



POLEMICS I. BETWEEN SHI'ITES AND JEWS

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Twelver (Eṭnā 'Aṣari Emāmi) Shi'ite polemics refer here to arguments gleaned from compositions written by Shi'ites; they do not usually have original and specifically Shi'ite characteristics that separate them from their Sunni counterparts. Polemical arguments are scattered in commentaries on the Qur'ān, in the Hadith, heresiographies (*melal wa-neḥal* literature), anti-Christian polemics, books on theology, law, and history; and texts specifically inveighing against Judaism. Various religious, socio-political, and personal reasons in different times account for the writing of anti-Jewish texts.

Among the most common anti-Jewish contentions were the following six: First, the Jewish oral law is nothing but innovations—additions to or omissions from the Torah—which made the Jews stray from God's path. Second, the Torah foretells Muslim—including Shi'ite—history and beliefs, and predicts Islam's superiority. Third, at a certain time the Torah was repealed (*nask*) by later revelations; the Torah is therefore not eternal. One nuance of this concept is that the Torah cannot be applied outside the land of Israel after the destruction of the Temple. Fourth, the Torah sanctified by the Jews is not the one originally revealed. Certain parts were added to or omitted from the



original Torah in various times, including during the days of 'Ozayr (Ezra). The Torah had been subjected to alterations (*taḡyir*) as shown from discrepancies found in it as well as irrational themes (e.g. anthropomorphic depictions of God) and stories (e.g. stories ascribing sins to prophets) in the Torah. *Taḡyir* occurred also through the misleading teachings and commentaries of the rabbis. Fifth, even if the Jews had been God's Chosen People, this privileged status had ended long ago. Sixth, the Jews hold erroneous practices and tenets.

Whereas specific references to Shi'ite polemics against Judaism are scarce compared to those against Christianity, Shi'ite tradition records some real or fictitious exchanges between Shi'ites and Jews from the earliest days of Islam. 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb (d. 661) is said to have answered questions put to him by a certain leader of the Jewish community (Ebn Bābawayh, *Ketāb al-keṣāl*, pp. 364-82; Modarressi, I, pp. 59, 206). Another case elaborates on questions asked by a Jew relating to Moḥammad's position vis-à-vis other prophets; 'Ali thus proved that Moḥammad's status was superior (Ṭabresi, *Eḥtejāj*, pp. 210-26). In another instance, 'Ali satisfactorily answered questions asked by a Jew (Ṭabresi, *Eḥtejāj*, pp. 226-27). In all the above cases the Jew is said to have ultimately embraced Islam. Another incident is the polemic between the eighth Imam, 'Ali al-Rezā (d. 818), and a Jewish [Exilarch](#) (*ra's al-jālūt*), in the course of which the Imam proves the prophecy of Moḥammad from Jewish sources (Ebn Bābawayh, *Ketāb al-tawḥīd*, pp. 440-44; Ṭabresi, *Eḥtejāj*, pp. 421-24; Wasserstrom, pp. 113-16. There is apparently a philosophical-mystical interpretation of this text by Sa'id al-Qommi, *Al-Fawā'id al-raḏawiya* as referred to in Ṭehrāni, XVI, pp. 340-41). It seems that one of the earliest texts directed specifically against Judaism was written by Abu Sahl Esmā'il b. 'Ali al-Nawbakṣṭi (d. 924), who is credited with a *Refutation of the Jews* (*Radd 'ala al-yahūd*) (Najāši, I, p. 121; Newman, p.21).

Arguments often adduced what was viewed as Jewish Scriptures to prove the veracity and superiority of Islam. One tradition ascribes to Moḥammad the statement that the first passage of the Torah says that he is the messenger of God (Kister, p. 222). The twelve sons of Ishmael (Genesis 17:20; 25:12-16) are viewed as the twelve Shi'ite Imams (Kohlberg, XIV, p. 527; Rubin, pp. 278-80). Whereas this equation may have been rooted in the wish to validate the doctrine of the Twelve Imams, it also served to prove to the Jews that a major tenet of Shi'ite dogma is found in the Jewish scriptures themselves.

The Jews criticized the concept of abrogation (*nask*), arguing that it implies *badā'* in the sense of a divine change of mind, ascription of which to God



demeans Him. While Al-Šarīf Mortazā (d. 1044) replies to this by contending that *badā'* and *nask* are two different things, the rejoinder of Ebn Bābawayh (d. 991) is based on his perception that *badā'* and *nask* are closely related, but that *badā'* does not involve a change of God's mind. According to him, the doctrine of *badā'* is "a refutation of the Jews, for they say that God has finished with ordering, while we say that every day God is engaged in giving and taking away life, nourishing, and doing what He wills (McDermott, pp. 333-34, 392-93)."

Polemical contentions—including the prediction of Moḥammad in the Bible—were occasionally mentioned almost in passing (e.g. in Mirkānd, II, pp. 41-45; Ṭehrāni, XI, p. 296 argues that Mirkānd (d. 1498) was a Twelver Shī'ite; Moreen, 1992, p. 193), whereas the genre of texts composed specifically against Judaism continued. In 1622-23 Aḥmad 'Alawī wrote *Šawa'eq al-raḥmān fī'l-radd 'ala al-Yahud wa-itṭbāt taḥrīf tawrātehem* (God's Lightning Bolts in Refuting the Jews and Proving the Corruption of their Torah) (Ṭehrāni, XV, p. 94; Abisaab, pp. 168, 199). In the days of the Šafavid Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn (r. 1694-1722) 'Alī-Qolī Jadīd-al-Eslām wrote his Persian *Sayf al-mo'menin fī qetāl al-mošrekin* (Sword of the Believers in Killing the Polytheists) against Jews and Christians (Ṭehrāni, XII, pp. 289-90; Dānešpajuh, III, p. 585).

Towards the end of the 18th century there is some evidence of polemical exchanges. Such is Baḥr-al-'Olum's supposed debate with Jews of Du'l-Kefl, Iraq, in Du'l-Hejja 1211/1796. The arguments raised were "not original," but based on medieval polemical writings (Moreen, 1999, p. 575). A much more elaborate and highly significant attempt at refuting Jewish tenets was offered by a religious scholar of a lower caliber, Ḥājj Bābā Qazwīnī Yazdī, in his *Maḥzar al-šohud fī radd al-Yahud* (The Court for Refuting the Jews), composed in Ramadan 1211/1797. Apparently, Qazwīnī Yazdī was the first to use not only the Bible but also *Nevuāt ha-Yeled* (The Prophecy of the Child), a Jewish text written in Aramaic (Tsadik, 2004, pp. 5-15), for anti-Jewish polemical reasons; Qazwīnī Yazdī also organized meetings of a polemical nature with the Jews of Yazd (Tsadik, 2005, p. 98).

Whereas texts addressing Judaism among other religions were still being composed—such as Moḥammad 'Alī Kermānšāhi's *Rādd šobohāt al-koffār* (Refutation of the Infidel's Doubts) in 1800-1 (Tsadik, 2005, p. 100; Purjavady and Schmidtke, 2006, pp. 69-94)—specifically anti-Jewish text were also written; for example, the Tehran Jewish convert Moḥammad Reżā(i) Jadīd-al-Eslām's extensive *Manqul-e Reżā'i* ([The Sayings] Transmitted by Reżā[i]) from



the early nineteenth century. Around a half a century later this book was enlarged, and published in 1875-76. Beyond the literary criticism of Judaism, there is evidence of nineteenth century live disputations of Shi'ites with Jews. It should be noted, however, that Iranian Jews were mostly afraid to engage in polemics with Muslims, and if they took part in these disputations, it was usually after they were forced to do so (Tsadik, 2005, pp. 104-7).

In later years, based on earlier literature, some anti-Jewish arguments continued to surface by Shi'ites (e.g. Tājpūr, 1344, pp. 24-36) and even by secular Iranians (e.g. the contention that the Torah was forged by 'Ozār; Soroudi, 1998, p. 161). Polemical exchanges failed to disappear even in the days of the supposed national co-existence under the Pahlavis: the Jew Benayahu Ṣaddiq remembers how his fellow soldiers serving in the Iranian army at the time of Mohammad-Reza Shah believed that he and his ilk were followers of a distorted Torah, falsified during the times of 'Ozayr (Ṣaddiq). Occasionally, Shi'ites continued to challenge Jews with questions on the Torah or asked them to state their view on polemical anti-Jewish texts (Shofet, 2000, pp. 106, 351). At other times, however, some of them, notably Āyat-Allāh Kāẓem Ṣari'atmadāri, would praise Judaism and the Jews ('Ezri, 2001, p. 237; of relevance Ibid, pp. 224, 232-33, 243).

The polemics were one channel through which communication and discourse, of a certain kind and at a certain level, existed between the disputant communities. Still, the polemics were indicative of, and added to, the onerous socio-cultural pressure imposed upon the Jews by some Muslims. To preserve their community's cohesiveness, Jews responded to the Muslim criticism. Jewish anti-Muslim argumentation is few and far between; those arguments leveled specifically against Shi'ites are fewer in number also when compared to Shi'ite anti-Jewish polemics. Written in a Muslim milieu, Jewish contentions were only rarely explicit. Implicitly rejecting the Muslim polemical view of Ezra ('Ozayr), the 14th century, Ṣāhin says that after the Torah was burnt by Nebuchadnezzar Ezra wrote it "as it was at first; not a jot or little of it was changed" (Moreen, 2000, pp. 110-12). Occasionally, Moses is depicted as "superior" to Moḥammad, as by 'Emrāni (q.v.; d. 1536; Yeroushalmi, 1995, p. 85. Other examples: Moreen, 2000, pp. 272-74, 300). In his *Hōvōt Yehūda* (Duties of Judah), the 17th century Rabbi Yehuda b. El'azar emphasizes that the prophecy of Moses is higher than the rest of the prophets and that the Torah is not abrogated (*mansuk*); he addresses the charge of falsification (*tahrif*; Yehuda b. El'azar, 1995, p. 171 [tr. p. 391], p. 226 [tr. p. 459], p. 232 [tr.



p. 467]; Moreen, 2003, p. 165). Apparently addressing general Muslim contentions that view Genesis 17:20 (“And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make of him a great nation.”) as a major proof text for Ishmael’s and the later Muslims’ preponderance over the rest, he seeks to explain the verse in a way which would render it harmonious with Jewish beliefs. Most probably attempting to discredit the Shi’ite contention that reads into this verse a prediction of the emergence of the twelve Shi’ite Imams, he says that these twelve “princes” were simply the sons of Ishmael who were explicitly named elsewhere (Genesis 25:13-14) (Yehuda b. Elžazar, 1995, p. 538. Further polemical contentions: *ibid*, p. 78 [tr. p. 286], pp. 217-18 [tr. p. 449], pp. 539-40). Beyond these arguments, Jews viewed themselves as the “offspring of the Chosen people” (Moreen, 1990, p. 103, [tr. p. 53]). In his *Ḥayāt al-ruh* (The Life of the Spirit), Rabbi Siman-Tōv Melammed (d. 1800?) argues for the superiority of Moses above all prophets, and possibly alludes unfavorably to the Prophet Moḥammad, and, while citing the Qur’ān 7:144, he emphasizes that the contemporary Torah is the Torah that was given from heaven; it cannot and will not be changed for the sake of another one; it is eternal (Melammed, TaRNaH/1898, pp. 81b-82b, 117b-26b; Netzer, 1999, pp. 83-84, 87-88). Shi’ites of the time responded to Melammed’s arguments in a literal form (Qazwini Yazdi, pp. 142-43, 188) and possibly also in live disputations (Patai, 1997, pp. 168-70; Fischel, 1971, p. 1276).

In his *Derekha-Ḥayim* (The Way of Life), the Tehran Rabbi Ḥayim Mōreh (see [ḤAIM, Moreh](#)) discusses in 1921 the prophet that is promised in the Torah to come after Moses. Probably seeking to refute the Muslim belief that this prophet is Moḥammad, Mōreh emphasizes that the prophet is to be from the offspring of Israel (Deuteronomy 18:15-17) and is Joshua b. Nun. He explicitly says that some persons hold that Deuteronomy 33:2 speaks of different divine “manifestations” (*maḏāher*; prophets) who were manifested for people in different periods, alluding to a common Muslim reading of the verse, and maintains that the verse actually deals with revelations to the Israelites while in different locations in the desert. He rebuffs the possibility that the Torah went through falsification (*taḡyir*; *taḥrif*) (Mōreh, TaRžaT, pp. 67-70, 194-98, 200). Implicitly alluding to the Qur’ān 9:30, he asserts that “we do not view ‘Ezrā as the son of God,” and declares again that the Torah was not falsified (*taḥrif*) (Mōreh, TaRPaD, pp. 354, 359, 430). Dealing mainly with Christian criticism, Mōreh still addresses the question common in Muslim polemics of



how could the Biblical Jacob marry two sisters (Mōreh, TaRPaZ, p. 278).

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