

“I am the Messiah and I Can Revive the Dead”

A Critical Note on T-S. NS 164.26, a Fragment of the *Toledot Yeshu*

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Perhaps the most interesting feature in the *Toledot Yeshu* (“Generations of Jesus”),¹ a polemical Medieval Jewish “biography” of Jesus of Nazareth, is the story of how Jesus successfully defends himself against the charge of sorcery. Of course, in the context of the story, Jesus’ “success” only confirms that he has indeed accessed power through misuse of God’s Holy Name. What is interesting is that the *Toledot Yeshu*, which reflects anti-Christian and anti-Jesus polemic scattered here and there in rabbinic literature, in effect concedes that Jesus performed works of power, a concession that can be traced to the first-century Christian Gospels and is attested in one way or another in Jewish and Pagan literature and artifacts from late antiquity.² What is in doubt is not that Jesus performed works of power, including raising the dead, but how he was able to do it.

Study of the *Toledot Yeshu* has made significant progress in recent years thanks to the work of Peter Schäfer and his colleagues. He and Michael Meerson have produced a critical edition of the most important Hebrew texts, along with

¹ The longer form of the title is *Sepher Toledot Yeshu* (“Book of the Generations of Jesus”). The title echoes the opening verse of Matt 1:1 “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ.” Shem Tob’s Hebrew version of Matthew reads: *אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת יֵשׁוּעַ*.

² On the history of the tradition, see G. N. Stanton, “Jesus of Nazareth: A Magician and a False Prophet Who Deceived God’s People?” in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ. Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, eds. J. B. Green and M. Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 164–80. On the Jewish and Pagan literary and archaeological artifacts, see C. A. Evans, “Jesus, Healer and Exorcist: The Non-Christian Archaeological Evidence,” in *A City Set on a Hill: Essays in Honor of James F. Strange*, eds. D. A. Warner and D. D. Binder (Fayetteville, AR: BorderStone Press, 2014), 55–77.

English translation, notes, commentary, and bibliography.³ We are all in their debt.

Meerson and Schäfer identify four Judeo-Arabic Cairo genizah fragments as belonging to the *Toledot Yeshu*.⁴ Two of these fragments are classified as belonging to Group I. They are T-S. NS 224.123 and T-S. NS 246.24. Both are dated to the 12th–13th centuries. The other two *Toledot Yeshu* fragments are classified as belonging to Group II. They are T-S. NS 164.26 and T-S. NS 298.57. The former is dated to the 13th–14th centuries and the latter is dated to the 11th century. Two other genizah fragments, T-S. NS 298.49 and T-S. NS 298.55, have been considered as possible *Toledot Yeshu* fragments, but Meerson and Schäfer find the identification questionable.

Stefan Reif reported the discovery and identification of T-S. NS 164.26 in 1983 and provided a brief description of its contents and rightly noted its affiliation with the *Toledot Yeshu*.⁵ The fragment appears in the list of published genizah materials,⁶ and has been briefly described.⁷ T-S. NS 164.26 is written in an Oriental, semi-cursive hand. It comprises only one leaf of text that is part of what Meerson and Schäfer call the "First Trial," the trial in which the Jewish sages bring Jesus before Queen Helen and accuse him of sorcery. Jesus demonstrates his power to heal and raise the dead, which convinces the queen. Vindicated, Jesus is then released, though controversies with the rabbis will continue. Versions of this trial appear in almost all of the extant *Toledot Yeshu*

³ M. Meerson and P. Schäfer, eds. and trans., *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus*. Vol. I: *Introduction and Translation* (TSAJ 159; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); idem and idem, eds. and trans., *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus*. Vol. II: *Critical Edition* (TSAJ 159; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014). There are some problems, however. One will want to see the review by D. Stökl Ben Ezra, in *Asdiwal* 11 (2016): 226–30. For further studies on *Toledot Yeshu*, see P. Schäfer, M. Meerson, and Y. Deutsch, eds., *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus") Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (TSAJ 143; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); idem, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); idem, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁴ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 2:45.

⁵ S. C. Reif, *Genizah Fragments: The Newsletter of Cambridge University's Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit at Cambridge University Library*, No. 6 (Cambridge, 1983). Available online at <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Taylor-Schechter/GF/6/>.

⁶ R. J. W. Jefferson and E. C. D. Hunter, eds., *Published Material from the Cambridge Genizah Collection: A Bibliography 1980–1997*, Cambridge University Library Genizah Series 13 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 250, 490.

⁷ A. Shvitiel and F. Niessen, *Arabic and Judaeo-Aramaic Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 150.

manuscripts, including the Judeo-Arabic version under review. The Judeo-Arabic text and English translation of this fragment do not appear in the Meerson-Schäfer edition. We present the text and offer a first translation here, along with notes and points of comparison with parallel texts, and a brief discussion of how the *Toledot Yeshu* responds to Christian apologetic centered on Jesus' ability to raise the dead.

T-S. NS 164.26 preserves a small portion of the narrative of the *Toledot Yeshu* (Helena version). Goldstein suggests on paleographical grounds that this text was copied in the 13th–14th century,⁸ the date range accepted by Meerson and Schäfer as already noted. T-S. NS 164.26 is written in the Classical Judeo-Arabic spelling, a spelling which largely calques the orthography of standard Arabic written in the Arabic script.⁹ A dotted *gimel*, ג, is consistently used to designate the Arabic ġ, whereas the undotted ג is used to write the Arabic ġ. Dotted *šāḍi*, ש, is used both to write etymological ḍ and ṣ, suggesting that these two sounds had merged. This merger is commonly attested in modern dialects, as well as Middle Arabic texts.¹⁰ The writing of the 'alif maqṣūrah bi-ṣūrat al-yā' with a *yod*, calquing Classical Arabic orthography is attested several times, e.g., the prepositions על for 'alā (r° 13) and ל for 'ilā (v° 4), but verbs and nouns which in Standard Arabic orthography would also be written with a *yā*' are written with an 'alep, e.g. מותא for *al-mawtā* (r° 10), מצא for *maḍā* (v° 2), and אטגא for 'aṭṭā (v° 8). kaḍā (v° 9) is spelled with a *yod*, כד, rather than 'alep, contrary to Classical Arabic orthography. The 'alep-lāmeḍ ligature, ל, is usually employed when an 'alep is followed by a *lāmeḍ*. Final -ū of plural verbs is never marked with the 'alif al-wiqāyah. In this aspect this text deviates from the standard Arabic orthography, but this is common in Classical Judeo-Arabic spelling.¹¹

While this text is almost entirely in Arabic, in four instances the Hebrew spelling (and presumably Hebrew pronunciation) of words are used. The first is the name for Israel, which is spelled as in Hebrew ישראל; second is the divine name, which is spelled שם, with the Arabic definite article preceding the

⁸ M. Goldstein, "Judeo-Arabic Version of the *Toledot Yeshu*," *Ginzei Qedem* 6 (2010): 9–42, here 31 (Hebrew).

⁹ J. Blau, *A Handbook of Early Middle Arabic* (Jerusalem: The Max Schloessinger Memorial Foundation, 2002), 20–21.

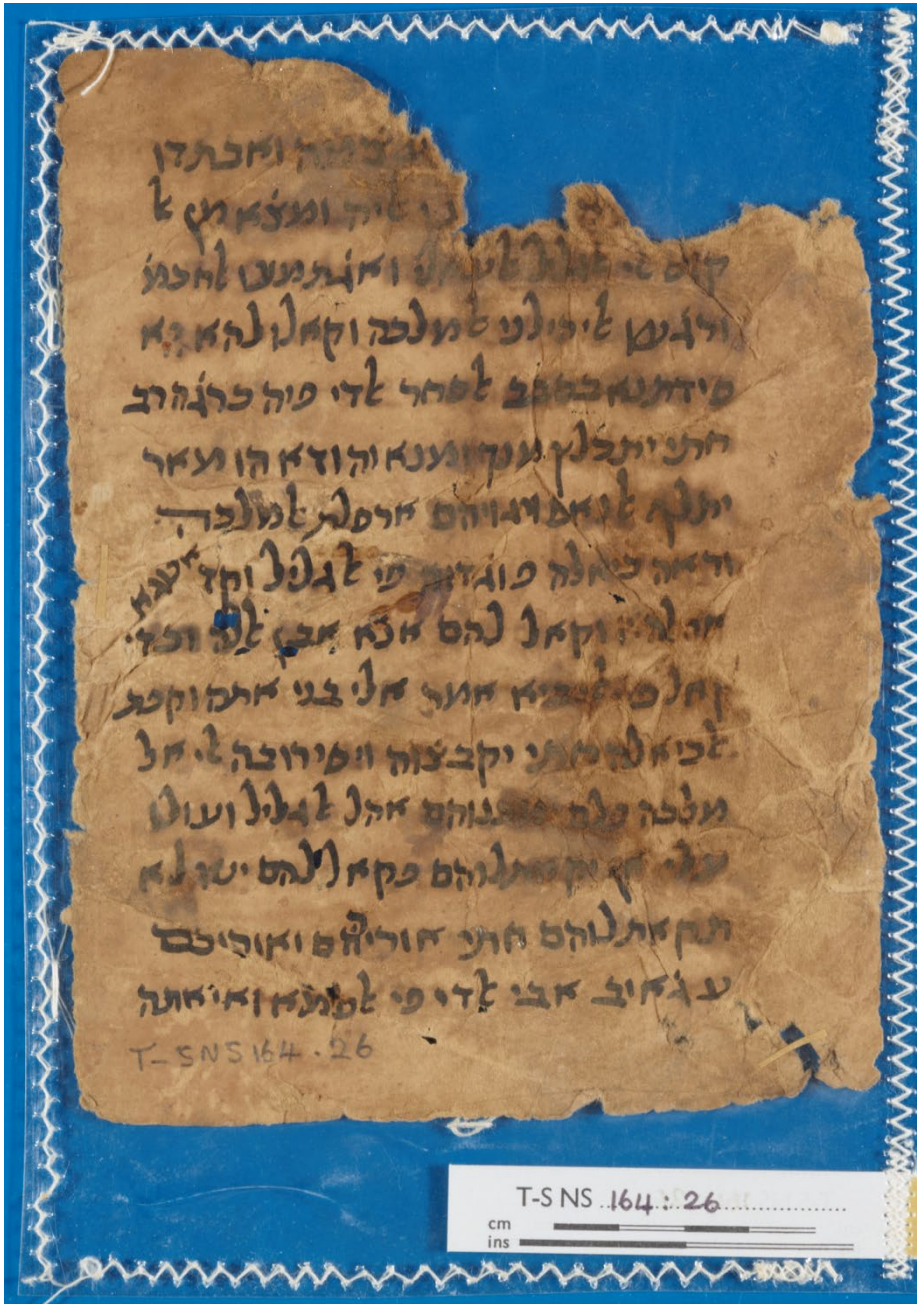
¹⁰ Blau, *A Handbook of Early Middle Arabic*, 34, §20.

¹¹ Blau, *A Handbook of Early Middle Arabic*, 35, §25. See also J. Blau and S. C. Reif, *Genizah Research After Ninety Years: The Case of Judaeo-Arabic*, University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Hebrew word for "name." The third is "prophet," spelled נִבִּיָּא, once again preceded by the Arabic definite article. Finally, an abbreviated form for the Hebrew word "sages" is used twice, spelled חכְמֵי.

While the first two references to scripture in this text are texts translated into Arabic (Isa 11:4; Jer 23:6), the last verse cited (Ps 2:7) is entirely in Hebrew.

We offer a transcription of the Judeo-Arabic text. The following sigla should be noted: [...] indicates damaged text. Words in between these brackets have been reconstructed from the context. Dot below letter indicates text that is damaged or difficult to read. Dots on top of letters are present in the original manuscript. (...) denotes an addition of the editor.



Recto

1. אִקּוּל אֲדִי אִקִּיל¹² עֲלִי¹³.. [הדא]
2. מִתְנַבִּי וְתַנְפִּי אֶהֱלֵ אֶל [קֹדֶס] בְּמִן [. . .]
3. אֵן אִמְסִיחַ אֲדִי דְכִרּוּהּ אֲנִבְיָאנָא עֲסִ¹⁴
4. לֵה עֲלֵאמָאֵת וְאִיאַת וּמִן גְּמִלְתָּהָּ יִהְיֶה
5. אֲעֵדָא בְּקִצִּיב פֶּאֶה¹⁵ וּבְרִיחַ שְׁפִתָּהּ
6. יִקְתֵּל אֲלֵצָמִין וְאִיצָא מִן גְּמִלְתָּהָּ זֹא¹⁶
7. (ו)אִיאַתָּה אֵן פִּי אִיאַמָּה יִפְרֹג עֵן גְּמִיעַ
8. יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִסְכְּנוּ וְאִתְקַהּ מִן אֲעֵדָא וְהִדָּא
9. לִיס פִּיהּ מִן הִדָּה כֻּלָּהּ שִׁי פִקָּא לֵהּ יִשּׁוּ
10. אֲנָא אִמְסִיחַ וְאִנָּא אַחִיִּי אֲמוּתָא פֶּאֶרְסִלָּתָּ¹⁷
11. רִסְלָ תְקַתָּ פֶּאֶזְאָבוּ מִיִּת כֶּאֱנוּ רִאִיחִין
12. יִדְפְּנוּהּ פִּדְכֵר אִשְׁם עֲלֵיהּ פִּקָּאִם אֲמִיִּת
13. יִקְףּ עֲלֵי רִגְלֵיהּ פִּי דִלְךָ אִסְאֶעָה [פ]דֶּהֶשֶׁת
14. אֲמִלְכָהּ וְקֶאֱלֵת מֵא הִדָּה אִא אִיהָ¹⁸ עֲצִימָה
15. פֶּאֶנְתֵּהֶרֶת אֲחִכְמָ¹⁹ פִּכְרָגוּ מִן בִּין יִדִּיָּהּ

¹² The use of a stem IV in hollow passive verbs where Classical Arabic would normally have a stem I verb is often attested in Middle Arabic. See J. Blau, *A Grammar of Christian Arabic: Based Mainly on the South-Palestinian Texts from the First Millennium*, 3 vols., Corpus Scriptorum Orientalium 267 (Louvain: Peeters, 1967), §57.2; idem, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic: A Study of the Origins of Middle Arabic*, 3rd rev. ed. (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, 1999), 111.

¹³ There are two visible dots here. They are probably traces of a letter.

¹⁴ An abbreviation of the formula ‘*alayhim as-salām*, “peace be upon them.”

¹⁵ A fossilized accusative construct of *fum* “mouth,” common in Medieval Arabic; cf. Blau, *A Grammar of Christian Arabic*, §220.1.

¹⁶ These letters have been dotted to mark them to be ignored. The *wāw* probably should have been repeated on the next line, however.

¹⁷ This word is written slanted compared to the preceding text.

¹⁸ The function of the single dot on the *he* is unclear to us.

¹⁹ Presumably a literary Hebrew loan *hākāmim* abbreviated after the first *mem*, which receives a dot to mark the abbreviation. It is used again on the verso, on line three.

1. The word which was spoken about me(?) [.....
This man]
2. is a soothsayer; and he destroys²⁰ the people of
[Jerusalem?] [and they will think]
3. that he is the Messiah whom our prophets have
mentioned — peace be upon them.
4. he (i.e. the Messiah) has symbols and signs. And
among others (the scripture says): "He will destroy
5. the enemies with the rod of his mouth; and by the
breath of his lips
6. he will kill the wrongdoers" (Isa 11:4),²¹ and also
from among it
7. and his signs are that "In his days he will liberate all
of
8. Israel, and they will live secure from the enemies" (Jer
23:6). And this (man)
9. does not have any of these signs at all. So Yeshe said
to her (Queen Helena),
10. "I am the Messiah, and I will revive the dead." So she
sent
11. trusted messengers; and so they brought a dead man
whom they were going to
12. bury. And then he mentioned the NAME over him;
and the dead man rose up,
13. standing on his two feet at that moment. And the
queen
14. was surprised and she said: "What is this, if not a
great sign?"
15. And she chased away the sages, and they left her
presence.

²⁰ For this meaning, see Blau, *Dictionary*, 710.

²¹ The Isaiah passage is paraphrased.

Verso

1. [וכאן פי ישראל מנאזוה] עצימה ואבתדו
2. [באן יג]מ[עוה ואנצ]מו איה ומצא מן א
3. קדס אי אגליל אעאלי ואגתמעו אחכמ
4. ורגעו אי הילני אמלכה וקאלו להא יא
5. סידתנא בסבב אסחר אדי פיה כרג הרב
6. חתי יתכלץ מנד ומנא והודא²² הו מאר
7. יתלף אנאס ויגויהם ארסלת אמלכה
8. וראה כיאלה פוגדוה פי אגליל וקד אטגא²³
9. אהלהא וקאל להם אנא אבן אלה וכדי
10. קאל פי אנביא אמר אלי בני אתה וקפת
11. אכיאלה חתי יקבצוה ויסירו בה אי אל
12. מלכה פלם ימכנוהם אהל אגליל ועולו
13. עלי אן יקאתלוהם פקאל להם ישו לא
14. תקאתלוהם חתי אוריה²⁴ס ואוריקם
15. עגאיב אבי אדי פי אסמא ואיאתה

²² To be read as *huwa-dā*, “that one.”

²³ This word is written slanted compared to the preceding text.

²⁴ It appears the author first miswrote a *het* and then wrote a *he* above it.

1. [and there was] great [strife in Israel], and they started to
2. [come together to him; and they joined] him. And he departed from
3. Jerusalem to Upper Galilee. And the sages gathered
4. and they returned to Helena the Queen and they said to her: "O
5. our Lady; because of the sorcery which is in him he left fleeing,
6. in order to escape from you and us. That one (i.e., Yeshu) is going around
7. destroying the people and he leads them astray. The queen sent
8. horsemen after him. And so they found him in Galilee and he had already led
9. her people astray. And he said to them: "I am the Son of God; and thus the prophet said about me:
10. 'He said to me: Thou art My Son' (Ps 2:7)". The horsemen
11. stopped in order to capture him and take him to the
12. queen. The people of Galilee did not let them and they intended
13. to fight them. So Yeshu said to them: "Do not
14. fight them, so that I may show them and I may show you
15. the wonders of my Father who art in heaven and his signs."

Yeshu's declarations, "I am the Messiah, and I will revive the dead," and "I am the Son of God," find counterparts, though usually with variations, in the parallel versions of the First Trial in the other extant manuscripts. Comparison with several parallel texts will help us appreciate what may be distinctive features in T-S. NS 164.26.²⁵

²⁵ The texts published in Meerson and Schäfer that offer the closest parallels to T-S. NS 164.26 are New York JTS 2221 (Ashkenazi B), New York JTS 2343 (Late Yemenite A), and Leipzig BH 17 1-18 (Italian A).

The versions classified as Group I

Early Oriental C (St. Petersburg RNL EVR 2a.105/9): “Yeshu said ² to his disciples, ‘I am the Messiah, the son of David, ³ now I have come!’” (2r^o lines 1–3).²⁶

Yeshu: ²⁷אנא משיחא בר דוד ³ כען איתתי

The versions classified as Group II

Ashkenazi A (Strasbourg BnU 3974): “Yeshu said to her, ‘My lady, I am the one, I can revive ⁷ the dead’” (171v^o lines 6–7; cf. Luke 7:11–17; John 11:38–44).²⁸

Yeshu: ²⁹אדונתי ואני אחיה ⁷ המתים

Ashkenazi B (New York JTS 2221): “‘. . . But this Yeshu in no way has the ability to do so many things.’ Yeshu replied, ‘I am he, the Messiah, ²⁸ and I have the ability to do all all of that, and even to revive the dead’” (40r^o lines 27–28).³⁰

Yeshu: ³¹אני הוא משיח ²⁸ שיש יכולת בידי לעשות כל זאת ואפילו להחיות מתים

Late Yemenite A (New York JTS 2343): “He said to her, ‘I am the one and I will make alive the dead’” (64r^o line 21).³²

Yeshu: ³³אני הוא ואני אחיה מתים

Italian A (Leipzig BH 17 1–18): “‘. . . in his hands are great (tools of) sorcery ³² with which to lead the world astray. He leads Israel astray when he says ¹ that he is the Messiah’” (5r^o line 31 – 5v, line 1); “You should know, ¹¹ my lady, that I am the Son of God, and (I do) not (act) with sorcery” (5v^o lines 10–11).³⁴

Accusers: ³⁵ומטעה לישראל באומרו ¹ כי הוא משיח

Yeshu: ³⁶ולך לדעת ¹¹ גבירתי כי אני בן אלוהים ולא בכשפים

²⁶ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 1:145.

²⁷ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 2:63.

²⁸ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 1:172.

²⁹ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 2:86.

³⁰ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 1:192.

³¹ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 2:102.

³² Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 1:209.

³³ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 2:117.

³⁴ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 1:242–43.

³⁵ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 2:153.

Italian B (Parma 2091 / De Rossi 1271): "And from the gullible all-believers ¹² he gathered many people and made an army and showed (them) miracles by the power of the Ineffable Name. And he ¹³ revived the dead, and healed the crippled, and showed signs and wonders . . ." (66r^o lines 11–13).³⁷

Description: ³⁸ והיה ¹³ מחיה מתים ומרפא פסחים ומראה אותות ומופתים

The Versions classified as Group III

Wagenseil (Harvard Houghton Lib. 57): "Yeshu said also, 'Bring me a corpse!' They brought him a corpse, and he placed his hand on him and uttered the Name, ¹⁰ and he lived and stood on his feet" (24r^o lines 9–10).³⁹

Description: ⁴⁰ ויביאו לו מת אחד וישם ידו עליו ויזכור את ¹⁰ ויחי ויעמוד על רגליו ⁴¹ השם

Slavic A1 (Princeton Firestone Lib. Heb. 28): "And they brought a dead man to him, and he pronounced the name, and he arose and stood ¹⁰ on his feet" (8v^o lines 9–10).⁴¹

Description: ⁴² ויביאו איליו מת ויזכר את השם ויעמוד ויקם ¹⁰ על רגליו

The extant manuscripts vary, sometimes a great deal, even within the categories (Group I, Group II, and the like) identified by Meerson and Schäfer. Jesus' claim to be the Messiah and Son of God is rejected. The sages tell Queen Helena that Jesus has deceived the people with his signs. Some now think he is the Messiah. But he cannot be this figure, for he has not fulfilled the prophecies of Isa 11:4 and Jer 23:6 (T-S. NS 164.26 r^o lines 2–9). Jesus replies, assuring the queen, "I am the Messiah, and I will revive the dead" (r^o line 10).

Jesus invokes the Holy NAME and restores life to a dead man. The sign satisfies the queen and Jesus is vindicated. The sages renew their attacks on Jesus in Galilee, where Jesus declares, "I am the Son of God" and appeals to Ps 2:7 (v^o lines 8–10). The sages complain to the queen, saying of Jesus that "he is destroying the people and he leads them astray" (r^o lines 6–7).

³⁶ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 2:154.

³⁷ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 1:276–77.

³⁸ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 2:199.

³⁹ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 1:293.

⁴⁰ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 2:224.

⁴¹ Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 1:346.

⁴² Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 2:287.

Jesus' blasphemous claim to be God's Son is found in most of the *Toledot Yeshu* manuscripts. In St. Petersburg RNL EVR 2a.105/9 Jesus says to his disciples, "I am the Messiah, the son of David." In New York JTS 2221 Jesus replies to the sages, "I am he, the Messiah." But in New York JTS 2343 Jesus only affirms, "I am the one." In Leipzig BH 17 Jesus says to the queen, "I am the Son of God." In Islamic tradition, too, where Jesus himself is not criticized, Christians are chastised for calling Jesus the "Son of God" (Qur'an 9.30: "and the Christians say: Christ is the Son of God [وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ النَّصْرِيُّ الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ اللَّهِ]").

The focus of the controversy in the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition, to which our single leaf from the Cairo Genizah bears witness, is on Jesus' bold claim to be able to raise the dead, followed by his challenge to bring him a corpse, which Jesus successfully reanimates. Queen Helena accepts this ability as proof that Jesus really is the Messiah and really is the Son of God. The sages remain unconvinced and continue in their efforts to show that his ability does not derive from God or from Jesus' divine identity; rather, it derives from black magic, in which the potent Holy NAME of God is misused.

This theme in the *Toledot Yeshu* has roots in older rabbinic tradition. The oldest text that probably alludes to Jesus as a dabbler in magic is found in the Tosefta (c. 300 CE). Although Jesus (or Yeshu, as he is called in rabbinic literature) is not mentioned by name, it is likely that he is in view in the following aside: "He who scratches a mark on his flesh: ... Rabbi Eliezer said to them, 'Now did not Ben Satra learn only in such wise?' They said to them, 'Because of one fool shall we impose liability on all intelligent folk?'" (*t. Šab.* 11.15).⁴³

In this aside, the scratching of a mark on one's flesh is understood to allude to Jesus' successful attempt to hide an amulet bearing the Holy NAME in an incision in his flesh. Jesus, a.k.a. "Ben Satra [בן סטרא],"⁴⁴ is that "one fool" whose action now creates difficulties for many others. This Tosefta material is alluded to in the Talmud, with the saying credited to Eliezer expanded to read: "But did not Ben Stada [בן סטדא] bring forth witchcraft from Egypt by means of

⁴³ Translation is based on J. Neusner, *The Tosefta* (6 vols., New York: Ktav, 1977–86), 2:42.

⁴⁴ A number of sobriquets are used for Jesus in the rabbinic literature, e.g., Ben Stada (*b. Šab.* 104b MSS Vatican 108, Munich 95; *b. Sanh.* 67a MSS Munich 95, Firenze II.1.8–9, Vilna), Ben Stara (*b. Šab.* 104b MS Oxford 23; *b. Sanh.* 67a MSS Herzog I, Karlsruhe 2, Barco), Ben Siteda (*b. Šab.* 104b MS Vatican 487), and Ben Pandera (*t. Hull.* 2.22–24; cf. Celsus, *apud* Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.32, 69: Πανθήρα). The name *Satra* plays on *le-šaref*, "to scratch"; see Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 148 n. 6.

scratches (incisions) upon his flesh?" (*b. Šab.* 104b; cf. *y. Šab.* 12.4/3, 13d).⁴⁵ The charge of acquiring magic while in Egypt is attested in Celsus (*apud* Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.6, 68: "feats performed by those who have been taught by Egyptians, who in the middle of the market place, in return for a few obols, will impart the knowledge of their most venerated arts ... expel demons ... dispel diseases ... produced by magic").

The tradition of scratches or incisions for purposes of acquiring magical power is attested in the magical papyri⁴⁶ but in reference to Jesus it is taken to a new level in the *Toledot Yeshu*. In many of the versions and manuscripts, we are told that Yeshu ha-Notsri acquired (illicitly) the Ineffable NAME in the Temple of Jerusalem. He did this by writing it on parchment and inserting it into his thigh. He then departed from the Temple and removed the parchment, so he could remember how to pronounce the NAME of God.⁴⁷ His ability to pronounce the Holy NAME is what gave him his power and protected him from the sages.⁴⁸ Only after losing the parchment and forgetting how to pronounce the Holy NAME is Jesus finally overpowered and killed by the sages.

Convicted of practicing magic and teaching heresy, Jesus is executed: "On the eve of Passover Yeshu⁴⁹ was hanged ... because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy" (*b. Sanh.* 43a). The tradition is repeated anonymously elsewhere: "One of his disciples ... The disciple practiced magic and led Israel astray" (*b. Soṭa* 47a).

In other Talmudic tradition we may have reference to resuscitation/resurrection ideas possibly linked to Jesus. In a polemical midrash directed against Balaam, the prophet hired to curse the approaching tribes of Israel, Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish is remembered to have said, "Woe to him who makes himself alive by the name of God [אוי מי שמחיה עצמו בשם אל]" (*b. Sanh.* 106a). How exactly this would apply to Balaam of the biblical story is far from

⁴⁵ One will note that the older and probably original sobriquet Satra (in the Tosefta, the older tradition) has been replaced with the later and more commonly used sobriquet Stada.

⁴⁶ See the magical instructions for obtaining counsel through a dream oracle: "On your left hand draw [ῥαγὰ κερὰ] Besa in the way shown to you below. Put around your hand a black cloth ..." (*PGM* VII.222–232).

⁴⁷ For examples of the story in the *Toledot Yeshu* MSS, see New York JTS 2221 39v^o lines 39–50; New York JTS 2343 63v^o line 17–64r line 2; New York JTS 6312 67v^o lines 47–64; Strasbourg BnU 3974 171r^o lines 1–12.

⁴⁸ Pronouncing the Holy NAME, in one form or another, is ubiquitous in the magical papyri.

⁴⁹ Some MSS read ישו הנוצרי, Yeshu ha-Notsri, i.e., "Jesus the Nazarene."

clear. Balaam is vilified in Jewish tradition, to be sure, but the prophet's attempt to make himself alive is not part of it. Because Balaam the false prophet seems sometimes to serve as a parody of Jesus, some scholars think the resurrection of Jesus is in view.⁵⁰ Admittedly, given the oblique, allusive, and often intentionally hidden nature of rabbinic references to Jesus, the Church, and the Byzantine authority, certainty is not possible. But the language, "make himself alive [שמהיה לעצמו]," does seem to echo the polemic directed against Jesus, whose messianic and divine claim is understood to be closely linked to his ability to make the dead alive and, in reference to himself, to be resurrected.

A second passage is more promising: It is a midrash on extraordinary punishment to be meted out in the next life for three men whose sins were particularly egregious (Titus for burning the temple, Balaam for attempting to curse Israel, and Jesus for mocking the sages and introducing heresy). Onqelos, a magician and relative of Emperor Titus, brings up from the grave these three sinners and questions them, to ascertain the nature of their respective forms of punishment. With reference to Jesus we are told: "He then went and raised Yeshu ha-Notsri [ישו הנוצרי] out of his grave by incantation" (*b. Git.* 57a).⁵¹ Although most MSS read "raised the sinners of Israel [פושעי ישראל] out of their graves by incantation," it is probably a later gloss.

Not all will agree, but we think the reading Yeshu, or the longer reading Yeshu ha-Notsri, not the "sinners of Israel," was the original reading. It makes better sense to have a third individual in this interesting midrash on eternal punishment, rather than a group of people. Moreover, it is easier to explain a later replacement of Yeshu with "sinners of Israel," due to the pressure of Medieval Christian Europe, if not censors, than a later insertion of Yeshu in place of the original "sinners of Israel." Furthermore, three hated individuals, who in one way or another opposed or harmed Israel, provide the symmetry that the midrashic argument seems to require.

Further still, if Jesus is the third individual to be eternally punished, the nature of his punishment makes sense, as Peter Schäfer has recently argued.⁵² He convincingly shows that the whole point of the midrash found in *b. Git.* 56b–57a is to counter Christian beliefs about Jesus. However the ministry of Jesus is to be understood (i.e., notwithstanding his many signs, healings, resuscitations, even

⁵⁰ R. T. Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1903; repr. New York: Ktav, 1975), 75–76.

⁵¹ ישו הנוצרי is read by MS Vatican Ebr. 130; ישו is read by MSS Vatican 140 and Munich 95.

⁵² Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 82–94, 172–74.

his own apparent coming back to life), he will spend eternity in Gehenna, boiled in filth. This punishment applied to Jesus makes sense in the terms of the midrash, not applied to the sinners of Israel.

The Jewish attack on the apologetic value of Jesus' ability to give life to the dead makes good sense in light of the great importance Christians placed on it in the first three centuries or so of the Church. Not only the resurrection of Jesus, but his power to raise the dead during his public ministry — a power that continued among his followers — evidently played a major role in early Christian apologetic, which perhaps accounts for its centrality in the story in the *Toledot Yeshu*.

Jesus' ability to give life to the dead is seen in a wide variety of Christian literature, from serious apologetic to popular stories. We see examples of the latter in versions of the Infancy Gospels: "And seeing a man lying dead, he (Jesus) took hold of his hand and said: 'Man, I say to you, arise and do your work.' And immediately, arising, he worshipped him" (*Greek Infancy Gospel of Thomas A* 18:1). "And with the word the boy rose up and worshipping Jesus said: 'Lord, you did not throw me down, but when I was dead you made me alive'" (*Greek Infancy Gospel of Thomas B* 8:1). Note that in both cases those restored to life *worship* Jesus, which implies recognition of Jesus' divinity. The link between the ability to restore life and divinity is clearly assumed.

One will recall that in Greek thinking resurrection was simply not possible. Death "is a thing for which my father (Zeus) never made curative spells," says Apollo, son of Zeus (in Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 649–650). Therefore, "Once dead, there is no resurrection [ἀνάστασις]" (ibid. 648).⁵³ If the gods cannot restore life, then what should we think of one who can? Accordingly, if Jesus can restore life to the dead, then his claim to be the Son of God is credible. The logic of this argument was not lost on the framers of the *Toledot Yeshu*. Nor was it lost on early Christians who made use of it in evangelism and apologetic.

Quadratus, an early second-century Christian apologist, reasons: "But the works of our Savior were always present, for they were true: those that were healed, and those that were raised from the dead [οἱ ἀναστάντες ἐκ νεκρῶν], who were seen not only when they were healed and when they were raised, but were

⁵³ The hopelessness and finality of death are frequent themes in Greco-Roman epitaphs. Typical are expressions like these: "Earth hides your body, taking back the gift that she gave long ago" (EG 288); "Earth keeps the bones and flesh of the dear child" (EG 90); "All of us below who are dead have become bones and ashes" (EG 646); "Now she who was so dear to her family has been carried off from her home and is covered by earth ... Her bones but a bit of ash" (CIL I,2 1222).

also always present [ἀλλὰ καὶ αἰὲ παρόντες]; and not merely while the Savior was on earth, but also after his death, they were alive for quite a while, so that some of them lived even to our day [ἤσαν ἐπὶ χρόνον ἱκανόν, ὥστε καὶ εἰς τοὺς ἡμετέρους χρόνους τινὲς αὐτῶν ἀφίκοντο]” (Quadratus, *Apology* frag. 2; *apud* Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.3.2). What makes the mighty works of Jesus “true” (ἀληθῆ), as opposed to mythological, is that those healed and raised up remained alive and present, even into the second century. Their living presence offered proof of the truth of the reports.

Writing about the same time, Papias, says Philip of Side, “also records other amazing things, in particular one about Manaim’s mother, who was raised from the dead.⁵⁴ As for those who were raised from the dead by Christ, (he states) that they lived until the time of Hadrian [περὶ τῶν ὑπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναστάντων, ὅτι ἕως Ἀδριανοῦ ἔζων]” (Papias, frag. 5.7–8; *apud* Philip of Side [5th cent.]).⁵⁴

According to Justin Martyr, the priests who mocked the crucified Jesus said, “Let him who raised the dead save himself [Ὁ νεκροὺς ἀνεγείρας ῥυσάσθω ἑαυτὸν]” (*Apologia* i 1.38). Justin’s version of the mockery is interesting. In the canonical tradition of the mockery of Jesus, nothing is said about Jesus having *raised the dead* (Matt 27:41–43; Mark 15:29–32; Luke 23:35; cf. *Acts of Pilate* 10:1–2). The Synoptics only record, “He saved others” (Matt 27:42; Mark 15:31; Luke 23:35), which of course may have assumed raising the dead, as well as healings. But it is noteworthy that Justin specifies *raising the dead*. He probably did so because of the great apologetic value of the claims that Jesus raised the dead.

Another important text is found in Justin’s dialogue with the Jewish skeptic Trypho: “Christ ... appeared in your nation, and healed those who were maimed, and deaf, and lame in body from their birth, causing them to leap, to hear, and to see, by his word. And having raised the dead, and causing them to live [καὶ νεκροὺς δὲ ἀναστήσας, καὶ ζῆν ποιήσας], by his deeds he compelled the men who lived at that time to recognize him. But though they saw such works, they asserted it was magical art. For they dared to call him a magician [μάγος], and a deceiver of the people” (Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 69; cf. 108: “a Galilean deceiver”).

Justin, writing in the mid-second century, alludes of course to the canonical accounts in which Jesus is accused of being in league with Satan (Matt

⁵⁴ Text will be found in C. de Boor, *Neue Fragmente des Papias, Hegesippus und Pierius in bisher unbekannten Excerpten aus der Kirchengeschichte des Philippus Sidetes* (Texte und Untersuchungen 5.2; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1888), 170.

12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15), but the actual language he uses here ("magician," "deceiver of the people") echoes the charges found in Jewish polemic, evidently in circulation in his time, which eventually will find its way into rabbinic literature (*b. Soṭa* 47a), including the *Toledot Yeshu*. Justin is an important early witness to the tradition that will eventually come to expression in the Talmud and related literature.⁵⁵

There are two more important testimonies that should be considered, both from the late second century. Writing an apologetical letter to one Autolycus, Theophilus says:

Then, as to your denying that the dead are raised — for you say, 'Show me even one who has been raised from the dead [Δείξόν μοι καὶ ἓνα ἐγεγέρθῃτα ἐκ νεκρῶν], that seeing I may believe' — first, what great thing is it if you believe when you have seen the thing done? Then, again, you believe that Hercules, who burned himself, lives; and that Aesculapius, who was struck with lightning, was raised; and do you disbelieve the things that are told to you by God? But, suppose I should show you a dead man raised and alive [ἐπιδείξω σοι νεκρὸν ἐγεγέρθῃτα καὶ ζῶντα], even this you would disbelieve. (Theophilus, *Ad Autolycum* 1.13)

Although it seems doubtful that Theophilus will be able to persuade Autolycus, it is clear that he presupposes the great importance, even centrality, of resurrection for Christian faith and apologetic. Whether or not Theophilus is fair in his retort, Autolycus apparently is willing to believe the Christian proclamation if he is shown "one who has been raised from the dead." It is probable that most people in the Roman Empire shared this perspective. The skepticism of Autolycus and the Roman world in general, with respect to the possibility of raising the dead, has already been noted. If Jesus really did raise the dead, if he himself was really raised from the dead, then he must really be the Son of the God and, from the Jewish perspective, the Messiah of Israel.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ John Chrysostom (c. 400 CE) asks Jewish critics: "Why did you crucify Christ?" They answer, "Because he led (people) astray and was a magician" (*Expositiones in Psalmos* 8.3).

⁵⁶ Ramsay MacMullen shows that the miracles performed by Jesus and his followers, which included healing, exorcism, and raising the dead, were a major factor in the growth

And finally, Irenaeus (c. 180 CE) states: “Yes, moreover, as I have said, the dead even have been raised up, and remained among us for many years [καὶ νεκροὶ ἡγήρθησαν, καὶ παρέμειναν σὺν ἡμῖν ἱκανοῖς ἔτεσι]” (Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 2.32.4). Although he is probably only echoing the much older tradition found in Papias, Quadratus, and perhaps others, the point is that the apologetic value of such stories remains.

Summing Up

As Schäfer and his colleagues have shown, the framers of the *Toledot Yeshu* have in effect produced a counternarrative to the Gospel story.⁵⁷ But what has not been underscored is the central role played by the claim and, evidently, widely held belief that Jesus in fact raised the dead. For Christians of the first 300 years of the Church stories of raising the dead — apparently confirmed by the longevity of those who were raised up — served well evangelism and apologetic. It is for this reason that Jewish polemic, especially as seen in the *Toledot Yeshu*, energetically attacks not the claim that these events took place but how Jesus was empowered to do so.

The *Toledot Yeshu* provides us with an invaluable witness to the nature of Jewish-Christian controversy and polemic. It also bears important witness to the diverse readings that grew out of the Talmudic tradition, whose readings in the medieval period were either modified or excised altogether. The debate centered around the ability of Jesus to raise the dead has its roots in the Old Testament prophecy that someday the dead will live (Isa 26:19), a prophecy that came to be associated with the awaited Messiah (as seen, for example, in 4Q521 “he shall make alive the dead”; and in Matt 11:5 // Luke 7:22, where Jesus tells the imprisoned John the Baptist: “the dead are raised up”). T-S. NS 164.26, the fragment that we have reviewed in the present study, happens to preserve what may be the most important element in the counternarrative of the *Toledot Yeshu*. We hope this brief study will contribute to a better understanding of an important if controversial time in Jewish-Christian relations.⁵⁸

of the Church. See R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire: A.D. 100–400* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 17–42.

⁵⁷ Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 8–9.

⁵⁸ The authors are grateful to the two reviewers who carefully read our study and made a number of helpful suggestions.