

Nittel Nacht: A Jewish Christmas?

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Abstract— The history of Ashkenazi Judaism in Christian Europe, particularly in the early-modern period, is the story of a religious minority subsisting within a threatening majority: its ability to resist cultural dominion and preserve its own cultural-religious traditions. One such setting in which this interaction materialized was through the religious calendar of the Christians. Specifically, the popular celebration of Christmas was a point of concern for the Jewish communities, and, in turn, became a vehicle for assault. While the tradition's inception was formed as a means to counter the holiday, its actualization served to inculcate Christianity, its doctrines and its ethos, within the Jewish tradition. Thus, Nittel Nacht was an anti-anti holiday — its observance blurring the line between repudiation and celebration — which produced an everlasting bond between the two religions.

In the centuries following the Jewish people's exile from the Holy Land, during the rise of Christianity as a major religion and the formation of a modern Europe, Ashkenazi communities were subsumed under a culture and tradition foreign to their own. This was most profoundly apparent in Judaism's rejection of Jesus Christ as the son of God, resulting, at its height, in persecution and death, while, more predominantly, in a general concern for the future of its communities. As a minority within this society, Jews were forced to create a space to express their own beliefs, traditions, and practices. Adapting to such a world — one seemingly different and antithetical to the practice of Judaism — produced a particular condition for Judaism within Europe. By existing within that state and repudiating Christianity while living underneath its authority, a new tradition was born: to “honor the religious culture of the powerful majority while simultaneously resisting its message.”¹ This animosity towards Christian Europe was mirrored in Ashkenazi Judaism that both reflected and absorbed aspects of the culture which enveloped it. Despite attempts to maintain complete distinctiveness, Judaism's tradition could not be disentangled from Christianity.² The centuries of Judaism within Christian Europe in the modern period — roughly the fifteenth to eighteenth century — had a profound effect on the complex history of Ashkenazi culture. Through attempting to deconstruct and undermine Christianity — a condition of the Jewish community's minority status in Europe — Ashkenazi Judaism, as a result, acquired a new identity, one that was birthed from the knowledge, inversion, and adoption of Christian traditions: *Nittel Nacht*.

One area in which Ashkenazi communities had to account for their surroundings and employ strategies to counter the Christian majority was through the Christian calendar. Christianity in the second century of the Common Era was transformed from a set of beliefs held by a proto-Christian group to a systematized religion, divergent from Judaism; this divergence was most apparent in the religion's deification of Christ. The Church fathers of this period established tenets and systems, fixing Christianity's religious doctrine. One structure used to organize

¹ Carlebach, Elisheva. *Palaces of Time: Jewish Calendar and Culture in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011 (115).

² *Ibid.*, 115.

amidst dissension was the advent of a Christian calendar, with its own Sabbath, holidays, and fasts. The calendar was intended to “to disengage from, to compete with, and ultimately to supersede the Jewish calendar.”³ This calendar ensured the social segregation of Judaism and Christianity. The ensuing separation was simultaneously felt by the Jewish communities.⁴ By living as a religious minority, Jews were forced to incorporate, and adjust to, the Christian calendrical system. As such, the calendar embodied the paradox for Judaism in Europe. By acknowledging Christianity — “to understand, internalize, and instruct in the culture of the other” — Judaism was able to advance its own strategies as a response to broader culture.⁵ Jewish existence, thus, shared an intimacy with Christian culture, both as a result of its physical proximity as well its attempted resistance. The enterprise of the Christian calendar for Judaism entwined both religions, particularly, preventing Judaism from existing independently from the surrounding society.

By recognizing the Christian calendar, Jews concomitantly attempted to undermine the principles of those holidays in favor of their own. Askenazi communities in Europe drew upon ancient traditions of disparagement of idolatrous beliefs. Based in the Talmudic idea of derision towards idolatry, the practices of polemics became common practice with derogatory terms being “substituted for words associated with the idolatrous religion and its sancta.”⁶ Through the formation of a comprehensive calendar, containing both Jewish and Christian dates, Askenazi communities opportunistically embedded their traditional approach: applying extensive knowledge and association to subvert the essence of Christianity. Achieved through a number of ways — most commonly through the changing a letter of the name of a holiday to alter its meaning or through using pejorative language — Jews focused intensely on the Christian holidays, a fundamental and repeated manifestation of its dogmas and tradition, as a point of assault. were both beneficial and detrimental to the Jewish cause: a notion both corrupted and inculcated.

Christmas gained religious and mass popularity during Europe’s transition to the modern period, evolving into the principal holiday of the Christian calendar.⁷ This transformation within Christianity was concurrently reflected in the language, practice, and traditions of the Askenazi communities on Christmas Eve. The Jews of Europe, subjected to a Christian winter seasonal culture, referred to Christmas predominantly as *Nittel Nacht*, though it was given alternative names based on geography and local language. Derived from the Latin *Natale Domini*, “Nativity of the Lord,” the phrase reflected Jews’ antipathy towards saying the word Christ in relation to Jesus — a concept found in earlier rabbinic tradition.⁸ In addition, drawing upon the Talmudic concept of derision of idolatry, the word *Nittel* was commonly spelled with the letter *tuf* in order to connote a derogatory meaning: “Night of the Hanged One.”⁹ Beyond altering its name, the Jewish communities formed their own folkloric reaction to Christmas, intended to renounce Christian dominance, and to counteract the purported powers at play during the night. In the process, these Askenazi communities developed a particular tradition for Christmas Eve; while inverting Christian doctrine, Jews allowed their version of Christmas to permeate their own tradition. This produced the quasi-holiday of *Nittel Nacht*; in its attempt to repudiate Christmas Eve it formed an annual Jewish tradition with Jesus as its focus.

The tradition of *Nittel Nacht* was a collection of observances practiced on the night of Christmas Eve, which consisted of Jews “putting aside their holy books, refraining from sexual

³ Ibid., 115.

⁴ Ibid., 115.

⁵ Ibid., 117.

⁶ Ibid., 119.

⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁸ Defined as the “anointed one,” historically, Jews would not refer to Jesus as the true messiah.

⁹ *Nittel*, when read with the letter *tuf* is a derivative of the Hebrew *talui*, meaning: to hang

relations... staying up late, and holding rowdy communal gatherings.”¹⁰ Additionally, *Toledot Yeshu*, an older Jewish biography of the life of Jesus, was commonly read on the holiday in those gatherings, though it was not given the same prominence in the rabbinic tradition as the other *Nittel Nacht* practices.¹¹ Rabbinic corroboration of the four practices was outlined in religious texts, in *responsas* and *halakhic* commentaries, from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; none of these customs are found in Talmudic or Medieval rabbinic literature, suggesting that they originated in a later period. The earliest explicit reference to these practices is found in the writings of Rabbi Yair Bacharach (1639-1702), also known as the *Mekor Hayyim*.¹² It is written in his work, “and there is a custom of abstaining from study on the evening of That Man’s [i.e., Jesus’] holiday.”¹³ The act of refraining from religious study, the foregoing of a fundamental aspect of Jewish life, was seldom performed during the Jewish calendar.¹⁴ A later rabbi, who discussed the customs of *Nittel Nacht* was Rabbi Moses Schreiber (1762-1839), known as the *Hatam Sofer*, one of the leading religious figures of European Jewry. Discussing the nucleus of observance, Schreiber cites the “prohibition of Torah study on the eve of their holiday,’ ‘the universal custom of forbidding sexual relations,’ and the practice of ‘staying awake’ or ‘rising after midnight’” as the main characteristics of the night.¹⁵ Such examples highlighted the mainstream nature of *Nittel Nacht* practices in the rabbinic tradition and Ashkenazi communities of the late modern period.

While buttressed by religious works of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the *Nittel Nacht* tradition formed out of a more ancient and complicated historical pattern. To traditional Jews, the basis or framework of the *Nittel Nacht* tradition acted as a “form of ritual protection.”¹⁶ This ideological response was a mirror of folkloric traditions of the antiquated pagan beliefs of the medieval period surrounding the winter season.¹⁷ Within pagan society, as well as Christian seasonal traditions, legends of the winter solstice were strongly associated with the observance of Christmas Eve. Christians believed that on the night of Christmas Eve, the earth was invaded by departed souls returning to the world of the living.¹⁸ Held by some Christians, the period of Jesus’ birth thus entwined with older pagan beliefs in the dead.¹⁹ The motif of “unnatural resurrection and supernatural danger” in Christianity during the winter season would then pervade the Jewish narrative surrounding *Nittel Nacht*.²⁰ The ritual of *Nittel Nacht* for Ashkenazi communities was paradigmatic of Judaism’s existence as a minority. Despite its intent to renounce Christianity and Christmas, “they [the Jews] subconsciously adopted some of the practices they saw around them.”²¹ By engaging in such observances and partaking in the other-

¹⁰ Scharbach, Rebecca. “The Ghost in the Privy: On the Origins of Nittel Nacht and Modes of Cultural Exchange.” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2013). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24751806>.

¹¹ Kattan Gribetz, Sarit. “Hanged and Crucified: The Book of Esther and Toledot Yeshu.” In *Toledot Yeshu Reconsidered*, edited Peter Schäfer et al., 159–80. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

¹² The *Mekor Hayyim* is a late seventeenth century commentary on the *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim*, the foremost work on Jewish legal codes

¹³ In the original Hebrew: “ומנהג ביטול הלימוד בליל חוגג של פלוגי”

¹⁴ Tisha B’av, the ninth of Av, commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temple. Considered a major fast day, and the saddest day of the Jewish year, a prohibition exists to learn most rabbinic texts except for certain Torah portions. This is based on the concept of Torah study being a joyous activity, and since the day is of such sadness, happiness is not appropriate on the date.

¹⁵ Scharbach, Rebecca. “The Ghost in the Privy: On the Origins of Nittel Nacht and Modes of Cultural Exchange.” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2013). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24751806>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Carlebach, Elisheva. *Palaces of Time: Jewish Calendar and Culture in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011 (131).

worldliness of the night, despite not believing in Christ, the communities, nevertheless, acknowledged and adopted certain aspects of the Christian-dominated culture.

The intent of the observance of *Nittel Nacht* was to avoid certain acts that would strengthen and intensify the powers of evil; this meant following specific customs to repudiate Christian beliefs regarding Christmas Eve. More broadly, the winter, according to European society, was a period when dark forces were around; in the Jewish tradition, a particular soul visited and terrorized their community on Christmas Eve: Jesus, in his return to Earth. Despite the centrality of Jesus in both religions' versions of the holiday, the differences in Jesus' character was stark; for *Askenazic* Jews it was concern regarding the character of Jesus which warranted a communal response. A variation on the Christian folk tradition, the framework of *Nittel Nacht* acted as a "mystical calculus... about European Jewish anxiety regarding the Christian majority."²² As such, while the themes and spirit of night originated in European culture, the Jews expressed the imagery differently: "in a way that expresse[d] the particular sensibilities and fears of the adoptive [Jewish] community."²³ This was due to older Judaic traditions and customs which were incorporated into the observance of *Nittel Nacht*. Thus, through the amalgamation of two distinct, yet interconnected traditions, *Nittel Nacht* was an anti-holiday-holiday: a night that blurred the line between recognition and denouncement.

In regard to the ban on religious study, the principal prohibition of the night, the rabbis related four main explanations for refraining from the commandment to learn Torah. First, by learning, the Jews would inadvertently be giving honor to Jesus' name, since it was celebrated as the day of his birth, as he too was considered to have studied the holy texts — there is even Talmudic basis for Jesus being a sage.²⁴ Second, in a similar vein, since Jesus had learned these religious texts, the Jews would therefore be giving comfort to his soul; this, too, is based in the Talmudic concept that studying Torah in a deceased's name would assist them in the grave or the next world.²⁵ Third, the idea, which worked within the framework of subversion, that the Jews were supposed to be mourning the date.²⁶ Accordingly, since Torah study was considered a joyful endeavor in the rabbinic tradition, Jews were supposed to abstain from the practice on such a particularly sad date.²⁷ The final explanation, considered by scholars to be the most historically relevant, originated in ancient an Christian belief that Jesus, on Christmas Eve, would travel from Jewish home to home looking for a place for his soul to rest: a home of study and prayer. To prevent, and counteract, this, Torah study was prohibited and merriment was practiced to prevent his soul from resting.²⁸ For the rabbis, the concept of evil being ascendant on Earth, and the dead returning to life to menace the living, worked in tandem with their own conception of Jesus; this was a key point in the Jewish subversion of the Christian tradition.

A similar Jewish tradition which defined itself through the characterization of Jesus as a demonic, defiled character, was the work *Toledot Yeshu*. *Toledot Yeshu*, "The Life of Jesus," is a folk narrative of Jesus and the rise of Christianity written from the stance of rabbinic Judaism. Considered an anti-Gospel work, *Toledot Yeshu* drew upon concepts found in the Talmud and Midrash, but was never considered part of the canonical rabbinic literature.²⁹ Composed, it is speculated, during the late Talmudic, early *Geonic* period (500-700 CE), the story was originally an oral tradition, but was later written down in manuscript form; the earliest cohesive narrative

²² Scharbach, Rebecca. "The Ghost in the Privy: On the Origins of Nittel Nacht and Modes of Cultural Exchange." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2013). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24751806>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "A Very Jewish Christmas: Old World Jewish Christmas Traditions." YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Accessed December 31, 2021. <https://www.yivo.org/Christmas2019>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ This explanation co-opts the *Tisha B'av halacha* mentioned above.

²⁷ "A Very Jewish Christmas: Old World Jewish Christmas Traditions." YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Accessed December 31, 2021. <https://www.yivo.org/Christmas2019>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

dates from the eighth century. Its purpose, borrowing motifs from Christianity and inverting their religious narrative, was to distort “the adversary’s [Christian] self-image, of his identity, through the deconstruction of his memory.”³⁰ Originally written as a polemic work — part of a larger and longer trend among the Abrahamic religions of the medieval period — *Toledot Yeshu* evolved into a communal experience.³¹ While originating as a form of literary protest, an attempt to delegitimize the Christian religion, the inculcation of *Toledot Yeshu* as a traditional text had adverse effects: attempting to “deny the adversary [Christian] identity” through the polemical work, in turn, it shaped Ashkenazi Judaism’s own character in the process.³²

Set in Judea during the beginning of the Common era, the narrative of *Toledot Yeshu* begins with the birth of Jesus:³³ While her husband Yohanan is away, Miriam is greeted by her neighbor Panthera. Panthera, portrayed either as a thief or Roman soldier, enters the bedroom of Miriam and Yohanan.³⁴ Since it is nighttime, Miriam is unable to recognize the figure as her neighbor. Despite her menstruation, she submits to his sexual advancements, tricked into having extra-marital relations. Rather than an immaculate conception of the Gospels, Jesus is born a bastard and from a menstruating woman. The narrative of *Toledot Yeshu*, rather than painting Jesus as the son of God and Christ, portrays Jesus’ origin in lowly terms, the antithesis to the virgin birth.³⁵

The narrative follows chronologically with the upbringing of Jesus, his excelling in Torah studies, and his arrogance resulting in sin; while in Jerusalem, Jesus acts disrespectfully to the Sanhedrin, the supreme rabbinical council in Judea, upsetting them by challenging their religious authority.³⁶ Through publicizing his lineage, the sages ex-communicate him and banish him to the Galilee. Enraged by the rabbis, Jesus enters the Holy of Holies in the Temple. Once inside, Jesus writes the *shem hameforash* — the four-letter ineffable name of God — onto a parchment, and sews it into the skin of his groin. Once in control of the *shem hameforash*, Jesus is given magical powers, including the ability to fly. Jesus then broadcasts himself as the messiah to the masses. In this narrative, since it is the name of God that empowers him, and not Jesus himself, the rabbis provide a logical explanation for the miraculous powers of Jesus and undermine his elevated, divine status.

Toledot Yeshu then inverts the Gospel’s presentation of events to promote the Jewish cause in regard to Jesus’ downfall; the sage Judas Iscariot is sent to disprove Jesus’ divinity. Once Judas is equipped with the *shem hameforash*, he confronts Jesus. A flying battle ensues, the wrangling concludes when Judas ejaculates on Jesus, causing him to become impure and lose the powers of God’s name. From there, Jesus rejoins his disciples; Judas infiltrates the group, and removes the name of God from Jesus’ groin. After returning to Jerusalem, Jesus is apprehended, tried, and executed by the Sanhedrin for his heretical crimes. Using the Gospel concept of Judas as a betrayer of Jesus, *Toledot Yeshu* subverts the Gospels’ story by having Jesus be persecuted for his heresy and false claims.

³⁰ Biale, David. “Counter-History and Jewish Polemics against Christianity: The ‘Sefer Toldot Yeshu’ and the ‘Sefer Zerubavel.’” *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 1 (1999): 130–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4467570>.

³¹ Kattan Gribetz, Sarit. “Hanged and Crucified: The Book of Esther and Toledot Yeshu.” In *Toledot Yeshu Reconsidered*, edited Peter Schäfer et al., 159–80. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

³² Biale, David. “Counter-History and Jewish Polemics against Christianity: The ‘Sefer Toldot Yeshu’ and the ‘Sefer Zerubavel.’” *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 1 (1999): 130–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4467570>.

³³ This account consists of a compilation of the Wagenseil, Strasbourg, Huldreich, and Krauss versions of *Toledot Yeshua* (all of which were written between the 17th and 20th century) presented in Michael Meerson’s “*Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus: Two Volumes and Database*”

³⁴ This draws upon the Talmudic concept that Panthera is the true father of Jesus (Talmud Bavli Shabbat 104b of the Talmud Bavli). The description of Jesus as the son of Panthera is more explicit in the Tosefta.

³⁵ From his birth, according to Jewish tradition, it is intrinsic to him, which will be fulfilled in his demise, later covered in bodily waste.

³⁶ The text is explicit in describing Jesus as being appreciated for his scholarship and learnedness, a concept found in earlier rabbinic works.

The narrative of *Toledot Yeshu* concludes with the death of Jesus and the rise of Christianity: After Jesus is buried, Judas removes the body. Three days later, his disciples return to an empty grave and assume that Jesus ascended to heaven. Through this alleged resurrection, the disciples promote the divinity of Jesus, while the rabbis are aware of the truth. Concerned with Jews who believe in Jesus, the sages create a way to detach themselves from the heretics, thus preserving the rabbinic tradition and preventing corruption of the Jewish religion. Working on behalf of the rabbis, infiltrators — merging and replacing the characters Peter or Paul of the Gospels — persuade the believers in Jesus to divorce themselves from the Judaic tradition. By framing Jesus as a heretic and pawn of the rabbis, not the son of God, *Toledot Yeshu* undermined Christianity at its fundamental and historical roots.

Following in line with *The Book of Esther*, *Toledot Yeshu* contained a similar motif, the narrative was read in the early modern period of Europe as a form of mockery of Christianity.³⁷ For Jews, the story of *Toledot Yeshu* began with Jesus' birth narrative, even proclaiming that the date of his birth was Christmas.³⁸ Furthermore, “the use of *Toledot Yeshu* as a liturgical or performative text... in the Jewish calendar” was corroborated by secondary sources.³⁹ Testimonies from Christian converts in Europe in the late fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, attested to the recital of *Toledot Yeshu* on the night of December 25th.⁴⁰ As such, there was historical evidence, based on ideological similarities in the Jewish tradition, that the story of *Toledot Yeshu* was not only a literary work, but served a performative purpose as well, indicating not only the natural affinity between the story and *Nittel Nacht*, but a long-lasting historical connection between the two traditions. *Toledot Yeshu* concerned itself with, and polemicized against, fundamental Christian beliefs, specifically, the virgin birth, the ascension and divinity of Jesus, the schism with Christianity, and its rise as a major religion. Drawing upon the basic story of the Gospels, *Toledot Yeshu* was entirely an inversion of Christian dogma, a prime polemic for the dynamic of *Nittel Nacht* and Judaism's minority status in Christian Europe. *Toledot Yeshu* served to frame the historical relationship of Judaism in a Christian-dominated world: its goal was to counter Christianity, while, in practice, further bonded the religions together. Since true rejoicing in Judaism could only occur with Torah study, and simultaneously Jews were supposed to deride the essence of Christmas Eve, the reading of *Toledot Yeshu* was apropos to the spirit of the night: studying a “Jewish text” that subverted and inverted Christianity.

There were a number of variants of *Toledot Yeshu*, which existed in “Aramaic, Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, Jewish-Persian, Yiddish, Spanish, Ladino and German,” yet all contained the same underlying ideology and framework.⁴¹ Similar to other rabbinic works, *Toledot Yeshu* was full of references to biblical passages, rabbinic concepts — “humility in front of one's teachers, laws of *nidah* and *mamzer*, the figure of Shimon ben Shetach” — and historical characters.⁴² The Talmud acts as the basis for the plot of *Toledot Yeshu*, most importantly in its portrayal of the character of Jesus as a defiled being. The Talmud Bavli, in Gittin 57a, questions the punishment for Jesus in the world-to-come, answering, in response, that he is punished with “boiling in

³⁷ Kattan Gribetz, Sarit. “Hanged and Crucified: The Book of Esther and Toledot Yeshu.” In *Toledot Yeshu Reconsidered*, edited Peter Schäfer et al., 159–80. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Even within Jewish tradition itself proofs exist to attest to the historical association between text and date. One of the foremost manuscripts of *Toledot Yeshu*, the Strasbourg variant, ends with the etymology of Christmas and why it is referred to as *Weihnachten*, a common name for Christmas: as they weep (*weinen*) on this night (*nacht*). The narrative concludes with the line: “And it is over this incident that they weep on their night [i.e., Christmas].”

⁴¹ Ezra, Daniel Stökl Ben. “An Ancient List of Christian Festivals in ‘Toledot Yeshu’: Polemics as Indication for Interaction.” *The Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 4 (2009): 481–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40390030>.

⁴² Kattan Gribetz, Sarit. “Hanged and Crucified: The Book of Esther and Toledot Yeshu.” In *Toledot Yeshu Reconsidered*, edited Peter Schäfer et al., 159–80. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

excrement.”⁴³ This imagined fate for Jesus in the world-to-come is linked to a lowly bodily function, with Jesus being immersed in the excrement for eternity.⁴⁴ This would be compounded by later conceptions of Jesus as a demon-like character, furthering his degraded status within the *Ashkenazic* tradition. *Nittel Nacht*, in certain regards, was the ritual-theatrical expression of *Toledot Yeshu*'s narrative, setting the stage for its declaration.⁴⁵

Through such a narrative, from the life of Jesus and the subsequent rise of Christianity, *Toledot Yeshu* served as a mouthpiece for *Ashkenazic* Judaism. The act of exploiting the Christians foundational source — the birth and life of Jesus and the inception of Christianity — was intended to create autonomy and counteract the sense of powerlessness felt by *Ashkenazic* communities; *Toledot Yeshu* was a narrative of empowerment of a minority community persecuted and subservient to Christian Europe. The narrative of *Toledot Yeshu* was not merely meant to paint the character of Mary, Jesus, and his disciples in a poor regard, though it achieves this objective, but, more importantly, it was to subvert the history of Christianity to favor Judaism. Rather than espousing the evils of Christianity, the story of *Toledot Yeshu* was framed to highlight the Jewish agency in the formation of Christianity. Jesus as the deistic figure for Christianity was an existential danger to the Jews of Europe. By inverting the Gospels, “Christianity’s break with Judaism and its ultimate success is not due to its own merits, nor to its rejection of Judaism, but to the cunning of the Jewish community and its desire to preserve itself intact.” *Toledot Yeshu* was not merely a polemical work, but underlined and delegitimize the history of Christianity, including its dominant position in Europe, in favor of Jewish control.⁴⁶ While *Toledot Yeshu* was based in older Jewish traditions, with the themes of *Nittel Nacht* gaining prominence in Europe in the modern period, the work was integrated into the observance of the night, contrasting the celebration of Jesus’ birth with the Jewish perspective.

The concept of a revenant Jesus, in the narrative of *Toledot Yeshu*, was given dynamism in popular Jewish culture in Europe, furthering the place of *Nittel Nacht* within the Jewish calendar. Drawing upon rabbinic concepts, the folkloric traditions of Christmas Eve supported the belief of Jesus, in physical form, intent on disturbing the Askenazi communities. Specifically, these popular sources supported a similar narrative of a grotesque, corporeal Jesus motivated to assault the Jews on *Nittel Nacht*. Many of these accounts relate to the concept of learning on the night, and the punishments directed towards Jesus for transgressing: “demand[ing] to be paid tuition,” will “hide in a holy book and won’t come out,” or “he soils it [i.e., defecates on it] in hatred and disgust.”⁴⁷ The explanations for such actions are a reiteration of rabbinic ideas, some based in contemporary thought while others from older tradition: “he was once a great scholar’ and will wish to be honored for it” or that “he also taught it.”⁴⁸ All of these corporeal descriptions are intended to prevent any individual from being reckless. This risen Jesus — the flying, monstrous, physical Jesus — therefore “require[s] defensive steps” seen in the observance of *Nittel Nacht*. As such, “Jewish tales of a revenant Jesus who wanders on Christmas Eve... predate[d] the earliest acknowledgement of these customs in Jewish sources.⁴⁹ Jewish legends surrounding Jesus assumed and encompassed motifs of European culture, in turn, becoming inherent to the character of Jesus in the Jewish tradition. Through the paradigm of *Toledot Yeshu*, *Nittel Nacht* extended a mythology of older traditions of the Jewish

⁴³ The Talmud’s account: דִּינִיָּה דְהוּא גְבֵרָא בְּמַאי אָמַר לֵיהּ בְּצוּאָה רֻתְמַתּ

⁴⁴ Scharbach, Rebecca. “The Ghost in the Privy: On the Origins of Nittel Nacht and Modes of Cultural Exchange.” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2013): 340–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24751806>.

⁴⁵ Alleson-Gerberg, Shai. “Nittel Nacht: An Inverted Christmas with Toledot Yeshu.” *TheTorah.com*. Accessed December 31, 2021. <https://www.thetorah.com/article/nittel-nacht-an-inverted-christmas-with-toledot-yeshu>.

⁴⁶ Heschel, Susannah. *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

⁴⁷ Scharbach, Rebecca. “The Ghost in the Privy: On the Origins of Nittel Nacht and Modes of Cultural Exchange.” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2013): 340–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24751806>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

communities of Europe, which borrowed from and undermined Christian traditions, simultaneously connecting and dividing the two religions.

The history of *Nittel Nacht*, in essence, is the history of Ashkenazic Judasim in Europe from the medieval to early modern period. The traditions of Judaism and Christianity were in constant interaction with one another, and, despite the Jewish communities' attempts to create strong barriers between the two religions, there were aspects in which merging occurred. Despite maligning Christianity — its theology, dogma, and religious practices — as an effort to counteract the religion, through such a process, Judaism was forced to acknowledge the presence of Christianity. In its recognition of Christian power in Europe, the line was blurred between the religious, the abject rejection of Christianity and its doctrines, and communal, the attraction and incorporation of Christian, European folklore, traditions of the Jewish minority. This mimicry, the borrowing and reorienting of Christmas, was “not such a radical departure from the Christian tradition at all, but this isn't to suggest that it ‘is somehow less Jewish.’”⁵⁰ Rather, *Nittel Nacht* is the manifestation of Jewishness in Christian Europe: its recognition of Christian authority, its inability to disengage from European culture, and, ultimately, its embrace of Christianity within its own traditions.

⁵⁰ Ibid.