

The University of San Francisco

## USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center

---

Theology & Religious Studies

College of Arts and Sciences


---

3-2020

### Infancy Stories of Jesus: Apocrypha and Toledot Yeshu in Medieval Europe

Natalie Latteri

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/thrs>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), and the [Social History Commons](#)

---

# Infancy Stories of Jesus: Apocrypha and Toledot Yeshu in Medieval Europe

---

NATALIE E. LATTERI\*

---

Stories of Jesus have circulated among Christians since the first century of the Common Era. Such lore functioned to provide early Christians who were eager to learn about their savior with information about his conception, life, death, and resurrection. Some made it into the canonical New Testament Gospel accounts but much of it, for one reason or another, did not. Even so, versions of many of the stories remained popular among Christians throughout the centuries and continued to supplement the biblical text while addressing the concerns of story tellers and their audience. For purposes of this paper, the entirety of these extra-canonical Christian texts is referred to simply as apocrypha. Like the canonical Gospel accounts and later hagiography, or (semi) fictional accounts of saints' lives, apocryphal stories of Jesus also offered entertainment and a type of model behavior for readers and listeners to emulate.<sup>1</sup>

---

\* Natalie E. Latteri earned her PhD in History from the University of New Mexico. She teaches Jewish-Christian Relations at the University of San Francisco in the Swig Program in Jewish Studies and Social Justice. Latteri is a Fellow of the Russell J. and Dorothy S. Bilinski Foundation (2016-17) and the American Academy for Jewish Research (2015), among others.

<sup>1</sup> See David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* (London: Routledge, 2001), 23; Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books*

Jews from the first centuries of the Common Era on told their own, often quite similar, stories of Jesus. A loosely configured collection of such stories would come to be known as *Toledot Yeshe* (the life story of Jesus).<sup>2</sup> Scholars commonly refer to the *Toledot Yeshe* accounts as “counter narratives,” or “counter gospels,”<sup>3</sup> because they parody Christian biographies of Jesus and most likely served as the main source of information Jews had about Christian origin stories.<sup>4</sup> The earliest extant accounts focus on Jesus’ education and adult life. Historically these were told from a perspective of disbelief for an audience who was intent on mocking the Christian doctrine that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Instead of providing a template for praiseworthy thought, speech, or action in a manner that

---

*that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 57.

- <sup>2</sup> There has been much scholarship regarding the appropriateness of labeling late antique practitioners of Israelite religion as “Jews” before the development of Rabbinic Judaism and the codification of the talmudic texts. See, for example, Daniel Boyarin’s discussions in *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and idem, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). For the purposes of this paper, I use the term “Jew/s” to refer to any practitioner/s of Israelite religion in antiquity, later practitioners of Rabbinic Judaism, and various other Jewish sects.
- <sup>3</sup> Though David Biale coined the term, he does not believe that “counter-history” should be applied to *Toledot Yeshe* because all of the episodes therein do not have a one-to-one polemical correlation with the Gospel accounts. See, David Biale, “Counter-History and Jewish Polemics against Christianity: The *Sefer Toldot Yeshe* and the *Sefer Zerubavel*,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 1 (1999): 130-45. This assessment is artificially limiting because it does not consider how the *Toledot Yeshe* might correlate with apocryphal stories of Jesus.
- <sup>4</sup> See Jonatan M. Benarroch, “God and His Son: Christian Affinities in the Shaping of the Sava and Yanuka Figures in the Zohar,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 107, no. 1 (2017): 39, 57.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshe: The Life Story of Jesus*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 47.

resembled the apocrypha, *Toledot Yeshu* served as cautionary tales—models of what not to do should another messianic pretender arise. Despite these functional differences, episodic similarities in the stories of Jesus underscore the close relationship among Christian and Jewish storytellers and, presumably, the close relationship among members of their religio-ethnic communities. At the same time, the extent of polemical elements reflects attempts by partisan storytellers to keep members of their respective religio-ethnic communities appropriately separate from the other.<sup>6</sup>

The variety, episodic similarities, and the polemical functions of Christian and Jewish stories of Jesus prove to be a combination that is far too vast to treat in any amount of detail in a single paper. Here, I have confined my scope to a pared down version of two related, but limited, lines of inquiry. Section I outlines the early development of a specific subset of stories of Jesus—so-called “infancy” stories—in late antiquity. Collectively, these relate information about Jesus’ parentage, conception, and childhood. Section II discusses the evolution of antique infancy stories of Jesus in medieval Europe and suggests ways that historical context may have informed regional developments. Doing so provides greater understanding of the complex relationships among Christians and Jews living in constant contact, and often conflict, in Northern Europe during the Middle Ages.

---

<sup>6</sup> In *Dying for God*, noted above, Daniel Boyarin has explored a similar phenomenon among early rabbis and priests who attempted to delineate their communities. In contrast to the “top-down” model he emphasizes as a reason for the ultimate severing of Jewish-Christian communities, the widespread diffusion of apocrypha and *Toledot Yeshu* in oral and written form suggests that divisions may have been propagated by community members rather than exclusively communal leaders. Below, I discuss how the specific polemical turn of apocrypha and *Toledot Yeshu* reflects the sentiments of anti-assimilationist partisans who were opposed to inter-confessional association.

# I. The Early Development of Infancy Stories of Jesus in Late Antiquity

## A. Canonical Christian Infancy Stories of Jesus

The most famous late antique stories of Jesus are those that arose in Jewish-Christian communities and would eventually<sup>7</sup> be included in two of the four Gospels of the Christian New Testament—the late first-century Gospel of Luke and the first- or second-century Gospel of Matthew.<sup>8</sup> While these are probably familiar to most readers, a review will be helpful when comparing extra-canonical and non-Christian stories of Jesus.

Luke's account, composed in a variety of Greek forms,<sup>9</sup> is, by far, the more detailed of the two and provides the lion's share of details popularly associated with Jesus' conception and early life. This Gospel begins with a chapter detailing the divinely ordained conception of John the Baptist by Elizabeth and Zechariah, cousin and cousin-in-law, respectively, of Jesus' mother, Mary. The placement of this introductory infancy story of John functions sequentially to reinforce Luke's text: a prophet (John) came before the Messiah (Jesus), in order that he might "prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people" (Lk. 1:76-7). Luke's first chapter also establishes that Mary came from an especially devout family (Zechariah was a priest and Elizabeth was descended from the priestly lineage of Aaron, brother of Moses) who had experienced God's miraculous involvement in domestic affairs.<sup>10</sup> As such, it was less of a surprise when the Gospel

---

<sup>7</sup> On the premise that the infancy segments were written later than the other portions of the Gospels, see Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 4.

<sup>8</sup> For the dating of the Gospels, see Michael D. Coogan, et al., ed., introduction to the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke, in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7-8, 94. Incidentally, the above edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* is the biblical text cited throughout this essay.

<sup>9</sup> Coogan, et al. *Oxford Annotated Bible*, 93.

<sup>10</sup> Lk. 1:5.

relates the angel Gabriel's Annunciation to Mary that God had chosen her to conceive Heaven's son, Jesus. When Mary questioned how this could happen, not least of all, because she was a virgin—a characteristic mentioned twice in Luke 1:27—Gabriel told her: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (Lk. 1:35). And Mary consented.

Luke continues by providing an account of Jesus' hasty Nativity in a manger, occurring on the way to Bethlehem where the family was traveling to register for the Roman census; Jesus' circumcision and presentation at the Temple; and, when he was bit older, a twelve-year-old Jesus teaching at the Temple.<sup>11</sup> As an accompaniment to these familiar events and Jewish rites of passage, Luke strategically includes affirmations by Jews that Jesus was the awaited Messiah of Israel and thus indicates that the child's identity was recognized early on by pious members of the Jewish community. For example, when a recently pregnant Mary went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth immediately knew that Jesus—even in utero—was the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy of God's promised Messiah: “When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women ... the mother of my Lord ...’” (Lk. 1:41-3). An angel revealed to shepherds tending their flocks the night Jesus was born that the child was “a Savior, who is the Messiah” (Lk. 2:11) and inspired them to adore the infant. The prophetess Anna, who lived at the Temple at the time of Jesus' presentation, spoke “about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk. 2:39). And a devout layman, Simeon, who was “looking forward to the consolation of Israel” (Lk. 2:25) and who was also in attendance at Jesus' presentation, recognized through the aid of the Holy Spirit that he had seen the “Lord's Messiah.” (Lk. 2:26) This knowledge prompted Simeon to warn Mary that Jesus would be both accepted and denied by many in Israel, and that she herself would be caught in

---

<sup>11</sup> See Lk. 2.

the crossfire of her son's message: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Lk. 2:34).

Luke's structure and tropes are somewhat similar to those found in Matthew. As in Luke, Matthew's infancy segment is composed of two short chapters that herald Jesus' impressive human ancestry, attempt to establish Jesus as the fulfillment of Hebrew messianic prophecy, and highlight Mary's miraculous Virgin Birth of Jesus. Beyond these elements, the information and emphases found in the infancy stories of the two Gospels differs. For example, Matthew's genealogy of Jesus complements rather than echoes Luke's. Whereas Luke opens with a discussion of Mary's family's priestly and prophetic lineage before going on to discuss the Annunciation, Nativity, etc., Matthew begins with a detailed lineage of Joseph that stretches back in four segments of fourteen to include such notable persons and moments in Judaic tradition as the patriarch Abraham, the messianic king, David, and the Babylonian Exile: "Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah" (Mt. 1: 17). Scholars have conjectured that Matthew may have originally been composed in Hebrew, and have shown that Matthew's repetition of the number of generations—fourteen—was intended to invoke for his Hebrew-speaking audience the numerical equivalent of David's name, thus providing further evidence that Jesus was the "son" (descendant) of the messianic King David, and the awaited Messiah in his own right.<sup>12</sup>

Only after tracing Jesus' patrilineal heritage does Matthew provide information regarding Joseph's reaction to discovering his fiancée pregnant and the events that followed: "When his [Jesus'] mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child" (Mt. 1:18). Joseph initially thought of dismissing Mary, albeit quietly, until the Lord appeared to him in a

---

<sup>12</sup> Coogan, et al. Oxford Annotated Bible, 9; James E. Patrick, "Matthew's Peshet Gospel Structured around Ten Messianic Citations of Isaiah," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, 61, no. 1 (2010): 63.

dream and told him that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her [Mary] as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus” (Mt. 1:24-5).

According to Matthew, shortly after the Nativity, King Herod was alerted to the birth of a political rival by three magi, wisemen from the East, who came searching for him to show their respects. The magi had followed a star which they believed announced the birth of the “king of the Jews,” (Mt. 2:2) and they asked Herod where they might find the child. Jealous Herod thought to trick the wisemen into finding and telling him where the child was so that he might slay him. Though the magi succeeded on their quest, Herod’s plan failed; the travelers did not return to tell the temperamental ruler the location of the child, for they had been warned in a dream to avoid him. Angered that his plot had been foiled, Herod ordered the slaughter of all male Israelite children under the age of two in what would come to be known as the “Massacre of the Innocents.” Like the magi, Joseph had been warned in a dream to flee Bethlehem with his family and hide from Herod in Egypt. When Herod died and the threat of imminent danger had passed, Joseph had another dream vision in which the angel of the Lord told him to return to Galilee with his family.<sup>13</sup>

Matthew’s recurring theme of Joseph’s reception of revelatory dreams is reminiscent of the earlier Hebrew dreamer of the same name, Joseph, son of Abraham, who accepted the responsibility of providing for the material needs of Israel before and during the nation’s sojourn in Egypt.<sup>14</sup> In further connection to Judaic tradition,

---

<sup>13</sup> See Mt. 2: 3-22.

<sup>14</sup> See Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 6. Matthew’s association of a biblical name with specific characteristics (i.e., visionary capabilities, provider, etc.) has a long history in the Judaic exegetical tradition of *peshet*. This tradition was en vogue among messianic and apocalyptic sects at the time Matthew wrote his Gospel and, recently, James E. Patrick has argued for several other instances of *peshet* in the Gospel of Matthew. See Patrick, “Matthew’s Peshet Gospel,” 43-81.



Matthew includes a number of quotations, also known as prooftexts,<sup>15</sup> from the Hebrew Bible and contemporary messianic literature in efforts to effectively illustrate that Jesus was in fact the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy and the awaited Messiah of Israel. The first of these is found near the conclusion of Matthew’s genealogy, immediately after Gabriel tells Joseph in a dream to take Mary as a wife, despite her condition: “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us’” (Mt. 1:22-3).

The prooftext here—“Look, the virgin shall conceive ... ”—is based on a revised version of the authoritative Greek translation of Hebrew Scripture, the Septuagint, that the Gospel writer employed and, most likely, adjusted his narrative to match.<sup>16</sup> The verse it alludes to is found in the messianic prophecy of Isaiah: “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (Is. 7:14). The Hebrew term for young woman (of a marriageable age), *‘almah*, was inconsistently translated in the Septuagint as either young woman or virgin.<sup>17</sup> The use of the Greek term, *parthenos*, virgin, for the Hebrew, *‘almah*, became a key point in Luke and Matthew, as well as in later Christian doctrine discussed further below. The Gospel writers may have favored this translation because it was what they were most familiar with. At the same time, however, their accounts of Mary’s virginal conception and birth of Jesus also coincided with popular contemporary Hellenistic stories of

---

<sup>15</sup> Prooftexts are quotations from—or sometimes allusions to—authoritative religious literature that are used to argue (i.e., prove) a point. Within the Judaic tradition, authoritative religious literature might include quotations from the Hebrew Bible, talmudic literature, commentary by esteemed rabbis, and more.

<sup>16</sup> See Maarten J. J. Menken, “The Textual Form of the Quotation from Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23,” *Novum Testamentum* 43, no 2 (2001): 144-60, especially 147-55.

<sup>17</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 19.

demigods and heroes who were born of virgins.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it is possible that the common trope was intended to help Christians ingratiate Jesus to pagans in the same way that references from the Hebrew Bible were employed to convince Jews of his messiahship. But if this was a calculated move, the plan backfired. For Jews, pagans, and every other group of non-believers seemed to have found particular delight in mocking the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and Incarnation, and in watching Christians perform mental acrobatics to defend them. This is most blatant in the Jewish rumors that would find their way into rabbinic literature and, later, in the full-blown stories about Jesus that circulated among Jewish communities throughout the world.

## **B. Jewish Infancy Stories of Jesus (According to Jews, Pagans, and Christians)**

There are no extant Jewish infancy stories of Jesus from late antiquity.<sup>19</sup> There are, however, hints peppered throughout rabbinic literature that versions may have existed in the first centuries of the Common Era, perhaps in oral form. A number of clues are also found in polemical writings by early Christians. These include second- and sometimes third-hand snippets of antagonistic Jewish infancy stories of Jesus that mock the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and Incarnation. Though originating in the hands of Christians, the latter category cannot be written off as mere hearsay. Instead, the similarities between Jewish and Christian references reflect what has been the growing consensus

---

<sup>18</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 34-5. The literary introduction of Luke also resembles Hellenistic histories, especially. See Coogan, et al. *Oxford Annotated Bible*, 95.

<sup>19</sup> The earliest versions of the *Toledot Yeshu* are believed to have circulated orally in the antique Levant and there is some evidence to suggest a compositional date of the fourth or fifth century CE, though this remains debated. See Pierluigi Piovanelli, “The Toledot Yeshu and Christian Apocryphal Literature: The Formative Years,” in *Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited: A Princeton Conference*, ed. Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson, and Yaacov Deutsch, *Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism* 143 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 94.

among scholars of religion and history—namely, that early Christian and Jewish communities were very much in contact with one another, if not part of a single community, who sought definition (individual and collective identity) through opposition.<sup>20</sup>

Recent scholarship of Jewish traditions about Jesus found in the late antique rabbinic corpus suggests the existence of deliberate counter narratives to the canonical Gospel accounts of Jesus' conception, life, and death.<sup>21</sup> These may have been part of already formulated Jewish stories of Jesus that either existed solely in oral form or that have not been preserved, for one reason or another. At the very least, there is no doubt that stray rabbinic comments would contribute to the majority of the later, full-fledged Jewish counter narratives—the *Toledot Yeshu*.

Rabbinic accounts, including information pertinent to Jewish infancy stories of Jesus, aim to refute the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and Incarnation by mentioning the activities and/or moral character of his very human parents—especially his mother, Mary.<sup>22</sup> In one Talmudic tradition, Mary had a husband, Stada, along with her Roman lover known only by the exceedingly common name, Pandera (or Panthera), and Jesus could have been the son of either. In another, Mary's husband's name was Pappos ben Yehudah and he would lock her in the house every time he left in the hopes of maintaining her wifely chastity. Pappos' lack of success is suggested by the term "Stada," here a reference to Mary's extra-marital activity as a *sotah*, or adulteress, who engaged in illicit relations with the Roman soldier Pandera.<sup>23</sup> In related Talmudic traditions alluding to promiscuity, Mary is said to have occupied herself as a spinner of cloth who let her

---

<sup>20</sup> Again, see Boyarin, *Dying for God*; idem, *Border Lines*.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 8-9, 15, 122, 129.

<sup>22</sup> Jesus' name is not specified in the following passages. However, because the same patrilineal (ben Pandera, son of Pandera) is intertextually applied to Jesus, it is a fair assumption. For a concise review of such references, see Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 133-43.

<sup>23</sup> Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 15-22; idem, "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

“women’s hair grow long” and left it uncovered in public, suggesting a lack of modesty and that she may have been plying more than her handiwork at market.<sup>24</sup>

Christians were well aware of Jewish critiques. The second-century Christian apologist Justin Martyr (d. 165) wrote a good deal about them in his polemical treatise, *Dialogue with Trypho*. As the title suggests, this text presents an account of Justin’s conversations with Trypho, a Jew. The subject of their conversation: the finer points of religious doctrine. The dialogic form of Justin’s *Dialogue* is a commonplace in philosophical treatises aimed at refuting the belief systems of others and most likely does not record an actual conversation that the author had with a Jew named Trypho. It does, however, provide a relatively thorough model of how Christians might respond to a myriad of Jewish doctrinal criticisms. As such, it suggests the types of arguments contemporary Jews leveled at their Christian neighbors or, at the very least, Christian self-consciousness at doctrinal elements that Jews might deride with some sting of validity. These include explicit acknowledgment that Jews did not approve of the translation of *‘almah* that Matthew and Luke employed as an integral component of the Isaiah 7:14 proof-text cited for the messiahship of Jesus, and a pointed comparison of the Christian doctrines of the Virgin Birth and Incarnation with Greek mythology.<sup>25</sup>

Early Christian knowledge of Jewish critiques went well beyond linguistic and tropic similarity, though. In *Althēs Logos*, Word of Truth (ca. 177)—a text by the second-century pagan philosopher Celsus that has been preserved only in quotation by the Church Father Origen in his treatise, *Contra Celsum*, Against Celsus (ca. 231-33)—a Jewish character relates his community’s belief that Jesus was the product of an adulterous liaison between Mary and a certain Roman

---

Yuval Shahar (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 141-43; and Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshu*, 46-7.

<sup>24</sup> Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 17-18; and Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshu*, 46.

<sup>25</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ed. Michael Slusser, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2003), 66, 102-04.

soldier identified only as Pandera. When Mary's husband discovered the affair, he drove her away and, as a result, she led a life of poverty as a spinner of cloth.<sup>26</sup> In a contemporary treatise *De spectaculis*, On Spectacles (ca. 200), the Christian author Tertullian provided a brief comment on Jewish belief in regard to Mary that was, perhaps, even less flattering: Jesus was *quaestuariae filius*, a "prostitute's son."<sup>27</sup>

The Church Father Jerome's *Epistola ad Titum*, Letter to Titus (ca. 400), suggests that Jewish criticism of the Christian doctrines of the Virgin Birth and Incarnation were not merely literary, for it provides an account of Roman Jews who disturbed the peace by continuing to pose agitating questions regarding Jesus' parentage into the fifth century.<sup>28</sup> And the eighth-century *Vita Silvestri*, Life of St. Sylvester, likewise depicts sustained Jewish incredulity of Mary's virginal-maternal status in a public disputation.<sup>29</sup> The sections below discuss how early Christian apocrypha either responded to or anticipated some of these insults.

### **C. Early Apocryphal Stories of Jesus: The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas**

Luke's and Matthew's canonical infancy stories of Jesus are but two among many Christian versions to originate and circulate in the late antique Levantine and Mediterranean regions. As noted above, the Gospel accounts include Hellenistic tropes that would become doctrine, such as the Virgin Birth and Incarnation, while positioning Jesus' miraculous Nativity as a fulfillment of Hebrew messianic prophecy in a manner that might appeal to both pagan and Jewish audiences. In addition to these accounts, the apocrypha that did not make it into the cannon would continue to be transmitted by word of mouth, in writing, and through iconography, spreading to far-

---

<sup>26</sup> Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 18-20.

<sup>27</sup> Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 112; Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshu*, 6-7, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshu*, 5-6.

<sup>29</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshu*, 5-6.

flung regions and continuing to evolve long after their first iterations. Indeed, many apocryphal traditions remain significant to Christians around the world in the modern era.<sup>30</sup>

Part of the reason for the apocrypha's longevity is that popular stories about Jesus and the Holy Family have been told right alongside or even instead of the official Gospel accounts since the early centuries of Christianity's development.<sup>31</sup> The New Testament canon was not closed until the sixth century.<sup>32</sup> Thus the stories that would come to be known as the apocrypha, like the Gospel accounts, originated among early Christians who were formulating and propagating their beliefs about their savior without the benefit, or constriction, of later-developed official doctrine. Their continued spread after the closing of the canon is best understood within the context of multiple Christian sects and disputes regarding orthodox and heterodox (or heretical) teaching throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages—namely, that doctrinal diffusion, acceptance, and supersession among Christians who cherished different beliefs and traditions was a long time coming.

Popularity might also be owing to the fact that apocrypha are often shorter and their message simpler, serving to reinforce or contribute to Church teachings rather than introduce new ones altogether.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, it may be the case that, because stories unbound by the canon were free to evolve on the lips and pens of their tellers, the apocrypha better responded to their audience's context in a way that the Gospels did not. These later scenarios are evidenced in two of the

---

<sup>30</sup> This is especially the case with apocrypha that has been incorporated into hagiography and later Church practice, such as the Stations of the Cross/*Via Dolorosa* traditions associated with St. Veronica.

<sup>31</sup> For a thorough discussion of the apocrypha in relation to the New Testament, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faith We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Dale B. Martin, *New Testament History and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 27.

<sup>33</sup> The majority of Christian tradition regarding Joseph, Mary, and Mary's parents is from the apocrypha and apocryphal iconography. See Carlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 21-3.

most popular ancient apocryphal texts: The *Infancy Gospel of James* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.

The *Infancy Gospel of James* is believed to have been composed by a pseudonymous Jewish-Christian author,<sup>34</sup> writing in koine, in Greek-speaking Egypt, sometime between 180 and 200.<sup>35</sup> Though it provides information about the Annunciation and Nativity of Jesus, the *Infancy Gospel of James* is more aptly described as an account of Mary's life. The fullest versions of the text begin with the embarrassment of infertility suffered by Mary's pious, wealthy, and aging parents, Joachim and Anna, until an angel of the Lord appeared and announced to both that they would be blessed with a child.<sup>36</sup> Joachim and Anna dedicated Mary to the Lord in gratitude and, on her third birthday, took her to be raised at the Temple among the undefiled virgin daughters of Israel. Toddler Mary danced with joy at her presentation before the priest and high altar, where she was blessed as a singular revealer of redemption and was said to be loved by all of Israel. She was also loved by Heaven, for as she grew in God's house she was alleged to have been fed from angelic hands.

---

<sup>34</sup> Though the author's identity remains unknown, their ethnicity is often assumed to be Jewish due to the extensive use of the Septuagint. See Harm R. Smid, *Protevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, Apocrypha Novi Testament 1 (Assen: van Gorcum, 1965); E. Cothenet, "Le Protévangile de Jacques: origine, genre et signification d'un premier midrash chrétien sur la Nativité de Marie," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.25.6 (1988): 4252-69. As noted below, I believe that the author was also familiar with rabbinic literature. Even so, some scholars have recently begun to question the author's Jewish identity. See Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, The Scholars Bible (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1995), 9-10.

<sup>35</sup> Pamela Sheingorn, "Reshaping of the Childhood Miracles of Jesus," in *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha es et Omega*, ed. Mary Dzon and Theresa M. Kenney (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 256.

<sup>36</sup> I have consulted the version translated by Ronald F. Hock in *The Infancy Gospels*, 32-77, with the exception of the presentation of Joseph's staff in Chapter 9, for which I have consulted Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 24-5. See note 39 below.

Despite these honors, when she reached the age of twelve, Mary's story took an abrupt turn. The priests, probably fearful of the impending onset of adolescence, menstruation, and subsequent defilement of the Temple,<sup>37</sup> decided that she should be cared for by a widower of Israel who would be identified by a sign from Heaven. Joseph's election was indicated by the sudden blossoming of his staff.<sup>38</sup> And so, despite his misgivings, Joseph took Mary in before promptly leaving on business. During Joseph's absence, Mary occupied her time by sewing a portion of the Temple curtain at the behest of the priests. With this occupational detail, James' gospel responds to, and attempts to subvert, Jewish and pagan polemic that Mary spun cloth out of necessity and in shame because Joseph had left her. In further contrast to the polemical accounts, James' gospel indicates that Mary's work preceded an angelic visit from Gabriel and the Annunciation that she had been chosen to conceive the Lord's child. Shortly thereafter, as in the Gospel of Luke, Mary visited her

---

<sup>37</sup> The treatment of menstruant women, *niddah*, in Jewish law suggests that Mary's imminent puberty was the underlying concern of the priests' eagerness to see her leave the Temple at the age of 12. For biblical stipulations regarding *niddah*, see Lev. 15:19-33. For a treatment of menstruation in Greek sacred texts, see S. G. Cole, "Gynaikiou Themis: Gender Difference in the Greek *Leges Sacrae*," *Helios* 19 (1992): 104-22, especially 111. For a discussion of antique rabbinic treatment of *niddah*, see Alexandra Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 32-5.

<sup>38</sup> The detail of Joseph's blossoming staff was most common in the Byzantine cycle of the Life of the Virgin, though it was known in Western Europe and represented in Western iconography. See Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 24-5. In other versions of the text, the sign of Joseph's election entailed a dove emerging from the widower's staff. See Hock, *The Infancy Gospels*, 49; Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 66. The sexual connotation of the dove—an ancient fertility symbol representing the Holy Spirit and recognized as the generative person of the Trinity in the Gospel of Luke (Lk. 1:35)—emerging from the phallic staff of Joseph is rich here. Perhaps the double entendre is why the staff with a dove alighting was a less popular iconographic representation of Jesus' stepfather's election.



pregnant cousin Elizabeth who immediately knew, and proclaimed, that she was pregnant with her Lord.

When Mary returned home, Joseph's initial reaction upon discovering the Temple virgin pregnant was less welcoming—until, that is, an angelic dream vision revealed that she was carrying God's child, as in Matthew's Gospel. After this vision, Joseph defended Mary when her virginity was questioned by a scribe and a priest of the Temple who put their testimony to the test in a trial by ordeal that entailed the drinking of foul, brackish water, and traveling to the wilderness alone to see if God would, essentially, preserve the pious or smote the sinners. When both Mary and Joseph returned healthy, the priest conceded their blamelessness before God but, evidently, it was not known throughout Israel. For Mary's honor would be questioned again at the Nativity.

While she was in childbed in a cave, en route to Bethlehem for the Roman census, Joseph sought out a Hebrew midwife to attend Mary. The midwife remained in disbelief until awed by a miraculous light from Heaven. After blessing the family, the midwife went away and told an acquaintance, Salome, whom she met along the road, of the night's events. This second Hebrew midwife was audacious enough to perform a gynecological examination to determine if Mary was in fact a virgin mother. As divine retribution for this act of temerity, Salome's hand withered until she prayed to God for forgiveness and obediently held the baby Jesus to attest to his divinity. The text goes on to describe the adoration of the magi before closing with events surrounding the "Massacre of the Innocents." Here, shortly after the magi departed to avoid Herod, Mary—rather than Joseph, as in Matthew's account—learned of the ruler's murderous plot. Fearing for the safety of her child, she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and put him in a manger to hide him before the Holy Family fled to Egypt. The text closes with description of how Elizabeth too feared for her son, John the Baptist. When she could not travel to safety because of her age and fragility, God opened a mountain to receive them both as Herod's henchmen murdered her husband for his refusal to help locate his child who was also of the condemned age.

The *Infancy Gospel of James* shares a number of narrative elements with Luke and Matthew to an extent that suggests the authors of all three accounts may have based their versions on an older, more encompassing infancy story. This also suggests that James sought to answer questions—and polemical criticisms of inconsistency—arising from reading alternative accounts.<sup>39</sup> More extensively than Luke, James focusses on Mary’s lineage and familial relationships to her parents and cousin, Elizabeth, as well as the census precipitating the birth of Jesus. However, like Matthew, James also includes specific details that are lacking in Luke—such as Joseph’s proclivity to receive divine revelations while dreaming. Perhaps more pertinently, the *Infancy Gospel of James* also shares and expands upon the themes of the Virgin Birth, Incarnation, and the idea that Jesus represented a fulfillment of God’s messianic promise to redeem Israel that contemporary Jews and pagans mocked. Each of these details would become especially important in the development of Christian doctrine and its defense against polemical attacks.

The canonical accounts of the Virgin Birth, uttered by the narrators and angel Gabriel in Matthew and Luke, were effectually verified by the added scenario of the priestly trial by ordeal of Mary and Joseph in James’ account. Both the Virgin Birth and the Incarnation were also validated beyond events described in the Gospels regarding the Nativity—namely, by the heavenly light viewed by the first midwife and by Salome’s affliction and subsequent healing as a reward for obediently showing due deference to the Christ child. Written against the backdrop of Jewish and pagan rumors of her promiscuity,<sup>40</sup> the emphasis on Mary’s overall purity, and especially her virginity, suggests that her intact hymen was a defining characteristic. In time, it seems, the apocrypha impacted doctrine. For the idea that Mary remained a virgin perpetually and not just “*until* she had borne a son”

---

<sup>39</sup> J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M. R. James* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 50; Hock, *The Infancy Gospels*, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Scholars have commonly interpreted the *Infancy Gospel of James* as an apologetic account. In contrast to the consensus, see Hock, *The Infancy Gospels*, 15-20.

(Mt. 1:25), became widely supported by Christian exegetes as early as the fourth century. It would later become the official Church position and was determined significant enough to reaffirm in the catechism at the Council of Trent (1545-63).<sup>41</sup>

Finally, while Luke emphasizes Jewish rites of passage surrounding Jesus' early childhood, such as circumcision and presentation at the Temple, and Matthew extensively utilizes prooftexts to illustrate that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's messianic promise to Israel, James' account employs a combination of references to the Temple cult as well as biblical and rabbinic writings to the same end. James' presentation and the later popular iconographic representation of Joseph's flowering staff that signaled his election as Mary's protector,<sup>42</sup> for instance, alludes to the biblical account of Aaron's staff that blossomed as a sign of election to the priesthood.<sup>43</sup> Rabbinic traditions composed in the first centuries of the Common Era conflate Aaron's staff with that of Moses' and describe it as a wonder-working instrument that had been wielded since the days of Adam but had subsequently been hidden until the time of the Messiah. Upon his arrival, such texts assure, the Messiah would use the staff's power to redeem Israel.<sup>44</sup> The concept of dual messianic figures (a lesser messianic precursor to a greater redeemer figure), one of whom was hidden until the time of redemption is another trope familiar within rabbinic and Jewish messianic traditions.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 43-5.

<sup>42</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 25-6.

<sup>43</sup> See Nm. 17:8.

<sup>44</sup> See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 6 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909-38), 6:106-7; Christine Meilicke, "Moses' Staff and the Return of the Dead," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6 (1999): 347; John C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 188-89.

<sup>45</sup> For an overview of the concept of an occluded Messiah, see Martha Himmelfarb, "The Mother of the Messiah in the Talmud Yerushalmi and Sefer Zerubbabel," in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, ed. Peter Schäfer, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 93 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 369-89, especially 376-78.

These few examples indicate that the authors of the canonical Gospels and James' account hoped to appeal to Hellenistic Jews by legitimizing the Holy Family through contemporary and traditional Judaic customs and literature while defending them from persistent polemical attacks. By insinuating that Mary, her family, and Joseph were Jews *par excellence* who affirmed the advent of the Christian Messiah, James' account functioned as an attempt to establish their intermediary positions between the "Old" covenant of Judaism and the "New" covenant of Christ.<sup>46</sup> Yet, at the same time, James' memorable presentation of Salome provides an interesting dichotomy that recurs time and again in the history of Jewish-Christian relations—namely, a tentative license for violence against non-believers juxtaposed to an example of magnanimous forgiveness and restoration. This conveys the idea that Jewish converts, however late in coming, were welcome into the fold of the Church.

The same backhanded welcome would be echoed in official Church policy of toleration articulated by Church Father, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), when he called for Christians to permit Jews to live among them and not to harm them.<sup>47</sup> His admonition was based on the belief that Christ's return would only be realized once the majority of Jews finally accepted Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah by converting to Christianity of their own accord.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, the condoning of

---

<sup>46</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 23, assign the role of "bridge," or intermediary, between Judaism and Christianity to Mary. In James' account, this function appears to be shared among members of the extended Holy Family: Joachim, Anna, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph.

<sup>47</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 18.46 in *The City of God, Books XVII-XXII*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Daniel J. Honan, *The Fathers of the Church 24* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1954), 164-65.

<sup>48</sup> There are varied schools of thought regarding the reach of Augustinian tolerance. A number of scholars have approached the topic from a materialist perspective and have pointed out that the tenet of qualified toleration did not have a major impact in terms of socio-economic and political relationships between Jews and the leaders of various communities throughout the Latin West—that is to say, Jews were permitted to reside throughout different areas because of the benefits (usually economic) they provided to the local

violence against unbelieving Jews was largely frowned upon, at least among the highest ranking Church officials,<sup>49</sup> but would become

---

ruler and not due to any reverence for Judaism, or in the hopes of successful proselytization. Likewise, when violence erupted against Jews, it was not an intended breach of an unrecognized or irrelevant Augustinian ideal. See, for instance, David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Jonathan Elukin, *Living Together, Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Robert Chazan, *Reassessing Jewish Life in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). While these texts do make some valid points, they (especially Nirenberg's) are largely reactionary, written in response to R. I. Moore's sweeping, Foucauldian generalization of the medieval emergence of a bureaucratized web of intolerance in *The Formulation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). For examples of those who do consider Augustinian tolerance to have had an impact on Jewish-Christian relations, see Gavin I. Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and David E. Timmer "Biblical Exegesis and the Jewish-Christian Controversy in the Early Twelfth Century," *Church History* 58, no. 3 (1989): 309-21; and Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 1995); these authors opine that the dissipation of Augustinian tolerance began to emerge with the rationalist turn during the long twelfth century, in which those attempting to effectively argue the supreme coherence of Christianity did so at the expense of Judaism and Jews. Jeremy Cohen has repeatedly claimed that Augustinian tolerance only truly began to dissolve in the thirteenth century via the polemics of the friars. See *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982); idem, "Scholarship and Intolerance in the Medieval Academy: The Study and Evaluation of Judaism in European Christendom," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 592-613; idem, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 23-65. There is much to appreciate in these arguments; however, as the emergence of widespread anti-Jewish persecution occurred before the majority of intellectual justifications for it, one may deduce a somewhat earlier fomentation and a motivation other than heightened rationalism and rationalization. Vengeance—an explicit justification given in Latin and Hebrew narratives depicting pogroms—coincides with teachings of the Church in regard to Jewish culpability for Christ's crucifixion.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Friedrich Lotter, *Die Konzeption des Wendenkreuzzugs* (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1977), 34-8.

all the more blatant in another popular apocryphal text, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, and, in time, an increasingly frequent occurrence in Christian Northern Europe.

The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is a pseudonymous text believed to have been composed during the second century<sup>50</sup> in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. Like James' account, it was originally written in koine,<sup>51</sup> and filled in some of the gaps found in the canonical Gospels. But meaningful similarities end here. Unlike James' account, it is not a continuous narrative but a collection of stories focussed exclusively on the miracles (or exploits, depending on the audience's perspective) of the young Jesus, aged roughly five to twelve, and thus bookended by the biblical account of the Holy Family's return from Egypt and Jesus teaching at the Temple. While there are a number of versions of Thomas' account that contain one or more different stories, the evident function of each is to underscore Jesus' divinity—the doctrine of the Incarnation. Common episodes include a young Jesus sculpting clay birds on the Sabbath and, when reprimanded for working during the period of rest, defiantly animating them and commanding them to fly away; Jesus killing one or more other children for spoiling his play, or vexing him for some other minor infraction, and Joseph reprimanding him; and Jesus cursing his teacher and rendering him incapacitated because the man had grown aggravated at difficult questioning and

---

<sup>50</sup> Some debate remains regarding the dating of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* because, as with the *Infancy Gospel of James*, only later manuscripts are extant. According to Stephen Gero, "The Infancy Gospel of Thomas: A Study of the Textual and Literary Problems," *Novum Testamentum* 13 (1971): 48, the earliest date from the fifth to sixth century. As a result, some scholars at the extremis propose that the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* might not have been written until the sixth century but may have circulated in oral form much earlier. Regardless of the limited textual remains, the second century is generally accepted as the origin of this narrative. See Hock, *The Infancy Gospels*, 91-2; Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 58; Sheingorn, "Reshaping of the Childhood Miracles," 257.

<sup>51</sup> Hock, *The Infancy Gospels*, 90-1.

slapped the head of the boy who so arrogantly displayed superior knowledge.<sup>52</sup>

In these stories, Jesus eventually heals those he harmed once they show contrition or the community threatens to ostracize the Holy Family, but he does so grudgingly and only as a result of public outcry and (usually) Joseph's admonishing entreats. As such, Thomas appears to have been less interested in affirming Jesus' (or Mary's) position as an intermediary between Covenants as proclaiming an ideology of the Christian supersession of Judaism and a model of violent suppression of Jews for an erstwhile pagan audience.<sup>53</sup> By casting Jesus as a hothead who engaged in violence towards irreverent Jews, these episodes appear to condone and even encourage Christian followers of Jesus to carry out similar acts. The section below discusses how this unofficial policy of anti-Jewish violence carried over into medieval apocrypha, and how Jews responded with more fully developed infancy stories of their own.

## **II. The Evolution of Infancy Stories of Jesus in Medieval Europe**

### **A. Christian Infancy Apocrypha and Iconography**

The *Infancy Gospel of James* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* provided the basis for iconographic traditions and medieval apocrypha throughout the Christian world. The withered hand of Salome, Jesus and the birds, and Jesus rebuking his teacher(s) would become favorite scenes, prominently depicted in the stained glass of cathedral windows, on murals and frescoes, and in statuary and devotional objects.<sup>54</sup> (Jesus harming Jewish children was represented less frequently and, to my

---

<sup>52</sup> Each of these episodes is found in Chapters 2, 3, 4, 6-8, and in Ronald F. Hock's translation of the version of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* known as "Tischendorf A," in *The Infancy Gospels*, 104-43.

<sup>53</sup> See Sheingorn, "Reshaping of the Childhood Miracles," 277-9, 287.

<sup>54</sup> See Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 90, 107-8, 116.

knowledge, only within the manuscript tradition.<sup>55</sup>) Iconographic representations were owing to artists' familiarity with James' and Thomas' Greek infancy gospels, gleaned especially in Mediterranean workshops.<sup>56</sup> But the ubiquity in Continental Europe was also due to the evolution of these gospels in different contexts.

In Continental Europe, a popular hybrid of James' narrative and a version of Thomas' collection of stories (the *pars altera*) emerged during the seventh century in a text that would come to be known as the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*. By the eighth century, Latin translations circulated throughout Europe, some of which reduced the role of Joseph to that of an unnecessary nag while casting Jesus as Mary's true protector and provider. This shift is representative of a minor motif of the doctrine of Christian supersessionism already present in Thomas' collection in which Joseph, a Jewish man, symbolizes adherence to the "Old Covenant" of Judaism and the Jewish people writ large.

As early as the sixth century, related but decidedly more polemical articulations of this model began to crop up in miracle stories of the Virgin Mary popularized by Gregory of Tours (c. 538-95) in his *De gloria martyrum* (the Glory of Martyrs), and reiterated in dozens of later texts to circulate throughout Continental Europe and the British Isles. In an especially popular story—the tale of the "Jewish Boy"—a Jewish youth was attracted to Christianity and visited a church where he partook of Holy Communion. When his father discovered the offense, he stoked the fire and threw his son in to kill him as punishment for committing an act that Jews considered to be idolatrous. The Virgin Mary miraculously protected the child while the townspeople answered the wailing of the boy's mother and rescued

---

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, *Gesta Infantiae Salvatoris*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Selden Supra 38, f. 9r, ff. 22v-23r, in which Jesus is depicted killing a child who disrupted the pools he had created to make the clay for his birds, and is shown to have turned Jewish children into swine when their parents tried to hide them so that Jesus could not play with them. The conversion of Jewish children into "Christian" animals is a topic that deserves more treatment than possible in the current essay.

<sup>56</sup> Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 26.



them both. Mother and child were easily converted and welcomed into the Church; but the obstinate, abusive fool of a father who clung overmuch to Judaism was killed in the fire he had prepared for his son.<sup>57</sup>

## **B. Ashkenazic *Toledot Yeshu***

The first references to Jewish infancy stories about Jesus that suggest a written tradition (beyond the smattering of comments found in the rabbinic literature and pagan and Christian hearsay) emerged in Northern Europe more than two centuries after the introduction of the “Jewish Boy,” and about a century after the Latin translation of *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* had begun to circulate. Earlier Levantine versions of *Toledot Yeshu* existed, to be sure, but these were more interested in Jesus’ adult ministry and the events leading up to his death. Mention of the Jesus’ birth and childhood are absent in these (the only allusion to his conception is the epithet “ben/bar Pandera,” the son of Pandera).<sup>58</sup> These casually recall the ancient rumor that Jesus was the son of a Roman soldier in such a way as to suggest that the matter was already widely accepted and needed no further explanation. After all, not only Jews but Roman luminaries had spread the polemical attack against the then upstart religion during the early centuries of the Common Era.

The later assertions about Jesus’ parentage, conception, and childhood became topics of interest in Northern Europe under entirely different circumstances. By the early Middle Ages, Christianity was no longer novel in the Levantine and Mediterranean regions. After it had become the official religion of the Roman Empire during the fourth century, Christianity rapidly spread into the Germanic

---

<sup>57</sup> See the discussion of the tale of the Jewish Boy and its popularity in Western Europe in Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 7-39; and in Ora Limor, “Mary and the Jews: Story, Controversy, and Testimony,” *Historiein* 6 (2006): 66.

<sup>58</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to the *Toledot Yeshu*, 47.

Successor States where missionaries confronted many of the same questions about the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and Incarnation, questions posed by a skeptical populace that had frequently been converted at the point of a sword.<sup>59</sup> Gospel and apocryphal accounts of Jesus and the Holy Family functioned, in this context, in the same noted educational and entertaining capacities. But the apocrypha also helped to ease the conversionary process and establish a cohesive group identity, in part, by identifying a group of people—Jews—who remained stubborn and dangerous outsiders.

In the fullest versions of Northern European, or Ashkenazic *Toledot Yeshu*, Jews responded to their Christian neighbors' polemical characterization of members of their community and the implicit license to harm those who refused to convert to Christianity with their own polemical characterizations of Christians and a celebration of violence against the Virgin Mary. Through crass language and innuendo, Ashkenazic *Toledot Yeshu* worked to undermine the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and Incarnation while speaking to the precarious position of Jewish minorities in Christian Europe who might be tempted to assimilate and/or convert.

The earliest indication of an Ashkenazic *Toledot Yeshu* tradition, like the ancient polemic surrounding Jesus, reaches us second hand. Beginning in the ninth century, Charlemagne (768-814) invited Jews into his realm for the linguistic abilities, culture, and wealth it was rightly assumed that they would bring.<sup>60</sup> When the new group of Jewish emigres and local Christians confronted each other, members

---

<sup>59</sup> Severe indoctrination was something of a continuation of the violent, expedited manner of cultural hegemony reflected in the practice of conversion by conquest that many pagans in Saxony and in Avar territory, as well as Visigothic Christians living along the Spanish March, had experienced under the Carolingian rulers. See, for example, Cullen J. Chandler, "Heresy and Empire: The Role of the Adoptionist Controversy in Charlemagne's Conquest of the Spanish March," *The International History Review* 24, no. 3 (2002): 505-27.

<sup>60</sup> Aryeh Grabois, "The *Hebraica Veritas* and Jewish-Christian Intellectual Relations in the Twelfth Century," *Speculum* 50, no. 4 (1975): 615-16; Elukin, *Living Together, Living Apart*, 47.

of the upper echelons of society and many religious scholars interacted amicably.<sup>61</sup> But, in time, some Christians became suspicious of the political, economic, and social protection that secular rulers offered Jews whom they held responsible for Jesus' death.<sup>62</sup> For their part, some Jews were leery of accommodating the broader Christian culture because, in efforts to maintain amicable relations with their hosts, and because of pragmatic concerns for Jewish livelihood, some rabbis had become lenient (some would say, overly lenient) in their interpretations of *halakhah*, or Jewish law. Their willingness to accommodate the needs of their community and the wishes of their hosts impacted regulations regarding anything from the handling of ritually impure meat, or trading in the trappings of Christians religious ceremony, or crafting synagogues to look like Christian churches, to fraternizing with apostates and Christians for economically advantageous purposes.<sup>63</sup> It is in this context of renewed efforts by Christians and Jews to maintain religio-ethnic distinction in an atmosphere where the lines had blurred that we see a resurgence in doctrinal disputes centered on the Nativity and Incarnation of Jesus.

In the mid-ninth century, Amulo (841-52), a Carolingian Archbishop of Lyon, was angered with what he perceived as deferential treatment of Jews in the realm. In efforts to encourage stricter laws regulating Jewish behavior, he complained of the alleged beliefs of his neighbors. In his treatise, *Contra Judaeos*, Against the Jews, Amulo claimed that Jews were so confident of their position in the Frankish

---

<sup>61</sup> Grabois, "Hebraica Veritas," 613-34.

<sup>62</sup> J. Allen Cabaniss, "Agobard of Lyons," *Speculum* 26, no. 1 (1951): 59-61; Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 41-2; Rebecca Moore, *Jews and Christians in the Life and Thought of Hugh of St. Victor*, South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 138, ed. Jacob Neusner, et al. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 67-8; Elukin, *Living Together, Living Apart*, 46-7; Peter Schäfer, "Agobard's and Amulo's *Toledot Yeshu*," in *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus") Revisited: A Princeton Conference*, ed. Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson, and Yaacov Deutsch (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 42-3.

<sup>63</sup> See Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, especially 24-47.

Empire that, beyond denying Jesus' messiahship, they openly spread rumors (and recited every time they prayed)<sup>64</sup> that Mary had not been impregnated by the Holy Spirit, given birth to the son of God, Jesus, and raised him with his divinely elected foster father, Joseph, but that she had been “defiled,” by an “impious man . . . whom they [Jews] call Pandera,” and had thus conceived Jesus.<sup>65</sup> Plainly put, this version of *Toledot Yeshu* suggests that Mary had been raped by a man who was not her fiancé/husband Joseph,<sup>66</sup> but an impious man named Pandera in a manner that undermined the doctrines of Virgin Birth and Incarnation.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshu*, 47.

<sup>65</sup> “Confitentes eum esse impium et filium impii, id est, nescio cujus ethnici, quem nominant Pandera: a quo dicunt matrem Domini adulteratam, et inde eum in quem nos credimus, natum”: Amulo Lugdunensis, *Liber Contra Judaeos*, in *Patrologia Latina*, 116:169D (Ateliers Catholiques: Paris, 1844-55).

<sup>66</sup> Contra 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), 142; idem, “Agobard’s and Amulo’s *Toledot Yeshu*,” in Schäfer, Meerson, and Deutsch, *Toledot Yeshu Revisited*, 27-48; and idem, Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshu*, 9, who asserts that Amulo’s text reads that Jews blasphemed Jesus by claiming that he was “impious and the son of an impious, namely, [someone] of uncertain origin (ethnici), whom they call Pandera: with whom (a quo) they say the mother of our Lord committed adultery (adulteratam) . . .” Schäfer’s interpretation of “a quo . . . adulteratam” is questionable in that it presents Mary as an active party to adultery when the Latin of Amulo’s account suggests she was a passive recipient of action—in this case, the victim of defilement. Pandera’s active role and Mary’s passivity are suggested through the ablative prepositional phrase “by whom” (*a quo*), followed by the accusative form of “mother” (*matrem*), indicating that action was done *to* mother Mary rather than *with* her. *Matrem* agrees in case, number, and gender with the perfect passive participle of “defile” (*adulteratam*), thus conveying that mother Mary had been the recipient of defilement—i.e., rape—by Pandera.

<sup>67</sup> See Natalie E. Latteri, “Playing the Whore: Illicit Union and the Biblical Typology of Promiscuity in the *Toledot Yeshu* Tradition,” *Shofar* 33:2 (2015): 90-2.

As incendiary as this rhetoric might appear, the existence of some form of written Ashkenazic *Toledot Yeshu* is verified by Jewish sources, albeit significantly later. In the twelfth-century, Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn (1132-1200) mentioned a text similarly entitled *Tolada de Yeshu*.<sup>68</sup> Beyond this reference, Jewish anti-Christian polemic akin to that expressed by Celsus, Tertullian, and that found in the Babylonian Talmud, which would be incorporated into many versions of *Toledot Yeshu*, are also present in the multiple epithets for Jesus, common in Northern European Jewish texts.<sup>69</sup> These include insults that Jesus was the son of *ha-zonah*, “the whore,” a *mamzer u-ven niddah*, “bastard son of a menstruating woman,” or the combined *mamzer ben ha-niddah ha-zonah*, “bastard son of the menstruant whore.”<sup>70</sup>

Amulo’s claim that his neighboring Jews recited anti-Christian slander as part of their prayers may also have some merit. In the thirteenth-century Ashkenazic liturgy for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, Israel was directed to sing to the Lord in affirmation of their Covenant with God while denouncing Mary as a promiscuous woman and Jesus as a bastard in the closing prayer: “The nations call ‘Your Holiness’ [i.e., Israel] to a son of whoredom [Jesus]; Your chosen ones despise the one conceived by the whore [Mary].”<sup>71</sup> The blending of a Jewish declaration of faith and penance found in this prayer is

---

<sup>68</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshu*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Anna Sapir Abulafia, “Invectives against Christianity in the Hebrew Chronicles of the First Crusade,” in *Crusades and Settlement: Papers Read at the First Conference of the Society for the Study of Crusades and the Latin East and Presented to R. C. Smail*, ed. Peter W. Edbury (Cardiff, UK: University College Cardiff, 1985), 67; John G. Gager and Mika Ahuvia, “Some Notes on Jesus and his Parents: From the New Testament Gospels to the Toledot Yeshu,” in *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, vol. 2, ed. Ra’anan S. Boustán, et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 2:1009.

<sup>70</sup> Shlomo Eidelberg, *The Jews and the Crusaders: The Hebrew Chronicles of 70 the First and Second Crusades* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 16, 144n10.; Limor, “Mary and the Jews,” 58; Evyatar Marienberg, “Jews, Jesus, and Menstrual Blood,” *De Gruyter Open* 14 (2016): 7.

<sup>71</sup> “Old Version of *Aleinu Le-Shabbé’ah*,” quoted in Marienberg, “Jews, Jesus, and Menstrual Blood,” 7.

further suggested in Ashkenazic Inquisitorial records. These show that, by the mid-fourteenth century at least, apostates who wished to revert to Judaism and incite Christians to kill them so that they might die as holy martyrs recited formulaic renunciations of Jesus as “an accursed bastard” and Mary as “the greatest of whores.”<sup>72</sup>

As is the case with the second- and third-hand accounts mentioned above, parts of Amulo’s account regarding the beliefs and practices of his Jewish neighbors can be corroborated. There was, in fact, a medieval Ashkenazic *Toledot Yeshu* tradition that included information about Jesus’ conception, and some of the slanderous language associated with it was recited by Jews as part of religious ceremonies. But what of the details that Amulo mentioned that differ from Celsus, Tertullian, and the Babylonian Talmud? In those earlier accounts, and in many of the medieval epithets used to describe her, Mary was depicted as a promiscuous woman who consented to an illicit affair with a Roman soldier and conceived Jesus. In Amulo’s version, by contrast, Mary was defiled by an impious man of uncertain religio-ethnic origin.

Unfortunately, we do not have an extant recension of *Toledot Yeshu* that mentions Jesus’ conception until the fifteenth century, and the manuscripts of it and related versions date primarily from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries.<sup>73</sup> Bearing this caveat in mind, each of the Ashkenazic accounts that we do have include the idea that Mary was a non-consensual party in Jesus’ conception, as had Amulo. But the later *Toledot Yeshu* also include some notable variations and additions to Amulo’s account. In them, Amulo’s impious man of unknown religio-ethnic origin is identified as a wicked Jew; not only did he rape Mary, but he did so while she was menstruating. These later accounts reflect the development of Jewish critiques of the Virgin Birth and Incarnation in Northern Europe as well as mounting self-criticism regarding overfamiliarity with Christians and assimilation to Christian society. They also provide a revenge fantasy condoning

---

<sup>72</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshu*, 15.

<sup>73</sup> See Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshu*, 14-18, 50-1, 54.

violence in a manner that is not so dissimilar from that found in contemporary Christian apocrypha.

In the earliest account of Jesus' conception in Ashkenazic *Toledot Yeshu*, the reader is presented with a fuller narrative and Mary plays a far more substantive role than in Amulo's account. The tale begins with a depiction of Jesus' conception: Mary was a descendant of Israel and her fiancé, Yohanan, was of royal Davidic lineage. Yohanan was a good Jew, both God-fearing and well versed in Scripture. And one Sabbath's eve while he was away—presumably at Temple—a “good-looking”<sup>74</sup> neighbor named Yosef ben Pandera passed by Mary's house. In a drunken state, this good-looking Yosef went inside and began to behave as if he were her fiancé. Mary “thought in her heart that he was her fiancé Yohanan”<sup>75</sup> but, even so, when he began hugging and kissing her, she hid her face in shame and protested, saying, “Do not touch me, for I am menstruating.”<sup>76</sup> Yosef “was not alarmed and did not pay attention to her words. He lay with her, and she conceived from him.”<sup>77</sup>

When Yohanan returned in the middle of the night and sought Mary—presumably once Pandera had fled the scene—she asked him about his uncustomary behavior of (1) engaging in sexual activity twice in one night and (2) engaging in sexual activity while she was menstruating. In frustration, Yohanan left and told his rabbi what had happened. Shortly after discovering Mary's pregnancy and suspecting Pandera to be the father, Mary's fiancé Yohanan fled to Babylonia in shame, leaving Mary to bear and raise Jesus, seemingly alone and evidently without manners. For young Jesus had behaved disrespectfully to his teachers—much like the Jesus of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*—by asking difficult questions and showing his own mental superiority. As a result, one of the rabbis declared he

---

<sup>74</sup> Strasbourg, Bibliothèque Universitaire et Régionale, MS 3974, f. 170a, lines 4-5, in Meerson and Schäfer, vol. 2 of *Toledot Yeshu*, 82; Meerson and Schäfer, vol. 1 of *Toledot Yeshu*, 167.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

was a “bastard,” and another that he was a “bastard and the son of a menstruating woman”<sup>78</sup>—two epithets referencing Jesus’ illegitimacy and inherently defiled status as an explanation for his wickedness.<sup>79</sup> Shortly thereafter, the rabbis paid Mary a visit and questioned her about Jesus’ parentage. They determined that Mary was not liable for conceiving Jesus because Pandera’s bad reputation preceded him and, surely, he was the culprit.<sup>80</sup>

In this account, the idea that Mary was a non-consensual victim of sexual assault is clear and her assailant’s identity as a Jew is belied by the addition of a Hebrew name and patronymic, “Yosef ben.”<sup>81</sup> But, in addition to these elements that appear to have built upon the ninth-century *Toledot Yeshu* that Amulo complained of, Mary rejected Yosef ben Pandera with verbal protests that referred to Jewish purity laws against copulating with a woman during her menses.

The Babylonian Talmud and response literature indicate that women often claimed to be menstruating when they were not to avoid unwanted advances. It was commonly believed that even a wicked man would refrain from raping a woman if he thought she was menstruating because she was like impure meat and the penalty for copulating with her during menstruating stipulated death by

---

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

<sup>79</sup> See Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshu*, 46-9.

<sup>80</sup> Strasbourg, Bibliothèque Universitaire et Régionale, MS 3974, f. 170b, line 28, in Meerson and Schäfer, vol. 2 of *Toledot Yeshu*, 84; Meerson and Schäfer, vol. 1 of *Toledot Yeshu*, 170. Many scholars have noted that the story of Jesus as an arrogant yeshivah pupil, rabbinic name-calling of the youth as bastard son of a menstruant, and the questioning of the youth’s mother about his parentage closely parallel *aggadah* from the Babylonian Talmud: see Marienberg, “Jews, Jesus, and Menstrual Blood,” 3-4. Eli Yassif, “*Toledot Yeshu*: Folk-Narrative as Polemic and Self-Criticism,” in Schäfer, Meerson, and Deutsh, *Toledot Yeshu Revisited*, 106-7, also relates this story to the *Toledot Ben Sira* and *The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior*.

<sup>81</sup> William Horbury, “The Strasbourg Text of the *Toledot*,” in Schäfer, Meerson, and Deutsh, *Toledot Yeshu Revisited*, 59, also notes that Pandera is not a Gentile in this recension; however, he thinks this marks a change from Amulo’s account.



divine mandate.<sup>82</sup> In medieval Europe, this view was endorsed by the sages of the *Ḥasidei Ashkenaz*, or Pious of Ashkenaz. This group also promoted the belief that a child conceived of a menstruant would be unable to learn Torah properly or ever be counted among the pious but, instead, would be an idol worshipper whose moral nature was inherently flawed.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, Christians in medieval Europe were busy debating whether or not Mary menstruated. In part, this was owing to Aristotelian ecclesiastics' common association of menstruation with lust, of which the Church had proclaimed the Virgin void, but it was also owing to the fact that Jews had doubled down on their polemic against the Incarnation and claimed that God would never inhabit the filthy womb of a woman. In response, the Church came to the conclusion that Mary did not menstruate.<sup>84</sup> Thus the addition that she did in Ashkenazic *Toledot Yeshu* serves multiple polemical functions simultaneously.

In subsequent Askenazic *Toledot Yeshu*, the Jewish Pandera and the rape of a menstruating Mary would become more pronounced. In one version, the narrator indicates that Mary “screamed and cried out in a bitter voice and said, ‘What are you doing now? I have just begun menstruating!’”<sup>85</sup> And, in the most popular version to circulate in Northern Europe<sup>86</sup> Yosef was not only Jewish but also a “pimp,

---

<sup>82</sup> See Israel M. Ta-Shma and Judith R. Baskin, “Niddah,” in vol. 15 of *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Barenbaum and Fred Skolnick, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan, 2007), 15:253-58; Yonah Lavery-Yisraeli, “Talmudic Descriptions of Menstruation,” *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 13, no. 1 (2016): 9.

<sup>83</sup> Peter Schäfer, “The Ideal of Piety of the Ashkenazi Hasidim and Its Roots in Jewish Tradition,” *Jewish History* 4, no. 2 (1990): 14; Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 55-7, 104-05.

<sup>84</sup> Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 71, 108-15, 120.

<sup>85</sup> New York, Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, MS 2221, f. 39a, lines 17-18, in Meerson and Schäfer, vol. 2 of *Toledot Yeshu*, 97-8; Meerson and Schäfer, vol. 1 of *Toledot Yeshu*, 185-86.

<sup>86</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, introduction to *Toledot Yeshu*, 16-17.

an evil man, and [a] scoundrel ...”<sup>87</sup> But this version also includes other telling details that deserve consideration. In it, Yosef befriended Mary’s fiancé Yohanan for the purposes of having his way with her. Mary warned her fiancé to avoid Pandera because she recognized him to be an evil man. But Yohanan protested, claiming that his own goodness might rub off and positively influence the scoundrel. Yohanan was wrong. Pandera got him so drunk that he passed out. And, as Yohanan slept, Pandera stole into Mary’s house and pretended to be her exceedingly devout fiancé. He tricked her by turning out all the lights and reciting the *shema* (the Jewish declaration of faith, Dt. 6:4) with vigor. Even so, Mary rejected his advances because she was menstruating. To remedy the situation, Pandera lied and told her that a new *halakhah* had recently been determined that a man may copulate with his menstruating fiancée. Mary believed him and he had his way with her, once that night and then again, the next morning, thus conceiving Jesus.<sup>88</sup>

In each of these Ashkenazic *Toledot*, Mary conceives a bastard while menstruating. These two corrosive details mar Jesus *in utero* and lead to a disastrous severing of the Jewish community and the spawning of a new class of persecutors—Christians—in whose midst the Ashkenazic Jews who recounted these stories lived. In most cases, however, Mary is not presented so much as an adulterous or promiscuous woman but as a naïve victim who believed that her protests against sexual transgression might save her from defilement by any Jewish man who should have also been aware of the consequences of copulating with a woman during her menses, or as one who mistakenly believed that she could put her trust in a man known to be learned and pious but who she only later discovered had lied about both his identity

---

<sup>87</sup> Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Heb. 57, f. 22a, line 2, in Meerson and Schäfer, vol. 2 of *Toledot Yeshu*, 213; Meerson and Schäfer, vol. 1 of *Toledot Yeshu*, 286.

<sup>88</sup> The entire conception narrative in this recension is found in Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Heb. 57, f. 22a, line 1 through f. 22b, line 7, in Meerson and Schäfer, vol. 2 of *Toledot Yeshu*, 213-15; Meerson and Schäfer, vol. 1 of *Toledot Yeshu*, 285-87.

and the *halakhah* to serve his own purposes.<sup>89</sup> In these situations, Mary's victimization is not entirely dissimilar from that of medieval Ashkenazic Jews who, as early as the Carolingian era, protested what they perceived as lenient interpretations of *halakhah* by the rabbis. Especially devout members of the Ashkenazic community claimed that this leniency resulted in collective defilement that had incited God's wrath and, so, justified persecution against them.<sup>90</sup>

When allusions to Mary's promiscuity are mentioned in Ashkenazic *Toledot*, they are typically faint. But statements of Yosef's good looks and repeated sexual coupling, once even in the light of day when confusion about who he was seems much less likely, suggests that Mary might not have completely balked at all of the impious Yosef's advances. In these cases, perhaps Mary was like the majority of Ashkenazic Jews who only initially—if ever—resisted *halakhic* leniency. Like her, they could appreciate some of the attractive benefits of not looking too closely into the legality of matters, however fleeting and ultimately disastrous it might be to do so.

Medieval Ashkenazim would also have identified with Mary's defilement in relation to the many medieval pogroms where Jews were forcibly converted. In rabbinic literature, forced converts are referred to as *anusim*.<sup>91</sup> This term is also applied to the victims of rape, including the Mary of the Ashkenazic *Toledot Yeshu*.<sup>92</sup> This

---

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Gager and Ahuvia, "Some Notes on Jesus and his Parents," 2:1009-13.

<sup>90</sup> See Ilia Rodov, "The Development of Medieval and Renaissance Sculptural Decoration in Ashkenazi Synagogues from Worms to the Cracow Area" (PhD dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2003), 31-3, 43.

<sup>91</sup> See Avraham Grossman, "The Roots of Kiddush ha-Shem in Early Ashkenaz" [Hebrew], in *The Sanctification of Life and Self-Sacrifice. A Collection of Articles in Memory of Aamir Yequiel* [Hebrew], ed. I. Gafni and A. Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 1992), 109, 111; Norman Roth, *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 26; Eva Haverkamp, ed., *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während des ersten Kreuzzugs* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2005): 48.

<sup>92</sup> The trilateral root נסח in Hebrew refers to rape or force. See "נסח" in Francis Brown, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*

connection between physical and spiritual defilement was concretized when Northern European Christians took Jewish women hostage in pogroms. Such occurrences became increasingly common after the 1096 pogroms accompanying the First Crusade. And when pogroms occurred, it was not uncommon for the Jewish community to suppose that the women had been both raped and forcibly converted. Having been thus doubly defiled, the women were perceptually transformed into different entities altogether—either non-Jews or prostitutes.<sup>93</sup> In seizing Jewish women, the Christian aggressors also emasculated the community's male population through the defilement of their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters, and affirmed the subservience of the entire group under Christian rule.<sup>94</sup>

However the medieval Ashkenazim may have identified with the Mary of the *Toledot Yeshu* who had been lied to and assaulted, she, much more so than medieval Jewish women who had been compromised

---

(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 60. See New York, Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, MS 2221, f. 39a, line 24, in Meerson and Schäfer, vol. 2 of *Toledot Yeshu*, 98.

<sup>93</sup> See the discussion of Rashi's interpretation of Mishnah *Ketubbot* 2:9 in Rachel Furst, "Captivity, Conversion, and Communal Identity: Sexual Angst and Religious Crisis in Frankfurt, 1241," *Jewish History* 22, nos. 1/2 (2008): 192. Rashi, for instance, promoted the idea that wives who had been seized in pogroms and forcibly converted were probably raped and, because they could subsequently corrupt those around them by virtue of their defiled status, need not necessarily be accepted as wives again by their husbands should they return to Judaism and their community.

<sup>94</sup> Furst, "Captivity, Conversion, and Communal Identity," 199. The thirteenth-century Rabbi Yitzhak ben Moshe went a step further by presuming that women who had been captured would use any means at their disposal to save their lives—not only succumbing to rape (as opposed to committing suicide and dying in *kiddush ha-Shem*), but also by using their bodies to seduce and ingratiate themselves to their tormentors. And R. Hai ben Sherira Gaon (d.1038) pronounced that a woman who had apostatized but who later repented and returned to the community was not a "Jew" in the same way that men who had once belonged to the community but who had willingly apostatized were considered by Rashi to have retained their inherent Jewishness; rather, such a woman became "like a harlot."

through rape or forced conversion, could not be counted as part of the Jewish community. For it was through the fruit of her womb that Israel had been severed in two. To prove that they could resist the temptation to become like and part of the dominant Christian culture Mary represented, the Jewish authors and propagators of *Toledot Yeshu* maligned her as a menstruant and/or whore to deny and deride the inviolate purity that Christians touted as a characteristic of her saintly status. They also defiled her literary persona in a manner that corresponded to the treatment of Jewish hostages and forced converts. In this way, the rape of Mary in Ashkenazic *Toledot Yeshu* may have functioned as an expression of revenge fantasy intended to harm Christians in ways comparable to the violence wielded by Christ against Jews in the apocrypha and, all the more so, the violence that Christ's followers continued to wield against Jews in reality.

## Conclusion

Christian and Jewish stories about Jesus originating in the first centuries of the Common Era continued to develop throughout the Middle Ages. Their evolution provides clues to the socio-political contexts in which they were composed and promoted, especially as regards the shifting patterns of interfaith relations. For in each iteration, the stories provided doctrinal information, entertainment, and models of positive or negative behavior for their respective communities. The earliest Christian stories of Jesus found in the biblical Gospels and the *Infancy Gospel of James* reveal the insecurities and identity crises of communities so eager for acceptance by Jews and pagans alike that they presented Jesus as a fulfillment of Jewish messianic prophecy and the extended Holy Family as a bridge between “Old” and “New” covenants, even while adopting motifs from Hellenistic mythology. Early pagan and Jewish stories, by contrast, reveal some of the initial derision these groups showed for the emergent Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and Virgin Birth when they maligned Mary as a promiscuous woman who had engaged in a liaison with a Roman soldier.

Circumstances and alliances often change, and ideologies along with them. As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and, later, the Germanic Successor States, Christian identity increasingly became linked with the polemical identification of Jews as outsiders who threatened the moral and social fabric of society. Late antique and early medieval apocrypha and iconography based on the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* reflect and likely affected this ideological shift by depicting coercive conversionary efforts that appear to promote the marginalization of Jews and the physical abuse of those who resisted Christianity.

This ideology gained traction in step with large-scale Jewish immigration into Northern Europe at the behest of Charlemagne. The protections and privileges that the monarch (and subsequent rulers) provided to the Jewish community, and the feelings local Christians harbored of being slighted as a result of these, suggest that xenophobia and jealousy contributed to the fervor of anti-Jewish literary abuses. Ashkenazic Jews attempting to maintain their own unique religio-ethnic identity amid pressures and temptations to assimilate and/or convert to the dominant culture and religion responded in kind by developing regionally specific *Toledot Yeshu* tradition. In these, Jewish storytellers directed doctrinal polemics and literary abuses toward Jesus' mother while also projecting their own experiences as persecuted minorities onto Mary. The combination reflects the use of rhetorical resistance to assimilation and/or conversion when few other options were available, as well as the shared milieu of Jews and Christians living in contact and conflict.