

Diversity and Rabbinization

Jewish Texts and Societies
Between 400 and 1,000 CE

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Cover image: Zodiac motif and figure of Helios on the mosaic floor of the fourth-century Hammat Tiberias synagogue. Moshe Dothan, *Hammath Tiberias* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1983), plates 10/11. Courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society.
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12. WHO IS THE TARGET OF TOLEDOT YESHU?

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In his groundbreaking study *Verus Israel*, Marcel Simon was the first to recognize the historical value of John Chrysostom's polemical homilies *Adversus Iudaeos* for study of the phenomenon of Judaizing Christians.¹ He, followed by others, such as Robert Wilken, showed that Chrysostom's primary target (much more than the Jews) was undecided pagans hovering between Judaism and Christianity and, even more, members of his own Christian flock who blurred the boundaries by attending ceremonies or taking oaths in synagogues—those whom John Gager called “dangerous ones in between.”²

Among the Jewish compositions written between 400 and 1000 CE, the period relevant for this conference, is also the polemical treatise *Toledot Yeshu*.³ The following lines are an

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- 1 Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire AD 135–425*, trans. by H. McKeating (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996).
 - 2 Robert Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); John Gager, ‘Jews, Christians and the Dangerous Ones in Between’, in *Interpretation in Religion*, ed. by Shlomo Biderman and Ben Ami Scharfstein (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 249–57.
 - 3 For a recent edition of most of the Hebrew and Aramaic witnesses, along with a very useful introduction, see *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus*, ed. by Peter Schäfer and Michael Meerson, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014). Among the most important classical studies are

attempt to read Toledot Yeshu in a manner similar to the way Marcel Simon and Robert Wilken understood Chrysostom, in order to learn more about a group that has lost its voice.

In its briefest version (the ‘Pilate recension’ in Riccardo Di Segni’s nomenclature), Toledot Yeshu gives a counter-narrative of Jesus’s miracles and his expiatory, vicarious death and resurrection as told in the Gospels: Jesus is depicted as an impostor who is executed and whose corpse is hidden and found again. The other recensions add a birth narrative (where Jesus’s father is a villainous neighbour who rapes Mary during the period of her monthly impurity) and explain Jesus’s miracles as deriving from the power of the Ineffable Name, which was stolen from the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

Most manuscripts also include a sort of ‘Anti-Acts of the Apostles’, with stories about Peter, Paul, and Nestorius.⁴ In the first tradition, the rabbis send out an agent, Elijah, alias Paul, to separate Jewish Christians from Judaism by introducing new festivals and ethical standards and abolishing *kashrut* and circumcision. This is followed by the Nestorius episode, where the heresiarch converts some Persian Christians back to pre-Pauline Christianity by reintroducing circumcision.⁵ Finally, Simon Kephas turns out to be a famous rabbi and paytan who agrees to become a crypto-Christian, but lives alone in a tower while continuing to compose important piyyutim for the Jewish liturgy.⁶

Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1902; reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1977, 2006); William Horbury, ‘A Critical Examination of the *Toledoth Yeshu*’ (PhD diss., Cambridge, 1970); Riccardo Di Segni, *Il vangelo del ghetto* (Rome: Newton Compton, 1985).

- 4 Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, ‘On Some Early Traditions in Toledot Yeshu’, in *Toledot Yeshu in Context: Jewish-Christian Polemics in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern History*, ed. by Daniel Barbu and Yaacob Deutsch (TSAJ 182, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 43–58.
- 5 Stephen Gerö, ‘The Nestorius Legend in the *Toledot Yeshu*’, *Oriens Christianus* 59 (1975): 108–20.
- 6 John Gager, ‘Simon Peter, Founder of Christianity or Saviour of Israel?’, in *Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited*, ed. by Peter Schäfer,

The redaction history of the Toledot is highly complex. We can discern three main recensions and many subdivisions among the principal recensions. Di Segni identifies three: Pilate, Helena, and Herod, named after the ruler of Judaea given in the text. Peter Schäfer and Michael Meerson have modified his model slightly. Only the Pilate recension (Meerson-Schäfer Recension I) is materially attested for the first millennium. The earliest manuscripts in Aramaic from the Cairo Genizah are dated approximately to the tenth century. Two recent linguistic analyses have dated the Aramaic dialect to around 500 CE.⁷ The earliest external attestations of Recension I are by Agobard and Amulo, bishops of early ninth-century Lyon, on the opposite corner of the Mediterranean. In their recent edition of the Hebrew and Aramaic versions, Meerson and Schäfer conclude that this was the only recension extant in the first millennium.

Many other scholars, however, would disagree on this dating, which takes the absence of evidence as evidence of absence.⁸ In many cases, Jewish compositions of the first millennium are attested only in manuscripts from the first centuries of the second. Many of the largely neglected Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts are in fact very ancient and indicate that the Helena recension is about as old as the Pilate recension.⁹ The birth narrative is attested as

Michael Meerson, and Yaacov Deutsch (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 221–45.

- 7 Michael Sokoloff, 'The Date and Provenance of the Aramaic *Toledot Yeshu* on the Basis of Aramaic Dialectology', in *Toledot Yeshu ('The Life Story of Jesus') Revisited*, 13–26, who strongly criticizes the slightly earlier study by Willem Smelik, 'The Aramaic Dialect(s) of the *Toldot Yeshu* Fragments', *Aramaic Studies* 7 (2009): 39–73.
- 8 See, e.g., Horbury, 'A Critical Examination of the Toledoth Yeshu'; idem, 'The Strasbourg Text of the *Toledot*', in *Toledot Yeshu ('The Life Story of Jesus') Revisited*, 49–59 (59); Hillel Newman, 'The Death of Jesus in the *Toledot Yeshu* Literature', *Journal of Theological Studies* 50 (1999): 59–79; Philip Alexander, 'The *Toledot Yeshu* in the Context of Jewish-Muslim Debate', in *Toledot Yeshu ('The Life Story of Jesus') Revisited*, 137–58 (157); Stephen Gerö, 'The Nestorius Legend in the *Toledot Yeshu*'.
- 9 The main publication on the Arabic fragments is Miriam Goldstein, 'Judeo-Arabic Versions of *Toledot Yeshu*', *Ginzei Qedem* 6 (2010), 9*–42*. See also

part of the Helena recension of *Toledot Yeshu* in a Judeo-Arabic Genizah manuscript¹⁰ dated to around the twelfth century.¹¹ In a recent article, Michael Rand revealed the influence of *Toledot Yeshu* on a Yom Kippur piyyut by Yosef ibn Abitur from late tenth- or early eleventh-century Spain.¹² The ancient strata of the Genizah manuscripts are not entirely free of Anti-Acts. While they are missing from the Aramaic data, at least one old Judaeo-Arabic manuscript includes passages from Anti-Acts.¹³ Several other Arabic fragments belong to the Helena recension.¹⁴

Furthermore, internal evidence provides good reasons to attribute several stories and motifs of the Helena recension—especially those in the Strasbourg manuscript—to a mid-first-millennium date in a Syriac-speaking environment.¹⁵ As acknowledged also by Meerson and Schäfer from the perspectives of Form Criticism and Tradition Criticism, the narrative of the execution of the disciples of Jesus as reported in the Strasbourg

Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, 'On Some Early Traditions in *Toledot Yeshu*' and idem, 'Review of Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus, Two Volumes and a Database* (2014)', *Asdiwal* 11 (2016): 226–30.

- 10 Cambridge, University Library, The Taylor-Schechter collection New Series 298, Miscellaneous 57 (henceforth T-S 298.57).
- 11 Miriam Goldstein, 'Judeo-Arabic Versions of *Toledot Yeshu*', dates it to the eleventh or twelfth century. According to a private correspondence, she now dates it later, i.e., to the twelfth or thirteenth century.
- 12 Michael Rand, 'An Anti-Christian Polemical Piyyut by Yosef Ibn Avitur Employing Elements from *Toledot Yeshu*', *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 7 (2013): 1–16. This very explicit anti-Christian piyyut mentions the cross of Jesus on a cabbage stalk, alludes to the five disciples, and refers to Jesus as *ממור ובן נדה*, a term specific to the birth narrative in *Toledot Yeshu*, showing that the motif of Mary's impurity at the time of Jesus' conception was already circulating in the first millennium.
- 13 The National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg EvrArab I 3005.
- 14 For example, NY, ENA 3317.21, eleventh–twelfth century; University of Cambridge T-S 298.57, eleventh–twelfth century; and many more from the twelfth–thirteenth centuries.
- 15 See the publications of Horbury, Gerö, Newman, and Stökl cited above.

manuscript is based on a form that seems earlier than the account in the Talmud (b. Sanh. 43a).¹⁶ Second, the Nestorius legend in Anti-Acts is closely related to legends concerning Barsauma of Nisibis from the fifth century.¹⁷ The *terminus a quo* for this part of the story is Nestorius's death in 451 CE. While the portrait of Nestorius is largely imaginary, it reflects orthodox accusations against Nestorius as a Judaizer.¹⁸ It is also relatively close to the description of the Sabbatians in the heresiology of Marutha from early fifth century. The legend of Barsauma's death was known in the Middle Ages, but only in the Syriac-speaking East, i.e., Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286 CE), not in the West. Third, the calendar of Christian festivals given in the Strasbourg manuscript is not garbled nonsense—as Samuel Krauss thought—but concords rather well with a Christian liturgical calendar from the early fifth century in a Syriac-speaking part of the Roman Empire.¹⁹ As this passage is crucial also for the present paper, I will quickly review the evidence:

Jesus said to you: "Everybody in my possession shall desecrate the Sabbath (which already the Holy One, may he be blessed, hated) and keep the First Day [Sunday] instead, since on this day the Holy One, may he be blessed, enlightened his world; and for [the days of] Passover, which Israel keeps, make them into the festival of the Resurrection (מועדה דקיימתא), since on this [day] he rose from his tomb; and instead of Shavuot (עצרתא), Ascension (סולקא), for this is the day on which he ascended to heaven; and instead of Rosh Hashanah, the Passing Away of the Cross (אשכבתא דצליבא); and

16 Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus*, 91.

17 Gerö, 'The Nestorius Legend in the *Toledot Yeshu*'.

18 E.g., *Chronicon Paschale* 1.640, ed. by Ludwig Dindorf, 2 vols. (Bonn: E. Weber, 1832), I.640. Cf. Averil Cameron, 'Jews and Heretics: A Category Error?', in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. by Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 345–60.

19 Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, 'An Ancient List of Christian Festivals in *Toledot Yeshu*: Polemics as Indication for Interaction', *Harvard Theological Review* 102 (2009): 481–96.

instead of the Great Fast, the Circumcision (גזירתא); and instead of Hanukkah, *Kalendae*.²⁰

Indeed, some details in this list seem strange. From a modern or medieval perspective, one would expect Pentecost rather than the Ascension to be compared to Shavuot. Moreover, there is no festival of the Passing Away of the Cross; if the Circumcision, commemorated on 1 January, is part of a comparison to Jewish festivals, one would expect a juxtaposition to Hanukkah rather than to Yom Kippur. The *Kalendae*, finally, belong to Roman religion, not Western Christianity.

A close reading in the context of Christian liturgy shows that these comparisons make perfect sense in the late fourth or early fifth century in an eastern part of the Empire. At this time, many places still celebrated the Ascension as part of Pentecost instead of two distinct festivals, which was a very recent innovation and not yet widespread.

The Passing Away of the Cross is a reference to the Invention or Exaltation of the Cross, which takes place on 14 September, around Rosh Hashanah. The word אשכבתא ‘passing away or funeral’ can easily be explained as wordplay on אשכחתא ‘invention’.

The *Kalendae*, meaning the *Kalendae* of January, were celebrated by many people in the Roman Empire—not only pagans—even after the emperors became Christian.

The strangest point is the reference to circumcision, גזירתא. If one changes the *waw* to a *yod*, one of the most common scribal errors, and reads גזורתא, we arrive at a Syriac equivalent for *indictio* ‘decree’. *Indictio* was the Latin *terminus technicus* for the fifteen-year tax cycle. By extension, it also became the name for the festival celebrating the Byzantine New Year in September, as, for example, in a famous Constantinopolitan Typicon of the Great Church from the tenth century.²¹ Until 450 CE, this festival was celebrated on 23 September, exactly nine days after the

20 Strasbourg 3974, 174v:7–12.

21 Jerusalem, Patriarchate Library, ms. Ste-Croix 40.

Exaltation of the Cross, comparable to the nine days separating Rosh Hashanah from Yom Kippur. After 450, it was celebrated on 1 September. The cumulative evidence of these observations speaks for an earlier rather than later date. Only before 450 would the comparisons hold, because after 450 the Indiction would always fall before the Exaltation of the Cross, as opposed to the order of festivals given in this list. Furthermore, we have geographical evidence for the origin of this list. The Indiction was celebrated only inside the Roman Empire. The festival names, on the other hand, are not Jewish Aramaic, but Judaeo-Syriac, a fact which limits the possible areas even further.

Meerson and Schäfer agree on the early date of most of these *traditions* from the Helena recension in the Strasbourg manuscript, but consider their incorporation into the *narrative* of Toledot Yeshu late (early second millennium). While this is entirely possible, it is in my opinion highly improbable. If true, why would almost exclusively *early* traditions, and not contemporary ones, serve as building blocks? Why would many of these traditions come from Eastern Christianity rather than the Latin world? The cumulative evidence speaks for an origin of the narrative, including the main traditions of the Strasbourg manuscript, in the early fifth century in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, where Aramaic was spoken.

Toledot Yeshu is not a typical rabbinic composition, though it is sympathetic to rabbinic religion. The ‘good’ Jews are called Sages²² or rabbis.²³ Jesus studies Bible and Talmud (170r:30), and his fellows are in the midst of studying treatise Neziqin (170v:8). The institutions mentioned include the synagogue of Tiberias (172r:30). An interesting gloss seems to reveal an earlier form of the story of Jesus’s public ministry, because ‘they’ are said to call ‘synagogue’ what the redactor calls ‘(Bet) Midrash’ (170v:4). Also, the geography is rabbinic. The action takes place in Upper Galilee (171v:11.15.16), Tiberias (174r:20), Jerusalem,

22 ‘Sages’ (171v:12, 172r:8, 172v:25, 173v:5.13) or ‘Sages of Israel’ (171v:27, 172r:13.29) or ‘elders of Israel’ (171r:3–4; cf. 173v:14).

23 E.g., the references to R. Simeon ben Shetah and R. Tanhuma (173v:15).

and Babylonia, where Mary's *fiancé* R. Johanan flees after he discovers her infidelity (170r:27). The style is a far cry from a Talmudic *sugya*. Rather than halakhic discussions, the text is replete with proof-text polemics (171r:12–21, 171r:27–171v:9, 172r:7–13, 172v:27–173r:8, 173v:1–10) and miracle stories: two animate copper dogs protect the Holy of Holies (170v:29–171r:12); Jesus works miracles with the stolen Tetragrammaton, including healing (171r:21–27), making clay birds fly (171v:18–19), walking on a floating millstone (171v:20–26), and flying (172r:13–24); finally, Jesus is executed on a cabbage stalk (173r:13–21).

1.0. The Adversaries of Toledot Yeshu

Following these prolegomena, we can resume the discussion of the adversaries of Toledot Yeshu. The various recensions of Toledot Yeshu do not all have the same general line or polemicize against the same group. Obviously, Christianity is a central opponent. This is especially true for the Aramaic fragments, but also for all other recensions. Among the principal targets are the Christian doctrines of Jesus's virginal conception, the divine source of his miraculous healing powers, his sinlessness, his resurrection, and the scriptural proofs brought forward for these claims. All these claims are ridiculed, turned upside down, or countered with scriptural proof-texts. Therefore, anyone believing in them is considered a fool.

I would like to argue that Jews—or Muslims—attracted to such Christian claims would also fall in this category. In fact, as with most polemical screeds, Toledot Yeshu is aimed at internal as well as external forces, all people or ideas perceived as menace. This becomes clearest in Anti-Acts:

Many villains among our people (ורבים בני פריצי עמנו) made the mistake of following him, and there was a strife between them and Israel [...] and confusion of prayers (בלבול תפלות), and loss of property (הפסדות), and wherever the villains noticed the people of Israel, they were saying to the people of Israel, "You killed the Messiah of God," while the people of Israel said to them, "You are liable to death,

because you believe in a false prophet.” Despite this, they did not separate themselves from Israel, and there was strife and quarrels among them, and there was no rest for Israel.²⁴

In the eyes of the narrator, the main problem is not that Jesus has *followers*, but that these followers are *Jews*. The fact of Christians belonging to Israel causes internal unrest: Christian ideas are much more dangerous if perpetuated by people that have some claim to be Jews. If they are no longer Jews, the problem ends. The first remedy is therefore the separation of Christians from Jews by ‘de-judaizing’ Christianity. The Sages send out one of their own as a mole, Elijah/Paul. “We should rather choose one Sage who will separate those who err from the congregation of Israel [...] Let them perish and let us have some rest.”²⁵ Elijah introduces a number of laws that distinguish the followers of Christ from Judaism. These laws focus on new festivals replacing the traditional Jewish festivals (as discussed above), the abolition of circumcision and food laws, and non-retaliation.²⁶ Following these new commandments determines when a Jew ceases to be Jewish. Thus, the fundamental problem, confusion caused by Jews believing in Jesus, is solved by differentiating them externally through observable customs. The narrative ends as follows:

And this [was] Eliyahu who demonstrated to them those laws which are no good, [and] who did [this] for the sake of the religion of Israel, and the Christians call him Paulus. After Paulus established these laws and commandments for them, the erring ones separated from Israel, and the quarrel ceased.²⁷

24 Meerson and Schäfer, I, 179, translating Strasbourg 3974, 174r:1–7.

25 Ibid., I, 180; Strasbourg 3974, 174r:13–16.

26 Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra and John Gager, ‘L’éthique et/de l’autre: Le christianisme à travers les yeux polémiques de *Toledot Yeshu*’, in *L’identité à travers l’éthique: Nouvelles perspectives sur la formation des identités collectives dans le monde gréco-romain*, ed. by Katell Berthelot, Ron Naiweld, and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 73–90.

27 Meerson and Schäfer I, 182; Strasbourg 3974, 174v:23–26.

According to this passage, the main danger posed by Christianity to Judaism is Jews with affinities for Christianity, “the dangerous ones in between,” to use John Gager’s terminology: Jewish Christians (or maybe, more precisely, Christian Jews) and Christianizing Jews. Jewish Christians still existed when this text came into being, that is, in the fifth century. The existence of Jewish Christian groups beyond the sixth century has been argued by Shlomo Pines, Averil Cameron, John Gager, and Guy Stroumsa.²⁸ According to Stroumsa:

[I]t is probable that some Jewish Christian groups survived until at least the seventh century. The fact that such groups were probably not more than a few marginal communities does not really matter [...] Jewish Christianity seems not only to have survived across the centuries, but also to have retained a really seducing power, and to have been a key element of what one can call *praeparatio coranica*.²⁹

While their number may not have been significant, Gager stresses it is not the *number* of Jewish Christians that constitutes a

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- 28 Shlomo Pines, *The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity According to a New Source* (Jerusalem: The Academy of the Sciences and Humanities, 1966); idem, ‘Studies in Christianity and in Judaeo-Christianity based on Arabic Sources’, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 6 (1985): 107–61; idem, ‘Gospel Quotations and Cognate Topics in ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s *Tathbīt* in Relation to Early Christian and Judaeo-Christian Readings and Traditions’, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 195–278; John Gager, ‘Did Jewish Christians See the Rise of Islam?’, in *The Ways that Never Parted*, 363–72; Guy G. Stroumsa, ‘Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins’, in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, ed. by Behnam Sadeghi, Asad Q. Ahmed, Adam Silverstein, and Robert Hoyland (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 72–96; idem, ‘Judéo-christianisme et Islam des origines’, in *Comptes rendus de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* 157 (2013): 479–502; Patricia Crone, ‘Islam, Judaeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm’, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 59–95; Averil Cameron, ‘Jews and Heretics—A Category Error?’, 345–60. Holger Zellentin, however, is more skeptical; see his *The Qur’an’s Legal Culture* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), e.g., ix and 175–76.
- 29 Stroumsa, ‘Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins’, 90.

menace, but their *social position*, which blurs the borders between two larger blocs.³⁰ To a lesser extent, “the dangerous ones in between” also include Judaizing Christians, who are, however, a more problematic ‘deviation’ for the Christian side. Nevertheless, Judaizing Christians are perceived negatively, especially in the Nestorius passage. Nestorius wants to undo the separation cunningly achieved by Elijah/Paul:

After some time, there arose the kingdom of Persia. One man of the nations came forth from them, [and] he separated from them, like the heretics separated from the Sages. He said to them, “Paulus made a mistake in his writings, saying to you that you should not be circumcised, for Yeshu was circumcised.” Yeshu also said, “I did not come to remove a single word from the teaching of Moses, not even one letter, but rather to affirm all his words, and this is their disgrace what Paulus did to them.”³¹

Unlike Jewish Christians or Christianizing Jews, this third group, Judaizing Christians, does not demand action on the part of the Sages. Waiting suffices, since Judaizing Christians are dealt with by other Christians.³²

2.0. Christianizing Jews

Do we have further evidence for Christianizing Jews in the third quarter of the first millennium? One indication might be conversions from Judaism to Christianity, at least conversions that were ‘unforced’.³³ Most evidence for this phenomenon is

30 Gager, ‘Jews, Christians, and the Dangerous Ones in Between’, 256.

31 Meerson and Schäfer, I, 182; Strasbourg 3974, 175r.

32 Philippe Gardette, ‘The Judaizing Christians of Byzantium: An Objectionable Form of Spirituality’, in *Jews in Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, ed. by Robert Bonfil, Oded Irshai, Guy G. Stroumsa, and Rina Talgam (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 587–611.

33 The distinction between forced and voluntary conversion is not always clear-cut. While some Jews were forced to convert, others may have been motivated by economic, social, or even religious factors. Christian

highly problematic, because it appears in Christian literature in stereotypical form, e.g., in hagiographical accounts of conversions that resulted from the deeds of this or that saint.

Frequently, Christian sources add that such converts were attacked by Jews. An anonymous chronicler claims that in early sixth-century Ravenna, Jews frequently attacked their former coreligionists.³⁴ Gregory of Tours mentions a Jew who poured rancid oil over a Jewish convert to Christianity in his baptismal robe in Clermont-Ferrand in 576.³⁵ In both cases, suspiciously, these attacks serve to explain why Christians subsequently burned

pressure to convert mounted notably in Clermont-Ferrand, but also in Arles and Marseilles and, in the East, under Emperor Heraclius in 632. The Justinian Code (1.12.1) prohibits conversion for tax evasion or avoidance of punishment: see Amnon Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 26.

34 *Anonymous Valesianus* 14.81–82, cited in Bernhard Blumenkranz, *Les auteurs chrétiens latins du Moyen Age sur les juifs et le judaïsme* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 61 (no. 45ter).

35 Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 5.11, cited in Blumenkranz, *Les auteurs chrétiens*, 70 (no. 58). Brian Brennan, 'The Conversion of the Jews of Clermont-Ferrand in 576', *Journal of Theological Studies* 36 (1985): 321–37; Walter Goffart, 'The Conversions of Avitus of Clermont, and Similar Passages in Gregory of Tours', in *'To See Ourselves as Others See Us': Christians, Jews, 'Others' in Late Antiquity*, ed. by Jacob Neusner and Ernst Frerichs (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 473–97; Marc Reydellet, 'La conversion des juifs de Clermont en 576', in *De Tertullien aux Mozarabes. Mélanges offerts à Jacques Fontaine*, ed. by Louis Holtz, Jean-Claude Fredouille, and Marie-Hélène Jullien, 3 vols. (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1992), I, 371–79; Emily Rose, 'Gregory of Tours and the Conversion of the Jews of Clermont', in *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. by Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 307–20. Cf. the earlier case of Severus of Minorca, *Letter on the Conversion of the Jews*, ed. by Scott Bradbury (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). See David Noy, 'Jews in the Western Roman Empire in Late Antiquity: Migration, Integration, Separation', *Veleia* 30 (2013): 169–77. On Gregory of Tours, see *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. by Alexander C. Murray (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

the local synagogues. In the second case, the Jewish convert is described as an exception. There are other cases. For example, in 598 Gregory the Great reports the conversion of numerous Jews from Agrigent.³⁶ Cassiodorus mentions the Jewish convert Sabbatius, who became bishop, but received the permission to celebrate Passover according to the Jewish fashion.³⁷

Obviously, we cannot take all of these sources at face value. However, other data suggests that it is unlikely that all of them are inventions. In a letter to Peter, subdeacon in Sicily, Gregory the Great describes the case of a young female convert.³⁸ In a letter to the subdeacon Anthemius from 594, he stresses that poor converted Jews should be supported financially.³⁹ In another letter, also from 594, he describes economic advantages promised to Jewish converts in Sicily.⁴⁰ The concentration of sources in the late sixth century is noteworthy. It corresponds to the Justinian era and its notable increase in oppressive legislation.⁴¹ If Christian sources were the only evidence, we could shelve the case, but, in

36 Gregory the Great, *Epistulae* 8.23, cited in Blumenkranz, *Les auteurs chrétiens*, 80 (no. 80). See Robert Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 76–80, and Bruno Judic, ‘Grégoire le Grand et les juifs: Pratiques juridiques et enjeux théologiques’, in *Jews in Early Christian Law: Byzantium and the Latin West, 6th–11th centuries*, ed. by John Tolan, Nicolas de Lange, Laurence Foschia, and Capucine Némo-Pekelman (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 95–118 (111). Other letters of Gregory point to Christian Judaizers: see *Epistulae* 3.37 and 13.3 and Judic’s comments, 111.

37 Cassiodorus, *Historia Tripartita* 9.37, cited in Blumenkranz, *Les auteurs chrétiens*, 57 (no. 39ter).

38 Gregory the Great, *Epistulae* 1.69, cited in Blumenkranz, *Les auteurs chrétiens*, 76 (no. 67).

39 Ibid., *Epistulae* 4.31 = 4.33, cited in Blumenkranz, *Les auteurs chrétiens*, 78 (no. 73).

40 Ibid., *Epistulae* 5.7 = 5.8, cited in Blumenkranz, *Les auteurs chrétiens*, 78 (no. 74). See also Judic, ‘Grégoire le Grand et les juifs’, 110.

41 On this era, see Nicholas de Lange, ‘Jews in the Age of Justinian’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. by Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 401–26.

addition to Toledot Yeshu, there is another, lesser-known Jewish source.

On the Jewish side, *Sefer ha-Ma'asim li-Vne Eretz Israel* 'The Book of the Deeds (or Verdicts or Records) of the Children of the Land of Israel' reinforces the perception that conversions of Jews to Christianity were an important factor in that period.⁴² *Sefer ha-Ma'asim* is a halakhic source from late Byzantine or early Muslim Palestine, i.e., the sixth or seventh century CE.⁴³ The great number of Greek loanwords, several of which are otherwise unknown from classical rabbinic literature and are unattested in Arabic or Syriac, speaks for a time when Arabic had not yet replaced Greek as a language used by Jews. Many rules presume a Christian Byzantine administration. There are neither traces of Umayyad administration nor Arabic loanwords.

Sefer ha-Ma'asim devotes an exceptional number of discussions to converts.⁴⁴ Two cases address the complications of levirate marriage (*yibbum* and *halitzah*).⁴⁵ If the brother-in-law converts,⁴⁶ the widow is forbidden to marry the baptized brother-in-law, but

42 See the annotated edition of Hillel Newman, *The Ma'asim of the People of the Land of Israel: Halakhah and History in Byzantine Palestine* (Tel Aviv: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 2011) (Hebrew).

43 There is no manuscript with the whole text, only fragments from the Genizah and quotations here and there in Geonic and later sources. Scholars differ as to whether this or that tradition indeed belonged to the *Ma'asim*, Newman has collected seventy-three *Ma'asim* whose origin is almost certainly from the original compilation.

44 In this time and place, almost certainly conversion to Christianity.

45 While later Geonic sources continue the debate about apostate *levirs*, *Sefer ha-Ma'asim* seems to be the earliest source. See Moshe Drori, Menachem Elon, and Louis Rabinowitz, 'Levirate Marriage and Halizah', in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. by Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, 22 vols. (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), XII, 725–29 (727).

46 M41: "Case: A man had a wife and a brother and dur[ing his lifetime]. His brother converts (יָצָא אֶחָיו לְעוֹלָמוֹ), and then this man dies without a son. Does the wife of the dead need to be released [from levirate marriage] by that brother who con[verted]? Thus, the verdict: She has to ask for release from him and accordingly also with regard to writs of divorce."

she still needs the ritual of *halitzah* to be released from him. The other ruling decides that even if the only son converts, he is still reckoned as valid living offspring, which makes levirate marriage for the widow(s) unnecessary.⁴⁷

A third ruling deals with the status of a Jewish girl whose father dies and whose mother converts and marries a non-Jew.⁴⁸ The text tacitly assumes that the daughter did not convert, but lives with a non-Jew in the same house, a status akin to captivity.

Another ruling seems to deal with forced converts.⁴⁹ This ruling recognizes the validity of a writ of divorce (*get*) delivered

47 M42: "A man had [a wife] and a son, whether from this wife or another wife, and [this] man also had a brother, and [the son] converted during the lifetime of this man, and then the man dies. Does the wife of the dead man need to be released [from levirate marriage] by that brother of the dead man, because the [son] converted during the lifetime [of his father]? Our rabbis taught us: Because he had a son, even if he converted, she is not subject to release or levirate marriage and can marry another man and is forbidden to [her levirate/former brother-in-law]."

48 M66: "And their question: A woman whose husband died and left her a daughter, and the mother of the adolescent girl converts (נשתמדה) and marries a non-Jew (גוי) and the daughter lives with her mother together with the non-Jew for a considerable time, and a [Jewish] priest (כהן) comes and takes the girl as a wife. Is she permitted to him? Thus, the verdict: Because the girl has lived together with a non-Jew in the house of the non-Jew, she shall be counted as profaned (חללה) and therefore forbidden to the priest. And if they have sons, they will be profaned but permitted to take wives whether from priestly, levitical, or Israelite families. And if they [the couple] give birth to girls, they are reckoned as profaned and unfit for [marriage with men of] the priesthood, but for Israel they are fit and their daughters with Israelites are fit for [marriage with men of] the priesthood."

49 M25: "The validity of a letter of divorce [*get*] written by a forced convert outside of Palestine who was prohibited to travel, if it was delivered by somebody else who could leave his province to come to Palestine...." Visigothic legislation (*Leges Visigothorum* 12.3.20) limits the rights of (converted) Jews to continue travel before they have passed the Sabbath (or other normal Jewish festivities) without celebrating them, but instead celebrating Christian rites under priestly observation. See Erviga's

by a man who converted to Christianity between engagement and marriage, i.e., a Christian *get*. That the subject is not allowed to travel has been interpreted against the background of the travel interdiction for forced converts. This ruling speaks only of the situation where the woman is not yet married and does not want to convert. The opposite case, i.e., of the bride converting, is not discussed, and indeed does not need to be discussed in this patriarchal society, as only the groom could provide a *get*. Nowhere is the case of the married convert discussed, even though this situation was probably more frequent. Married couples presumably lived in the same place, and it is less probable that only one of the partners underwent forced conversion. The Theodosian Code of 438 CE prohibited intermarriage (*Cod. Theod.* 3.7.2). In imperial legislation, both spouses converted, or the marriage had to be dissolved.

Hillel Newman quotes another ruling from a Genizah text on Palestinian halakhah published by Morderchai Margalioth: "A woman that puts on perfume and goes to houses of idolatry (לבת עבודה זרה) has to be beaten and shaved."⁵⁰ Intriguingly, the discussion is limited to Christianizing women under patriarchal control.

With a single exception, all discussions pertain to individual converts. The frequency and the varying contexts seem to imply that conversion was not a rare phenomenon, though such a deduction is always methodologically suspect. Real behaviour can look quite different from legal theory. Still, the *Ma'asim* is the first source to discuss this problem to such an extent. It seems to me, therefore, that such an interpretation and our reading of *Toledot Yeshu* mutually support each other. If a text close to the

recension from the late seventh century in Amnon Linder, *The Jews in the Legal Sources of the Early Middle Ages* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 321–23, no. 562, as well as the Twelfth Council of Toledo from 681 in *ibid.*, 517–18, lines 50–54.

50 Morderchai Margalioth, *The Laws of the Land of Israel from the Geniza* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1973), 86 (*non vidi*), quoted in Newman, *Ma'asim*, 106.

rabbinic movement sees the need to fight Jewish Christianizing, this may be an indication that Jews less closely related to rabbinic networks may have experienced even more conversions among their flock.

This interpretation may be supported by another observation. Some scholars have tentatively advanced the notion of a very large Jewish presence in the Roman Empire for the first centuries of the Common Era, around ten percent of the total population.⁵¹ At the beginning of the second millennium, the communities in Byzantium and southern Italy were much smaller. Some Jews may have moved to the Abbasid Caliphate. Pogroms may have decimated the Jewish population. The long-term success of forced conversions in Spain, Byzantium, and North Africa is unknown. Other factors, such as mortality rates, are unknown. Therefore, either the current estimates of Jewish populations in the early Roman Empire are too high, as has been argued by Michael Toch,⁵² or we have to assume that a considerable number converted to Christianity. Furthermore, the emergence of Christian Palestinian Aramaic in the late fifth century, especially around Jerusalem, has been connected to a significant number of conversions from Judaism or Samaritanism because of its close relationship to Samaritan and Jewish Palestinian Aramaic.⁵³ However, there are far fewer Hebrew loanwords in Christian Palestinian Aramaic than in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, which speaks somewhat against this thesis.

51 E.g., Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 BCE to 640 CE* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2001), 10–11, 41.

52 Michael Toch, *The Economic History of European Jews: Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 38–46. See also his contribution “Jewish Demographics and Economics at the Onset of the European Middle Ages” in the present volume.

53 Friedrich Schulthess, *Grammatik des christlich-palästinischen Aramäisch* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1924), 1.

3.0. Conclusion

Toledot Yeshu and Sefer ha-Ma'asim show that rabbinic circles or circles close to the rabbinic movement perceived the possibility of 'unforced' conversions of 'their' Jews as sufficiently real to be considered a threat demanding a literary response. Toledot Yeshu seeks to give male (and, I assume, female) readers possessed of rather superficial Jewish learning ammunition for daily encounters with neighbours in an increasingly Christian world in an entertaining way. While it is impossible to know for certain how widespread the phenomenon of Christianizing Jews or conversions of Jews to Christianity was, we should integrate the *possibility* of a not insignificant number of Jews attracted to Christianity in our reflections on the panoply of Jewish identities. These Christianizing Jews did not, of course, constitute a group with tight boundaries and an internal leadership or hierarchy.

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