

Conversion and Polemic in the Late-Fifteenth Century Ottoman Empire: Two Polemical Treatises Against Judaism

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On Beşinci Yüzyıl Sonu Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda İhtida ve Polemik: Yahudilik Aleyhinde İki Reddiye

Öz ■ II. Bayezid'in hizmetindeki iki Yahudi mühtedi Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Yahudi inancını hedef alan bilinen en erken tarihli reddiyeleri yazmışlardır. Bu makale, söz konusu iki reddiyenin tarihsel bağlamına ve Müslüman reddiye yazım geleneği ile irtibatına ışık tutmayı amaçlamaktadır. Abdüsselam el-Mühtedi ve Abdülallam isimli yazarlar tarafından kaleme alınan *Risâletü'l-hâdiye* ve *Risâletü'l-ilzâm'il-Yahûd* in eşzamanlı olarak ortaya çıkışı bu dönemde başlayan Sefarad göçü bağlamında tartışılacaktır. İlk bakışta iki metin de Yahudi bir okuyucu kitlesini hedef alarak onlara İslamiyet'i kabul ettirmek amacıyla yazıldığı izlenimini vermektedir. Bununla beraber, risalelerin dili olarak İbranice yerine Arapçanın seçilmiş olması ve metinlerin Müslüman okuyucular arasında ilgi görmesi Yahudileri muhatap almanın retorik bir yöntem olduğunu göstermektedir. Dönemin Osmanlı elit çevrelerinde mühtedilerin zaman zaman maruz kaldığı olumsuz imalar düşünüldüğünde iki mühtedinin eski dinlerini çürüten reddiyeler yazmaları kendileri ile Yahudi geçmişleri arasında mesafe koyma çabası olarak anlaşılabilir.

Anahtar kelimeler: reddiye, dinlerarası polemik, Osmanlı Yahudileri, Müslüman-Yahudi ilişkileri, II. Bayezid.

Two Jewish converts to Islam who lived in the time of Bayezid II penned the earliest known polemics written against Judaism in the Ottoman Empire. 'Abd al-Salâm al-Muhtadî *Risâla al-hâdiya* (A Guiding Epistle)¹ and 'Abd al-'Allâm's

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treatise titled *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd* (An Epistle Compelling the Jews)² are exclusively devoted to the refutation of the Jewish faith and greatly informed subsequent Ottoman writers who compiled anti-Jewish texts. The two polemics were written at a crucial juncture in the history of Jews in the Ottoman Empire, for the period in question witnessed the earliest Sephardic influx to the Ottoman lands.³ Both polemicists' dedication of their works to the sultan and their close connections with the Ottoman imperial administration make the simultaneous appearance of the two anti-Jewish texts even more important.

Recently, the interplay between conversion narratives and polemics was discussed by several writers within the framework of 'the Ottoman age of Confessionalism'.⁴ Tijana Krstić's two studies dealing with the polemical works of two Christian converts, one compiled in 1556/7 and the other translated into Ottoman Turkish in 1604, are noteworthy. Krstić points to the elements of confessional polarization as manifested in the self-narratives integrated into the

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- 1 Abd al-Salam al-Muhtadi al-Muhammadi, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Yazma Eserler Bölümü, MS TSMK A. 1735; hereafter, *Hadiya*.
 - 2 Al-Salam Abd al-Allam, *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd fī mā za'amū fī al-Tawrāt min qibal 'ilm al-kalām*, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, MS Fatih 2994; hereafter, *Ilzam*.
 - 3 See Minna Rozen, *A History of the Jewish Community in Istanbul: The Formative Years*, (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2010), Aryeh Shmuelevitz, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire in the Late Fifteenth and the Sixteenth Centuries*, (Leiden: Brill, 1984), Jonathan S. Ray, *After Expulsion: 1492 and the Making of Sephardic Jewry*, (New York: NYU Press, 2013), Halil İnalçık, "Jews in the Ottoman Economy and Finances, 1450-1500," *The Islamic World: From Classical to Modern Times*, ed. Clifford E. Bosworth et al., (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1989).
 - 4 Several historians have recently argued for the usefulness of the confessionalization paradigm, which originated as an approach to probe the early modern social and political implications of state-church alignment in Christian Europe, to the Ottoman context. See, for example, Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014). Guy Burak, "Faith, Law and Empire in the Ottoman 'Age of Confessionalization': The Case of 'Renewal of Faith,'" *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 28 (2013), pp. 1–23. Derin Terzioğlu, "How to Conceptualize Ottoman Sunnitization: A Historiographical Discussion," *Turcica*, 44 (2012), pp. 301–338. Derin Terzioğlu, "Where 'İlm-i Hāl Meets Catechism: Islamic Manuals of Religious Instruction in the Ottoman Empire in the Age of Confessionalization," *Past & Present*, 220 (2013), pp. 79–114. For a critique of using this concept for the Ottoman Empire, see Marc D. Baer, "Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire by Tijana Krstić," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 23 (2012), pp. 391–394.

polemical works.⁵ In explaining the underlying dynamics of confessional mentality, she ascribes a particular role to the inter-imperial political context in which the Ottoman Empire was engaged in military, political and religious rivalry against the Habsburgs in the west and the Safavids in the east. Judith Pfeiffer's article on a seventeenth-century polemical treatise against Judaism penned by a Jewish convert to Islam stands out as the first attempt to understand the Muslim-Jewish relations in the Ottoman Empire in connection with this paradigm.⁶ While drawing heavily on the concept of 'Ottoman confessionalization' in explaining the Ottoman politics of religion, Pfeiffer contends that the absence of an imperial backing for the Jews unlike in the cases of Shiites and Christians makes it problematic to locate the Jewish conversion narratives in the context of inter-imperial rivalry as framed by Krstić.⁷ Instead, Pfeiffer proposes an examination of the anti-Jewish polemical text "within the context of Ottoman internal politics" with a particular focus on the strife between the Kadızadelis and some Sufis.⁸

Existing scholarly literature on the two epistles is limited to critical editions, translations, and a single study by Joseph Sadan who discussed linguistic characteristics of Abd al-Allam's polemical text.⁹ The critical editions and translations of the two texts have been undertaken exclusively by Sabine Schmidtke and Camilla Adang. Schmidtke published a critical edition of Abd al-Salam's anti-Jewish polemics, based on five manuscripts dated 1499/1500, 1568, 1581, 1790, and 1851, but left out the earliest copy held in the Topkapı Palace library.¹⁰ An English

5 Tijana Krstić, "Illuminated by the Light of Islam and the Glory of the Ottoman Sultanate: Self-Narratives of Conversion to Islam in the Age of Confessionalization," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 51 (2009), pp. 35–63; Tijana Krstić, "Reading Abdallah b. Abdallah al-Tarjuman's *Tulila* (1420) in the Ottoman Empire: Muslim-Christian Polemics and Intertextuality in the Age of "Confessionalization," *al-Qantara*, 36 (2015), pp. 341–401.

6 Judith Pfeiffer, "Confessional Polarization in the 17th Century Ottoman Empire and Yūsuf Ibn Ebi 'Abdū'd Deyyān's *Keşfü'l-Esrār Fi Ilzāmi'l-Yehūd ve'l-Aḥbār*," Camilla Adang and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.), *Contacts and Controversies Between Muslims, Jews and Christians in the Ottoman Empire and Pre-Modern Iran*, (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2010), pp. 15–55.

7 Schmidtke, *Contacts and Controversies*, p. 18.

8 Schmidtke, *Contacts and Controversies*, p. 19.

9 Joseph Sadan, "Phonemes and Sounds as Criteria: Biblical Curses Submitted to Muslim Scholars by a Converted Jew in the Reign of Sultan Bāyazīd (Beyazıt) II (1481–1512)," Jan Hogendijk and Arnoud Vrolijk (eds.), *O Ye Gentlemen: Arabic Studies on Science and Literary Culture*, (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 495–510.

10 Al-Salām 'Abd al-'Allām, "Epistle Forcing the Jews [to Admit Their Error] with Regard to What They Contend about the Torah, by Dialectical Reasoning (Risālat Ilzām al-Yahūd

translation of this edition was published by Adang.¹¹ In the introduction to her translation, she briefly introduces the author of the text, Abd al-Salam, and supplies information available on the author in several Ottoman sources, particularly in the later works of Katip Çelebi and Mustafa Âli. She avoids, however, elaborating on the widely diverging narratives offered by these sources concerning Abd al-Salam's place of origin and occupation, and concludes with a call for further research to shed light on the polemicist.¹² As for Abd al-Allam's work, we have again Schmidtke's critical edition, based on the single extant manuscript,¹³ and Adang's translation into English.¹⁴

Jewish Converts Refuting Judaism

What the author of *Hādiya* provides about himself is limited to his name: Abd al-Salam al-Muhtadī al-Muhammadi,¹⁵ which explains why we have to construct his historical biography based largely on indirect evidence scattered across later sources. The earliest surviving copy of *Hādiya* bears the date of 1497, at which time Bayezid II had been on the throne for sixteen years. Additionally, a reference

Fimā Za‘amū Fi l-Tawrāt Mīn Qibal ‘ilm al-Kalām) by al-Salām ‘Abd al-‘Allām. A Critical Edition,” trans. Sabine Schmidtke, *Contacts and Controversies Between Muslims, Jews and Christians in the Ottoman Empire and Pre-Modern Iran*, eds. Sabine Schmidtke and Camilla Adang, (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2010).

11 ‘Abd Al-Salām Al-Muhtadī Al-Muhammadi, “Guided to Islam by the Torah: The Risāla Al-Hādiya by ‘Abd Al-Salām Al-Muhtadī Al-Muhammadi, trans. Camilla Adang, *Contacts and Controversies Between Muslims, Jews and Christians in the Ottoman Empire and Pre-Modern Iran*, eds. Camilla Adang and Sabine Schmidtke, (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2010).

12 Abd al-Salam, “Guided to Islam by the Torah,” pp. 57-8.

13 Abd al-Allam, “Epistle Forcing the Jews.”

14 Al-Salam Abd al-Allam, “A Polemic against Judaism by a Convert to Islam from the Ottoman Period: Risalat Ilzam Al-Yahud Fima Za‘amu Fi l-Tawrat Mīn Qibal Ilm Al-Kalam,” trans. Camilla Adang, *Journal Asiatique*, 297 (2009), pp. 131–51.

15 The name of the author, Abd al-Salam, is reminiscent of a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām, who reportedly converted to Islam when he was a Jewish scholar and was given his name by the Prophet himself. In medieval Islamic literature, ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām represents the first example of the Rabbinic Jews who embraced Islam by the guidance of the Torah, which makes the name choice of the Ottoman polemicist even more intriguing., Josef Horovitz, “‘Abd Allāh b. Salām,” eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Accessed on July 25, 2019.

to “Bayezid Khan” as the name of the sultan in rule confirms that Abd al-Salam lived during the reign of Bayezid II.¹⁶ According to an archival document, Abd al-Salam married the sultan’s granddaughter.¹⁷

Sixteenth-century narrative sources also confirm Abd al-Salam’s self-representation in *Hādiya*. Aşık Çelebi (d. 1572), who completed his celebrated biographical work in 1568, is the earliest Ottoman writer to mention Abd al-Salam. In an anecdote about the poet Başıri, he tells a joke Başıri made about a *kazasker* (military judge), Sarıgörez Nureddin Efendi (d. 1522) whose son married a daughter of “Defterdar Abd al-Salam who had converted from Judaism to Islam.”¹⁸ The story suggests that some viewed the marriage as strange since Sarıgörez’s son comes from a *sipahi* family while Abd al-Salam is from among scholars *ehl-i ilm*, which points to Abd al-Salam’s scholarly credentials independent of his position.¹⁹ Mustafa Âli (d. 1600) identifies Abd al-Salam as a Jewish convert in the position of a *defterdar* in the reign of Sultan Selim I who commissioned a soup kitchen and a madrasa in the Küçük Çekmece neighborhood located in the vicinity of Istanbul.²⁰ Katip Çelebi (d. 1657)’s bibliographic encyclopedia is the earliest source to mention Abd al-Salam’s polemical treatise. Of the two entries relating to Abd al-Salam, the epistle was described as follows under the title of *al-Hādiya*:

A tract that refutes Judaism. Its writer is the defterdar Abd al-Salam, who converted to Islam from Judaism. He had memorized the whole Torah; after that, he was appointed as defterdar in the period of Sultan Selim. This person has a mosque and several foundations.²¹

16 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 7.

17 İlhan Gök (ed.), “Atatürk Kitaplığı M.C. O.71 Numaralı 909-933/1503-1527 Tarihli İn’âmât Defteri (Transkripsiyon-Değerlendirme)” (PhD, Marmara University, 2014), p. 1143.

18 “*Yahüdüden Müselmân olmuş Defterdâr ‘Abdü’s-selâm’uñ kızın alivirmiş*” Aşık Çelebi, *Meşâ’irü’-Şu’ara: İnceleme – Metin*, ed. Filiz Kılıç, vol. 1, (İstanbul: İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü, 2010), p. 423.

19 Aşık Çelebi sarcastically attributed the marriage to Abd al-Salam’s Jewish background. What connected the two families, he maintained, was “the association of his head with the color of yellow (*başdan sarı münasebeti*)”, making connection between Sarıgörez’s blondness and the color of Jewish turbans. Aşık Çelebi, *Meşâ’irü’-Şu’ara*, p. 423.

20 “*Hayli mal-dar ve sahibül’l hayrat namıyla bizzat iştihar bulmuş adem idi*” Mustafa Âli, *Kitâbü’t Târih-i Kühül’-Abbar: Kayseri Raşid Efendi Kütüphanesi’ndeki 901 ve 920 No.lu Nüshalara Göre*, ed. Ahmet Uğur, vol. 2, (Kayseri: Erciyes Üniversitesi Yayınları, 1997), p. 1187.

21 Kâtip Çelebi, *Keşfü’z- Zünun An Esami’l-Kütübi ve’l-Fünun (Kitapların ve İlimlerin*

Both the physical remnants of the buildings attributed to Abd al-Salam and archival documents confirm the information provided by Mustafa Âli and Katip Çelebi regarding his wealth and philanthropic activities. In a land survey from 1546, Abd al-Salam's waqf appears as one of the most affluent ones, after those founded by the members of the Ottoman dynasty, with a handsome annual revenue of 238.080 *akçe* drawn from various properties located in Istanbul as well as several western Anatolian towns.²² The foundation document of Abd al-Salam's waqf dated 931 (1525) records various buildings including a madrasa, a soup kitchen, a tomb, and a fountain all located in Küçük Çekmece.²³ The only surviving building of the original complex today is the tomb of Abd al-Salam, whose inscription indicates that its founder died in 933 (1526-7).²⁴ The madrasa bearing the name of its patron was constructed by the chief royal architect Sinan.²⁵ Another building commissioned by Abd al-Salam but not mentioned in the waqf records is a mosque in Hasköy that was named after its founder.²⁶ This neighborhood in Istanbul is a remarkable choice as it was inhabited predominantly by Jews including the newly arrived Sephardim.²⁷ Stéphane Yerasimos' examination of waqf registers reveals that Abd al-Salam was among the Muslim ruling elite who showed an increasing interest in buying properties in Jewish neighborhoods in order to sustain their waqfs.²⁸

İsimlerinden Şüphelerin Giderilmesi), trans. Rüştü Balcı, 8th ed., vol. 2, (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2011), p. 1626. In the other entry, in which the title of the work is given as *Risâla al-hâdiya*, Katip Çelebi provides additional information about the content of the polemical work by listing the titles of its three chapters (Kâtip Çelebi, *Keşfüz-Zünun*, vol. 2, p. 731.)

22 Ö. L. Barkan & E. H. Ayverdi (eds.), *İstanbul vakıfları tabir defteri: 953 (1546) târihli*, (İstanbul: Baha Matbaası, 1970), pp. 181–82.

23 14. Haremeyn vakfiyesi, 420 as cited in Mehmet Zeki Pakalın, *Maliye Teşkilatı Tarihi (1442-1930)*, vol. 1, (Ankara: Maliye Bakanlığı Tetkik Kurulu Yayını, 1977), p. 140; Salih Şahin, "Küçükçekmece Tarihi," Mehmet Yalçın (ed.), *Dünden Bugüne Küçükçekmece*, (İstanbul: Küçükçekmece Belediyesi Basın Yayın ve Halkla İlişkiler Müdürlüğü, 2009), p. 79.

24 *Tesbih edip melekler eder dua ve tarih / Abdüsselamına olsun darüsselam mesken 933*

25 Sâi Mustafa Çelebi, *Yapılar kitabı: Tezkiretül-bünyan ve Tezkiretül-ebniyye, Mimar Sinan'ın anıları*, eds. Hayati Develi and Samih Rifat, (İstanbul: Koçbank, 2002), p. 182.

26 Hafız Hüseyin Ayvansarayi, Ali Sâti, and Süleyman Besim, *Hadikatül-Cevâmi': İstanbul Câmileri ve Diğer Dini-Sivil Mimâri Yapılar*, Ahmed Nezhîh Galitekin (ed.), (İstanbul: İşaret, 2001), p. 394.

27 Süleyman Faruk Göncüoğlu, "Hasköy," *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, XVI, pp. 388-9.

28 Stéphane Yerasimos, "La Communauté Juives d'Istanbul à La Fin Du XVIIe Siècle," *Turcica*, 27 (1995), p. 126.

In contrast to the archival and narrative sources discussed so far, we have a rather different picture of Abd al-Salam drawn by later writers. The building inscription of the fountain commissioned by a descendant of Abd al-Salam in 1795/6 in the Küçük Çekmece Complex identifies Abd al-Salam as a *seyyid* denoting his lineage to the Prophet Muhammad, let alone mentioning the benefactor's Jewish origins.²⁹ The nineteenth-century bibliographer Mehmed Süreyya's *Sicill-i Osmânî*, perhaps relying on the same inscription, elaborates on the person he identifies as *Seyyid* Abd al-Salam with no reference to *Hâdiya*.³⁰ In an attempt to reconcile conflicting accounts relating to Abd al-Salam, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu has suggested that there were in fact two individuals both known as Abd al-Salam who have been mistakenly deemed to be the same person. He argued that having come from Egypt *Defterdar* Abd al-Salam was a Muslim by birth who endowed many properties including the one in Küçük Çekmece while the other person, Abd al-Salam al-Muhtadi was a Sephardic convert to Islam who served both Bayezid II and Selim I, and also penned *Hâdiya*. İhsanoğlu's reasoning seems problematic as he overlooks several sixteenth-century Ottoman sources that describe him as a *defterdar* who converted from Judaism.³¹ A more likely explanation of the conflicting historical narratives about Abd al-Salam is that the later accounts that trace his lineage to the Prophet Muhammad might have been fabricated by his descendants who perhaps attempted to conceal the Jewish past of the Abd al-Salam. Indeed, the earliest source mentioning Abd al-Salam as an Egyptian *seyyid* is an inscription commissioned by a descendant of Abd al-Salam. It is also revealing that none of these later sources reference Abd al-Salam's *Hâdiya* in which he declares himself to be a former Jew.

29 Hüsamettin Aksu, "Küçükçekmece'de Emîni Çeşmesi'nin Kitabesi," *Sanat Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 13 (1996), pp. 61–62.

30 "He is a son of Seyyid Abd al-Allam. Brought to Istanbul after the conquest of Egypt, he was employed in accounting affairs and ascended to the position of defterdar. In 932 [1526] he left [his position] and died when residing in Küçük Çekmece. He was buried in his [complex containing] madrasa and imaret that he had constructed. He had a mosque in Hasköy and a school in Küçükpazar. He was a skillful person who changed the rules of siyakat script." Mehmet Süreyya, *Sicill-i Osmânî Zeyli: Son Devir Osmanlı Meşhurları Ansiklopedisi*, ed. Mehmet Zeki Pakalın, vol. 3, (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2008), p. 337.

31 Additionally, without providing any supporting evidence İhsanoğlu speculates that Abd al-Salam al-Muhtadi should be the same person as the famous Iberian Jewish scholar of medicine and astronomy, İlyas bin İbrahim (Abram), who converted to Islam and later became known as Hoca İlya(s) al-Yahūdî following his arrival to Istanbul. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, *Büyük Cihad'dan Frenk Fodulluğuna*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1996), p. 89.

Our information concerning the author of the other anti-Jewish polemical treatise, *Ilzām*, is extremely limited, making his historical personality rather obscure. Having introduced himself as Abd al-Allam, the author proclaims to be a Jewish convert to Islam who “had been among the Israelites and the group of their rabbis (*zumra aḥbārahūm*).”³² Indeed, the polemicist’s remarkable command of Jewish scholarship beyond the scriptures supports his claims. Several references to Bayezid II in the text, including the epistle’s dedication, indicate that he was a contemporary of the sultan, who ruled from the year 1481 to 1512. However, neither archival nor narrative sources help us trace *Ilzām* or his writer. Perhaps “Al-Salam Abd al-Allam” was a pseudonym that alludes to the writer’s self-identification as a scholar and a convert at the same time.³³

The Revival of Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Ottoman Empire

Muslim scholars have composed treatises devoted to the refutation of Judaism along with other faiths since the early ninth century.³⁴ It was the eleventh and twelfth centuries, however, when the anti-Jewish literature established itself as a genre characterized by a certain repertoire of arguments and biblical references. The works of the Andalusian polymath, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) have long served as models for later Muslim polemicists in terms of their biblical criticism and theoretical discussions, especially on *takhrīf* (distortion of the scriptures).³⁵ A later Jewish convert from Morocco, Samaw’al al-Maghribī’s (d. 1175) widely circulated work *Iḥyām Al-Yahūd* has been particularly celebrated for its conversion narrative.³⁶

32 Abd al-Allam, *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd*, f. 2a.

33 The Arabic word *al-salām* shares the same root with *Islam* and *Abd al-‘allām* literally means the slave of the All-Knower (God).

34 Muḥammad ibn Iṣḥāq Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist: A 10th Century AD Survey of Islamic Culture*, trans. Bayard Dodge, (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1970), vol. 2, p. 42, 357, 406, 415, 419. Also see Camilla Adang and Sabine Schmidtke, “Polemics (Muslim-Jewish),” *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman A. Stillman (Brill) (Accessed on June 25, 2019). http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/polemics-muslim-jewish-COM_0017750.

35 See Ghulam Haider Aasi, “Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: An Analytical Study of Ibn Hazm’s ‘Kitab Al-Fasl Fi Al-Milal Wa Al-Ahwa’ Wa Al-Nihal” (PhD, Philadelphia, PA, Temple University, 1987) and Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

36 See Samaw’al al-Maghribi, *Iḥyām Al-Yahūd: Silencing the Jews*, trans. Moshe Perlmann, (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1964).

The personal narrative of a learned Jew's intellectual path to Islam, frequently supported by a dream, appeared in the works of many medieval Muslim polemicists, who integrated autobiographies into the argumentative corpus of their texts following the example of al-Maghribī.³⁷

From the end of the fourteenth century, interreligious polemical literature seems to have lost its popularity in the Islamic world. It appears that the Ottoman Empire was not an exception in this regard. A bibliographical study providing a comprehensive list of Arabic apologetical tracts demonstrates a steady decrease in the number of polemics written between the early fifteenth and late sixteenth centuries.³⁸ The catalog of Bayezid II's royal library records six anti-Christian polemical works without providing the names of their authors in the section devoted to the field of kalam.³⁹ Among the six polemics, two identifiable epistles belong to two medieval scholars: al-Ghazzali (d. 1111), who refutes the Christian doctrine of Jesus, and al-Ṭūfī (d. 1316), who responds to a contemporary Christian polemicist. None of the other four works are available in manuscript libraries and no bibliographical dictionaries of the period mention these works to the best of my knowledge.⁴⁰

37 Mercedes García-Arenal, "Dreams and Reason: Autobiographies of Converts in Religious Polemics," *Conversions Islamiques: Identités Religieuses En Islam Méditerranéen*, ed. Mercedes García-Arenal, (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2001), pp. 97–99.

38 Moritz Steinschneider, *Polemische und Apologetische Literatur in Arabischer Sprache Zwischen Muslimen, Christen und Juden: Nebst Anhängen Verwandten Inhalts*, (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1877), p. 426.

39 'Umar al-'Aṭfī, *Daftār-i Kutub*, MTA Könyvtár és Információs Központ (Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences), MS Török f. 59, 63. For a recent study on this catalogue see Cornell Fleischer, Cemal Kafadar and Gülru Necipoğlu (eds.), *Treasures of Knowledge: An Inventory of the Ottoman Palace Library, 1502/3-1503/4*, 2 vols., (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

40 The rarity of interreligious polemical works until the late sixteenth century does not mean that Ottomans had not engaged in interreligious discussions in any way despite the surrounding religious diversity. It is known that the early Ottoman sultans were interested in polemical conversations between Muslim and Byzantine religious scholars, some of which were written down by contemporaries. Also, Many Muslim hagiographies (*menakibnâmes* and *velâyetnâmes*) depict Christian priests, soldiers or laymen who embraced Islam after theological debates with Muslims. Elisavet A. Zachariadou, "Religious Dialogue between Byzantines and Turks during the Ottoman Expansion," *Studies in Pre-Ottoman Turkey and the Ottomans*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007) pp. 289–304, and Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam*, pp. 67–69.

Neither the catalogs of manuscript libraries nor pre-modern/modern bibliographical studies include any polemical texts written against Judaism before the last years of the fifteenth century as far as I can trace. Besides, these sources do not record any copies or translations of the medieval anti-Jewish polemical works which had widely circulated across the empire. *Hādiya* and *Ilzām* stand out not only as the earliest extant anti-Jewish polemical texts by Ottoman writers but also as indicative of the revival of interest in refuting the Jewish faith. A relatively high number of copies located in the libraries of distant Ottoman cities shows that Abd al-Salam's *Hādiya* circulated significantly from right after its composition to the nineteenth century. I could identify eight manuscript copies of *Hādiya* dating from the years between 1497 and 1851.⁴¹ This stands in contrast with Abd al-Allam's *Ilzām*, which is extant as a single manuscript copy.

The earliest copy of Abd al-Salam's treatise that is held in the collection of Bayezid II in Topkapı Palace Museum Library is dated 902 (1497). Entitled, perhaps by a royal librarian, fully as *Risāla al-bādiya fī ibtāl hujaj al-Yahūd 'alā al-Islām min qibal 'ilm al-kalām* (A Guiding Epistle That Refutes the Proofs of the Jews about Islam by the Science of Kalam), its multi-colored elegant writing style supports the idea that this copy was intended to be circulated among members of the ruling elite. Sixteenth to eighteenth-century miscellaneous volumes which contain copies of *Hādiya* give the impression that the text primarily circulated among learned Turkish speakers. The audience of *Hādiya* appears to have been readers of Islamic sciences, learners of Arabic and Persian languages as well as Turkish literature enthusiasts. Remarkably, no copies of *Hādiya* were included in a miscellaneous volume composed of other polemical texts until 1790, which raises doubts about the polemical purposes and uses of the treatise.⁴² The circulation of the two epistles primarily among Muslims makes it unlikely that they were intended for the Arabic-speaking Jewish literati.

Abd al-Allam's polemical work survives as a single copy held in the Süleymaniye Library (MS Fatih 2994). On the opening page, which was probably left blank by its scribe and later filled in by a royal librarian, the title of the

41 Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Yazma Eserler Bölümü, MS TSMK 1735; Manisa İl Halk Kütüphanesi, MS 8061/1; Erzurum İl Halk Kütüphanesi, MS 24053/1; Leiden University Library, MS Or. 17.054, ff. 125b-127b Or. 17.054; Princeton Digital Library of Islamic Manuscripts, MS Garrett 974H/3; Süleymaniye Library, MS Laleli 3706/36, MS Reşid Efendi 1039/7, MS Esad Efendi 6/5.

42 Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, MS Esad Efendi 6/5, f. 203–210.

epistle reads as *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd fī mā za‘amū fī’ al-Tawrāt min qibal ‘ilm al-kalām* (An Epistle Compelling the Jews by the Science of Kalam Concerning What They Alleged about the Torah).⁴³ This undated manuscript consists of twenty-one folios. Stamps bearing the name of Bayezid II on the first and last pages as in the Topkapı copy of *Hādiya* indicate that the copy belonged to the sultan’s collection located in the Topkapı Palace. The epistle also appears in the library catalog compiled by Bayezid II’s royal librarian in the list of books written in the sciences of bases of religion (*usūl al-dīn*) and kalam.⁴⁴ Although the Topkapı copies of *Hādiya* and *Ilzām* were apparently penned by different scribes, they share formal qualities such as almost identical *basmala* designs on the starting pages and the use of red ink in Hebrew quotations. That *Ilzām* exists in a single manuscript copy accords with the absence of an external reference to the text and its writer in relevant historical sources, suggesting that the treatise was far from reaching the level of reception that Abd al-Salam’s epistle enjoyed.

The two polemical works were organized in a similar but not identical fashion. In the first two sections, Abd al-Salam and Abd al-Allam attempted to invalidate Jewish proofs regarding their religion and proposed Biblical evidence for the announcement of Muhammad’s prophethood, but the order is different. In the additional third section of *Hādiya*, Abd al-Salam argues for the Jews’ alteration of the words in the Torah (Table 1).

43 Abd al-Allam, *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd*, f. 1a.

44 ‘Umar al-’Aṭūfī, *Daftār-i Kutub*, f. 33a.

Table 1. Formal Structure and Number of Biblical References in *Hādiya* and *Ilzām*

Topic of Section	Number of Quotations from the Torah	
	<i>Hādiya</i>	<i>Ilzām</i>
Invalidation of Jewish proofs	9 ⁴⁵	4 ⁴⁶
Announcement of Muhammad’s prophethood	6 ⁴⁷	5 ⁴⁸
Alteration of the words of the Torah	3 ⁴⁹	-
Total	18	9

Narrating Conversion: Learned Jews’ Path to Islam

On the initial pages of *Hādiya* and *Ilzām*, both authors report that they have converted from Judaism to Islam.⁵⁰ The ways in which the two Ottoman polemicists narrated their conversions remarkably overlap. Right after praising God and enumerating his noble names, the two polemicists similarly articulate that God has guided them to embrace the Muslim faith. Abd al-Salam relates that he became Muslim having reflected on the Torah.⁵¹

His Eternal Happiness (*al-sa’āda al-abadiyya*) supported me and cast into my heart the love of Islam and the Muslims, and hatred of those who are neither scholars nor students. I perused the books of the Torah, one after the other, and found therein evidence of how the Jews are thwarting God, exalted is He, and Moses, peace be upon him, one foul thing after another, when “trading the grace of God for the unbelief. They established their people in the house

45 Exod. 31:16; Exod. 21:2-6; Exod. 25:8, 10, 40-42, Num. 23:19; Deut. 13:2-6; Deut. 5:22-24; Deut. 18:16-17; Deut. 5:24, 35, 27, 28; Exod. 20:19; Deut. 12:32; Deut. 33:4.

Compiled from Camilla Adang in Abd al-Salam, “Guided to Islam by the Torah.”

46 Deut. 31:19-21; Deut. 30:12-13; Deut. 4:2; Deut. 33:4.

47 Deut. 18:18-19; Deut. 34:10; Deut. 33:2; Gen. 49:10; Lev. 16:3; Gen. 17:15, 20.

48 Extracted from the following verses with small alterations: Deut. 13:1-5; Deut. 18:18; Deut. 34:10; Deut. 18:18-19; Gen. 49:10. Compiled from Camilla Adang in al-Salam Abd al-Allam, “A Polemic against Judaism by a Convert to Islam from the Ottoman Period: Risalat Ilzam Al-Yahud Fima Za’amu Fi l-Tawrat Min Qibal Ilm Al-Kalam.”

49 Gen. 12:6, 13:7; Deut. 34:1, 5, 6, 8; Deut. 34:6.

50 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 2; Abd al-Allam, *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd*, f. 2a.

51 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 3-4.

of perdition: Jahannam, exposed to its flames; a wretched adobe [Quran 14:28].⁵²

A strikingly similar conversion story stands out in the work of Abd al-Allam, who tells that he had also belonged to the group of Rabbinic scholars:

At the time when God, exalted is He, guided me to the religion of Islam, and my heart was joined to the believers, turning away from unbelief and sins, I belonged to the Children of Israel and the body of their religious scholars, perusing the verses of their book and their traditions. Already the light and the pure guidance to the truth of the prophethood of Muhammad the Chosen One, God bless him and grant him peace, had set my eyes aglow and lit up my mind; the light shining from the niche of the verses of the Torah, even after they had distorted what was patently clear, evident and obvious, and had studiously extracted, from some of its verses and words, [passages] which they claim point to the eternal validity of the religion of Moses, peace be upon him, and which they assume indicate that revelation had ended with [the Torah] and that the heavenly scripture ceased [to be sent down] after it; they believed they were right, but [in fact] they were disputing what they [themselves] were saying, going astray and leading many astray, but only wrongdoing folk are misguided by it.⁵³

The conversion of Christian priests, if not Jewish rabbis, to Islam was a prevalent theme in the widely circulated Ottoman hagiographies in the fifteenth century.⁵⁴ The conversion stories in the two polemical texts are reminiscent of medieval polemics in which the author claims to have been a learned Jew before his conversion. Abd al-Salam and Abd al-Allam's depictions of their conversion to Islam as an intellectual process remind particularly of the conversion story told by Samaw'al al-Maghribī. In the autobiographical part of his polemical treatise, *Ifhām al-Yahūd* (Silencing the Jews) the author, who self-reportedly devoted many years to Torah study, gives an account of the course that had led him to embrace the Muslim faith. Likewise, both Ottoman polemicists state that their close examination of the Hebrew Bible guided them to embrace the Muslim faith.⁵⁵ Another parallelism between the two epistles is their portrayal of a radical and abrupt shift in their socioreligious affinities after they became Muslim. Abd

52 Abd al-Salam, "Guided to Islam by the Torah," p. 60.

53 Abd al-Allam, "Epistle Forcing the Jews," p. 135.

54 Krstic, *Contested Conversions to Islam*, p. 68.

55 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 3-4; Abd al-Allam, *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd*, f. 2a.

al-Salam tells that after his conversion “he became friendly to Muslims and hostile to those who are neither scholars nor students.”⁵⁶ Abd al-Allam similarly narrates that God reconciled his heart to Muslims (*āhl al-īmān*) while turning him away from unbelief and sins.⁵⁷

Despite many similarities, the two polemicists differ remarkably in the role ascribed to the Torah in their conversions. For Abd al-Allam, the Jewish scripture, which he describes as a source of light, guides to the truth even in its corrupted form. He reports that it was the Torah that directed him to Islam following disputations with Israelite scholars (*‘ulamā banī isrā’īl*) on the true interpretation of the biblical verses.⁵⁸ In contrast with Abd al-Allam, the author of *Hādiya* tells that he converted to Islam after he realized the corruption of the Torah by the Jews.⁵⁹ This significant divergence is related to how the two polemicists construe the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible in its existing form. Abd al-Salam adopts a literal understanding of textual corruption in the Torah, which had been formulated largely by Ibn Ḥazm who had argued that not only did the Jews corrupt the meaning of the Scripture (*takhrīf al-mā’nā*) in the act of interpreting, but they also altered the text itself (*takhrīf al-naṣṣ*). Adopting this literalist approach, Abd al-Salam, who devotes a section to the alteration of words in the Torah, highlights the unreliability of the text in the first place. As opposed to Abd al-Allam, he does not bother himself with offering an authentic interpretation of the Hebrew Scripture.

Was the embracement of the Muslim faith by the two Ottoman writers part of a wave of conversion from Judaism to Islam at the time? And, did they compile their polemics in the context of an imperial project to convert Jewish subjects? In fact, the phenomenon of Jewish conversions to Islam in the context of the early modern Ottoman Empire rarely appears in the historical sources, either archival or narrative. For this reason, we have to make use of historical sources dealing indirectly, and only in passing, with some Ottoman Jews who converted to Islam. Contemporary archival documents record a few examples of Jewish conversion to Islam. Two imperial orders (*ahkam*) sent in 1501 to the qadi of a town in Rumeli, for example, document the case of two girls who were entrusted by their Jewish

56 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 3.

57 Abd al-Allam, *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd*, f. 2a.

58 Abd al-Allam, *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd*, f. 3a.

59 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 2.

father to a Muslim before his travel. The documents note that the Jewish plaintiff claimed that his Muslim neighbor refuses to give his daughters back claiming that they had become Muslim. While in the first order it is decided that the girls be released, another order sent some ten days following the former one orders the qadi to send the girls to Istanbul for further investigation.⁶⁰

Jewish sources also provide glimpses of complaints concerning conversions to Islam. For all his general depictions of Bayezid II as welcoming and favorable to the Iberian Jews,⁶¹ the sixteenth-century Cretan Jewish writer Elijah Capsali's chronicle contains remarks on the restrictions that the Ottoman Jewish community was increasingly subjected to during the reign of the same sultan. He claims that Bayezid II ordered the closure of the synagogues which had been built during Mehmet II's reign.⁶² Referring to the period when the Sephardim arrived at the Ottoman lands, he mentions the forced conversion of some Jews to Islam, a clear divergence from his appreciative remarks concerning the sultan's welcoming attitude towards the expelled Jews from Iberia.⁶³

A closer look at the *responsa* literature from the sixteenth century reveals a sense of apprehension on the side of rabbinic authorities about an existing wave of conversion. The *responsa* of the Salonican rabbi, Samuel de Medina (c. 1505-1589), for example, contain many cases of Jewish conversion to Islam.⁶⁴ While Samuel's tenure as a rabbi in Salonica did not coincide with the reign of Bayezid II, his collection is still worth mentioning as it includes firsthand accounts of cases

60 Feridun M. Emecen and İlhan Şahin, *II. Bayezid Dönemine Ait 906/1501 Tarihli Ahkam Defteri: Osmanlılarda Divan, Bürokrasi, Ahkam*, (İstanbul: Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları Vakfı, 1994), p. 62, 101.

61 For example, he previously says in the same book "Just as God deliberately brought evil upon the King of Spain, so He brought good upon Sultan Bayezid –for he received the Jews cordially, with love and brotherhood and great affection" Joseph Hacker, *The Sürgün System and Jewish Society in the Ottoman Empire during the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries*, Aron Rodrigue (ed.), *Ottoman and Turkish Jewry: community and leadership*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Turkish Studies Department, 1992), p. 22.

62 Mark Alan Epstein, *The Ottoman Jewish Communities and Their Role in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, (Freiburg: Klaus Schwarz, 1980), p. 29.

63 "He [Sultan Selim] even restored to Judaism many Jews whom the Turks had forced to convert contrary to their own wishes." Epstein, *The Ottoman Jewish Communities*, p. 29.

64 Morris S. Goodblatt, *Jewish Life in Turkey in the XVth Century as Reflected in the Legal Writings of Samuel de Medina*, (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1952), p. 104.

of conversion during the same century from a rabbinic perspective. Jews becoming Muslims are stigmatized as acting out of their immediate personal interests such as divorcing and marrying another person. In the same vein, a contemporary of Samuel and the leading rabbinic authority in Cairo before and after the Ottoman takeover, David ibn Abi Zimra (1480-1573) complains about the members of the Jewish community who threatened the rabbinic authorities to turn to Islam when they were faced with communal restrictions.⁶⁵ In a question addressed to Rabbi David, the situation of Jews who were being forced to convert to Islam is asked:

Suppose a Jew is forced to turn to Mohammedanism. Should he be ready to sacrifice his life rather than accept Mohammedanism? Or since this religion is not idolatrous but holds strictly to Monotheism, should a Jew not sacrifice his life, but adopt it?⁶⁶

The reply given by the rabbi begins with a complaint that many contemporary Jews consider it to be permissible to embrace the Muslim faith in such cases of compulsion. According to the rabbi, embracing Islam means approval of Muslim disrespect for the Torah of Moses, and “a Jew should be ready to sacrifice his life rather than violate one single commandment.”⁶⁷

The aforementioned Ottoman and Jewish sources suggest that the Jewish conversions to Islam were in no sense unusual in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. However, except for Capsali who does not always provide accurate information especially when contrasting the central figure of his messianic narrative Selim I to earlier rulers, contemporary or near-contemporary sources make no mention of the Ottoman authorities’ active involvement in those conversions. Neither do we have enough evidence to discuss whether the two polemicists’ embrace of Islam along with these accounts of individual conversions demonstrates a wave of conversion among Jews in that period.

65 Israel M. Goldman, *The Life and Times of Rabbi David Ibn Abi Zimra: A Social, Economic and Cultural Study of Jewish Life in the Ottoman Empire in the 15th and 16th Centuries as Reflected in the Responsa of the RDBZ*, (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1970), p. 130.

66 Goldman, *The Life and Times*, p. 62.

67 Goldman, *The Life and Times*, p. 62. For a discussion of a parallel Rabbinic concern for conversion and assimilation in a similar conversion-friendly atmosphere of the medieval Iberia, see Jonathan Ray, “Beyond Tolerance and Persecution: Reassessing Our Approach to Medieval ‘Convivencia’,” *Jewish Social Studies*, 11/2 (2005), pp. 1–18.

Addressing the Jews in the Shadow of the Sultan

The Jewish influx from Iberia to the Ottoman Empire led to increased visibility of Jews in Bayezid II's court even though the Jewish presence in the Ottoman palace has not been exceptional beforehand.⁶⁸ Among the Iberians moving to the Ottoman lands were distinguished families whose members had served in Christian or Muslim kingdoms in Spain and neighboring countries. Their arrival in Istanbul in the early sixteenth century quickly stimulated the interest of the Ottoman court, as manifested in the case of Joseph Hamon, a member of a notable Sephardi family from Granada, who entered the service of Bayezid II in the 1510s.⁶⁹ His position in the imperial court marked the beginning of successive family members' employment as physicians of the Ottoman sultans without necessarily converting to Islam.⁷⁰

In *Ilzām*, Abd al-Allam relates that he became Muslim "in the shadow (*zill*) of (...) Sultan Bayezid bin Muhammad Han" whom he describes as a *mujāhid* and protector of Muslims who "suppressed the unbelievers with the sword of God."⁷¹ In a strikingly similar vein to Abd al-Salam, compliments to the sultan are followed by Abd al-Allam's lengthy prayer to God for assistance in the sultan's praiseworthy struggle against unbelievers.⁷² He appeals to God to help the sultan consolidate religion and divine law (*shari'a*). Furthermore, right before starting the polemical discussion, Abd al-Allam states that he "presented these words to the deputies (*nawwāb*) of his Sublime Porte expecting mercy and favor from the servants of the high gate."⁷³ Likewise, Abd al-Salam articulates that his refutation of Judaism served as a means "through which he reached his [the sultan's] service."⁷⁴

68 Ottoman chronicles recorded many Jewish subjects who served the Ottoman sultans in different occupations and ranks during the fifteenth century. An outstanding example was the glittering career of a Jewish physician Jacopo of Gaeta, later known as Hekim (Physician) Yakub or Yakub Pasha (c. 1430-1484), at Mehmed II's service.

69 Cengiz Şişman, "Hamon, Joseph," Norman A. Stillman (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, Brill, 2010, accessed on March 1, 2018.

70 Rhoads Murphey, "Jewish Contributions to Ottoman Medicine, 1450-1800," Avigdor Levy (ed.), *Jews, Turks, Ottomans: A Shared History, Fifteenth through the Twentieth Century*, (NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 64-5; Stanford J. Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic*, (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 87.

71 Abd al-Allam, *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd*, f. 4a.

72 Abd al-Allam, *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd*, f. 4a-b.

73 Abd al-Allam, *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd*, f. 4b.

74 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 8.

Whereas Abd al-Allam does not speak to a specified group in his text, Abd al-Salam unequivocally addresses the Jews whom he invites to Islam. He directs his remarks toward a supposed Jewish audience throughout the text. Abd al-Salam warns his Jewish audience, whom he depicts as “stubbornly refusing to [accept] the obvious truth”, with a disastrous end in the two worlds.⁷⁵ He maintains that Jews who decline to embrace Islam despite the proofs proposed in his epistle will face catastrophic consequences in this world prior to the punishment in the after-life as they lose the protection of Bayezid II:

If you convert to the truth and return to the belief in the book [of the Qur’an] you will be protected under the safety of Islam from the severe end of humanity. And if you do not become Muslim, you are not secure from the strict constraints of the sultan, son of the sultan, Sultan Bayezid Khan, may God help him back the religion and may perpetuate his empire for the sake of the fight against infidels (*kafara*) and unbelievers (*mulḥidīn*).⁷⁶

Given the writers’ claim to be Jewish scholars with profound knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, one would expect these polemics to have been composed in Hebrew instead of Arabic. The question of language choice pushes us to think more cautiously about the audience. Even though the texts are framed as if they are addressing the Jews, the expected audience of the polemicists might actually have been learned Muslims. I have previously pointed out that the polemics circulated primarily among the Muslim readers who were interested in scholarly and literary works mostly written in Arabic and Persian. Indeed, Arabic, as the most common language in Muslim polemics as well as the fifteenth-century Ottoman theological literature, was the first option for the author in place of any other language including Turkish. Addressing the Jews, therefore, seems to be a rhetorical device rather than reflect the actual intended audience.

Using the Torah Against Jews

The general structures of both *Hādiya* and *Ilzām* are based on biblical verses extracted from the Torah’s five books. The polemicists’ interpretations of each verse are preceded by the transliteration of the Hebrew passage in Arabic script with vowel marks and its loose translation into Arabic. Compared to Abd

⁷⁵ Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 5.

⁷⁶ Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 6-7.

al-Allam's treatise, *Hādiya* contains a higher number of references to the Torah as is shown in Table 1. The biblical passages quoted by both polemicists in the sections on the invalidation of Jewish arguments, whose lengths vary from a few words to several sentences, are used to refute the eternal validity of Judaism and to prove the cessation of revelation with the Prophet Moses. In both treatises, the sections dealing with the announcement of Muhammad's prophethood basically argue that the coming of the Islamic prophet was prophesied in the Torah. The additional third section in *Hādiya* is devoted to a short argumentation for the alteration of the words in the Torah based on biblical statements that allegedly contradict each other.

The selection of biblical quotations in the two polemics shares considerable similarities. In the sections relating to the Prophet Muhammad, three biblical verses were quoted in both *Hādiya* and *Ilzām*.⁷⁷ When it comes to the biblical passages used to prove the abrogation of the Jewish religion, the two authors reference the same verse.⁷⁸ However, these similarities in the use of biblical sources do not necessarily indicate a connection between the two texts, as polemicists in the Islamic world have historically selected from a limited repertoire of Biblical verses. More importantly, substantial variances when quoting from the same Biblical passages stand out. For example, the two writers in most cases quote different parts of the same verse or alter its words as significantly distinct from each other. Likewise, the two writers' translations of the Hebrew passages into Arabic are never identical even though general meanings frequently overlap.

Frequent references to the Hebrew scriptures and Rabbinic opinions in *Hādiya* and *Ilzām* demonstrate that Abd al-Allam and Abd al-Salam were highly familiar with Jewish religious literature. Both writers provide a synopsis of how Jewish exegetes interpreted the biblical passages in question before arguing against them. The Jewish views are mostly mentioned without any reference to specific scholars or books. The only exception in that sense is Abd al-Salam citing Abraham ibn Ezra (d. 1167) whom he introduces as "the greatest of the exegetes of the Torah among the Jews." Abd al-Salam argues that the Andalusian scholar himself admitted the alteration of the biblical words by referring to the inconsistencies in the Torah as secrets rather than offering any explanation.⁷⁹

77 Deut. 34:10, Deut. 18:18-9, Gen. 49:10. Compiled from Camilla Adang, Abd al-Salam, "Guided to Islam by the Torah."

78 Deut. 33:4. Compiled from Camilla Adang, Abd al-Salam, "Guided to Islam by the Torah."

79 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 64-5.

In *Hādiya*, Abd al-Salam displays his competence in the Hebrew language and the Torah by making nuanced distinctions between the meanings of the Hebrew words that can be used interchangeably. In several instances, he explains the meaning of a word by comparing it with the use of the same word in a different context in the Torah. For example, in the invalidation of Jewish arguments regarding the eternal validity of the religion of Moses, he demonstrates that the Hebrew word for eternal is also used in other verses to mean a long duration instead of infinity.⁸⁰ It is evident that the author of *Hādiya* was informed about the history of the prophets as narrated in Jewish tradition as well. In an attempt to prove that abrogation has already been accepted in Judaism, Abd al-Salam quotes Rabbinic scholarship, including the Talmud, to prove that Jews themselves admitted that the later prophets revised the religion of Moses.⁸¹

As opposed to Abd al-Salam, Abd al-Allam's use of Hebrew sources raises doubts about his knowledge of Hebrew. In a study on the language of *Ilzām*, Joseph Sadan comes to the conclusion that the writer is in fact not an educated Jewish convert contrary to his self-proclamation. His transliteration of the verses in Hebrew to Arabic, he argues, suggests that the writer was actually a Muslim who faultily quoted the biblical passages from a Jewish convert.⁸² Sadan interprets the self-representation of the writer as "a tactical step, useful for polemical purposes." Indeed, discrepancies between sounds in Hebrew and their representation in Arabic letters when transliterating the biblical passages are evident. However, we have no evidence to suggest that the single extant copy of *Ilzām* was written in the author's hand. Instead, it is more likely that the text was copied by a scribe who was not familiar with Hebrew. It is therefore misleading to rely on transliteration to test the competency of the polemicists in the Hebrew language.

An interesting theme situated at the intersection of Jewish and Muslim religious scholarships is the use of numerology in *Hādiya*. In an attempt to substantiate the announcement of the Prophet Muhammad in the Torah, Abd al-Salam utilizes gematria which he identifies *ḥurūf al-abjad* or *ḥurūf al-jumal al-kabīr*, a reference to an analogous system used in the Islamic world to assign numerical

80 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 9-10.

81 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 32-33, 64, 69.

82 Sadan, "Phonemes and Sounds as Criteria."

values to the Arabic letters.⁸³ Abd al-Salam views *hurūf al-abjad* as convincing proof that has been employed by most Jewish scholars. In a biblical passage which translates as “God said to Abraham that I accepted your prayer for Ishmael, then, I blessed and increased their number very much (*bi-me’od me’od*),”⁸⁴ he calculates the numerical value of the expression *bi-me’od me’od*, which announces the enlargement of Abraham’s lineage through Ishmael. According to his calculation, the numerical value of the word is equal to none other than that of the word Muhammad, who was also a descendant of Ishmael. Besides taking advantage of basing his argument on a scholarly field familiar to both Muslims and Jews, Abd al-Salam perhaps aimed to appeal to Bayezid II’s interest in number mysticism.⁸⁵

Both polemicists highlight conflicting interpretations of the Biblical verses in the Jewish tradition in an attempt to rebut the Jewish faith. Besides, Abd al-Salam pays particular attention to inconsistencies in the Torah itself. Different from Abd al-Allam, he regards the verses that he claims to be contradictory as irreconcilable. Rather than offer explanations that would favor the Muslim arguments as Abd al-Allam does, Abd al-Salam takes examples of contradictions as signs demonstrating the distortion of the Hebrew Bible by the Jewish scholars. Relying on the perceived inconsistencies in the historical account provided in the Bible, for instance, Abd al-Allam makes the case that the words of God were altered by the Jewish authorities.⁸⁶

Neither the short autobiographical introductions nor historical sources that I have discussed tell anything about the training of the two polemicists after their conversion to Islam, a reason why we have to scrutinize the lines of the texts to have an idea about their scholarly backgrounds. The content and language of the two polemical tracts under discussion give the impression that the authors were well acquainted with Islamic religious scholarship. Like earlier examples of Muslim polemics, the two texts do not adhere to the structure of works adopted in any Islamic discipline including kalam. Nevertheless, when arguing against the Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, Abd al-Salam and Abd al-Allam frequently benefit from concepts borrowed from different branches of religious sciences. For instance, according to Abd al-Allam, the historical account which

83 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 56.

84 Quoted from Gen. 17:15, 20 with slight changes, Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 58.

85 See Ahmet Tunç Şen, “Reading the Stars at the Ottoman Court: Bāyezīd II (r. 886/1481-918/1512) and His Celestial Interests,” *Arabica*, 64/3-4 (2017), pp. 557-608.

86 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 62-9.

confirms that Muhammad was qualified with the characteristics announced in the Torah about the prophet-to-come was transmitted by *tawātur* (common report), a term used primarily in the science of hadith to indicate the broadest authentication of a given report.⁸⁷ Among other recurrent references to the concepts of Islamic disciplines in two treatises are such technical terms as *qiyās* (analogy), *tanāquḍ* (contradiction), *burhān* (decisive proof), and *dalīl* (sing). All these examples demonstrating the familiarity of the two converts with the Muslim religious disciplines suggest that they were trained in Islamic disciplines following their conversions, perhaps in the Ottoman court.

Given that both texts are constructed around select verses from the Torah, a sensible way of examining their interconnectedness is to look at the biblical passages quoted in the two treatises. Comparing the two Ottoman polemicists' use of the Hebrew scriptures to that by the earlier Muslim writers, one can also observe the influence of the medieval Muslim polemical literature on the two Ottoman polemicists. *Hādiya* and *Ilzām* contain several biblical passages that had appeared in the Muslim polemics before. While the two tracts contain verses quoted by many medieval polemicists, the influences of two medieval influential polemicists Ibn Ḥazm and al-Maghribī are particularly evident. Of the five verses that Abd al-Salam discusses in confirmation of Muhammad's prophethood, two verses exist in Ibn Ḥazm's *Kitāb al-faṣl*.⁸⁸ Moreover, the numerological calculation of the biblical words that Abd al-Salam proposes to provide evidence for the announcement of Muhammad in the Torah is a repetition of al-Maghribī's calculation in *Iḥām al-Yahūd*.⁸⁹ Likewise, two of the five quoted verses in *Ilzām* concerning the announcement of the Prophet Muhammad in the Torah are used by Ibn Ḥazm in his apologetical works, and another biblical passage in the same section is included in *Iḥām al-Yahūd*.⁹⁰ The use of the Jewish scriptures in the parts concerning the abrogation of the Jewish religion in both polemical texts appears to be more innovative compared to sections on Muhammad's prophethood. A verse from the Torah that

87 Abd al-Allam, *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd*, f. 6a;

88 Abd al-Salam, *Risāla Al-Hādiya*, f. 65, 67; Ghulam Haider Aasi, "Muslim Understanding of Other Religions," p. 134.

89 Samau al-Maghribi, *Iḥām Al-Yahūd: Silencing the Jews*, trans. Moshe Perlmann, (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1964), p. 46.

90 Abd al-Allam, *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd*, f. 5a; al-Maghribi, *Iḥām Al-Yahūd*, p. 23; Aasi, "Muslim Understanding of Other Religions," p. 118; Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 196.

is cited by Abd al-Salam in an effort to refute the Jewish biblical interpretation was partly used by the theologian al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) in his polemical work.⁹¹

This examination of the Biblical references has revealed that the two Ottoman polemicists produced a fair amount of original content within the structural framework adopted by the medieval Muslim polemic writers. The two Ottoman polemics do not look like copies of any medieval polemics as both writers include new biblical quotations never used before in the major examples of the genre as far as I can trace. Furthermore, the frequent use of biblical quotations in these polemics supports the authors' claim to be Jewish converts.

The simultaneous appearance of the two anti-Jewish polemics and common structural elements in the two texts suggest that the two epistles and their writers were closely connected. The resemblance in the names of the two authors and the lack of reference to the author of *Ilzām* in contemporary sources might give the impression that there was actually a person who penned two similar texts, or even two subsequent editions. Indeed, it is difficult to eliminate this possibility given the limits of historical sources at our disposal. However, the textual examination offered in this section demonstrates that the texts significantly diverge in their ways of argumentation and uses of biblical sources, which supports that they were compiled by two different writers. Out of twenty-seven references to the Hebrew Bible in two polemics in total, there are only four identical Biblical passages referred to by both Abd al-Salam and Abd al-Allam.⁹²

Conclusion

In her study on the autobiographical narratives of conversion to Islam in the period between the second half of the sixteenth century and the early eighteenth century Krstić argues:

A close reading of these narratives further substantiates the argument that some Ottoman converts readily entered the debate about the correct rituals and the most authentic, scripture-based path toward salvation, which modern scholarship

91 Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, p. 211.

92 In the sections about the confirmation of the Prophet Muhammad, three biblical verses (Deut. 34:10, Deut. 18:18-9, Gen. 49:10) were quoted in both *Hādiya* and *Ilzām*. As to the biblical passages used in refutation of the Jewish arguments in order to prove the abrogation of Jewish religion, only a single verse (Deut. 33:4) was quoted by both polemicists.

often considers germane only to post-Reformation Christendom. In their conversion narratives they promoted Islam as the religion that promises salvation and the Qur'an as the true word of God by bringing together the tradition of medieval Islamic anti-Christian polemics (the so-called *reddiye*) with Christian humanist sensibilities for textual criticism, the study of scriptural languages, and the call for return to the original sources to bear on questions of the authenticity of religious scriptures. This development was not a result of the simple transference of a post-Tridentine Christian genre to an Ottoman setting but a manifestation of Ottoman participation in the age of confessionalization—the era of simultaneous state and confession building that transpired in both Christendom.⁹³

Many textual elements that Krstić identifies as the characteristics of anti-Christian polemics in the “age of Ottoman confessionalization” such as the use of textual criticism combined with an emphasis on the authenticity of sacred scriptures are actually among the defining features of the two anti-Jewish polemics that I have discussed in this study. Abd al-Salam and Abd al-Allam's treatises, which were written more than half a century before the earliest polemical work discussed by Krstić, invite us to reconsider the underlying dynamics and the time frame of the “Ottoman confessionalism” if we would still regard this periodization as a useful concept for the study of interreligious tension in the early modern Ottoman Empire.

The two polemics appeared precisely in a period when Iberian Jews started to arrive at the Ottoman lands while it did not transform into a massive one at that point.⁹⁴ The visibility of the Jews in the empire had already increased with the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, which resulted in the transfer of the Jewish population to the new capital of the empire. Albeit limited in number for the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Jewish influx might have fed a consciousness to defend the Muslim faith on the part of both Ottoman statesmen and scholars. Nonetheless, Ottoman archival documents do not record traces of an imperial project to convert the Jews, and we know that the Ottoman court ordered local governors to maintain the well-being of the Jews heading to the Ottoman lands. This gives the impression that the growing population of the Jewish community was not a significant source of worry for the Ottoman administration at the turn of the fifteenth century. Relying on these considerations, it would be misleading to attribute the appearance of these polemics directly to a perceived

93 Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam*, p.100.

94 Jonathan S. Ray, *After Expulsion: 1492 and the Making of Sephardic Jewry*, (New York: NYU Press, 2013), p. 42.

threat against the Jews on the side of the Ottoman state. In other words, the two anti-Jewish texts cannot be considered as a part of, or accompanied by, broader measures taken against the growing Jewish community in the Ottoman cities.⁹⁵

The two treatises are apparently structured so as to persuade the Jewish audience to embrace the Muslim faith. However, the sixteenth and seventeenth-century collective volumes in which *Hādiya* or *Ilzām* appear are mostly composed of Islamic texts dealing with nuanced issues that would interest Muslims. One can infer that these treatises targeted the Muslim literati and did not serve the conversion of Jews to Islam. Nevertheless, the popularity of the texts among Muslim readers rather than Jews might have been an unintended consequence, therefore, may not reveal the initial motives of their authors. The choice of Arabic, instead of Hebrew, as the language of the epistles supports the idea that they were produced primarily for a Muslim audience. Given that the Arabic-speaking Jewish population in the Ottoman Empire was negligible until the conquest of the Arab lands in the 1510s, it is unlikely that these epistles addressed the Jews.

The personal motivations of the authors should be emphasized especially when contextual explanations fall short. Krstić points out that an underlying reason for the compilation of conversion narratives by Christian converts to Islam between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries was to “resolve the contradictions and prove the loyalty” on the part of new participants of the Muslim society.⁹⁶ The two polemicists perhaps made a comparable effort to consolidate their court positions by refuting their former religions. Considering the negative connotations attached to converts by the Ottoman elite, perhaps the authors composed these anti-Jewish treatises to demonstrate that their conversion was sincere.

Subsequent polemical works composed by Ottoman scholars against Judaism suggest that the two polemics marked the beginning of Ottoman scholarly interest in the Jewish faith. For example, a well-circulated anti-Jewish polemical text attributed to Taşköprizâde Ahmed (d. 1531) and an Ottoman Turkish

95 As examples of the welcoming attitude of the Ottoman administration towards the incoming Sephardim, in two imperial orders sent to Rumeli qadis in the summer of 1501 regarding the cases of two Jews from the Italian cities of Korfoz and Apulia (Pulya) requesting to settle in the Ottoman lands with their families it is stipulated that the two Jews and their families should be allowed to reach whatever Ottoman port they would prefer, and that their safe and easy arrival should be sustained by the local governors. Emecen and Şahin, *II. Bayezid Dönemine Ait*, p.15, 58.

96 Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam*, p. 57.

epistle written by a Jewish convert in the following century were largely informed by *Hādiya*.⁹⁷ The late fifteenth-century revival of anti-Jewish scholarship, therefore, needs to be understood as a critical point in the transformation of Muslim perception of Judaism in the Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman-Jewish literature directed against the Muslim faith is beyond the scope of this study. The polemical dialogue between Muslim and Jewish writers in the early modern Ottoman Empire can only be partially comprehended if the Jewish side is neglected. Studies on Jewish literature must involve sources and methods that are substantially different from the examination of Muslim literature. Looking for scholarly works composed by Ottoman Jews for the refutation of Islam would be futile given the obvious difficulties in writing directly against the dominant and imperially backed religious doctrine. Instead, other genres, especially exegeses and *responsa*, would be useful in tracing the Jewish scholarly perception of Islam in the context of growing concerns on the part of the Rabbinic authorities over Jewish conversions to Islam.

Conversion and Polemic in the Late-Fifteenth Century Ottoman Empire: Two Polemical Treatises Against Judaism

Abstract ■ Two Jewish converts to Islam in the service of Bayezid II penned the earliest known anti-Jewish polemicals in the Ottoman Empire. This article aims at exploring the historical context of the two epistles and their connection with Islamic polemical literature. The simultaneous appearances of Abd al-Salam's *Risāla al-hādiya* and Abd al-Allam's *Risāla al-ilzām al-Yahūd* will be discussed in the context of the Sephardic influx to the Ottoman lands, an encounter that stimulated scholarly interest in the Jewish faith among Ottoman intellectuals. At first glance, the two treatises seem to be structured so as to persuade a Jewish audience to embrace the Muslim faith by abandoning their former religion. However, the choice of Arabic instead of Hebrew, and the circulation of the texts primarily among Muslim readers suggest that addressing the Jews appears to have been a rhetorical tactic. Considering the negative connotations attached to converts by the Ottoman elite, the authors might also have viewed the composition of anti-Jewish treatises as an effort to distance themselves from their Jewish past.

Keywords: Muslim Polemics, interreligious polemics, Ottoman Jews, Muslim-Jewish Relations, Bayezid II.

⁹⁷ See Sabine Schmidtke and Camilla Adang, "Ahmad b. Mustafa Tashkubrizade's (d. 968/1561) Polemical Tract against Judaism," *Al-Qantara* 29 (January 2008), pp. 79–113; Krstić, "Illuminated by the Light of Islam and the Glory of the Ottoman Sultanate,;" Pfeiffer, "Confessional Polarization."

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