



# The Alternative Chronology: Dating the Events of the Wagenseil Version of Toledot Yeshu

Gavin Mcdowell

## ► To cite this version:

Gavin Mcdowell. The Alternative Chronology: Dating the Events of the Wagenseil Version of Toledot Yeshu. Daniel Barbu; Yaacov Deutsch. Toledot Yeshu in Context: The Jewish “Life of Jesus” in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern History, 182, Mohr Siebeck, pp.59-80, 2020, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism. hal-03928867

**HAL Id: hal-03928867**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03928867>**

Submitted on 7 Jan 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# The Alternative Chronology: Dating the Events of the Wagenseil Version of *Toledot Yeshu*

GAVIN MCDOWELL

Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris, UMR 8167 Mondes Sémitiques.

Confusion about the chronology of Jesus has a long history. The New Testament itself does not give enough information to establish the exact dates of Jesus's birth and death, although there is enough information to establish his *floruit* between the reign of Herod the Great (d. 4 BCE) and the government of Pontius Pilate (26–36 CE). Josephus (*A.J.* XVIII 63–64) and Tacitus (*Annales* XV 44) both confirm Jesus's death during the time of Pilate, although they say nothing about his birth. Ancient historians eventually agreed that Jesus was born in the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus, according to a system in which Augustus ruled for fifty-six years.<sup>1</sup> Since Augustus died in 14 CE, the forty-second year of his fifty-six year reign corresponds to 1 BCE. This date became part of a traditional chronology and appears in the historical works of Christians, Muslims, and Jews.<sup>2</sup> Jewish writers, however, also knew of an alternative chronology that suggested Jesus lived about a century earlier than the conventional date, during the reign of the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus (r. 103–76 BCE). This tradition first appears in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 107b; *b. Sotah* 47a) as well as in the works of such medieval luminaries as Saadia Gaon (d. 942 CE),<sup>3</sup> Judah ha-Levi (d. 1141 CE),<sup>4</sup> Abraham ibn Daud (d. 1180 CE),<sup>5</sup> Moses Maimonides (d. 1204 CE),<sup>6</sup> and Moses Nachmanides (d. 1270 CE).<sup>7</sup> The alternative chronology played a role in both the Disputation of Paris in 1240 and the Disputation of Barcelona in 1263.<sup>8</sup> Finally, it appears in the opening lines of the Wagenseil version of *Toledot Yeshu*.<sup>9</sup> The translation and dissemination of the Wagenseil *Toledot Yeshu* (including,

---

This article was supported by Labex RESMED (ANR-10-LabX-72) under the program *Investments for the Future* (ANR-11-IDEX-0004-02).

<sup>1</sup> This would date Augustus's reign from either the foundation of the Second Triumvirate in 43 BCE or the Battle of Philippi in 42 BCE. Modern historiography dates Augustus's reign from 27 BCE, the year he assumed the title "Augustus." He therefore reigned only forty years.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* I 5.2, and *The History of al-Tabari, Vol. 4: The Ancient Kingdoms* (trans. Moshe Perlmann; New York: SUNY Press, 1987), 124. A Jewish example can be found within the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition itself. See the Ashkenazi B recension (MS. New York JTS 2221, formerly Adler 4089) in *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus: Two Volumes and Database* (ed. Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), vol. 1:185 (English); vol. 2:97 (Hebrew).

<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Daniel: The Commentary of R. Saadia Gaon*, (ed. and trans. Joseph Alobaidi; Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 603 (Judeo-Arabic text: 343).

<sup>4</sup> Judah Hallevi's *Kitab Al Khazari* (trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld; London: Routledge, 1905), 187.

<sup>5</sup> *The Book of Tradition (Sefer ha-Qabbalah) by Abraham ibn Daud* (ed. Gerson D. Cohen; Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1967), 20–2 (Hebrew section: 15).

<sup>6</sup> *Moses Maimonides' Epistle to Yemen: The Arabic Original and the Three Hebrew Versions Edited from Manuscripts and Notes*, (ed. Abraham Halkin; New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1952), iv (Hebrew and Arabic texts: 14–5).

<sup>7</sup> Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages* (Washington, DC: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993), 110–1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 26, 110–1, 156.

<sup>9</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:286 (English); vol. 2:213 (Hebrew).

eventually, on the Internet) promoted knowledge of the tradition outside Jewish circles. The tradition lives on in the realm of pseudo-history and conspiracy theory.<sup>10</sup>

There have been many attempts to explain the alternative chronology, most of them focusing exclusively on the Talmudic passages. Scholars tend to explain the reference to Alexander Jannaeus as a simple anachronism, citing the legendary character of the Talmudic story that introduces this chronology.<sup>11</sup> A few scholars claim that the story is about a different Jesus who was later confused with the Christian Messiah.<sup>12</sup> Other explanations are more colourful. Jacob Lauterbach proposed that the Jesus of the alternative chronology is Jesus ben Sira, the grandson [*sic*] of the famous sage who wrote the book of Ecclesiasticus. In this connection, he cites the “virgin birth” of Ben Sira in the tenth century *Alphabet of Ben Sira*.<sup>13</sup> In pseudo-scholarship, the alternative chronology is employed to suggest that Jesus is the Teacher of Righteousness from Qumran<sup>14</sup> or else to show that the incoherence of the Jewish chronology is further proof that Jesus never existed.<sup>15</sup>

The only extended discussion of the post-Talmudic history of the alternative chronology appears in Isidore Loeb’s book-length study of the sixteenth century Jewish historian Joseph ha-Cohen.<sup>16</sup> Loeb has adduced numerous Jewish chronicles that adhere to the alternative chronology, showing that this chronology is an authentic Jewish counter-tradition despite its lack of historical authenticity. The Wagenseil version of *Toledot Yeshu* is therefore on the receiving end of several centuries of the transmission and development of this tradition. It is an anachronism but not an error: it had meaning for the authors who used it, most of whom were also aware of the traditional chronology. However, Loeb offers no explanation of its origin and meaning.

In this chapter, I will briefly sketch this history of the alternative chronology from the Babylonian Talmud to notable medieval authorities and, finally, to the Wagenseil version of *Toledot Yeshu*. The differences between the Talmud and *Toledot Yeshu* reveal a curious evolution in the tradition. On the one hand, the Talmudic story focuses on Joshua b. Perahyah, the teacher of Jesus, who in the *Toledot* tradition is either redated to the first century CE or disappears completely. Indeed, he is absent from the Wagenseil version. On the other hand, Alexander Jannaeus, who is missing from most forms of *Toledot Yeshu*, reappears in the Wagenseil version, which is the only version of this text to clearly subscribe to the alternative chronology. I propose, therefore, that Alexander Jannaeus, rather than Joshua b. Perahyah, lies at the origin of this tradition, and that the deeds of the historical Alexander Jannaeus help explain the invention of the alternative chronology.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., G. R. S. Mead, *Did Jesus Live 100 B.C.?* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1903).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching* (trans. Herbert Danby; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1947), 24–7. For additional bibliography, see Thierry Murcia, *Jésus dans le Talmud et la littérature rabbinique ancienne* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 377–8.

<sup>12</sup> Within *Toledot Yeshu* research, the most famous exponent of this theory is in the work of the English divine, folklorist, and lycanthropologist Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Lost and Hostile Gospels: An Essay on the Toledoth Jeschu* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1874), 56: “That this Jeshu is our blessed Lord is by no means evident. On the contrary, the balance of probability is that the pupil of Jehoshua Ben Perachia was an entirely different person.”

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Lauterbach, “Jesus in the Talmud,” in *Rabbinic Essays* (New York: KTAV, 1973), 473–570 (481–90).

<sup>14</sup> Michel Coquet, *Jésus, sa véritable histoire: une exceptionnelle découverte à partir des manuscrits de la Mer Morte: la naissance de Jésus un siècle avant notre ère* (Monaco: Alphée, 2008). The author also claims that Jesus lived in India.

<sup>15</sup> Frank R. Zindler, *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew: Sepher Toldoth Yeshu and the Quest of the Historical Jesus in Jewish Sources* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Isidore Loeb, *Josef Haccohen et les Chroniqueurs Juifs* (Paris: A. Durlacher, 1888), 86–98.

## The Babylonian Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud is the first rabbinic source to give any indication of the date of Jesus. Although the Talmud is the origin of the tradition that places Jesus in the time of Alexander Jannaeus, the same source gives other dates. In other places, the Talmud identifies Jesus with the mysterious Ben Stada (*b. Shabb.* 104b; *b. Sanh.* 67a), a magician and madman who was condemned and stoned to death in the town of Lod. Ben Stada, we are told, was the son of one Miriam the hairdresser, the wife of Pappos b. Yehudah (d. 2<sup>nd</sup> ca. CE). Pappos was a friend and contemporary of R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, to whom are attributed the Ben Stada traditions. The identification of Jesus with Ben Stada would present a second alternative chronology, which, instead of placing Jesus a century before the historical chronology, would locate him about a century later. This second alternative date, however, has no further history. Rabbenu Tam, the grandson of Rashi, even comments that Ben Stada cannot be the same as Jesus of Nazareth because his *floruit* contradicts the tradition that Jesus was the student of one Joshua b. Perahyah during the persecution of Alexander Jannaeus.<sup>17</sup>

The story of Jesus and Joshua b. Perahyah appears twice in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 107b; *b. Sotah* 47a). Except for some minor variations, the two stories are identical. When Alexander Jannaeus begins persecuting the Sages, Joshua flees to Egypt with his student Jesus. They remain there for several years until the death of the tyrannical king, whereupon Joshua is invited by Simeon b. Shetach to return to Jerusalem. As they leave, Joshua makes an offhand remark about the inn where they are staying, which Jesus interprets as a remark about the innkeeper, a woman. Joshua, offended that Jesus would look at her, expels Jesus from his presence. Later, Jesus attempts to reconcile with his master while he is praying. Joshua motions for him to wait, but Jesus interprets Joshua's hand gesture as a refusal to take him back. Jesus then turns to idolatry by worshipping a brick. The passage ends with a note that Jesus practiced sorcery in order to lead Israel astray.

The story essentially has nothing to do with Jesus. It is a stock tale—dubbed the tale of the “Stern Master and his Wayward Disciple” by Stephen Gerö—which appears in both Jewish and Christian sources.<sup>18</sup> The story in the Babylonian Talmud is evidently modelled on a parallel version found in the Palestinian Talmud (*y. Hag.* II:2 [77d]; *y. Sanh.* VI:9 [23c]), which does not refer to Joshua, Jesus, or even Alexander Jannaeus. The main character in the Palestinian version is Judah b. Tabai, who flees to Alexandria with an anonymous disciple to escape an appointment as president of the Sanhedrin. The Babylonian redactor has transformed the Palestinian tale into a story about Jesus, explaining how he abandoned the teachings of the Sages in favour of idolatry and magic. To achieve this end, the redactor has made two key changes to his Palestinian model. First, he has changed the historical context to the persecution of the Sages by Alexander Jannaeus. Second, he has substituted Joshua b. Perahyah for Judah b. Tabai as the main character.

<sup>17</sup> See the introductory essay of Heinrich Laible in Gustaf Dalman, *Jesus Christ in the Talmud, Midrash, Zohar, and the Liturgy of the Synagogue* (trans. A. W. Streane; Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, 1893). Text at 7\* with translation at 31\*, referring to *Tosafot b. Shabb.* 104b.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Gerö, “The Stern Master and His Wayward Disciple: A ‘Jesus’ Story in the Talmud and in Christian Hagiography,” *JSJ* 25 (1994): 287–311. The Christian sources are an anonymous fifth-century Armenian chronicle and the sixth-century *Life of Saint Sabas* by Cyril of Scythopolis (292–7).

Regarding the first change, many have noted that the new historical context resembles the Gospel story of Jesus's flight to Egypt to escape Herod the Great's massacre of the infants (Matt. 2:13–23).<sup>19</sup> The story also recalls an anti-Christian tradition, first reported by Celsus's Jew, that Jesus learned magic while working as a hired hand in Egypt (*Contra Celsum* I 28). The Talmudic story reads like a harmonization of these two traditions. The observation that the Talmud story is a rabbinic version of the flight to Egypt is likely correct. However, this observation does not explain why the story takes place during the persecution of Jannaeus.

The second change, the substitution of Joshua b. Perahyah for Judah b. Tabai, is even more curious in light of the change in historical context. According to rabbinic tradition, Judah b. Tabai and Simeon b. Shetach belonged to the third generation of *zugot* (pairs) who ruled over the Sanhedrin during the Hasmonean and early Herodian period (*m. Avot* 1:8). Simeon b. Shetach, the only character to appear in both the Palestinian and Babylonian versions of the story, was also said to be the brother-in-law of Alexander Jannaeus (*b. Ber.* 48a). Judah b. Tabai was thus an exact contemporary of Jannaeus. Joshua b. Perahyah, however, belonged to the second generation of *zugot* (*m. Avot* 1:6), an entire generation before Simeon b. Shetach and Alexander Jannaeus. It is possible that Joshua lived until the days of Jannaeus's persecution, although, as Thierry Murcia has pointed out, it seems unlikely that he would have outlived Jannaeus.<sup>20</sup> Questions of verisimilitude are beside the point. The redactor has made a deliberate change to his model: Jesus is the disciple of Joshua b. Perahyah rather than Judah b. Tabai, although Judah would be a better fit for the historical context.

What, therefore, is the connection between Joshua b. Perahyah and Jesus? There are a few possibilities. First, there is the similarity in names. Jesus (ישו or ישוע) is simply an abbreviated form of the common Hebrew name Joshua (יהושע). Jews were cognizant of this fact.<sup>21</sup> For proof, one need look no further than the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition. Numerous texts of *Toledot Yeshu* state that Mary named her child after a male relative.<sup>22</sup> The earliest datable attestation of this tradition does not appear in a text of *Toledot Yeshu* but in the *Kitāb al-Anwār* of the tenth-century Karaite scholar Jacob Qirqisani. In his history of Jewish sects, Qirqisani explicitly identifies Joshua b. Perahyah as a relative of Jesus:

Then came Jesus whom the Rabbanites say is the son of Pandera and is known as 'Īsā bin Maryam (Jesus son of Mary). He lived in the time of Joshua b. Peraḥiah, who is said to have been the maternal

<sup>19</sup> This observation is very common. See, among others, Dalman, *Jesus Christ in the Talmud, Midrash, Zohar*, 43; Mead, *Did Jesus Live 100 B.C.?*, 142–3; R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1903), 53; Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching*, 26; Lauterbach, "Jesus in the Talmud," 488; Morris Goldstein, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 77; Gerard Mussies, "The Date of Jesus' Birth in Jewish and Samaritan Sources," *JSJ* 29 (1998): 416–37 (422); Dan Jaffé, *Le Talmud et les origines juives du christianisme: Jésus, Paul et les judéo-chrétiens dans la littérature talmudique* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2008), 151.

<sup>20</sup> Murcia, *Jésus dans le Talmud*, 382.

<sup>21</sup> On this topic, see Elchanan Reiner, "From Joshua to Jesus: The Transformation of a Biblical Story to a Local Myth," in *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land* (ed. Arie Kofsky and Guy G. Stroumsa; Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1998), 223–71.

<sup>22</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:169 (English) and vol. 2:83 (Hebrew); vol. 1:187 (English) and vol. 2:98 (Hebrew); vol. 1:222 (English) and vol. 2:128 (Hebrew); vol. 1:235 (English) and vol. 2:142 (Hebrew); vol. 1:275 (English) and vol. 2:197 (Hebrew); vol. 1:289 (English) and vol. 2:217 (Hebrew). In brief, this is a standard element of "Group II" or, in Di Segni's classification, the "Helena" versions. For this classification, see note 54.

uncle of Jesus. That was in the time of Caesar, the king of Rome, in [the days of] the Second Temple. The Rabbanites plotted against him and eventually killed and crucified him.<sup>23</sup>

Incidentally, both Qirqisani and most versions of *Toledot Yeshu* subscribe to the traditional chronology, a point I will return to in the examination of the Wagenseil version.

Stephen Gerö believes that the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition antedates the Talmudic story and thus argues that the tradition of Jesus's naming in *Toledot Yeshu* influenced the pairing of Jesus and Joshua b. Perahyah in the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>24</sup> While some form of *Toledot Yeshu* may have preceded the final redaction of the Talmud,<sup>25</sup> the two traditions seem to be separate. The texts of *Toledot Yeshu*, as opposed to Qirqisani, never identify the Joshua after whom Jesus is named as Joshua b. Perahyah. Furthermore, Qirqisani's work is post-Talmudic. His witness therefore says nothing about the Talmudic form of the Joshua-Jesus tradition. More importantly, this Joshua is never stated as being the teacher of Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

A second, more compelling reason for the Talmudic association of Jesus and Joshua involves their reputations as magicians. In both cases, evidence can be found in Late Antique Aramaic magic bowls of the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>27</sup> Both men are mentioned within the corpus of magic bowls, but the two never appear together on the same bowl. The Babylonian Talmud is the first source to unite them. This suggests that dependence, if any, flows in the direction from the magic bowls to the Talmud. Jesus's reputation as a magician, of course, precedes both the magic bowls and the Talmud. The accusation of sorcery, implied in the Gospels (e.g., Matt. 9:34), reappears in the above-cited tradition of Celsus's Jew and finds its consummation in the portrayal of Jesus in *Toledot Yeshu*.<sup>28</sup> Strangely, Joshua b. Perahyah's activities as healer and exorcist appears nowhere in rabbinic literature. It is restricted to the magic bowls. Nevertheless, the concluding sentence of the story, invoking Jesus's reputation as a sorcerer, shows that magic was not far from the redactor's thoughts.<sup>29</sup> Whatever motive brought Joshua and Jesus together, the Talmudic tradition cemented their relationship as master and disciple.

The association of Jesus with Joshua b. Perahyah, however, is not sufficient to explain the alternative chronology. It should be remembered that the redactor has temporally displaced both Jesus and Joshua in order to place them in the time of Alexander Jannaeus. Furthermore, Joshua,

<sup>23</sup> *Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī on Jewish Sects and Christianity: A Translation of Kitāb al-Anwār, Book 1, with Two Introductory Essays* (trans. Bruno Chiesa and Wilfrid Lockwood; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1984), 102.

<sup>24</sup> Gerö, "The Stern Master and His Wayward Disciple," 306–10.

<sup>25</sup> For an early date for *Toledot Yeshu*, see Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, "An Ancient List of Christian Festivals in *Toledot Yeshu*: Polemics as Indication for Interaction," *HTR* 102 (2009): 481–96. See also the same author's contribution to this volume.

<sup>26</sup> The strange kabbalistic text published by Samuel Krauss, "Un texte cabbalistique sur Jésus," *REJ* 62 (1911): 240–7, mentions Joshua b. Perahyah as Jesus's teacher but also censures him for failing to circumcise Jesus, something that is expected of a relative rather than a teacher. The text, however, is far too late to have a bearing on our discussion.

<sup>27</sup> For an overview with pertinent bibliography, see Tal Ilan, "Jesus and Joshua Ben Peraiah: A Jewish-Christian Dialogue on Magic in Babylonia," in *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (ed. Ra'anan S. Boustani et al.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), vol. 2:985–95. Significantly, she notes that the names of Jesus and Joshua are spelled differently.

<sup>28</sup> On this last subject, see Gideon Bohak's chapter in this volume.

<sup>29</sup> Gerö, "The Stern Master and His Wayward Disciple," 309–10n52, opposes the idea that Jesus and Joshua were linked by their reputations as magicians, citing, in particular, the absence of Joshua's magical abilities in rabbinic literature. He also believes that the final sentence, written in Hebrew, is a secondary addition to the story taken from *b. Sanh.* 43a. Given that the presence of Joshua and Jesus are also "secondary additions," I do not see any particular reason why this sentence should be divorced from the rest of the text.

like Jesus, is a time-traveller. Early Aramaic texts of *Toledot Yeshu* (“Group I”/“Pilate”) portray Joshua b. Perahyah as one of Jesus’s accusers (but never as his teacher), but they also follow the traditional chronology and feature Pontius Pilate and Tiberius Caesar as major characters.<sup>30</sup> The alternative chronology is therefore not dependent on the figure of Joshua b. Perahyah. He is a moveable part. Nevertheless, the alternative chronology, supported by the Talmud, exercised a powerful influence on Jewish writers of the Middle Ages.

## Medieval Authorities

The alternative chronology was invoked several times throughout the Middle Ages, usually in conjunction with the Talmudic story. The most significant difference between medieval authors and the Talmud is that medieval writers are fully aware of the traditional chronology. They must therefore explain the traditional chronology in light of the alternative chronology of the Talmud. Medieval Jews chose one of two approaches. Either they accepted the alternative chronology at face value and denounced the traditional chronology as a Christian forgery, or they claimed that the alternative chronology referred to a different Jesus, while the traditional chronology was correctly applied to the Christian Messiah. I refer to these two positions as, respectively, the polemic and the apologetic positions.

The earliest non-Talmudic witness to the alternative chronology known to me is the tenth century polymath Saadia Gaon (d. 942 CE), who, however, does not rely on the Talmudic tradition. Saadia’s most substantial reference to the alternative chronology appears in his commentary to the book of Daniel.<sup>31</sup> Concerning Dan. 9:26, “an anointed one (משיח) shall be cut off,” commonly cited by Christians as a foretelling of Jesus’s death, Saadia writes:

When they saw that their master was born one hundred thirty-five years before the destruction of the Second Temple, they considered that these four hundred thirty-four years started at the time [the vision] was told to Daniel.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, they added the fifty years earlier to the one hundred thirty-five years after the birth of their master. The total was close to two hundred years that they added in the chronology between the Persian and the Greek reign. They pretended that from the time the vision was told to Daniel until the beginning of the reign of the one with the two horns<sup>33</sup> there are a bit more than two hundred forty years. And, unsatisfied with that, they attacked us pretending that we deducted from the count two hundred years, out of prejudice against their master.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> For the classification of texts, see note 54. Late Hebrew texts such as the Huldreich version and Meerson and Schäfer’s “Slavic A1” adhere to the traditional chronology but also feature Joshua b. Perahyah as Jesus’s teacher. These texts seem more obviously influenced by the Talmudic tradition. See Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:308 and 336, as well as the discussion below.

<sup>31</sup> He also refers to it in his philosophical opus, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, at the end of Treatise 8. See Saadia Gaon: *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (trans. Samuel Rosenblatt; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1948), 319–22, and the analysis of both passages in Robert Chazan, “Daniel 9:24–7: Exegesis and Polemics,” in *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews* (ed. Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1996), 143–60.

<sup>32</sup> Saadia derives the figure of 434 years from the sixty-two weeks mentioned in Dan. 9:26 (62x7=434). Traditionally, the Second Temple period lasted 420 years, which is 490 years of the full seventy weeks minus the seventy years of the Babylonian Exile. I cannot account for the figure of 135 years.

<sup>33</sup> I.e., Alexander the Great.

<sup>34</sup> Alobaidi, *The Book of Daniel*, 603 (Judeo-Arabic text: 343).

Saadia is fulminating against the longer Christian computation of the Second Temple period, which is opposed to the notoriously truncated rabbinic calculation of the same epoch (*Seder Olam Rabbah* 30).<sup>35</sup> He claims that Jesus (“their master”) was born long before the traditional date and that Christians “cooked the books” in order to accord his birth with the prophecy of Daniel (and, implicitly, to connect Jesus’s death with the destruction of the Temple). He furthermore excoriates the Christians for accusing the Jews of similar tampering. Saadia’s date for Jesus (ca. 67 BCE) is curious in that it is too late for him to be the contemporary of Alexander Jannaeus. The passage does, however, mark a new development in that Saadia invokes the alternative chronology in order to attack the traditional chronology. The Jewish dating is correct; the Christian dating is faulty and reflects deliberate falsification.

The Spanish philosophers Judah ha-Levi (d. 1141 CE) and Moses Maimonides (d. 1204 CE) both briefly refer to Jesus in ways that seem to indicate the alternative chronology. Judah ha-Levi refers to the Talmudic tradition in his famous philosophical treatise *Sefer Kuzari*, completed around 1140 CE. He mentions that Jesus was a disciple of Joshua b. Perahyah during the time of Nittai the Arbelite and before the advent of Judah b. Tabai and Simeon b. Shetach (*Kuzari* 3:65).<sup>36</sup> He therefore preserves the order of *m. Avot* against the Talmudic story of Jesus and Joshua b. Perahyah. Consequently, Jesus lives slightly before the reign of Alexander Jannaeus. Maimonides, in his *Iggeret Teman*, written ca. 1170 CE, has little more to say. He writes that “quite some time” after the appearance of Jesus, “a religion appeared the origin of which is traced to him by the descendants of Esau, albeit it was not the intention of this person to establish a new faith.”<sup>37</sup> The “descendants of Esau” refers to the Romans and might suggest an origin for Christianity at the time of Constantine, which is “quite some time” after both the traditional and the alternative chronologies.

The historian Abraham ibn Daud (d. 1180 CE) is the strongest proponent of the alternative chronology for a polemic purpose. He invokes the alternative date numerous times in his multifaceted historical work *Dorot Olam*. This work begins with the *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, a chronicle that traces the chain of rabbinic authority from the biblical period until the author’s own day. Ibn Daud mentions Jesus while discussing the pair Joshua b. Perahyah and Simeon b. Shetach (following the Talmud rather than *m. Avot*):

The historical works of the Jews state that this Joshua b. Perahyah was the teacher of Jesus the Nazarene. If this is so, he lived in the time of king Jannaeus. However, the historical works of the Gentiles state that he was born in the days of Herod and crucified in the days of his son Archelaus. Now this is a significant difference of opinion, for there is a discrepancy between them of more than 110 years. The Gentile historians indicate their chronology in several different ways, by saying that he was born in the year 312 of the Seleucid Era and crucified thirty-three years later; that he was born in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Augustus king of Rome, in the days of Herod, and was crucified in the days of his son Archelaus. They argue this point so vehemently in order to prove that the Temple and the kingdom of Israel endured for but a short while after his crucifixion. However, we have it as an authentic tradition from the Mishna and the Talmud, which did not distort anything, that R. Joshua b. Perahyah fled to Egypt in the days of Alexander, that is, Jannaeus, and with him fled

<sup>35</sup> In particular, the rabbis attributed a mere fifty-two years to Persian rule, which lasted over two hundred years (539–332 BCE). This issue is still contentious among very traditional Jews. For a summary of positions, both ancient and modern, see Mitchell First, *Jewish History in Conflict: A Study of the Major Discrepancy between Rabbinic and Conventional Chronology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Hirschfeld, *Kitab Al Khazari*, 187.

<sup>37</sup> Halkin, *Epistle to Yemen*, iv (Hebrew and Arabic texts: 14–5).

Jesus the Nazarene. We also have it as an authentic tradition that he was born in the fourth year of the reign of King Alexander, which was the year 263 after the building of the Second Temple, and the fifty-first year of the reign of the Hasmonean dynasty. In the year 299 after the building of the Temple, he was apprehended at the age of thirty-six in the third year of Aristobulus the son of Jannaeus.<sup>38</sup>

Ibn Daud differs from his predecessors in that he not only refers to the Talmudic tradition, but he explicitly invokes the Mishnah and the Talmud as the source of this allegedly authentic tradition against Christian claims.<sup>39</sup> Like Saadia Gaon, he considers the historical date of Jesus to be a Christian invention. He also fixes a precise date for Jesus's birth and death, although it differs significantly from the one given by Saadia. The year 263 of the Second Temple period corresponds to AM 3671 in traditional rabbinic chronology (ca. 90 BCE), which places Jesus's death in AM 3707 (ca. 54 BCE).<sup>40</sup> These *anno mundi* dates depend on *Seder Olam Rabbah*, a work Ibn Daud apparently did not know, yet they would become traditional within Jewish chronography.<sup>41</sup> It is found in the works of Aaron b. Jacob ha-Cohen (fourteenth century), Joseph ibn Zaddik of Arevalo (d. ca. 1467 CE), and Abraham Zacuto (d. 1515 CE).<sup>42</sup> It is also, we will see, found in the Wagenseil version of *Toledot Yeshu*.

Ibn Daud is also well-informed about Christian traditions concerning the chronology of Jesus. Curiously, he dates Jesus's birth to the thirty-eighth year of Augustus' reign rather than the forty-second year. However, he attributes only fifty-two (rather than fifty-six) years to the total reign of Augustus, which is evident from a second report about Jesus: "In the thirty-eighth year of his [Augustus's] reign Jesus the Nazarene was born, for he ruled for fifty-two years over an empire that extended over the whole world; so they say."<sup>43</sup> This means that there is still a fourteen year difference between the birth of Jesus and the death of Augustus. Therefore, Ibn Daud knows both the traditional date of Jesus's birth (ca. 1 BCE) and the traditional date of his

<sup>38</sup> Cohen, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, 20–2 (Hebrew section: 15).

<sup>39</sup> However, he has altered the tradition from *m. Avot* to fit his claim. In the sentences just preceding this passage, he writes that Joshua b. Perahyah and Simeon b. Shetach served together as the third generation of *zugot*, when the Mishnah states that Joshua b. Perahyah served a generation earlier. Ibn Daud has in fact switched Joshua b. Perahyah with Judah b. Tabai, who is now part of the second generation of *zugot*.

<sup>40</sup> These dates, of course, do not correspond to the historical dates of the fourth year of Alexander Jannaeus (r. 103–76 BCE) or the reign of his son Aristobulus (ca. 66–63 BCE). A table of traditional rabbinic dates can be found in an appendix to Azariah de'Rossi, *The Light of the Eyes* (trans. Joanna Weinberg; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 723–4.

<sup>41</sup> For Ibn Daud and *Seder Olam Rabbah*, see Cohen, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, 165–7.

<sup>42</sup> Loeb, *Josef Haccohen*, 90–4. He refers to Adolf Neubauer, ed., *Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles and Chronological Notes*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1887), vol. 1:50 (Ibn Daud), 89 (Joseph of Arevalo), 191 (MS. Paris 263 f. 68, attributed by Loeb to Aaron b. Jacob ha-Cohen), and Abraham Zacuto, *Sefer Yuhasin ha-Shalem* (ed. Herschel Filipowski; London, 1857), 15ab. Loeb, *Josef Haccohen*, 97 also refers to a Hebrew manuscript (Paris, BnF 187), which contains Ibn Daud's dates.

<sup>43</sup> Abraham ibn Daud, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, 39 (Hebrew section: 30). Cohen believes that this second report is a lapse on Ibn Daud's part, but I interpret "so they say" (כמו שהם אומרים) as the author distancing himself from the report. Furthermore, Ibn Daud mentions the alternative chronology in the other parts of *Dorot Olam*. The second part, *Zikhron Divrey Romi*, a short chronicle of the Roman emperors, claims that Constantine lived 420 years after Jesus. The third part, *Divrey Malkhey Yisrael*, an adaptation of *Sefer Yosippon*, adds a short notice that Jesus of Nazareth was captured at the beginning of the reign of Aristobulus II. For these texts, see Abraham ibn Daud's *Dorot 'Olam (Generations of the Ages): A Critical Edition and Translation of Zikhron Divrey Romi, Divrey Malkhey Yisra'el, and the Midrash on Zechariah* (ed. Katja Vehlow; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 119–20 and 208–9.

death (thirty-three years later). Surprisingly, he even knows of an apocryphal Christian tradition that places Jesus's death during the reign of Herod Archelaus rather than Herod Antipas.<sup>44</sup>

Ibn Daud's testimony is valuable because he reveals the precise reason why the traditional date would be odious to Jews, which was only implicit in Saadia's polemic: The proximity of the date of Jesus's death to the destruction of the Temple was exploited by Christians for their own polemic purposes. That is, Christians claimed the destruction of the Temple and the resulting misfortune of the Jews was a punishment for the death of Jesus. Ibn Daud thus challenged a central argument of anti-Jewish Christian discourse.

A final noteworthy application of the alternative chronology appears at the Disputation of Barcelona in 1263. The Jewish disputant, Nachmanides, maintained the veracity of the alternative chronology before his Christian opponents without, however, relying on the tradition established by Ibn Daud: "His birth was nearly two hundred years before the Destruction [of the Second Temple] in fact, though according to your reckoning it was seventy-three years before the Destruction."<sup>45</sup> The reference to two hundred years may be rhetorical and refer to Jesus's *floruit* in the first century BCE. Taken literally, it would represent the earliest proposed date for Jesus's birth, approximately 132 BCE. This date would accord with the date of Joshua b. Perahyah according to *m. Avot* and Judah ha-Levi. Nachmanides's use of the polemic tradition rounds out what seems to be a predominantly Spanish preoccupation with demonstrating the truth of the alternative chronology. Apart from the Egyptian Saadia Gaon and the French Aaron b. Jacob ha-Cohen, all of the authors cited—Judah ha-Levi, Maimonides, Ibn Daud, Nachmanides, Joseph ibn Zaddik of Arevalo, and Abraham Zacuto—are indeed Spanish.

There is another school of thought about Jesus that is primarily apologetic rather than polemic. In this case, the alternative date became a way of protecting Jews against the accusation of blasphemy against Jesus. The argument runs that there was more than one Jesus, the first one being a disciple of Joshua b. Perahyah while the second was the Christian Messiah. The first written source to testify to the "second Jesus" theory is the record of the Disputation of Paris in 1240, in which R. Yehiel of Paris repeatedly emphasizes this point.<sup>46</sup> His fellow rabbis, questioned separately, use the same defence, which might show that this tactic is older than the Disputation.<sup>47</sup> While the Parisian rabbis all agree that the Jesus of the Talmud is a separate person, they do not agree on his date. R. Yehiel points to the passage about Joshua b. Perahyah as proof that there are two men named Jesus. His fellow rabbis, however, claim that there was another Jesus during the time of Tiberius. Either way, this tactic became a popular tool for defending Judaism against Christian accusations.<sup>48</sup>

Jewish writers, in fact, tampered with polemic texts in order to make them conform to the apologetic tradition. Gerson Cohen, in his edition of Abraham ibn Daud's *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, indicates a gloss in one manuscript claiming that there are two men named Joshua b. Perahyah

<sup>44</sup> See Mussies, "Date of Jesus' Birth," 431. He cites *Epistula Apostolorum* 9 and *Paradosis Pilati* 3.

<sup>45</sup> Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, 111.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 and 156.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 29; cf. the Latin account at 165.

<sup>48</sup> For further discussion, see David Berger, "On the Uses of History in Medieval Jewish Polemic against Christianity: The Quest for the Historical Jesus," in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi* (ed. Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron, and David N. Myers; Hanover, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 15–39 (33–4). Berger claims there are not two but three men named Jesus according to R. Yehiel: two in the Talmud (one living during the time of Jannaeus, another in the time of Tiberius) and the Christian Messiah. He also discusses the use of this tactic by Moses ha-Cohen of Tordesillas.

rather than two men named Jesus.<sup>49</sup> This second Joshua was the teacher of the Christian Messiah. Curiously, the “second Jesus” theory was later adopted by Christian authors as well. Ibn Daud’s work apparently attracted this kind of censorship. Three different sixteenth century Protestant authors referred to the second Jesus in their translations of *Divrey Malkhey Yisrael*, Ibn Daud’s adaptation of *Sefer Yosippon*. The sole reference to Jesus in this work indicates that he was apprehended in the time of Aristobulus. Sebastian Münster (*Shelosh ‘Esreh ‘Iqarim*, 1529), Hans Schwyntzer (*Josippi Judische Historien*, 1530), and Georg Wolff von Grimmer (*Josippus, Ejn kurtzer Auszug vnd Begriff Josippi*, 1557) all add a marginal gloss to the effect that this man is a different Jesus.<sup>50</sup> Apparently they were more interested in defending the integrity of Jesus than accusing the Jews of blasphemy.

Morris Goldstein, who is himself a modern proponent of the “second Jesus” theory, mentions several other authors who espouse it, including the Italian Abraham Farissol (*Magen Abraham*, 1514), the Germans David Gans (*Tzemach David*, 1592) and Salman Zevi Aufhausen (*Jüdische Theriak*, 1615), and the Portuguese Isaac Abravanel (*Ma‘aynei ha-Yeshu‘ah*, 1647).<sup>51</sup> The diffusion of the apologetic tradition is more geographically diverse than the polemic tradition, yet it first appears in France and has a number of German proponents—both Jewish and Christian. One wonders if the apologetic tradition was typically Ashkenazi in the same way that the polemic tradition was predominantly Sephardi. This division, of course, is not absolute. The fourteenth century Spanish philosopher and physician Shem-Tov ibn Shaprut knew of the “second Jesus” theory and mentions it in his (still largely unpublished) polemic work, *Even Bohan* (written ca. 1385).<sup>52</sup> The polemicist Yom-Tov Lipmann-Mühlhausen (d. ca. 1420), not a Spaniard, evokes the polemic tradition in his magnum opus *Sefer Nizzahon*, section 322, while discussing (like Saadia Gaon) Daniel 9:24–27.<sup>53</sup> Lipmann-Mühlhausen’s report hews closely to Ibn Daud. He mentions that Jesus was born in the fourth year of Alexander Jannaeus while Christians believe he was born in the thirty-eighth year of Augustine and crucified under Herod Archelaus, all of which are traditions peculiar to Ibn Daud. He also claims that Jannaeus’s wife was named Helena and her son was named Monobaz, also known as Hyrcanus. This historical error (to be discussed in greater detail below) is unique to the Wagenseil version of *Toledot Yeshu*, which, along with Ibn Daud, could have been one of Lipmann-Mühlhausen’s sources.

## The *Toledot Yeshu* Tradition

The traditional chronology is the default one in the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition. In fact, the Wagenseil version is the only one that clearly adheres to the alternative chronology. In this section, we will first present an overview of the date of Jesus in other *Toledot Yeshu* texts before examining the Wagenseil version in particular.

The *Toledot Yeshu* tradition can be broadly divided into three groups of texts. To the first group belong mainly Aramaic texts that recount the trial of Jesus and John the Baptist before

<sup>49</sup> Cohen, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, 114–5n100.

<sup>50</sup> See Vehlow, *Dorot ‘Olam*, 209n209.

<sup>51</sup> Goldstein, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition*, 76.

<sup>52</sup> For the “second Jesus” theory in Ibn Shaprut, see William Horbury, “A Critical Examination of the Toledoth Yeshu” (PhD diss., Clare College, Cambridge, 1970), 476–7. I am grateful to Daniel Barbu for this reference.

<sup>53</sup> Yom-Tov Lipmann-Mühlhausen, *Liber Nizachon Rabbi Lipmanni* (ed. Theodoric Hackspan; Amsterdam: Wolfgang Endter, 1644), 181. For good measure, the author also refers to the “second Jesus” theory in section 347 (ibid., 192). Loeb, *Josef Haccohen*, 87n2, noticed this discrepancy.

Pontius Pilate and Emperor Tiberius. This group corresponds to the “Pilate” recension according to the nomenclature of Riccardo Di Segni and “Group I” according to the classification of Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer.<sup>54</sup> The very presence of Pilate and Tiberius demonstrates an adherence to the traditional chronology. As stated earlier, this group of texts also features Joshua b. Perahyah as one of Jesus’s accusers (but never as his former teacher). He does not seem to be connected in any way to the Talmudic tradition that places Joshua in the same epoch as Alexander Jannaeus.

The second group, corresponding to Di Segni’s “Helena” recension and Meerson and Schäfer’s “Group II,” gives a fuller account of the life of Jesus and includes infancy narratives. They all take place during the reign of one Queen Helena. Queen Helena has been described as a composite figure who exhibits aspects of three separate historical figures: Helena of Adiabene; Helena, the mother of Constantine; and Salome Alexandra, the wife and successor of Alexander Jannaeus.<sup>55</sup> Essentially, however, she is Helena of Adiabene. The other two identifications are secondary and found only in certain texts.<sup>56</sup> According to Josephus, Helena of Adiabene—the historical Helena—was a pagan queen who converted to Judaism along with the rest of her family early in the first century CE (A.J. XX 17–96). Rabbinic tradition preserved her memory, and she is fondly recalled in classical rabbinic sources (*m. Yoma* 3:10; *m. Nazir* 3:6). In *Toledot Yeshu*, Helena is described as Queen of Israel, but she is not necessarily Jewish herself. She is at first kindly disposed toward Jesus, but she later changes her tune after the Sages are able to strip Jesus of his magical powers. Her trajectory in *Toledot Yeshu* is therefore also one of conversion.<sup>57</sup>

If Queen Helena is indeed Helena of Adiabene, then all of the texts of the “Helena” recension/“Group II” would adhere to the traditional chronology, since the historical Helena was a contemporary of Jesus. A number of texts in this group further specify the time period. The subgroup labelled “Ashkenazi B” in the Meerson/Schäfer collection (represented by MS. New York, JTS 2221, formerly Adler 4089) begins with the notice that Jesus was born in the forty-second year of Augustus and dates his death to the year AM 3791 (30/31 CE).<sup>58</sup> Pilate is also mentioned.<sup>59</sup> The Italian subgroups identify Helena as the wife (!) of Constantine but situate the action in the days of Tiberius Caesar.<sup>60</sup>

The traditional chronology of these texts is offset somewhat by the appearance of Simeon b. Shetach in the early part of the story. In some versions of the “Helena” group, Simeon is the rabbi of Yohanan, the husband of Mary. Simeon counsels Yohanan after Mary is raped by Pandera, the father of Jesus. He does not fulfil any of the functions of his Talmudic counterpart. However, he might be a stand-in for a particular New Testament character, the Simeon from the Gospel of Luke who prophesizes over the infant Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:25–35). This

<sup>54</sup> On the categorization of texts, see Riccardo Di Segni, *Il Vangelo del Ghetto* (Rome: Newton Compton, 1985); Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:28–39.

<sup>55</sup> Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Polymorphic Helena—*Toledot Yeshu* as a Palimpsest of Religious Narratives and Identities,” in *Toledot Yeshu ... Revisited* (ed. Schäfer, Meerson, and Deutsch), 247–82.

<sup>56</sup> The Italian subgroups identify Helena as the wife (not mother) of Constantine, while the Wagenseil version alone makes Helena the wife of Alexander Jannaeus. For the Italian subgroups, see Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:239 (English) and 2:148 (Hebrew); and vol.1:277n24 (English) and vol. 2:199 (Hebrew). For the Wagenseil version, see below.

<sup>57</sup> See further Sarit Kattan Gribetz’s contribution in this volume.

<sup>58</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:185 (English) and vol. 2:97 (Hebrew).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1:198 (English) and vol. 2:107 (Hebrew).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1:233 (English) and vol. 2:139 (Hebrew); as well as vol. 1:273 (English) and vol. 2:195 (Hebrew).

Simeon was promised by God that he would not die until he saw the Messiah with his own eyes. From this verse developed the idea that Simeon was in fact centuries old—he could not die until he saw the Messiah. Consequently, any Simeon from the Jewish past became a potential candidate for the true identity of the Simeon in Luke.<sup>61</sup> One of these is none other than Simeon b. Shetach. The identification is found in a remarkable Arabic text attributed (falsely) to Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235 CE), a sort of Christian counterpart to *m. Avot*: “And Nathan delivered it to Simeon the elder son of Shetach. He is the one who carried the Messiah in his arms.”<sup>62</sup> If Christians could identify the two Simeons, so could Jews.

The third group of *Toledot Yeshu* texts includes a number of idiosyncratic versions. These texts tend to be longer and have more detailed narratives. They also feature more motifs drawn from the Talmud.<sup>63</sup> Di Segni isolated the Huldreich version as the sole exemplar of this group, but Meerson and Schäfer expanded it to include more examples, including the Wagenseil version and the Slavic subgroup.<sup>64</sup> The Slavic subgroup opens with specific (if erratic) dates regarding the time of the story.<sup>65</sup> The most common date for the birth of Jesus in the manuscripts of this subgroup is AM 3728 [33/32 BCE] or 320 years after the construction of the Second Temple. This date might be a variation of the traditional chronology that understands the Christian calendar as beginning with the death of Jesus rather than his birth.

The Huldreich version is a special case.<sup>66</sup> The combination of multiple figures from different traditions makes the description of the chronology of this version particularly difficult. This version opens with a reference to “Herod the Proselyte” (Herod the Great?), suggesting that the author envisages the traditional chronology. However, the author has also attempted to harmonize specifically Talmudic traditions about Jesus, which throws doubt on the intended chronology. On the one hand, Joshua b. Perahyah appears as the teacher of Jesus, which is exceptional in the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition. On the other hand, the author also mentions figures such as Pappos b. Yehudah (here the husband of Mary), R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, and R. Aqiva, and the entire story is attributed to Yohanan b. Zakkai. These are all *Tannaim* who flourished at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century CE. The author is influenced by the Talmudic Ben Stada traditions as well as the story of Jesus and Joshua b. Perahyah.

From here, we finally arrive at the Wagenseil version.<sup>67</sup> The work is distinguished by its reference to Alexander Jannaeus. The king himself never appears in this text, but he is mentioned twice. The first reference situates the birth narrative during his reign. The narrator even gives a precise date: “In the year 671 of the fourth millennium, in the days of Yannai the King, there was

<sup>61</sup> Michael Stone lists several possible identifications for Simeon in *The Armenian Texts of Epiphanius of Salamis: De mensuris et ponderibus* (ed. Michael Stone and Roberta R. Ervine; Louvain: Peeters, 2000), 25–26n81.

<sup>62</sup> Marcel Poorthuis, “Tradition and Religious Authority: On a Neglected Christian Parallel to *Mishna Abot* 1,1–10,” *HUCA* 66 (1995): 169–201 (193).

<sup>63</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:36 note that the role of the Sages is greatly expanded in these versions. This is their primary criterion distinguishing these texts from those of “Group II.”

<sup>64</sup> Di Segni, however, classifies Wagenseil and the Slavic subgroup as part of the “Helena” group. Helena does, in fact, figure into these texts. She does not appear in the Huldreich version.

<sup>65</sup> See Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:43. Other dates that appear in the manuscripts include AM 3700 (61 BCE), 3708 (53 BCE), and 3720 (41 BCE). See *ibid.*, vol. 1:323–72 (English) and vol. 2:252–311 (Hebrew).

<sup>66</sup> For this text, see Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:305–22 (English) and vol. 2:238–51 (Hebrew). See also Adina Yoffie, “Observations on the Huldreich Manuscripts of the *Toledot Yeshu*,” in *Toledot Yeshu ... Revisited* (ed. Schäfer, Meerson, and Deutsch), 61–77.

<sup>67</sup> For this text, see Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:286–304 (English) and vol. 2:211–37 (Hebrew).

great trouble concerning those that ‘hate’ Israel.”<sup>68</sup> The second reference occurs in the introduction of Queen Helena and leaves the reader little doubt that Queen Helena is now to be identified with Salome Alexandra: “She was Queen Helene, the wife of king Yannai mentioned (above), and she ruled after the death of her husband; she is also called Elaina, and her son was king Monobaz, called Hyrcanus, who was killed by his servant Herod.”<sup>69</sup>

As a character, Queen Helena is herself unchanged from previous versions. It is only by virtue of these references that she “transforms” into Salome Alexandra. The redactor has even left the residual evidence that Queen Helena was originally intended to be Helena of Adiabene. Helena of Adiabene had a son named Monobaz, who ruled after her, although Hyrcanus was indeed a son of Salome Alexandra who was killed by Herod. The two notices situate the chronology of the Wagenseil version precisely: Jesus was born during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus and was apprehended during the reign of Salome Alexandra.

Meerson and Schäfer, however, suggest that the date AM 3671 is an error.<sup>70</sup> They point out that a simple inversion of two of the numbers would produce 3761, which corresponds to 1 CE. This is a remarkable coincidence, but it is an insufficient explanation of this figure. First, as the authors readily admit, the inversion is only possible with Arabic numerals. The Hebrew equivalents (תרע"א and תשס"א) are impossible to confuse. This leads them to postulate a “proto-Wagenseil” version written in Yiddish or another Jewish language that would use Arabic numerals. This solution is unnecessary. In the first place, the narrator is quite clear that Jesus lived during time of Alexander Jannaeus and his queen. Second, the year 3671 corresponds exactly with the date given by Ibn Daud (263 years after the building of the Temple) when it is applied to the traditional rabbinic chronology established by *Seder Olam Rabbah*. According to this system, the Second Temple was constructed in AM 3408. Adding 263 to 3408 produces 3671, the figure in Wagenseil.<sup>71</sup>

The date in the Wagenseil version is therefore correct. It goes back to Ibn Daud’s chronology as interpreted through the lens of *Seder Olam Rabbah* and ultimately draws on the Talmudic tradition that Jesus lived in the time of Alexander Jannaeus. The Wagenseil version is thus heir to both Ibn Daud and the Talmud, but it differs from them in an important way. The Wagenseil version never refers to the story of Jesus and Joshua b. Perahyah. Consequently, it does not base the alternative chronology on a tradition about Jesus’s teacher, nor does it present a distorted version of the Christian tradition about the flight to Egypt. Its appeal to the alternative chronology depends on the figure of Alexander Jannaeus alone.

The central question now emerges: What is the connection between Alexander Jannaeus and Jesus of Nazareth? The principal memory of Alexander Jannaeus in rabbinic tradition is his persecution of the Sages. But how did he persecute them? The classical rabbinic literature is hazy on this subject. Even the Talmudic story about Jesus and Joshua merely states that Jannaeus “killed” (קטל) the Sages. Jewish sources from both before and after the Talmudic period are clearer on this subject: Alexander Jannaeus crucified the Pharisees. The most famous passage comes from Josephus:

<sup>68</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:286 (English) and vol. 2:213 (Hebrew).

<sup>69</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:292–3 (English) and vol. 2:223–4 (Hebrew). This passage also appears in Lipmann-Mühlhausen, *Liber Nizachon Rabbi Lipmanni*, 181.

<sup>70</sup> Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:43–44.

<sup>71</sup> See Joanna Weinberg, *The Light of the Eyes*, 723. While these figures are derived from *Seder Olam Rabbah*, this work does not itself provide any *anno mundi* dates, only the time that elapses between significant events.

But later on the Jews fought against Alexander and were defeated, many of them dying in battle. The most powerful of them, however, he shut up and besieged in the city of Bethoma, and after taking the city and getting them into his power, he brought them back to Jerusalem; and there he did a thing that was as cruel as could be: while he feasted with his concubines in a conspicuous place, he ordered some eight hundred of the Jews to be crucified, and slaughtered their children and wives before the eyes of the still living wretches (*A.J.* XIII 379-380).<sup>72</sup>

A second reference is found in the Nahum Pesher from Qumran (4Q169 3–4 I, 6–8), which prophesies that the “Lion of Wrath” (generally agreed to be Alexander Jannaeus) will hang the “Seekers-after-Smooth-Things” (a reference to the Pharisees). The Nahum Pesher uses the Hebrew verb תלה to describe the action of Jannaeus. This verb, which means “to hang,” is also frequently employed in the sense “to crucify.” Examples are numerous,<sup>73</sup> but in this case one need look no further than the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition itself, where Jesus is always hanged instead of crucified.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, when a medieval source like *Sefer Yosippon* claims that Alexander Jannaeus hanged eight hundred Pharisees (ויתלו על עצים את שמונה מאות הפרושים), the implication is that he crucified them.<sup>75</sup>

The most salient fact about the historical Jesus is that he died by crucifixion. The most notorious episode in the life of Alexander Jannaeus was his crucifixion of the 800 Pharisees. Crucifixion is the one common element of these two very different people. It is perhaps sufficient to explain why there is a persistent tradition that Jesus lived in the time of Alexander Jannaeus. Jesus is moved to the time of Jannaeus because Jannaeus was known to have practiced crucifixion.

## Conclusions

From this survey of the history of the alternative chronology, I have arrived at the following conclusions. First, the Talmudic tradition is essentially a parody of the flight to Egypt, with Alexander Jannaeus replacing the figure of Herod. Temporal displacement and conflation of two distinct persons is common in rabbinic literature.<sup>76</sup> Jesus is not even consistently dated to the same time period in the Talmud—the Ben Stada tradition places Jesus in a completely different epoch. Although the Talmud does not mention crucifixion specifically, I think it is significant that the historical background for the story of Jesus and Joshua is the persecution by Jannaeus.

The authority of the Babylonian Talmud gave the alternative chronology renewed vitality in the Middle Ages in the context of Jewish-Christian polemics. Ibn Daud was the most influential writer on this topic. He not only defended the authenticity of the Talmudic tradition, he attacked the Christian chronology as an invention designed to link Jesus’s death with the destruction of

<sup>72</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books XII–XIV (trans. Ralph Marcus; London: William Heinemann, 1943), 417.

<sup>73</sup> For one particularly clear example, Targum Onkelos to Deut. 21:22 translates the Hebrew “you will hang him on a tree” (תלית אתו על עץ) with “you will crucify him on a cross” (תצלוּב יתיה על צליבא).

<sup>74</sup> See Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1:92–100.

<sup>75</sup> *Josippon: Jüdische Geschichte vom Anfang der Welt bis zum Ende des ersten Aufstands gegen Rom* (ed. Dagmar Börner-Klein and Beate Zuber; Wiesbaden: Marix Verlag, 2010), 287.

<sup>76</sup> Again, the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition provides a good example: the story of Simon Kepha (Peter) is conflated with the story of the fifth-century ascetic Simeon the Stylite. He is the chief disciple of Jesus yet spends his days fasting in a tower.

the Second Temple. He contributed to the alternative chronology by giving precise dates for the life of Jesus, which acquired an authoritative status among later authors, including the author of the Wagenseil version of *Toledot Yeshu*. The tradition had its greatest influence among Spanish writers. In France and Germany, the alternative chronology was instead invoked for an apologetic purpose, in order to show that the Jesus of the Talmud is not the Christian Messiah but another man with the same name. The Disputation of Paris is the first known example of this aspect of the tradition. Gradually, the apologetic use of the alternative chronology became dominant over the polemic use for what must have been entirely pragmatic reasons: the apologetic approach helped preserve the Talmud against the charges of blasphemy and, ultimately, consignment to the flames.

The Wagenseil version represents something like a final development for the alternative chronology. This work does not enter into a debate about the chronology of Jesus. It simply presumes the alternative chronology. The most prominent difference with earlier tradition is the transfer of Jesus's arrest and death from the time of Aristobulus to the time of Salome Alexandra, here presented under the guise of the stock figure of Queen Helena. Salome as Helena is merely an adaptation of the pre-existing *Toledot Yeshu* tradition. The great novelty with regard to earlier *Toledot* texts is the addition of references to Jannaeus, which, I maintain, derives from the importance of crucifixion in the lives of the two men. The date of AM 3671 found in the Wagenseil version reflects the predominantly Spanish use of the alternative chronology, although it is not necessarily a Spanish text. Lipmann-Mühlhausen's apparent use of the text in the early fifteenth century shows that this version was already several centuries old when Johann Christoph Wagenseil printed it in *Tela Ignea Satanae* in 1681.

As a final note, the Wagenseil version has had a notable influence on the perpetuation of the alternative chronology outside of Judaism. This particular version was much more widely diffused than any other *Toledot Yeshu* text. It was the first to be translated into English.<sup>77</sup> It was also, in all likelihood, the first to appear on the Internet. The destiny of this particular text gives the false impression that the alternative chronology is intrinsic to the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition when, in fact, it belongs only to this version. The Wagenseil version has a unique position among mythicists and other pseudo-historians as a tool employed to attack dominant scholarly opinions about the historical Jesus. In this domain, the alternative chronology is still very much a living tradition.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> The first translation of a *Toledot Yeshu* text into English was published by the agitator Richard Carlile, *Sefer Toledoth Jeshu, the Gospel According to the Jews, Called Toldoth Jesu, the Generations of Jesus: Now First Translated from the Hebrew* (London, 1823). This was followed by a translation with notes in an appendix of the anonymous *The Revelations of Antichrist Concerning Christ and Christianity* (Boston: J. P. Mendum, 1879), 357–422, and *The Jewish Life of Christ, Being the Sepher Toldoth Jeshu, or Book of the Generation of Jesus* (ed. G. W. Foote and J. M. Wheeler; London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1885). All three are translations of Wagenseil. None of these are scientific investigations of the text but polemics intending to draw blood. Contrast the first modern German publication in Richard Clemens, *Die geheimgehaltenen oder sogenannten Apokryphen Evangelien* (Stuttgart: J. Scheible, 1850). On these translations, see Martin Lockshin, "Translation as Polemic: The Case of *Toledot Yeshu*," in *Minhah le-Nahum: Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum M. Sarna in Honour of his 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (ed. Marc-Zvi Brettler and Michael Fishbane; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 226–41.

<sup>78</sup> Apparently, the original impetus for Zindler, *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew*, was the preparation of a new edition of Foote and Wheeler, *Jewish Life of Christ*, following a faulty edition published by Madalyn Murray O'Hair (the founder of American Atheists) in 1982. For this, as well as an overview of the contents of Zindler's book, see the review written by Robert M. Price at [http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/rev\\_zindler\\_never.htm](http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/rev_zindler_never.htm) [accessed 20 December 2016]. Price, like Zindler, does not believe Jesus was an historical figure.

## Postscript: The Birth of Jesus in Epiphanius' *Panarion*

A number of writers have connected the Talmudic tradition of Jesus's birth with a curious passage in the *Panarion* of Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403 CE), which seems to suggest that Jesus was born in the time of Alexander Jannaeus.<sup>79</sup> If true, this would mark the earliest attestation of the alternative chronology. Furthermore, the earliest attestation would be Christian rather than Jewish. Gerard Mussies points to Epiphanius' alleged Jewish upbringing and suggests that he had retained a Jewish tradition from his youth.<sup>80</sup> There is good reason, however, to believe that Epiphanius maintains the traditional chronology and has no inkling of the existence of an alternative chronology.

The relevant paragraph comes from Epiphanius' refutation of the Nazoreans in *Panarion* XXIX 3.2–3:

In time past David's throne continued by succession until Christ himself, since the rulers from Judah did not fail until he came "for whom are the things prepared, and he is the expectation of the nations," [Gen. 49:10] as scripture says. For the rulers in succession from Judah came to an end with Christ's arrival. Until he came the rulers were anointed priests, but after his birth in Bethlehem of Judaea the order ended and was altered in the time of Alexander, a ruler of priestly and kingly stock.<sup>81</sup>

The passage appears to state that Jesus was born in the time of Alexander Jannaeus. However, Epiphanius mentions the birth of Jesus several other times over the course of the *Panarion*, and in none of the other cases does he indicate that Jesus was born in the time of Jannaeus. On the contrary, he gives the conventional date of the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus. He first mentions this date in his exposition on the incarnation. Here Epiphanius states plainly: "The Savior was born at Bethlehem in Judaea in the thirty-third year of Herod, the forty-second of the Emperor Augustus" (*De Incarnatione* II 1).<sup>82</sup> He makes similar statements in *Panarion* LI 10.1, LI 22.19–21, and LVIII 10.1. These statements leave little doubt that Epiphanius adhered to the traditional chronology.

Epiphanius does not invoke Alexander Jannaeus in relation to Jesus's birth but in relation to the fulfilment of the prophecy in Genesis 49:10. *Panarion* LI 22.19–21 is especially relevant in this regard since Epiphanius mentions this prophecy while maintaining the traditional chronology. He writes:

Thus the Savior was born in the forty-second year of the Roman Emperor Augustus ... And then Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea and began to preach, after the last of the anointed rulers descended from Judah and Aaron had come to an end—their line had continued until the anointed ruler Alexander, and Salina, or Alexandra. This was the fulfillment of Jacob's prophecy, "There shall not fail a ruler from Judah and a governor from his loins, till he come for who it is prepared, and he is the expectation of the nations" [Gen. 49:10].<sup>83</sup>

<sup>79</sup>E.g., Mead, *Did Jesus Live 100 B.C.?*, 388–412; Goldstein, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition*, 74; Mussies, "Date of Jesus' Birth," 423–5; Murcia, *Jésus dans le Talmud*, 382n31.

<sup>80</sup> Mussies, "Date of Jesus' Birth," 425.

<sup>81</sup> Slightly modified from *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Book I (Sects 1–46)* (trans. Frank Williams; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 124.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 53, slightly modified.

The idea expressed in this passage is that Alexander Jannaeus was the last legitimate ruler of the Jewish people. The end of the Hasmonean dynasty and the installation of Herod, a Gentile proselyte, as king was the preliminary step before the advent of the Messiah, the legitimate heir of the priestly and kingly lines. Epiphanius also invokes this interpretation of Genesis 49:10 in his chapter on the Herodians (*Panarion* XX). The Herodians are those who think that Herod is the Messiah precisely because he broke the royal and sacerdotal chain.

Epiphanius's understanding of Genesis 49:10 is predicated on the belief that the tribes of Levi and Judah intermarried, and a legitimate ruler could arise from either tribe. Specifically, Exod. 6:23 states that Aaron, the first high priest, married Elisheva, the daughter of Amminadab and sister of Nahshon. Both Amminadab and Nahshon were leaders of the tribe of Judah, ancestors of David and, consequently, ancestors of Jesus (Ruth 4:20; Matt. 1:4). The kingship was an exclusive prerogative of the tribe of Judah, but this intermarriage meant that every high priest also had a claim to the kingship through Elisheva. This interpretation was widespread in early Christianity, and Epiphanius even mentions it in the *Panarion*.<sup>84</sup> In fact, he misstates it, claiming that Elisheva was Aaron's daughter and married Nahshon, the chief of Judah (*Panarion* LVIII 13.5).<sup>85</sup> This careless error is understandable: while a noblewoman of Judah marrying into the high priestly family could legitimate the rule of a Levite like Alexander Jannaeus, it does nothing to support the priestly genealogy of Jesus. The priesthood of Jesus is instead predicated on the levitical ancestry of Mary, the cousin of the more famous Elisheva—Elizabeth, a "daughter of Aaron" (Luke 1:5). This reference in Luke could in fact be the source of Epiphanius's error concerning the genealogy of the "ancient Elizabeth."<sup>86</sup>

Carelessness and an inelegant, obscure style are hallmarks of Epiphanius' writing. In *Panarion* XXIX 3, Epiphanius intends to say that Jesus inherited the dual functions of royalty and priesthood after both had been cut off with the death of Alexander Jannaeus. He is not claiming that Jesus was born in the time of Jannaeus. The earliest reference to the alternative chronology is still the Babylonian Talmud.

---

<sup>84</sup> William Adler, "Exodus 6:23 and the High Priest from the Tribe of Judah," *JTS* 48 (1997): 24–47, studies this motif in detail.

<sup>85</sup> Williams, *The Panarion*, vol. 2: 626.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*