Meaningful Nonsense: A Study of Details in *Toledot Yeshu*

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A statement that the *Toledot Yeshu* contains many weird passages sounds hopelessly banal, like saying that there is a tree in a forest. Apparently, the authors of *Toledot Yeshu*, whose main goal was to mock and offend their religious opponent(s), could not care less about realistic presentation of anything in their satire. On the other hand, why would they use empty metaphors that would mean nothing either to their enemies or their friends, instead of exploiting contemporary symbolism and well-known circumstances of their lives? Here, the word *contemporary* is key, signifying that not only modern scholars, but, also, medieval scribes and editors of the *Toledot Yeshu*, could be puzzled by separate motifs in this treatise, which, once detached from their original environment, had lost all significance. While most modern scholars ignore these motifs as nonsense, the medieval copyist tried to adjust them to the story, to present them as logical, if not natural, embellishments of the narrative. Why did Judah and Yeshu have to fight in the air?, the reader of the Aramaic *Toledot* might ask, and the later versions readily explain: it is because Yeshu wanted to surpass Judah in magical powers, and to prove that the Biblical passage *ky yqqaheny selah* (Psalms 49:16) refers to him.[1] Why didn't the priests foresee that Yeshu was going to steal the Ineffable Name from the temple? It is because, at the moment of Yeshu's entering to the temple, he already was a skilled magician, able to evade the priests' notice.[2] Is not Yeshu right, arguing that Moses was inferior to Jethro, since he had learned practical wisdom from him? No, he is not! For the true superiority of Moses was revealed through his ability to learn.[3] Such educated

[1] In manuscripts of the Wagenseil group, Yeshu boasts of being able to rise to the heaven, while Judah is not: *ve-'atah yhudah 'al tavo' shamah* (e. g., London JC 54, Leipzig BH 17.35–51, Paris AIU H 222a). The passage from Psalms 49:16 is quoted in the longer Italian (e. g., Rostock Orient. 38) and the longer Yemenite manuscripts (e. g., Cambridge Univ. Lib. T.-S. Or. 455), and also in Mss Strasburg BnU 3974 and Amsterdam Hs. Ros. 414.

[2] See, e. g., Cambridge Harvard Houghton Lib. 57 (Wagenseil): *'ekh henikhu ha-kohenym bene 'aharon ha-qedoshym likanes 'ella' vadda'y be-shem tum'a ve-kyshuf pa'al 'et ha-kkol.* The "Slavic" version (for this classification see Riccardo Di Segni, *Il vangelo del ghetto*, (Rome: Newton Compton, 1985) explains that Yeshu learned magic in the Galilee before coming to Jerusalem.

[3] New York JTS 2235 ("the shorter Italian"): *shelomoh 'aderabbah shom'a le-'etsa hakham*

explanations could more or less satisfy the reader of the *Toledot*, but they still may disappoint the scholar eager to unearth initial *microforms* concealed under the debris of these explanations and embellishments. Thus, the goal of the present study is to treat the apparent nonsense seriously, assuming that the author of the *Toledot* did not speak absurdities because ridiculous things popped up in his mind, but, rather, that he considered these things completely normal because he saw, heard or read them.

The "meaningless" details which I am going to discuss here are far more extreme than those mentioned in the examples above, and, although there are a lot of them throughout the story, I shall focus only on those found in the passage describing Yeshu's death and burial. The demonstrably earliest narrative of Yeshu's execution appears in *De Judaicis superstitionibus* of Agobard,[4] a bishop of Lyon, and stands in total disagreement with all other versions of the *Toledot*: being caught and condemned as a despicable sorcerer, Yeshu was suspended on a *fork* (*furca*), and then killed with a stone in the head. Since it is unlikely that a bishop of Lyon could confuse the *fork* with the *cross*, Agobard must have actually transmitted this peculiar detail from his Jewish contemporaries. But may this observation have more than an antiquarian value?

The *Fork*

The answer would follow from an explanation of why the authors of Agobard's *Toledot* had supplanted the cross with the *fork*. According to Plutarch, the *fork* denoted a piece of wood tied to a pole of a wagon – a very vague but the best available description; the rest is the scholar's conjectures.[5] Perhaps we can imagine the *fork* as an A-shaped gallows holding a head inserted in the triangle, and hands tied to the side beams. Plutarch also describes how the *fork* was used: primarily, it was considered to be the slave's punishment, and a slave who had committed a fault was severely scourged and had to carry a *fork* around through the neighborhood. After that, he would be contemptuously called *furcifer*, and no one who saw this slave undergoing his punishment would ever trust him again.

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ve-zeh hayah bosh lilmod mi-shefel ha-'anashim ve-ken david 'amar mi-kkol melamde hiskalti ve-nitbatel tto'anot ha-mamzer be-naqel.

[4] *PL* 104:87–88. On this subject see the article of Peter Schäfer in this volume.

[5] *Cor.* 24: ἦν δὲ μεγάλη κόλασις οἰκέτου πλημμελήσαντος εἰ ξύλον ἁμάξης ᾧ τὸν ῥυμὸν ὑπερείδουσιν, ἀράμενος διεξέλθοι παρὰ τὴν γειτνίασιν. ὁ γὰρ τοῦτο παθὼν καὶ ὀφθεὶς ὑπὸ τήν συνοίκων καὶ γειτόνων οὐκέτι πίστιν εἶχεν. ἐκαλεῖτο δὲ φούρκιφερ: ὃ γὰρ οἱ Ἕλλενες ὑποστάτην καὶ στήριγμα, τοῦτο Ῥωμαῖοι φοῦρκαν ὀνομάζουσιν. – "And it was a severe punishment for a slave who had committed a fault, if he was obliged to take the piece of wood with which they prop up the pole of a wagon, and carry it around through the neighborhood. And he was called 'furcifer'; for what the Greeks call a *prop*, or *support*, is called "furca" by the Romans."

In fact, however, not only slaves but also those found guilty of high-treason were sometimes condemned to the scourging on a *fork.* In the *Epitome* of Livy, a deserter was "sent under a *fork*, chastised with rods," but then again, sold as a slave for one penny, because, as Livy explains, people who refuse fighting for their freedom don't deserve it, and should be punished in a way appropriate for slaves.[6] The important thing demonstrated by these passages is that the *fork* was not a tool of death per se. To be sure, the scourging *could* serve as a prelude to the capital punishment, and a criminal, in exceptional cases, *could* be beaten to death.[7] While the deserter of Livy obviously survived the punishment, another soldier, Horatius, who, in a spasm of patriotism, killed his sister Horatia because she fell in love with an enemy of the state, had to be scourged to death as a usurper or the state's prerogative of punishment and, therefore, a traitor. Nevertheless, in most literary sources the suspension on a *fork* appears as a separate punishment that means only the *scourging*, regardless of whether this did, or did not, lead to death.

Speculations aside, the suspension on a *fork* – involving, potentially, either the scourging or the killing – cannot be confused with the standard methods of capital punishment in the Republic and early Empire: crucifixion (causing death from strangulation), decapitation, burning alive, and throwing to wild beasts.[8] This group of penalties can be found also in the sixth-century *Corpus Juris Civilis* (529 CE), with one difference, however: the *fork* has now supplanted the cross.[9] Ulpian in his treatise concerning the proconsul's authority explains that

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[6] *Periochae* 55: *P. Cornelio Nasica (cui cognomen Serapion fuit ab inridente Curiatio trib. pleb. impositum) et Dec. Iunio Bruto coss. dilectum habentibus in conspectu tironum res saluberrimi exempli facta est. Nam C. Matienius accusatus est apud tribunos pl., quod exercitum ex Hispania deservisset, damnatusque sub furca diu virgis caesus est et sestertio nummo veniit*. – "When the consuls Publius Cornelius Nasica (whose surname *Serapio* was invented by the irreverent tribune of the plebs Curiatius) and Decimus Junius Brutus were holding the levy, something happened in front of the recruits that served as an example: Gaius Matienus was accused before the tribunes because he had deserted the Spanish army, and was, after he had been condemned, sent under the "fork," chastised with rods, and sold for one sesterce."

[7] E. g., the scene of Nero's suicide in Svetonius: *Inter moras perlatos a cursore Phaonti codicillos praeripuit legitque se hostem a senatu iudicatum et quaeri, ut puniatur more maiorum, interrogavitque, quale id genus esset poenae; et cum comperisset nudi hominis cervicem inseri furcae, corpus virgis ad necem caedi …* – "While he hesitated, a letter was brought to Phaon by one of his couriers. Nero snatching it from his hand read that he had been pronounced a public enemy by the senate, and that they were seeking him to punish in the ancient fashion; and he asked what manner of punishment that was. Then he learned that the criminal was stripped, fastened by the neck in a *fork* and then beaten to death with rods."

[8] See, e. g., Ignatius, *Ad Rom*. 5: πῦρ καὶ σταυρὸς θηριῶν συστάσεις … ἐπ' εμε ἐρχέσθωσαν, μόνον ἵνα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐπιτύχω. – "Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of wild beasts … come upon me: only let me attain to Jesus Christ"; and Tertullian, *Ad Nat*. 1.18: Et utique non gladio aut cruce aut bestiis punienda sunt nomina (i. e., Chrestiani). – "Surely, surely, names (Christians) are not things which deserve punishment by the sword, or the cross, or the beasts."

[9] *Dig.* 48.19.28: *Callistratus libro sexto de cognitionibus: pr. Capitalium poenarum fere isti gradus sunt. Summum supplicium esse videtur ad furcam damnatio. Item vivi crematio: quod*

"persons guilty of sacrilege should be thrown to wild beasts, others be burned alive, and still others be hanged on a *fork*." Those, however, who deserve such harsh penalties are not petty debauchers, but the leaders of "an armed gang, (who) have broken into a temple, and carried away the gifts of the gods by night."[10] Another passage from Paul summarizes crimes and punishments in perfect accord with all aforementioned sources from the Early Republic to the Late Empire:

(1) Deserters who go over to the enemy, or who reveal our plans, shall either be burned alive, or hanged on a *fork*.

(2) Instigators of sedition and of tumult, which result in the uprising of the people, shall, in accordance with their rank, either be hanged upon a *fork*, thrown to wild beasts, or deported to an island.[11]

Taking into account that all jurists whose works were included in the 48th book of the *Digest*, namely, Ulpian, Callistratus and Paul, wrote in the third century CE, one can be surprised to find no mention of the cross (*crux*) among the capital penalties. This must be the result of the editor's zeal: since the crucifixion was abolished by Constantine, the *crux* was excerpted, and the *furca* interpolated retrospectively in the legal sources. In addition to this, certainly, the *fork* actually took the place of the cross, and a criminal sentenced to the suspension on a *fork* was not only scourged and dishonored as before but *always* scourged to death.

Thus, in the eyes of Agobard, the suspension on a *fork* had nothing to do with the crucifixion: the former was reserved for the vilest criminals of his time, and perhaps still bore the old connotation of the extreme indignity. For the *Toledot Yeshu*, however, everything fell into the right place, for it was a criminal accused of sacrilege, of leading an armed band, of the theft in a temple, and, finally, of instigating a tumult, who should be sentenced to death on a *fork*. It is hard to believe that, on the part of Jews, it was an intentional perversion of the Christian tradition regarding the crucifixion; it was, rather, negligence of this tradition, on

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quamquam summi supplicii appellatione merito contineretur, tamen eo, quod postea id genus poenae adinventum est, posterius primo visum est. Item capitis amputatio. Deinde proxima morti poena metalli coercitio. Post deinde in insulam deportatio. – "The following is the gradation of capital crimes. The extreme penalty is considered to be sentence to the *fork*, or burning alive. Although the latter seems, with good reason, to have been included in the term 'extreme penalty,' still, because this kind of punishment was invented subsequently, it appears to come after the first, just as decapitation does. The next penalty to death is that of labor in the mines. After that comes deportation to an island."

[10] *Dig*. 48.13.7 (6): *Ulpianus libro septimo de officio proconsulis: Et scio multos et ad bestias damnasse sacrilegos, nonnullos etiam vivos exussisse, alios vero in furca suspendisse. Sed moderanda poena est usque ad bestiarum damnationem eorum, qui manu facta templum effregerunt et dona dei in noctu tulerunt.*

[11] *Dig*. 48.19.38: *Paulus libro quinto sententiarum: pr. Si quis aliquid ex metallo principis vel ex moneta sacra furatus sit, poena metalli et exilii punitur. 1. Transfugae ad hostes vel consiliorum nostrorum renuntiatores aut vivi exuruntur aut furcae suspenduntur. 2. Actores seditionis et tumultus populo concitato pro qualitate dignitatis aut in furcam tolluntur aut bestiis obiciuntur aut in insulam deportantur.*

the one hand, and good acquaintance with *contemporary* juristic and punitive practices, on the other.

Not surprisingly, the *fork* could not mean much for those who lived considerably later than the ninth century, and far away from southwest Europe. As a result, it never surfaced again in any of the numerous *Toledot Yeshu* manuscripts. In the Aramaic version, Yeshu died on a cross (*tseliva'*), although at a certain point he managed to escape, since he was able to fly. Instantaneously, he took abode in Elijah's cave and closed the entrance, but Judah, who followed him, commands, in quite the Ali-Baba spirit: "Entrance, entrance open up!" Yeshu was recaptured, and the execution continued. Certainly, the *tseliva'* is not the *furca*, but on the other hand, both versions do agree in talking about *one* execution leading to Yeshu's death.

Juxtaposing the Aramaic and Agobard versions of the *Toledot* with their thirteen-century "successors" leaves no place for a possibility of the direct textual transmission. The *Toledot Yeshu* translated in 1285 by Raimundus Martinus[12] and, one hundred and fifty years later, by Thomas Ebendorfer[13] provides the earliest evidence for a totally different narrative, using some of the familiar motives, but clearly resonating with the canonical gospels, instead of a supposedly genuine source. As expected, Yeshu now undergoes the "normal" bipartite execution, borrowed from the New Testament's flagellation and crucifixion. The author of the *Toledot*, however, split the execution and inserted, in between, the motif of Yeshu's escape, known already from the Geniza versions. Germinating in a fertile soil of a religious satire, this motif soon developed into a story within a story: in all manuscripts of Di Segni's "Primo" group, Yeshu, being arrested, imprisoned and tortured, nevertheless manages to escape to Antioch.[14] He then returns and commands his followers to accompany him on the Passover ascension to Jerusalem. A certain man, Gisa, betrays Yeshu; he get caught, tried again, and finally executed.[15] The *Wagenseil* manuscripts insert also the story of Judah sneaking into Yeshu's camp and stealing the Ineffable Name from his leg.[16] Arguably the latest, and most elaborate *Tam u-Mu'ad* version uses the opportunity to incorporate all suitable traditions that were not yet utilized by the preceding

[12] Raimundus Martinus, *Pugio Fidei* (Wien: 1651), II.8.6.

[13] *Falsitates Judeorum* 1.1 – 12.16 (See Brigitta Callsen et al. eds. *Das jüdische Leben Jesu*, *"Toldot Jeschu": die älteste lateinische Übersetzung in den "Falsitates Judeorum" von Thomas Ebendorfer* [Wien: Oldenburg, 2003]).

[14] Including all Yemenite and Bukhara manuscripts plus Di Segni's "Primo b" (Mss. New York JTS 1491, Strasburg BnU 3974, Budapest Kaufmann 299) and "Primo c" (Mss. Amsterdam Hs. Ros. 414, New York JTS 2221).

[15] Yeshu's disciples are tried in "Primo b" (see above), and he himself is tried by Pilate and the Sanhedrin in "Primo c."

[16] E.g, Mss. Cambridge Harvard Houghton Lib. 57, and a shorter version, Jerusalem Schocken Institute 04088.

portion of the *Toledot*:[17] after the torture, Yeshu escapes to Antioch, and then to Egypt (to learn or upgrade his magical skills). Upon his return to Jerusalem, Yeshu is betrayed, arrested and … half-executed, for he escapes again, right from the cross, in order to undergo the purifying baptism in the Jordan and regain his magical powers. The sages and Judah then lure Yeshu to Jerusalem (compare to *Wagenseil*); he and his disciples submit themselves to one more trial (compare to "Primo"), and after all, Yeshu is killed.

There is a detail, however, equally meaningless in the Hebrew and Aramaic *Toledot*, regardless of whether it is connected to Yeshu's escape (as in the Geniza manuscripts), or the final stage of his punishment: the tool of Yeshu's execution is replaced. The earliest version of this strange act (Ms. Cambridge Univ. Lib. T.-S. Misc 35.87) is a complete puzzle – Yeshu flies away from the cross, but he returns onto a *cabbage root*, where he finally dies. The author indicates no reason for this substitution, allowing the future scribes and interpreters of the *Toledot* to ask why and wonder.

The *Flower*

A cabbage plant could hardly make a decent gallows. Yet, according to later versions of the *Toledot Yeshu*, it proved to be the only option, because all other trees, thanks to Yeshu's magical tricks, refused to hold the weight of his body, and broke immediately when sages tried to hang him. Fortunately, Judah recollected that there was a marvelous plant in his garden, big like a tree, though not really a tree – the giant cabbage; and, since cabbages escaped Yeshu's notion, the plant accepted him and did not break.

The earliest manuscripts of the "second wave" (late medieval) *Toledot* felt compelled to explain this botanical paradox, adopting and slightly rewriting a passage from *b. Ketubbot* 111b that speaks of the Messianic era, when crops will be plentiful and weeds gigantic. "No need to marvel at this," says R. Hiyya, "for a fox once made his nest in a turnip and when the (remainder of the vegetable was weighed), it was found (to be) sixty pounds in the pound weight of Sephoris." "Why go so far?" related R. Simeon. "Our father left us a cabbage stalk and we ascended and descended it by means of a ladder." This conversation was a source of the allusion in the corresponding passage in the *Toledot*:

> (Seeing that), they went and brought a stalk of some cabbage that does not belong to the wood but to herbs and hanged him on it. And this is not a miracle because every year one such cabbage springs up in the Sanctuary, and one hundred pounds of seeds fall from it.[18]

[17] E. g., Ms. Amsterdam Hs. Ros. 467.

[18] Martinus, *Pugio Fidei*, 2.8.6: *Abierunt itaque et adduxerunt stipitem unius caulis qui non est de lignis, sed de herbis, et suspenderunt eum super eum. Nec est hoc mirum quia singulis annis crescit tantum unus caulis in domo Sanctuarii, ut descendant de eo centum librae seminis*.

Certainly, the giant cabbage stalk *was* considered a miracle, despite the effort of the *Toledot* editors, which at some point was redirected to rid the story of this apparent nonsense instead of making sense of it. In ninetieth-century manuscripts from Baghdad and Yemen, the cabbage stalk turns into a cabbage tree, or a "different tree of cabbage," or a "carob tree,"[19] while the Italian editor makes it a kind of palm-tree, figuratively called "cabbage,"[20] or rewrites the story entirely: Yeshu hid a parchment with the Ineffable Name under the trees in his garden. One of the sages saw this and dug the parchment out. After that, sages were able to hang Yeshu on a regular tree.[21] At the same time, these eighteenth-century manuscripts still resonate of the explanatory tactics derived from the *Ketubbot* passage: one of the sages *had inherited* a garden with a "cabbage" palm-tree together with a detailed instruction in regards of who should be hanged on it, and why.[22] It is clear, that the editors of the *Toledot* were literally wrestling with the tradition of hanging Yeshu on a cabbage.

Similarly, modern scholars approach this botanico-philological enigma with only two options: one, to explain the *importance* of cabbage in the *Toledot* by another textual parallel, and another, to deny the importance, because of a scribal mistake or sheer mockery that supposedly stood behind the first mention of a cabbage as Yeshu's gallows. The suggestion of Schonfield that *keruv* (with the *kav*) was a misspelling of *haruv* (carob; with the *het*) did not find support among scholars, for the simple reason that there is no *kharuv* elsewhere in the texts, except for one ninetieth-century manuscript from Yemen (see above).[23] The position of folklorists, who believe that the *Toledot Yeshu* chose the cabbage as the most ridiculous plant for the most effective scorn, is better warranted. In the *Targum Sheni*, when Haman was sentenced to death, all trees except of the cedar declined being his gallows.[24] As well the story of *Jack and the Bean-Stalk*, with all its possible prototypes, and the Baldur myth come to mind.[25] These findings

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[19] E.g, Ms. Letchworth Sassoon 793: *ve-kelum gazar 'aleyhem huts mi-'eylan haruv she-lo' 'alah 'al dde'ato laqkhohu ve-talu 'oto 'ad ha-'erev.*

[20] Ms. London Brit. Lib. Or. 10457: *u-be-'oto gan hayah 'ets 'ekhad shel keruv she-lo' hayah ets 'amyty nivra' mi-'ets ttamar* (or: *ttomer*).

[21] Ms. London Brit. Lib. Or. 3660.

[22] Ms. Rostock Orient. 38.

[23] Hugh Joseph Schonfield, *According to the Hebrews: A New Translation of the Jewish life of Jesus (the Toldoth Jeshu) with an Inquiry into the Nature of its Sources and Special Relationship to the Lost Gospel According to the Hebrews* (London: Duckworth, 1937), 221–24. Similarly rejected is a position of Louis Ginzberg, who himself misread *berosh* (cypress) for *keruv,* see "Ma'aseh Yeshu," *in Genizah Studies in Memory of Doctor Solomon Schechter (Ginze Schechter)* (ed. Louis Ginzberg; 3 vols.; New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1928 [in Hebrew]), 1:324–38.

[24] *Targum Sheni* to Esther 7:9 (10).

[25] The mother of Baldur, adjuring various plants that may harm his son, overlooked the mistletoe, of which an arrow was made that killed Baldur. James George Frazer, *Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (3 vols., London: Macmillan and Co., 1900), 3:236–50.

of Heller, however, called up a storm of criticism on the part of Krauss, who accused him of picking curiosities regardless of context.[26] Indeed, the context is important, unless a folklorist does not mind blending the *Toledot Yeshu* with Nordic tales.

A hypothesis of Newman stands out as the only attempt to treat the *cabbage stalk* as a pointer to a certain cultural phenomenon, however peculiar it may seem. According to Newman, the legend of Adonis' death stands at the basis of the "cabbage-motif" in the *Toledot*: a wild boar had pursued and killed Adonis; after that, Aphrodite buried her lover in a garden of lettuces.[27] Finally, Newman concludes that in the *Toledot*, the cabbage stalk appears to point the finger at pagan ideas so amiably appropriated by the Christian tradition. Regardless of whether I do or do not support this conclusion, I would like to emphasize a couple of important details in Newman's argumentation: first, it was the Christian tradition, albeit derived from pagan, that introduced the "cabbage-motif": in addition to John 19:41, there is *Acta Pilati* IX 5 (5th c. CE), both talking about a garden (hence Gethsemane) as the place of the crucifixion; and more specifically, there is the Coptic *Book of the Resurrection of Christ by Bartholomew the Apostle* (5th-7th centuries), where a gardener, Philogenes, takes the body of Jesus *away from a garden of vegetables*, although with noble intentions, to embalm it. Second, most scholarly discussions regarding the *cabbage stalk*, for some reason, overlook the earliest and most important evidence for this tradition: in the Aramaic versions of the *Toledot Yeshu*, the *cabbage* clearly conceals its own, original and unexplained importance, while the tree-conjuration stories come from a later embellishment that rather distract the researcher's attention than help revealing the meaning of a cabbage stalk as Yeshu's gallows. The same holds true for all of the earliest references to the story crystallized in the *Toledot*: "This is He," Tertullian writes, "whom His disciples secretly stole away, that it might be said He had risen again, or the gardener abstracted, that his lettuces might come to no harm from the crowds of visitants."[28] Finally, Amulo repeats this passage, with a particular reference to the *Toledot Yeshu*:

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[26] See Bernhard Heller, "Über Judas Ischariotes in der jüdischen Legende," *MGWJ* 76 (1932): 33–42, and idem, "Über das Alter der jüdischen Judas-Sage und des Toldot Jeschu," *MGWJ* 77 (1933): 198–210 (esp. 201–4), and Samuel Krauss, "Neuere Ansichten über 'Toldoth Jeschu,'" *MGWJ* 76 (1932): 586–603. Krauss, in his turn, assumes that the authors of the *Toledot* refer to a cherub (*kheruv*) or seraphim that can elevate a worthy person to heaven – showing, at the same time, how different was the *kheruv* that "elevated" Yeshu.

[27] See Hillel I. Newman, "The Death of Jesus in the 'Toledot Yeshu' literature," *JTS* 50 (1999): 59–79 (esp. 75–79), where he lists numerous references to this story as well as supportive evidence to the fact that the legend of Adonis was well known among both Jews and Christians, and that the similarity between Jesus and Adonis was obvious in the eyes of pagans.

[28] Tertullian, *Spect.* 30.6: *hic est, quem clam discentes subripuerunt, ut surrexisse dicatur, vel hortulanus detraxit, ne lactucae suae frequentia commeantium adlaederentur*.

… and their teacher Joshua cried out and ordered that he be quickly taken down from the tree, and he was cast into a grave in a garden full of cabbages, lest their land be contaminated …[29]

While Newman was looking for mythological implications of the cabbage, I am going to approach the question from a different perspective, namely, by looking more closely at the cabbage plant. There is, perhaps, a simple explanation for why this direction of inquiry has been heretofore ignored: our common perception of cabbage does not usually go beyond our own dietary habits, familiar, as we are, with only a leafy globe chopped on our plates for soups or salads. Not many of us can answer a simple question of what the notorious cabbage stalk actually looks like, or, if it has flowers, what they look like. The most basic observations about such facts may, however, show our negligence of these questions to be quite ill-advised.

Thus, the cabbage is a biennial plant, meaning that it takes two years to complete its biological lifecycle. The garden cabbage must be harvested during the first year, but the wild cabbage shows what can be expected in the second year of its life – shortly before it begins to die, it shoots out a stem, unusually high for a weed or vegetable, and sometimes reaches ten feet high. In fact, because of this enormous stem, the cabbage was already by the fourth-century BCE considered to be a "tree-herb":

For of under-shrubs and those of the pot-herb class some have the character of a tree, such as cabbage and rue; wherefore some call these tree-herbs.[30]

The modern botanist, speaking about cabbage, lettuce, cauliflower, broccoli, and turnip, refers to them as "cruciferous vegetables" or "crucifers," clearly without any religious connotation.[31] The yellow, cross-shaped flowers covering the tall, tree-like stem of the cabbage plant can be accounted the origin of the name "crucifer." Botanists, certainly, are not the only ones who might make such associations, a fact that, itself, could make a decent conclusion to the present inquiry. Yet there is more than this, and the cabbage appears in the *Toledot Yeshu* not only because of its tall stem and cross-shaped flowers.

The next lead can also be found in Theophrastus' *Enquiry*. He knew three kinds of cabbage: one with a smooth leaf (οὐλοφύλος), another with curly leaf (λειοφύλος), and ῥάφανος ἀγρία – literally, the field cabbage, identified as *wild*

[29] Amulo of Lyon*, Liber contra judaeos ad Carolum regem,* ch. 25 (*PL* 116): *(e)t conclamante, ac jubente magistro eorum Josue, celeriter de ligno depositum; et in quodam horto caulibus plena, in sepulcro projectum, ne terra eorum contaminaretur* ... On this source also see the article of Peter Schäfer in this volume.

[30] Theophrastus, *Hist. Plant.* 1.3.4: τῶν τε γὰρ φρυγανωδῶν καὶ λαχανωδιῶν ἔνια μονοστελέχη καὶ οἷον δένδρου φύσιν ἔχοντα γίνεται, καθάπερ ῥάφανος πήγανον, ὅθεν καὶ καλοῦσί τινες τὰ τοιαῦτα δενδρολάχανα.

[31] See, e. g., Daniel Zohary and Maria Hopf, *Domestication of Plants in the Old World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 199.

cabbage or *wild mustard*; surprisingly, both of these names refer to one and the same plant, today known as *Brassica oleracea*, a kind of weed for modern botanists, but a quasi-tree in antiquity.[32] To be more specific, modern botanists argue that the wild *Brassica oleracea*, including wild cabbage and wild (white) mustard, have a common ancestor with *Sinapis arvensis*, wild black mustard; while the first of two species has evolved into the cultivated cabbage and turnip (*Brassica rapa*), the second has become the cultivated mustard (*Brassica nigra*).[33] *Brassica oleracea* and *Sinapis arvensis* are hardly distinguishable, especially for an untrained eye of a philologist, being the reason of a persistent inconsistency in commentaries to Theophrastus, where ῥάφανος ἀγρία is sometimes identified as wild cabbage and sometimes as wild mustard. This inexactness is all the more vindicated by the fact that the specific word for *black mustard* – σίναπι – is late.[34] In Greek literature, its earliest occurrence is in Matthew 13:31, while Latin authors, who themselves knew many species of *Brassica*, borrow the word instead of translating it.[35]

The famous parable from Matthew 13:31–32 is certainly the climax of my argument:

> The kingdom of heaven is like a *mustard* seed (κόκκῳ σινάπεως) that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest garden plant and becomes a *tree* (μεῖζον τῶν λαχάνων ἐστὶν καὶ γίνεται δένδρον), so that the wild birds come and nest in its branches.

Since, provided the common acquaintance with this gospel, no one would be surprised by an occurrence of mustard in Christian or anti-Christian literature, its twin-sister cabbage plant should not surprise us either. It is impossible to tell exactly how these two branches of one tradition developed. Were there two variants of the parable, both referring to the same plant but with different words? Did they actually mean two different plants – wild cabbage and wild (be it black or white) mustard – which were so similar that one finally supplanted the other? Were cross-shaped flowers ever important for the authors and listeners of the parable (provided that the cross became a manifest symbol of Christianity only in the fourth century)? Although these questions remain without answers, our hypothesis is not undermined: wild cabbage and wild mustard are almost

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[32] Theophrastus, *Historia Plantarum* 7.4.4; see also Don R. Brothwell and Patricia Brothwell, *Food in Antiquity: A Survey of the Diet of Early Peoples* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 117–118.

[33] K. M. Song et al., "Brassica Taxonomy Based on Nuclear Restriction Fragment Length Polymorphisms," *Theoretical and Applied Genetics* 75 (1988): 784–94; Geoffrey R. Dixon, *Vegetable Brassicas and Related Crucifers* (Reading: Columns Design Ltd., 2007), 4–8.

[34] There is an opinion, however, that both σίναπι (first century CE and later) and νᾶπυ (before the first century CE), refer to *Brassica alba* (white mustard; see *LSJ*) – a direct offspring of *Brassica orelacea*.

[35] Pliny (*Nat.*) mentions five, and Ps.-Dioscorides (*De herbis femininis*, and *Curae herbarum*) twelve subtypes of cabbage (Brassica).

indistinguishable subtypes of one floral kind; in oral transmission of Matthew's parable, both of them might appear to signify the triumph of Christianity, while, in a satire of this parable, both of them could be effectively used to signify its ultimate failure. It is only, therefore, the luck of the draw that *Brassica oleracea* sprang up as a mustard tree in Matthew and as a cabbage tree in the *Toledot Yeshu*.

An occurrence of the cabbage-tradition in a Christian source, beside anti-Judean attacks of Tertullian and Amulo, may support my argumentation. It is not until the late Middle Ages, however, that we witness such an occurrence – a remarkable story of "the cabbage-stalk of Eppendorf." In this legend, one female gardener had planted a consecrated bread of Eucharist in her cabbage garden in the hope that her cabbages would grow better, but, instead, a cabbage stalk resembling the crucified Jesus grew up in the place where she had planted his "body." This cabbage stalk was revered by the Cistercian nuns of Harvestehude during the fifteenth century and was subsequently acquired by the Emperor Rudolph the Second for the Imperial *Schatzkammer*.[36] Such an amazing mirror reflection of the Tertullian's lettuces could hardly travel from its source to the Cistercians via the *Toledot Yeshu*, and must, therefore, testify to the existence of a Christian tradition (in addition to the Jewish satire) associating Jesus with a cabbage stalk.

Having Yeshu executed, the *Toledot* soon grants us the next oddity. According to Jewish law, a corpse may not remain on a tree overnight. Therefore, the sages decide to bury Yeshu in … a water trench. This is "generally speaking," because places of Yeshu's burial vary in different versions of the text.

The *Water*

According to Agobard's version, Yeshu was buried next to an *aqueduct*. On the following night the aqueduct was flooded, Yeshu's body disappeared, and was never found. In an approximately contemporaneous version of the Geniza manuscripts, the place of burial is indicated as *rahata' de-mayya'* (Cambridge Univ. Lib. T-S Misc 35.87), *bet shaqeyya' de-mayya'* (New York JTS 2529.1), and *barezya'* (New York JTS 2529.1[37] and 2). These terms are not as unambiguous as *aqueduct*, but ultimately can hardly mean anything else but a *water conduit* or a *reservoir*. In both the aforementioned versions, Pilate commanded the Jews to find Yeshu's body, and, while they failed in Agobard, R. Judah of the Geniza

[36] Otto Beneke, *Hamburgische Geschichten und Sagen* (Hamburg: Perthes-Besser & Mauke, 1854), 153–56; Eduard Krohse, "Der Verbleib der wunderbaren Kohlwurzel aus Eppendorf," *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Hamburgische Geschichte* 10 (1908): 58–60; Silke Urbanski, *Geschichte des Klosters Harvestehude 'In valle virginum'* (Hamburg: Universität Hamburg, 2001).

[37] This one reads *barevya'*.

version proved able to demonstrate Yeshu to Pilate (since it was he who removed the body). After that, Judah reburied the corpse in the same water installation, *arguably despite* the strict order of Pilate to bury Yeshu in a proper place, that is, a cemetery. This persistent disobedience to the order of Pilate is all the more strange because of the dubious importance of the act of disobedience. Was it really so significant to put Yeshu's body in water instead of earth, such that Judah was willing to risk his life for it?

As in the case with the *cabbage stalk*, the authors of the *Toledot Yeshu* were struggling to explain the situation, which in the later versions involves the aqueduct of Agobard, the garden of Amulo, the water trench/reservoir of the Geniza, and even a sewer. Ms. Strasburg BnU 3974, and the entire Wagenseil group[38] tell that Yeshu was initially buried at the place where he was stoned, but R. Judah reburied him in his garden under an aqueduct, dissembling it first, and then restoring it on the top of Yeshu's body. Mss Amsterdam Hs. Ros. 414, New York JTS 2221, and all Yemenite manuscripts[39] have this differently: Yeshu was buried *near* the Pool (or river) of Siloam; after that, either Judah or an anonymous gardener stole his body to stuff a hole in his garden fence. Another explanatory version is presented by Huldreich:[40] Judah himself took down the body of Yeshu from the tree and threw it into a sewer in order to fulfill the prediction of sages sentencing Yeshu to boil in excrement in hell (*b. Gittin* 56b–57a). The arguably latest editions of the *Toledot* present thoroughly sanitized versions of Yeshu's burial: in Ms. Philadelphia University Lib. 361 ("Slavic" version), Judah buries Yeshu in his garden *under* a water-pipe that just happens to be there, while the Italian manuscripts simply get rid of the "aqueduct-burial" as they have got of the "cabbage-stalk-crucifixion" – Judah steals the corpse and buries it in his garden, in the family burial chamber![41]

It is remarkable that some protestant scholars, Baldensperger and then Kennard, trying to reconstruct the historical burial of Jesus on the basis of the gospels, present the same picture that appears in the reductionist Italian version.[42] Kennard's analysis starts from the statement that "the empty tomb may point rather to a removal of the body from the place where the women had seen it laid and to its burial elsewhere." Then, Kennard argues that the events of Jesus' death and burial can be restored in the following order: since 12:30 pm is the deadline

[38] E. g., Mss. Cambridge Harvard Houghton Lib. 57, Jerusalem Shoken 04088, Leipzig BH 17 35–51.

[39] E. g., Mss. Cambridge Univ. Lib. T-S Or. 455, New York JTS 2343, Princeton Firestone Lib. 19.

[40] E. g., Mss. Amsterdam Hs. Ros. 442, Frankfurt Hebr. 8 249, Princeton Firestone Lib. 24.

[41] E. g., Rostock Orient. 38: *ve-hevy'a 'et pelony miqevero ve-qavar 'oto be-gano be-qever yhudah ha-ganan.*

[42] Guillaume Baldensperger, *Le tombeau vide: la légende et l'histoire* (Paris: F Alcan, 1935); Joseph Spencer Kennard, "The Burial of Jesus," *JBL* 74 (1955): 227–38.

for a Passover-offering,[43] Jesus must have been taken from the cross no later than 1:00 pm, and these were the soldiers who "took him from the tree, and laid him in a tomb" (Acts 13:29). When "evening had come," Joseph of Arimanthea, "a respected member of the council" (Mark 15:43), "took courage" (Mark 15.42) to come to Pilate and ask him for the body of Jesus. Authorized by Pilate, Joseph "took away"[44] the body and placed it in his own sepulcher.

In addition to this speculation on account of the two-fold burial, there is a far more certain attestation to the ancient tradition of Jesus burial in a water reservoir: "But they blaspheme more (saying that) he was cast in a well," wrote Commodian (Gaza, 3rd c. CE [?]) in reference to an opinion of his contemporaries.[45] Thus, the picture presented in the *Toledot Yeshu* may eventually lead to an antique source of any kind, which we must try to reveal. This means that in addition to considering a figurative meaning of a burial in a water reservoir, it might be useful to consider actual water conduits and cemeteries in first-century Jerusalem.[46]

In that time, two aqueducts brought water to the city. The high-level aqueduct, which conveyed the water from the Pool of Siloam, was built by the Hasmoneans and improved by Herod,[47] and the lower, as Josephus reports, was built by Pilate, who used the temple's money for its construction:

> At another time he (Pilate) used the sacred treasure of the temple, called *korban*, to pay for bringing water into Jerusalem by an aqueduct from a distance of four hundred *stadioi* (*B. J.* 2.175–77).

Even more sacrilegious than usurping the temple's fond, however, was the route of this aqueduct for it cut its way through a cemetery that was evidently in use in that period, and even went directly through one of the family tombs which, of course, ceased to be used at that moment.[48] It was the fact of building the water conduit through the unclean grounds that led to a legal reform, starting from a regulation that forbids building an aqueduct at a cemetery:

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[43] "Six hours and a half" (*Pesahim* 5.1).

[44] ἦρεν instead of κατέθηκεν (*take down*): John 19:38; Mark 15:46.

[45] Commodian, *Carmen apologeticum* 440: *Sed magis infamant: In puteum misimus illum.*

[46] Newman, "The Death of Jesus," 74, summarizes the hypotheses concerning Yeshu's burial in a "water channel": Erich Bischoff connects it to a local Jerusalem tradition locating the grave of Jesus in the vicinity of the Siloam springs (ap. Samuel Krauss, 1902. *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* [Berlin: S. Calvary, 1902; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1977]), 30. Schlichting considers the abyssal waters beneath the temple (Günther Schlichting, *Ein jüdisches Leben Jesu* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1982), 218, and Krappe compares Yeshu's burial to the burial of Alaric in a river bed (Alexander Haggerty Krappe, "Les funerailles d'Alaric," *Annuaire de l'institut de philologie et l'histoire orientales et slaves* 7 [1939–44]: 234).

[47] Ehud Netzer, *The Architecture of Herod, the Great Builder* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 136.

[48] Joseph Patrich, "A Sadducean Halakha and the Jerusalem Aqueduct," *The Jerusalem Cathedra* 2 (1982): 25–39. See also David Amit, et al., *The Aqueducts of Israel* (Portsmouth, R.I.: Journal of Roman Archaeology; Supplement series 46, 2002).

People do not conduct an aqueduct out from the graves, and one shall not make there a way. (*Ebel Rabbati* 14)

Then to the controversy:

The Sadducees say, "We protest against you, Pharisees, for you declare clean the *nyzoq*." The Pharisees say, "We protect against you, Sadducees, for you declare clean the aqueduct that comes from among the graves." (*Yadayim* 4.7)

And eventually to a new law ruling that water attached to the ground is not subject to contamination:

R. Nehemia said: why is it said that the purity did not depart? Since water in [that vessel] is not subject to contamination until it is detached from its source, the purity prevails over defilement. (*t. Miqva'ot* 1.1)

In any case, the building of the Jerusalem aqueduct through the cemetery was a remarkable event to be noticed and remembered. In fact, inhabitants of Jerusalem enjoyed the use of this aqueduct until the 16th century, contemplating the close neighborhood of tombs and the water conduit. Isn't it the most natural explanation of why Yeshu's body was buried near an aqueduct, or even in an aqueduct, and why Judah, being required to rebury Yeshu in a proper cemetery, brought him back to the aqueduct's surroundings? For indeed, it was a proper cemetery.

In summary, "deciphering" the *Toledot*'s "nonsense" may have a two-fold significance: on the one hand, it demonstrates that the *Toledot Yeshu* does contain ancient traditions, which present interest for researchers of both Roman Christianity and Judaism, and, on the other, it shows that, by the time that these traditions were crystallized and coalesced into a literary form, their readers were unable to digest them. It was this inability that started a chain of interpretative additions to the story that appear so simple and coherent in the Agobard's *Supersitiones*, and so complex and repetitive in the *Tam u-Muad*.

Despite its importance, a study of details in the *Toledot Yeshu* must be limited to non-strictly-textual details. In other words, since the exact correspondence of the text in different *Toledot* manuscripts is rather an exception than a rule, it does not make sense to discuss, for example, whether Yeshu was buried *in*, *under*, or *beside* some water installation, and whether this *water installation* was designated with a proper name meaning specifically an aqueduct, an irrigation equipment, a water-pipe, or a channel. The manuscripts contain all of these, and only the forthcoming comprehensive study of all the available manuscripts shall be able to guide our preference.[49]

It must also be noted that the inevitably speculative argumentation, involved in a study of *one specific detail*, cannot help to date the composition and to re-

[49] This edition is currently in preparation, see http://www.princeton.edu/~judaic/toledotyeshu.html

veal the origin of its traditions. There will always remain a place for a different approach and interpretation. A number of details, however, can be organized like *tessarae* in a mosaic, provided that only matching *tessarae* can display a comprehensible picture, while mismatches must be adjusted. It is likely that there were antique traditions connecting the death and burial of Jesus with the Jerusalem aqueduct-cemetery and with the mustard-cabbage tree; yet the *Toledot* as a complete narrative seems to adapt these traditions in a later period, when the cross-shaped flowers became symbolic, the *furca* supplanted the *crux*, while the Jerusalem aqueduct was still functional.