

Adversaries in Jewish Tradition, Part II: Toledot Yeshu

R. Dr. Shlomo Zuckier
Torah in Motion
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1. תלמוד בבלי, מכסת סנהדרין דף מג עמוד א, משוחרר מהצנזורה

וכרוז יוצא לפניו לפניו אין מעיקרא לא והתניא בערב הפסח תלאוהו לישו והכרוז יוצא לפניו מ' יום ישו יוצא ליסקל על שכישה והסית והדיח את ישראל כל מי שיודע לו זכות יבא וילמד עליו ולא מצאו לו זכות ותלאוהו בערב הפסח אמר עולא ותסברא בר הפוכי זכות הוא מסית הוא ורחמנא אמר (דברים יג, ט) לא תחמול ולא תכסה עליו אלא שאני ישו דקרוב למלכות הוה ת"ר חמשה תלמידים היו לו לישו מתאי נקאי נצר ובוני ותודה אתיוהו למתי אמר להו מתי יהרג הכתיב (תהלים מב, ג) מתי אבוא ואראה פני אלהים אמרו לו אין מתי יהרג דכתיב (שם מא, ו) מתי ימות ואבד שמו אתיוהו לנקאי אמר להו נקאי יהרג הכתיב (שמות כג, ז) ונקי וצדיק אל תהרוג אמרו לו אין נקאי יהרג דכתיב (תהלים י, ח) במסתרם יהרג נקי אתיוהו לנצר אמר נצר יהרג הכתיב (ישעיה יא, א) ונצר משרשיו יפרה אמרו לו אין נצר יהרג דכתיב (שם יד, יט) ואתה השלכת מקברך כנצר נתעב אתיוהו לבוני אמר אמר בוני יהרג הכתיב (שמות ד, כב) בני בכורי ישראל אמרו ל' אין בוני יהרג דכתיב (שם, כג) הנה אנכי הורג את בנך בכורך אתיוהו לתודה אמר תודה יהרג הכתיב (תהלים ק, א) מזמור לתודה אמרו לו אין תודה יהרג דכתיב (שם נ, כג) זוכה תודה יכבדנני

1. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 43a (restored after being censored), trans.

Sefaria

The mishna teaches that **a crier goes out before** the condemned man. This indicates that it is only **before him**, i.e., while he is being led to his execution, that **yes**, the crier goes out, but **from the outset**, before the accused is convicted, he does **not** go out. The Gemara raises a difficulty: **But isn't it taught** in a *baraita*: **On Passover Eve they hung** the corpse of **Jesus the Nazarene** after they killed him by way of stoning. **And a crier went out before him for forty days**, publicly proclaiming: **Jesus the Nazarene is going out to be stoned because he practiced sorcery, incited** people to idol worship, **and led the Jewish people astray. Anyone who knows** of a reason to **acquit him should come forward and teach it on his behalf. And the court did not find** a reason to **acquit him, and so they stoned him and hung his corpse on Passover eve. Ulla said: And how can you understand** this proof? Was **Jesus the Nazarene worthy of** conducting a **search** for a reason to **acquit him? He was an inciter** to idol worship, **and the Merciful One states** with regard to an inciter to idol worship: **"Neither shall you spare, neither shall you conceal him"** (Deuteronomy 13:9). **Rather, Jesus was different, as he had close ties with the government**, and the gentile authorities were interested in his acquittal. Consequently, the court gave him every opportunity to clear himself, so that it could not be claimed that he was falsely convicted.

Apropos the trial of Jesus, the Gemara cites another *baraita*, where **the Sages taught: Jesus the Nazarene had five disciples: Mattai, Nakai, Netzer, Buni, and Toda. They brought Mattai in** to stand trial. **Mattai said to** the judges: **Shall Mattai be executed? But isn't it written: "When [matai] shall I come and appear before God?"** (Psalms 42:3). **Mattai claimed** that this verse alludes to the fact he is righteous. **They said to him: Yes, Mattai shall be executed, as it is written: "When [matai] shall he die, and his name perish?"** (Psalms 41:6).

Then **they brought Nakai in** to stand trial. **Nakai said to** the judges: **Shall Nakai be executed? But isn't it written: "And the innocent [naki] and righteous you shall not slay"** (Exodus 23:7)? **They said to him: Yes, Nakai shall be executed, as it is written: "In secret places he kills the innocent [naki]"** (Psalms 10:8).

Then they brought Netzer in to stand trial. He said to the judges: Shall Netzer be executed? But isn't it written: "And a branch [netzer] shall grow out of his roots" (Isaiah 11:1)? They said to him: Yes, Netzer shall be executed, as it is written: "But you are cast out of your grave like an abhorred branch [netzer]" (Isaiah 14:19).

Then they brought Buni in to stand trial. Buni said to the judges: Shall Buni be executed? But isn't it written: "My firstborn son [beni] is Israel" (Exodus 4:22)? They said to him: Yes, Buni shall be executed, as it is written: "Behold, I shall kill your firstborn son [binkha]" (Exodus 4:23).

Then they brought Toda in to stand trial. Toda said to the judges: Shall Toda be executed? But isn't it written: "A psalm of thanksgiving [toda]" (Psalms 100:1)? They said to him: Yes, Toda shall be executed, as it is written: "Whoever slaughters a thanks-offering [toda] honors Me" (Psalms 50:23).

2. Mika Ahuvia, "An Introduction to Toledot Yeshu," *Ancient Jew Review*, December 25, 2014, accessible at https://www.ancientjewreview.com/read/2014/12/25/a-quick-introduction-to-toledot-yeshu#_ftnref3

Toledot Yeshu is a decidedly non-rabbinic counter-narrative and satire of the foundational story of Christianity, which likely originated in the late antique or early medieval period. It probably circulated orally for centuries before being transcribed in various places and times. A version of it was already known to the archbishop Agobard of Lyons in 827 CE, who complained of the Jews' public and aggressive use of such vitriol to influence potential Christian converts' attitudes towards Jesus. According to some late medieval sources, it was a Jewish custom to read *Toledot Yeshu* on Christmas Eve.

In the genre of the folk story, no two manuscripts are identical and storytellers likely embellished it with every recounting. The earliest texts survive in Aramaic fragments found in the Cairo Genizah, but retellings of this narrative survive in virtually every Jewish language. Samuel Krauss brought scholarly attention to this work in 1902 with his *Das Leben Jesu nach judischen Quellen* (now available in the public domain).

3. David Biale, "Counter-History & Jewish Polemics against Christianity: The 'Sefer toldot yeshu' & the 'Sefer zerubavel'," *Jewish Social Studies* 6:1 (1999), pp. 130-145, at p. 133

The *Sefer toldot yeshu* is a compilation of stories told about Jesus and the early Church. Its original date of composition is unclear but may be either late talmudic or geonic since variants of it appear in Aramaic and Syriac fragments. Interestingly enough, Voltaire thought that it was from the first century and even predated the Gospels. He called it "the most ancient Jewish writing which has been transmitted to us against our religion. This is a life of Jesus Christ, completely contrary to our holy evangelists."

4. בנימין המבורגר, "הערה בענין ליל, ניטל," מוריה ט-י (תשמ"ו), ד' צב

באשכנז עוד לפני שנולד הבעש"ט. בספרו של רבינו החות יאיר על שו"ע או"ח, מקור חיים, שזכינו לאחרונה לאורו בהוצאת מכון ירושלים, נזכר בקיצור הלכות סי' קנ"ה סעי' א', מנהג ביטול הלימוד בליל חוגה פלוני".
(ועיי' ש סי' צ"ז סעי' ב').

4. Binyamin Hamburger, "A Note about 'Nittel' Eve," *Moriah*, 9-10 (1986), p. 92

In the work of the Havvot Yair on Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim, Mekor Hayyim, which we were lucky to recently see published by Machon Yerushalayim, mentioned quickly in section 155:1: "The practice of cancelling learning on the light of the celebration of so-and-so."

5. ספר מנהג אבותינו בידינו (2008), 'לימוד תורה בליל ניטל', מסוכם בויקיפדיה

ישנם שנהגו לקרא ביום זה את ספר תולדות ישו, ספר עברי מימי הביניים המוקדמים שגם תורגם ליידיש, המציג את קורותיו של ישו בצורה לעגנית. כמו כן הופיע במאה ה-19 "מגילת ניטל", המגוללת את קורות ישו, ומיוחסת לאחד מתלמידי החז"ם סופר שהעתיק אותה מכתבים שהיה מונחים אצל רבו.

5. From the Sefer Minhag Avoteinu Beyadeinu 2008

There are those who have the custom on this day to read the book *Toledot Yeshu*, a Hebrew book from the early Middle Ages that is also translated into Yiddish, it displays the chronicles of Yeshu in a scoffing manner. Similarly in the 1900s "Megillat Nitel" appears which tells the story of Yeshu, and is attributed to one of the students of the Chasam Sofer who copied it from writings of his teacher."

6. Marc Shapiro, "Torah Study on Christmas Eve," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8:2 (1999), 319-353, at pp. 334-35

A most significant passage that does *not* mention the practice of abstaining from Torah study on Christmas Eve is found in the writings of the notorious apostate Johann Pfefferkorn (1469-after 1521). After noting that Jews secretly read *Toledot Yeshu* on Christmas night, he writes:

They believe and maintain that the lord Jesus, punished by God because of his apostasy and false teaching, has to wander in all pits of excrement or latrines throughout the world that same night [i.e., Christmas Eve]. Thus did I learn and believe unthinkingly from my youth on. When it was Christmas Eve I urinated outside the privy because of worry and fear of the hanged Jesus, for he was acting in a filthy way that night as mentioned previously.

A similar accusation is found some years later in the apostate Ernst Ferdinand Hess' *Juden Geissel* [pub. 1589], where he writes as follows:

Dear Christians, when we are solemnly involved and piously observing our Christmas, during which on the entire day of the twenty-fifth of December we are in church, out of solemn habit standing up in our service to God [with] prayer and thanksgiving songs, through reading and singing to God, for in this same night the *Alma* according to the prophecy of Isaiah gave birth to the Christ, our Messiah, when you Jews hear the ringing of the bells [for Christmas], you utter the awful and terrible blasphemous words: "At this time the ממזר *Mamser* crawls through all *Maschovim*" (or, as they are otherwise called (כסאות ואשפות). That is, now the whore's son must crawl through every sewer and latrine. Thereby you instill in your small children a great fright, that they do not go out to the hidden chambers [privies] on this night even if they need to very badly.

7. תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף קטו עמוד א

משנה. כל כתבי הקדש מצילין אותן מפני הדליקה, בין שקורין בהן ובין שאין קורין בהן. אף על פי שכתובים בכל לשון טעונים גניזה. ומפני מה אין קורין בהם - מפני ביטול בית המדרש.

7. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 115a

Mishnah. All holy scriptures should be saved from a fire [on Shabbat], whether we read them or not. Although they are written in any language, they require burial [if no longer usable]. And we do we not read them? Because of canceling the beit midrash.

8. תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף קטז עמוד א

איבעיא להו: הגליונים של ספר תורה מצילין אותן מפני הדליקה, או אין מצילין אותן מפני הדליקה?... גופא, הגליונים וספרי מינין אין מצילין אותם מפני הדליקה... זימנא חדא אזיל, בעו לסכוניה. +/השמטת הצנזורה/ רבי מאיר הוה קרי ליה אוון גליון, רבי יוחנן הוה קרי ליה עוון גליון+...
 ר' מאיר קרי ליה - לספרי המינין און גליון לפי שהן קורין אותו אונגיל"א +ספר האונגליון+

8. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 116a

It was asked: Do we save the margins [*gilyonin*] of a Torah scroll from a fire, or not?...

(Several attempted proofs are offered)...

It was taught: The *gilayons* (margins/revelations) and books of sectarians are not to be saved from a fire [on Shabbat]... Rabbi Meir would call it *aven gilyon* (און גליון, false revelation) and Rabbi Yohanan would call it *avon gilyon* (עוון גליון, sin revelation).

9. ספר הערוך, 'אבן גליון'

אבן גליון (Evangeliu) •
 אבן גליון, (נשנת כריז גמרא
 דכל כתבי דף ע"א) •

9. Arukh Dictionary, entry אבן גליון

אבן גליון – evangelium. (On Shabbat at the beginning of ch. Kol Kitvei, *amud alef*)

10. תולדות ישו (גרסת ליידין)

ועוד כתב להם ספרי כזבים וקרא אותם ע"ון כלי"ון והם סברו שהא אומר אב"ן גליו"ן כלומר אב ובן וגלוי רוח הקודש ועשה להם שמעון ספרים מתלמידי יז"וש ומיה"נוס ואמר שיז"וש מסר לו כל הדברים ויכתב שמעון ברמז את ספר יהנ"וס והם סוברים שהוא סודות והוא הכל הבל ורעיון רוח...

10. Huldreich recension of *Toledot Yeshu* from 1705 (pub. Leiden, Holland, based on manuscript)

And he [Simon] also wrote for them books of lies, and called them *avon kilayon* (sin of destruction), and they thought that he said *even gilayon* (evangelion/stone revelation), meaning father (*av*) and son (*ben*) and revelation of the holy spirit (*gilluy ruah ha-kodesh*). And Simon fashioned for them books from the students of Jesus and John and said that Jesus had passed on to him all of these words and Simon wrote the Book of John with hints; they [his audience] thought that they were secrets, but it was all empty and meaningless wind.