evoke shock, humor, or excitement in the reader or hearer.

What new insights might we gain about the stories and their medieval and early modern tellers and audiences when we read them from an “affective” perspective?

There are over 100 manuscripts of Toledot Yeshu, each of which tells a different version of the same basic story. I am therefore interested in:

- (1) identifying how each manuscript incorporates emotional dimensions into the story in various ways and communicates different themes through doing so;
- (2) determining the specific concerns of the particular authors of any given manuscript based on the ways in which he or she employs emotions in the narrative – that is, what can we conclude about a text/author/audience once we determine a text's “emotional center of gravity?”;
- (3) thinking through the ways in which the transmission of traditions, tales, and texts is an affective process itself - how authors of different versions of a shared story might have changed this story (its plot, characters, style, allusions, etc.) in order to evoke different emotional responses from their audiences. In other words, how did Toledot Yeshu's narratives change not only because of local culture, shifts in Jewish-Christian relations, geographical and historical context, but also because of the emotions of those who, as individuals and communities, told these stories, read these texts, and reacted to them?

I have chosen to include below an excerpt of the opening narrative sequence of the manuscript, which details Miriam's conception of Yeshu, Yeshu's birth, and the revelation of Yeshu's illegitimacy, because (a) it can easily be compared with other manuscripts that tell the same or similar narrative; (b) the story contains material that can easily be cast in affective terms: marriage, love, lust, jealousy, rape, embarrassment, shame, and so on; and (c) it sets the scene and tone for the remainder of the narrative, and thus serves an important role in the manuscript as a whole.

Suggested Readings

Mika Ahuvia and John G. Gager, "Some Notes on Jesus and his Parents: From the New Testament to the Toledot Yeshu," in *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (ed. Ra'anan S. Boustan et al.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 997-1119.

Philip Alexander, "The *Toledot Yeshu* in the Context of Jewish-Muslim Debate," in *Toledot Yeshu* ("The Life Story of Jesus") *Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (ed. Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson, and Yaacov Deutsch; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 137-158.

Daniel Barbu and Yaacov Deutsch, eds., *Toledot Yeshu in Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming).

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), 155-170.

Yaacov Deutsch, "New Evidence of Early Versions of *Toldot Yeshu*," *Tarbiz* 69 (2000): 177-197 [Hebrew].

Miriam Goldstein, "Judeo-Arabic Versions of *Toledot Yeshu*," *Ginzei Qedem* 6 (2010): 9-42.

Sarit Kattan Gribetz, "Hanged and Crucified: The Book of Esther and *Toledot Yeshu*," in *Toledot Yeshu Reconsidered* (ed. Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson, Yaacov Deutsch; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 159-180.

Sarit Kattan Gribetz, "Jesus and the Clay Birds: Reading *Toledot Yeshu* in Light of the Infancy Gospels," in *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (ed. Ra'anan Boustan, Klaus Hermann, Reimund Leicht, Annette Yoshiko Reed, and Giuseppe Veltri, with the collaboration of Alex Ramos; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 1021-1048.

Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus*, Two Volumes and Database (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

Peter Schäfer, "Jesus' Origin, Birth, and Childhood According to the *Toledot Yeshu* and the Talmud," in *Judaea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome: Jews in Antiquity* (ed. Benjamin Isaac and Yuval Shahar; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 139-164.

EARLY MODERN WORKSHOP: Jewish History Resources

Volume 13: History of Emotions/Emotions in History, Fordham University, New York, August 23-24, 2016

Emotions in the Margins: Reading *Toledot Yeshu* after the Affective Turn

Sarit Kattan Gribetz, Fordham University

Princeton Hebrew MS. 18, fol. 1r-2v

Preliminary Translation by Sarit Kattan Gribetz

The Story of Yeshu the Nazarene.

It was said: I begin his story and the meanings of its outcomes, that is Yeshu the Notzri - God was not satisfied with him!¹

Verily there was a young man in Israel and his name was Yohanan. He was a great scholar and jurist in Israel and very learned, and he was married to a woman and her name was Miriam the daughter of Yehuda and she was strikingly beautiful. And he was devoted to her. And she was vivacious and she was a hairdresser who coiffeured the women.² There was a neighbor, a prodigal person, in the neighborhood and he was blamed for every calamity and misfortune.

When this person saw Miriam his soul desired her. And it was on a certain night that Yohanan her husband left for the bet midrash and he sat there with the sages and read with them, and he delayed [leaving] until nightfall. And his wife waited for her husband, Rabbi Yohanan, to come [back].

The man who was her neighbor happened to pass by, and he was drunk. Since she could not see, she thought that he [the neighbor] was her husband and he embraced her and kissed her and she said “Don’t touch me because I am a *niddah!*” and he did not heed her words and he slept with her and he left.

And then Rabbi Yohanan her husband drew near from the house of study and requested his wife before sleep. She said: “From the day I betrothed you³, you never had a habit of coming to me twice in one night.” He said to her “And how is this? [what do you mean?]” She told him: “You already came to me tonight one time before this, and I told you not to

¹ This is an inversion of the expression “رضي الله عنه.”

² The last word in this sentence is either מפאפון or כפאפון (“at the time of [hair] trimming”?). On the tradition that Miriam coiffeured hair or helped women grow their hair long, see *b. Eruv*. 100b and Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 18.

³ Or perhaps “from the day I knew you” (ערפתך), rather than “betrothed you” (ערסתך).

do it because I am a *niddah* and you were not concerned.” Rabbi Yohanan listened to this matter and learned from this that the intruder came to her.

And the matter was deeply difficult for him, so much so that he wanted to extinguish his soul. And he [Rabbi Yohanan] departed for Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah and he said to him “You should know what happened to me, my master.” He said to him: “Tell what it is.” He said to him: “Yesterday I came to the house of study as is my habit and when I returned walking back to my house I requested [to sleep with] my wife. She told me that such and such happened to me.” He said to him: “Who is to blame?” He said to him: “An intruding man in our neighborhood and his name is Joseph bar Pandera and I suspect him.” Thus he [Rabbi Yohanan] told her [Miriam] not to say a word about it until he comes a second time and you will be there for it. A long time passed, and [Rabbi Yohanan] did not see him [the intruder].

And his wife Miriam was pregnant and word spread about her that she was pregnant with life. [When] Rabbi Yohanan saw that she was pregnant, he got up and left to Iraq [Babylonia]. And when the days were completed and he did not return, she gave birth to a baby boy and she named him Yeshua after her father, and she raised him such that he was proud, and he went to the house of study. The sages said “Whose son is this lad?” Because his shame was revealed to them they called him “Yeshu.”

One time: [it was customary] not to pass in front of the Sages except with deference and with one’s head covered out of respect for the sages. And Yeshua the wicked passed by without a hair covering, bareheaded. The sages were astonished by him, and said “Who is this mamzer and son of a *niddah*?” And not just that; he [also] issued legal opinions regarding *halakhot* and *perushim*. They [the sages] said to him: “Has it not been taught that he who issues rulings before his teacher brings curses upon himself?” He [Yeshu] said: “Who is the teacher and who is the student? Or, who is the wise one and who is the follower? Jethro or Moses? Wasn’t Moses the father of the sages and the head of the prophets, and the law [*sharia*] was revealed to him, as it says, ‘And no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses’ (Deut 34:10)? And Jethro is a prophetic person and taught Moses *derekh eretz*.”

When the sages heard this, they said “Let us (discover⁴) and reveal whose son this is.” They went to his mother, and when they met her they said “Tell us whose son this scoundrel is.” She said “He is the son of Yohanan my husband. After I became pregnant he went to Iraq and I do not know what has come of him.” They said to her: “Witnesses

⁴ This word is unclear in the manuscript.

already testified about him, that he is a mamzer and the son of a *niddah*.” Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah responded and he said “Thirty years ago today Yohanan came to me and told me everything that happened to him. He said that when he entered on that night to Miriam [his] wife shortly before sleeping she said to him that from the day that we were betrothed you did not approach me two times in one night [...] and I said to you that I am a *niddah* and you did not listen to my words and you did as you desired and then you left and then you returned a second time. When I heard these words, I understood [what had happened] but did not tell him, and I said to him ‘My child, whom do you blame for this?’ He told me that there is a young man, an apostate and a squanderer in all that is forbidden, and I suspect him. I told him to hold fast and see if he returns a second time, and Yohanan held fast for him until she got a name in the town for having become pregnant out of harlotry. When he heard, he [Yohanan] left to Iraq. And Miriam his mother gave birth to him and she named him Yeshua, after her father.” And Miriam heard what the sage said and she knew because she understood why her husband left.

When Miriam heard Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah’s words she became very scared. They said to her “Inform us who that man was.” She said to them “...I knew him and he was Yosef ben Pandera.” The sages said “We knew that he was a mamzer and the son of a *niddah*!”

EARLY MODERN WORKSHOP: Jewish History Resources

Volume 13: History of Emotions/Emotions in History, Fordham University, New York, August 23-24, 2016

Emotions in the Margins: Reading *Toledot Yeshu* after the Affective Turn

Sarit Kattan Gribetz, Fordham University

Princeton Hebrew MS. 18, fol. 1r-2v transcribed by Sarit Kattan Gribetz

Page 1 (fol.1r):

קצת ישוע הנוצרי
קיל אן אבתדי קציתהו ומעאני נתאיג'ה אלדי
הו ישוע הנוצרי לא רצ'י אללה מנהו באנהו כאן רג'ל
שאב פי ישראל ואסמהו יוחנן חכם גדול ופקיה פי
ישראל עלום וכאן קד תזוג' באמראה וכאן אסמה
מרים בת יהודה וכאנת פאיקה פי אל חסן ועאלק לה
ונשוטה וכאנת מאשטה תמשט אל נסא וקת
מפאפהן וכאן פי ג'ארהא שכץ מפרט פי חארהם
ומתהום פי כל בלא ומציבה חית ראה האדא אל
שכץ למרים שבעת נפסהו בהא ולמא כאן פי בעץ'
אליאלי מצ'י ר יוחנן בעלהא אלי בית המדרש וקצד
תם מע אל חכמים וקרא מעהם ואבטא אלי אן דכל
אל ליל וקפת זוג'תהו עלי באבהא תנטרהו לבעלהא
ר יוחנן חתי יג'י אתפק עבר אל שכץ אלדי הו ג'ארהא
והו סכראן חית נט'רהא מא אליהא חסבת אנהו בעלהא
ועאנקהא וקאבלהא והי תקול לא תרכן בי לאנני
נדה ולם ילתפת אלי כלאמהא ונאם מעהא וכרג' ואדא
בר יוחנן בעלהא קד אקבל מבית המדרש וטלב
זוג'תהו כחאל אל נאם קאלת להו מן יום ערסתך לם
יכון לך עאדה תתקדם אלי מרתיין פי אל לילה
קאל להא וכיף דאלך ואיש קד ג'רי קאלת להו קד גית
אליי אל לילה מרא קבל הדה וקלת לך לא תפעל יא
מידי לאנני נדה ולם תעבא בכל אחד חית סמע
ר יוחנן אל אמר בדלך עלם אן אל פרוץ ג'א עליהא

Page 2 (fol.1v):

וצעב עליה אמר עצים אלי אן אראד יתלף רוחה
[....] ענהא ומצ'י אלי ר שמעון בן שטח וקאל
להו תעלם איש קד ג'רי יא סידי עליי קאל להו קול
איש הו ומאהו קאל להו ג'יתו אמס אלי בית המדרש
כעאדתי ולמא רג'עת משיתו אלי ביתי טלבתו

זוג'תי קאלת לי ג'רי לי כדי וכדי קאל להו במן
 מתהמהא קאל להו שכץ פרוץ פי ג'ארנא ואסמהו
 יוסף בר פנדירה ואני אתהמה לאנהו קד כאן
 קאל להא לא תכלמה ולו כלמה ואחדה אלי אן ידכל
 מרא תאנייה ואנת תכון מתג'סם להא בקי מרה
 טוילה ולם יראה פהמלת זוג'תהו מרים וכרג'
 עליהא צות באנהא חאמלה מן חית ראי ר יוחנן
 אנהא חאמלה קאם ומצ'י אלי אל עראק ולמא כמלת
 איאם ולא תדהא ולדת ולד דכר וסמת אסמהו
 ישוע באסם אביהא ורביתהו אלי אן פכר וג'א [...]]
 אלי בית המדרש קאלו אל חכמים אבן מן הו האדא
 אל צבי חתי ינכשף להם עיבהו והם יסמנוה ישו
 זמאן פי אל זמאן מא ידפר אתר יעבר בין ידי אל
 חכמים אלי באנכסאר ומטאטא אלי ראס מן היבת
 חכמים וכאן אל ישוע אל רשע יעבר בלא מזער
 מכשוף אל ראס בקחה לא יקדם כיף תעג'בו מנהו
 אלחכמים וקאלו מא הדה אל ממזר ובר הנדה ומא
 יכפא הדא אלא אנהו כאן יפתי בח[.]תהם פי אל
 הלכות ואל פירושים קאלו להו אלים קד קרית מן
 יפתי בין ידי אסתאדהו וג'ב עלוה אלקלל אגאגה
 וקאל מן הו אסתאד ומן הו אלתלמיד או מא הדא
 חכם מן צאחב יתרו או משה אליס משה כאן אבי

Page 3 (fol.2r):

לחכמים וראש לנביאים ואל שריעה שהדת להו
 באנהו ולם קם עוד נביא בישראל כמשה והדה יתרו
 רג'ל רג'ל נבי ועלם למשה דרך ארץ פלמא סמעו אל
 עלמה כדאך קאלו נפת[.] [.] ונהצר אבן מן הו משו אלי
 אמהו ג'אבוהא קאלו קולי לנא אבן מן הו האדא זערת
 וקאלת אבן יוחנן בעלי בעד מא חמלת מנהו משי אלו
 עראק ולם אעלם איש כאן מנהו קאלו להא והודה
 שהוד קד שהדי עליה לאנהו ממזר ובר נידה
 אג'אב ר שמעון בן שטח וקאל אל יום ל' סנה למא ג'א
 יוחנן אלי וקעלו⁵ כל מה ג'רי לה קאל למה דכלתו פי
 האדא אללילה אלי ענד מרים זוג'ת בקביל אלנאם
 קאלת לו מן יום ערסתוך לם תתקדם אלי מרתין פי
 לילה ואחדה ואיצ'א חצרתוך חדרתוך ואנת
 ואנדרתוך וקלתו לך אנני נדה ולם תעבא בכלאמי
 אלי פעלת רצ'אך ומצ'ית ולא קד רגעת מרת
 תאנייה פלמא סמעת הדא אל כלאם דרשת ולם
 אקול להא איא כרגת וקלת לה יא ולדי באן הודא

⁵ It should probably be וקאלו be וקאלו.

תתהמהא קאל לי שכץ באן פי ג'אהי והו צבי רדי
ומפרט פי אל חראם ומנהא אנא דא אתהמהא
קלתו להו אמסך אלי אן יגי תאנייה ואמסך יוחנן
אלי אן כרג להא אסם פי בלד באנהא האמלה
מן זנא למא סמעהו דא אל מעיירא הרב אלי אל
עראק ומרים אמהו ולדת האדא ופטת אסמהו
ישוע באסם אביהא ומרים הדה מא עליהא חכם
קתל לאנהא מא ערפת וחקקת אנה ג'יר בעלהא
למא סמעת מרים כלאם ר שמעון בן שטח פזעת
אי עטים קאלו להא תעלמין מן כאן דאלך אל שכץ

Page 4 (fol.2v):

אל ט[...]. קאלת להם בעד קצי שגלהו ערפתהו אנהו יוסף
בן פנדידא קאלו אל חכמים אלאן ערפנא אנהו ממזר
ובר הנדה