A Jew on Java, a Model Malay Rabbi and a Tamil

Torah Scholar: Representations of Abdullah Ibnu Salam

in the Book of One Thousand Questions

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Introduction

In contrast to many regions of the Middle East, where Jewish communities existed at the time of the Prophet and throughout the centuries following his death, the Tamil region of south India and the Indonesian–Malay world lacked such populations. The absence of Jewish communities did not, however, imply a complete unfamiliarity with Jews and Judaism. Rather, their image emerged from a variety of textual sources in lieu of direct encounters. In addition to their depictions in the Qur’an and hadith literature, Jewish figures occasionally appeared in texts produced in these regions’ local languages. The *Book of One Thousand Questions*, composed in Arabic and translated thereafter into many languages – including Javanese, Malay and Tamil – offers a glimpse to portrayals of Jews and Judaism in lands where their actual presence was virtually unknown.¹

The ‘Book of One Thousand Questions’

The *Book of One Thousand Questions* is a story about a question and answer dialogue between the Prophet Muhammad and an important Jewish leader by the name of Abdullah Ibnu Salam in seventh-century Arabia.² Ibnu Salam asks the Prophet about various aspects of Islamic ritual, history and theology. Convinced by the replies that Muhammad is, indeed, the ‘seal of the prophets’ and the bearer of Truth, Ibnu Salam converts to Islam.

The *Book* had been composed, in Arabic, by the tenth century and later circulated far and wide across both Asia and Europe.³ While the two protagonists and the dialogue format remained constant – as did many of the topics addressed – certain thematic elements were transformed by translators adapting the story in different places and times. The many versions of the *Book of One Thousand Questions* comprise rich cultural documents, offering hints of local agendas and concerns within the broader, trans-local Muslim community. For example,

¹In the following pages these abbreviations are employed: J. (Javanese), T. (Tamil), M. (Malay), A. (Arabic), I. (Indonesian).

²I use the protagonist’s name here as it appears in Javanese, Tamil and Malay rather than in Arabic.

³Pijper’s study, concerned mainly with the *Book of One Thousand Questions* in Malay, provides an introduction to the text’s versions in several other languages. On the development of the Arabic corpus see Guillaume Frederic Pijper, *Het Boek Der Duizend Vragen* (Leiden, 1924), pp. 35–54. On the first translation of the *Book* in Europe – from Arabic to Latin in twelfth century Toledo – see James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton, 1964), pp. 89–96.

Javanese versions, in which Ibnu Salam is known as Samud, to a large extent focused on Javano-Islamic mysticism; in Tamil, in which only a single version was composed, the customs and beliefs of the non-Muslim population were discussed in detail and repudiated. The localised *Book* thus represented to its audiences both a famous and ancient story rooted in the Prophet's time and a local engagement with contemporary concerns.

What then, was the image of Ibnu Salam and his people, projected through the texts by authors – and to audiences – to whom Jews were known as textual figures, most notably from their mention in the Qur'an? This article begins by looking back to Ibnu Salam's appearance in early Arabic sources, suggesting that not only the narrative of the *Book* but also its thematic structure is part of a broader inter-religious, trans-local paradigm. It then moves on to address Ibnu Salam's portrayal in Javanese, Malay and Tamil versions of the *Book of One Thousand Questions*, and concludes with mention of the terminologies used to define Judaism in the *Book*, the question of Ibnu Salam's homeland, and the appearance of Jews in other textual traditions in these three languages.

Early sources on Abdullah Ibnu Salam

The story of the Jew Ibnu Salam's meeting with the Prophet Muhammad and his subsequent conversion to Islam goes back to some of the earliest recorded Muslim traditions available to us today. Before discussing Ibnu Salam's depiction in the much later Javanese, Malay and Tamil tellings of his story, let us briefly examine his appearance in older sources, contextualising the image and significance of the man and the encounter.

The earliest authoritative source narrating the story of Ibnu Salam is Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*, an epic history of the Prophet's life which was composed in Arabia in the eighth century and reworked in the following century by Ibn Hisham. It is the latter's version which has survived to the present, while only fragments of the earlier – and much fuller – text survive.⁴

Ibn Hisham relates that Jewish rabbis “used to annoy the apostle with questions and introduce confusion, so as to confound the truth with falsity. The Qur'an used to come down in reference to these questions of theirs, though some of the questions... came from the Muslims themselves”.⁵ This passage accords the Jews an outstandingly important position, as partly dictating through their questions the content of the Qur'an. It also portrays the questioning as an attempt to confuse and entrap, a tendency which is linked to other characteristics with which Jews are typically endowed in these stories.

Ibn Hisham then lists the names of rabbis from the different Jewish clans or tribes who participated, at one time or another, in such questioning of the Prophet. The last rabbi mentioned from amongst the Banu Qaynuqa is Abdullah bin Salam bin al Harith, who was “their rabbi and most learned man”.⁶ His name was al-Husayn but the Prophet re-named

⁴For an introduction and translation into English see A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (London, 1955). The introduction is on pp. i–xlvii. I use this edition when citing from the text. Based on many surviving sources, often fragmentary, Newby has reconstructed Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah*. See Gordon Darnell Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia, 1989).

⁵Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*. pp. 239.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 240.

him Abdullah after he embraced Islam. Here we find two elements which remain significant in future tellings: Ibnu Salam is portrayed as an important and wise leader of his people, and he receives a new name upon conversion.

How the conversion actually took place was related to the author by one of Abdullah's family members. Abdullah is said to have known right away, upon hearing the description of the Prophet, his name and the time of his arrival, that he was the Awaited One. The news of Muhammad's arrival in Medina came when Abdullah, then still known as al-Husayn, was working at the top of a palm tree and his aunt Khalida was sitting below. Hearing the news he cried "God is Great" and his aunt, puzzled, said: "good gracious, if you had heard that Musa bin Imran had come you could not have made more fuss!" upon which al-Husayn explained to her that the Prophet was indeed Moses' brother, a follower of the same religion, sent to them with the same mission.⁷ Here we note the readiness of a Jewish rabbi to accept Muhammad as fulfilling a prophecy given to the Jews, and Muhammad's intimate relationship with the figure of Moses, tying him immediately to the heart of Jewish tradition.

Al-Husayn descended from the tree and, in his account, described his conversion thus: "straightaway I went to the apostle and became a Muslim, and when I returned to my house I ordered my family to do the same".⁸ It is a description which denies us any knowledge of what, in fact, the ritual of this conversion consisted of, but it appears to have been a quick and simple affair. As the head of the family the newly converted and newly named Abdullah ordered his family to follow him in accepting Islam, a hint of the seven hundred followers who were to convert along with him in later versions of this account.

The final section of this narrative, as recorded in the *Sirah*, is significant in its portrayal of the Jews as a community, elements of which are echoed in later tellings. Abdullah conceals his conversion from the Jews, goes to the Prophet and tells him that they are a nation of liars. He asks to hide in the Prophet's house while the Prophet asks the Jews about Abdullah's position among them, without mentioning his conversion. Abdullah fears that if they knew he had converted they would slander him. The Prophet agrees, asks the Jews about Abdullah, and they reply that he is their rabbi, chief, and learned man. Abdullah then emerges and asks his people to acknowledge Muhammad, who has been named and described in the Torah. Upon hearing this the assembled Jews immediately accuse him of lying. Reminding the Prophet of his prediction, Abdullah again proclaims them a "treacherous, lying and evil people".⁹

Although not all mention of Jews in the *Sirah* is negative, it is so in the majority of cases.¹⁰ They are consistently portrayed in various episodes as liars, corrupt and deceitful people, often equated with the despised hypocrites (A. *munāfiq*). They should not be trusted; they

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 240.

⁸ Guillaume, *Ibid.*, pp. 241.

⁹ Guillaume, *Ibid.*, pp. 241. Wensinck mentions this event, in which Ibnu Salam recited the *shahāda* in front of the Jews as acknowledgment of his conversion to Islam, as evidence for the very early use of the *shahāda* by converts, A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 33.

¹⁰ A positive mention – although this relates specifically to the converted Jew – is found in the tradition that Abdullah was the only one proclaimed by Muhammad as a "man of Paradise". See the ninth-century *Imam Muslim, Sahih Muslim: Being Traditions of the Sayings and Doings of the Prophet Muhammad as Narrated by His Companions and Compiled under the Title Al-Jami-Us-Sahih by Imam Muslim*, trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, 4 vols. (New Delh, 1977). pp. 1323–1324.

are envious of God sending the ‘seal of the prophets’ to the Arabs rather than to them; they should never be taken as close, intimate friends; they are dishonest traitors. Abdullah himself, beyond his conversion scene, is mentioned as one who reveals the treachery of the Jews and brings it to light.¹¹

The accounts mentioned by Ibn Hisham consistently appeared anew in hadith collections recounting the deeds and sayings of the Prophet.¹² Ibnu Salam became the token Jewish convert, exemplifying through his story the logic inherent in Jewish conversion. This was a logic that, according to Muslim sources, followed the tenets of Judaism’s own sacred scripture. At the same time the repetition of the story – as opposed to mention of many such cases – underscored the Jewish resistance to Muhammad, the antagonisms between Jews and emerging Muslim communities during the Prophet’s time, and the relative uniqueness of Ibnu Salam’s experience.

With time the Ibnu Salam tradition began acquiring an element central to the *Book of One Thousand Questions* – which is not found in Ibn Hisham’s account – that of questioning the Prophet. In the late ninth-century *Sahih al-Bukhari* hadith collection, Abdullah upon hearing of the Prophet’s arrival, approaches him and asks about three things “which only a prophet knows”. The questions are: what is the first sign of the last hour? What is the first thing the inhabitants of paradise shall eat? And what makes a boy look like his father or his mother? The Prophet replies that – just as in the *Book* – the archangel Jibril has just informed him of the answers. Hearing the answers Ibnu Salam converts on the spot, professing his faith in Allah and His messenger.¹³

The theme of the Jews posing questions to the Prophet and requesting proof of his prophecy appears already in the Qur’an.¹⁴ In one Qur’anic encounter the Prophet is posed with hypothetical questions, and with what he should say in reply, if he should indeed be asked. Muslim commentators have interpreted the questions being asked by the Jews as challenging Muhammad, and mention of a Jewish convert to Islam has been taken to refer to Ibnu Salam, the protagonist of our story.¹⁵ This is further testimony to the importance of his character in this tradition and to the significance accorded to this particular conversion story.

¹¹In a case in which a Jewish man and woman, both married to others, commit adultery, the Jews are portrayed as attempting to shield the couple from the punishment by stoning, commanded in the Torah. The rabbi puts his hand over the verse specifying the punishment, trying to hide it from view. Abdullah then strikes his hand and proclaims the verse to the Prophet, see Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 267.

¹²For later depictions of these events see, for example, Muslim’s 42 volume *Sahih Muslim* hadith collection and al-Tibrizi’s fourteenth-century *Mishkat Al-Masabih*. On the stoning episode, see Muslim, *Sahih Muslim* pp. 918 and 758.

¹³The replies are: (1) the first sign is a fire that will gather mankind from the east to the west (2) the first delicacy in paradise will be the ligament of a fish’s liver and (3) “when the man’s liquid comes before the woman’s he attracts the child to his likeness, but when the woman’s liquid comes first she attracts it to her likeness”. See Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *Miracles of the Prophet Muhammad: Adapted from the Introduction to Sahih al Bukhari* (New Delhi, 1982), pp. 24–25. The rest of the story, depicting the Jews’ negative reaction to the conversion, remains the same. An identical version appears in Tibrizi, *Mishkat Al-Masabih*. pp. 1272.

¹⁴Not only do the Jews demand such proofs, so do the infidels. See, for example Qur’an 6:7, 6:50, 17: 92–93, 8:32 (for the infidels) and 3:179 and 4:152 (for the Jews). Christians too are depicted as arguing with Muhammad over certain points, see 3:54. For the purpose of this article I cite the following edition of the Qur’an: *The Koran*, trans. N.J. Dawood (London, 1956).

¹⁵An early tradition mentions three questions that the Jews of Medina encouraged the Jews of Mecca to pose to Muhammad, as a test of his prophecy. These are mentioned in Qur’an 17: 85 (about the Spirit), 18:9 (about the cave dwellers), and 18: 84 (about the “two-horned one”). The reference interpreted as mention of the convert Abdullah ibn Salam is in Qur’an 46: 10. *The Koran*. Trans. N. J. Dawood, (London, 1956).

The incorporation of questions into Abdullah's encounter with Muhammad is likely to be a combination of the earlier conversion story and the accounts of questioning, doubting Jews, and it was further elaborated in subsequent centuries until Abdullah was said to have asked the Prophet no fewer than one thousand questions.¹⁶

The consistent appearance of Ibnu Salam's account in the collected hadith of eminent Muslim scholars raises the question of why it was so significant. We have already mentioned that it presented a Muslim 'take' on the rationale for Jews to embrace Islam and that it highlighted, perhaps, the rareness of this occurrence as it was not accompanied by similar stories portraying other converts. Reading of the historical expectations and struggles between Jews and Muslims in the Prophet's time, and the often violent means employed against Jewish communities, certainly makes this story of a peaceful, voluntary conversion a powerful one. That it was then retold, transmitted and elaborated on in so many languages is even more remarkable.

On Judaism, leadership and conversion: related narratives

Recounting earlier traditions of the encounter between Muhammad and the Jewish leader Abdullah Ibnu Salam and examining their links to the *Book of One Thousand Questions* is important for contextualising the story within a long history, one which began centuries before it was translated in South and Southeast Asia. Central to this context is the crucial importance of transmission genealogies (A. *isnād*) in Islam, especially as related to the authoritative and sacred words and deeds of the Prophet, a genre to which this account belongs.

Having examined early depictions of the Ibnu Salam tradition we now widen the scope of exploration. The story has been inspired by, and has also inspired, other related stories. It is not unique in its general parameters but rather belongs to a broader genre addressing the relationship between Judaism, leadership and conversion.

A story which may have in part inspired the way the Ibnu Salam episode was narrated – especially as we know it from the *Book* – is the account of the encounters between King Solomon and the queen of Sheba. First mentioned briefly in the Old Testament it was later developed by the commentators into a full fledged tale of persuasion, love and religious transformation.¹⁷ The similarities between the narratives are quite striking. King Solomon, ruling in Jerusalem, was known to be the leader of his people and the wisest of men. The queen, herself the ruler of a powerful kingdom in Africa, had heard of his greatness and,

¹⁶From early on Islamic traditions stress questions as an important test of knowledge and correct answers as signs and proof of its possession. Newby cites the case of K'ab al-Ahbar, a converted Yemeni Jew, who in the context of a discussion of Moses' staff asked Abdullah b. 'Amr b. al-'As three questions as a test of his learning, Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad*. pp. 125; Eaton recounts a Bengali folk tradition about a yogi asking questions of a sufi, then converting after receiving the true reply. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204–1760* (New Delhi, 1993), pp. 81; special debates in which sages discussed matters of esoteric knowledge, often through the exchange of riddles (J. *bantah kawruh*), appear in Javanese *suluk* literature and *wayang* plays. Nancy K. Florida, *Javanese Literature in Surakarta Manuscripts: Introduction and Manuscripts of the Karaton Surakarta*, vol. 1 (Ithaca, 1993), pp. 225.

¹⁷The encounter is mentioned in I Kings 10: 1–3: "The queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame through the name of the Lord, and she came to test him with hard questions... Solomon had answers for all her questions; there was nothing that the king did not know, [nothing] to which he could not give her an answer" *Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*, (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 537.

upon receiving a letter of invitation, goes to his city. There she asks him many questions – most of them riddle-like – as a test of his knowledge and spirituality. The queen is convinced by Solomon's words about God, albeit more gradually than Abdullah. She and the king fall in love, the queen strongly being attracted to him and to his wisdom. Upon her return to her own country she tells her people of the One God and they follow her in conversion to Judaism.¹⁸ The story of Solomon and the queen appears also in the Qur'an, where she accepts the king's faith (although Islam is not explicitly mentioned) after he proves his powers to her.¹⁹ This episode was elaborated in Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah*, probably drawing on Jewish sources such as the one mentioned above.

We find in these sources, and especially the Jewish one, many elements familiar from the Ibnu Salam story: the meeting of two important religious and also political leaders²⁰; the letter of invitation to a debate, which appears in many of the later Ibnu Salam accounts; the love and admiration that develops within the relationships, romantic in the case of the king and queen, but more spiritual in the case of Prophet and disciple; and of course the dialogue of questions and answers which serves to prove that one contender has knowledge and divine inspiration that cannot be outdone. One of the questions the queen asks the king – about a place on earth which has seen the light of day only once – appears as such in the Arabic, Malay and Tamil versions of the *Book of One Thousand Questions*.²¹ The major difference between the stories lies in their directionality: whereas the queen of Sheba follows a Jewish leader and converts to his faith, Abdullah, a Jewish leader himself, follows a Muslim prophet and embraces Islam. But despite this difference the similarities draw our attention to a pool of motifs and stories, many of which appeared in Jewish literature and were adopted into Muslim traditions, which came to be shared to a certain extent.

More directly linked to the Ibnu Salam episode in terms of region and, no less important, directionality of conversion is a tradition from Afghanistan. When Ibn Battuta visited Kabul in the fourteenth century he found it inhabited by the Afghans, a “powerful and violent people” from Persia.²² These people believed they were descended from the house of Israel, from the family of Saul, the first king. Originally residing on Mt. Solomon in Syria, they migrated to Kandahar, some making their way into India and assisting Mahmud of Ghizna in his first conquests there.

A local historian and author, Ibn Shah Alam, who put this history in writing in his *Kholasut al-Ansāb*, told Ibn Battuta that his ancestors, upon hearing in Kandahar of Muhammad's teachings, sent a deputation to him into Arabia to inquire whether or not he was the last

¹⁸A sample of such Jewish traditions is found in Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 4: *From Joshua to Esther* (Baltimore, 1998 {1913}) pp. 142–149.

¹⁹Solomon is mentioned in seven different *surahs* of the Qur'an, two of which also mention the queen of Sheba: 27: 15–44 and 34: 12–20.

²⁰According to tradition the queen was a follower of Manichaeism (Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad*, pp. 164). Solomon says of her: “Her false gods have led her astray, for she comes from an unbelieving nation” (Q. 27:43).

²¹The answer to this riddle is the bottom of the Red Sea, revealed when Moses – inspired by God – split it open to let the Israelites escape Pharaoh's army.

²²Samuel Lee, ed., *The Travels of Ibn Battuta; Translated from the Abridged Arabic Manuscript Copies Preserved in the Public Library of Cambridge with Notes Illustrative of the History, Geography, Botany, Antiquities Etc. Occurring Throughout the Work*. (London, 1829).p. 99.

prophet mentioned in “the law and the gospels”. Upon being assured that he was, the whole nation at once received the Muslim faith.

Although Lee, the nineteenth-century translator and editor of Ibn Battuta’s travelogue, believed this tradition to be largely a fable, the strong similarities between this tradition and the Ibnu Salam tradition point to the popularity of this circulating model which emphasised doubts and questions arising regarding Muhammad’s Truth, conversion by persuasion, a leader or representative of a people initially convinced, then followed by the community, and the importance of direct contact with the Prophet.²³ Clearly, the *Book of One Thousand Questions* fits into a larger paradigm which crossed religious and geographical lines.

Having offered a context for considering the Ibnu Salam conversion story through time, and within the extended geographical region in which it was produced, we are now ready to examine its elaborations in the *Book of One Thousand Questions* in Javanese, Tamil and Malay, and return to the questions of what, in fact, was the image of Ibnu Salam and his people projected through the texts by authors – and to audiences – to whom Jews were known from other textual sources alone, most notably from their mention in the Qur’an.

Ibnu Salam in Javanese, Tamil and Malay versions of the ‘Book of One Thousand Questions’

The *Book of One Thousand Questions*, and its protagonist Ibnu Salam, have been known in Javanese since at least the early eighteenth century. Malay versions – translated from Persian – have also been circulating in the Archipelago since approximately the same period. In Tamil a single text of the story was composed in south India in 1572.²⁴

Ibnu Salam is, generally, depicted in very positive terms, most often in the opening section of the texts. For example, in the Javanese *Samud* the Jewish leader is given the titles of *sang raja pandhita* (sage king) and guru, and his powers are described as exceedingly great (J. *saktinipun kalangkung*); in the 1884 *Serat Samud* he is, once again, referred to as a great pundit (J. *pandhita linuwih*);²⁵ Some Malay versions employ only the title *pandita* (“scholar”, “sage”) when depicting Ibnu Salam while others elaborate further and refer to him also as an ‘*alim*’ from (“pious”, “learned man”) and *penghulu* (“chief”, “leader”), one who is versed in the Torah, the Gospels and Psalms and can interpret them all.²⁶ In the Tamil *Book*, which

²³The *Tareki Afghan*, Ni’mat Allah’s 17th century Persian-language history of the Afghans who claim descent from the Jews, was translated by Bernhard Dorn and published in the same translation series as Ibn Battuta’s book (London: Oriental Translation Committee, 1829–1836), University of Michigan Library microfilm X104 no.5.

²⁴For a list of twenty five Javanese, and twenty one Malay, manuscripts and books which contain this text see Ronit Ricci, “Translating Conversion in South and Southeast Asia: The Islamic *Book of One Thousand Questions* in Javanese, Tamil and Malay,” Ph.D dissertation, University of Michigan, 2006. pp. 406–411 (Javanese) ; 427–430 (Malay). The Tamil text has most recently appeared in Cayitu “Hassan” Muhammad, ed., *Āyirā Macalā: Islāmiyat Tamil Ilakkiya Ulakin Mutar Kāppiyam* (“*One Thousand Questions: The First Narrative Poem of Tamil Muslim Literature*”) (Madras, 1984).

²⁵*Samud*, Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, Jakarta. MS.PNRI KBG 434. And *Serat Samud*, Pura Pakualaman Library, Yogyakarta, inscribed 1884 MS. St. 80.

²⁶An example of the former is found in Edwar Djamaris, ed., *Hikayat Seribu Masalah* (Jakarta, 1994). The latter descriptions are found in *Hikayat Seribu Masa’il*, Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, Jakarta, inscribed 1757 MS.PNRI ML 200 and in *Kitab Seribu Masa’il*, Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia MS.PNRI ML 442. The Torah, Gospels and Psalms (M. *Toret*, *Injil*, *Sabur*), along with the Qur’an, are typically presented as the four scriptures in the Malay *Book* and are depicted as the “four Vedas” in Tamil.

generally tends to be more elaborate and descriptive, he is depicted throughout as learned and wise, knower of the Vedas, an ascetic, a faultless man.

Such positive, respectful terminology employed in the portrayal of the Jewish leader is, as we have seen, rooted in the earliest Arabic traditions which proclaim him to have been a learned rabbi and chief of his people. It serves the purpose of strengthening the message that Ibnu Salam was a worthy opponent. His broad knowledge, and intimate understanding of the scriptures, made his acceptance of the Prophet's words all the more persuasive.

The image is not, however, entirely positive. In one instance Ibnu Salam is referred to in Tamil as *arapin kāpir* – “infidel of Arabia” – and in a Javanese version he is twice mentioned as being the guru of the infidels (J. *gurune wong kapir*).²⁷ But these attributes pale in comparison to the positive ones, appearing consistently in the different versions. Also, the distinction between Ibnu Salam himself and the character of the Jews as a people had to be maintained since, as we have seen, he was considered an exception and the attitude of his followers in the early traditions points to a great gap between Ibnu Salam the leader and his community, the Jews.²⁸

The episode that appeared at story's end in many hadith versions, in which Ibnu Salam was afraid of the Jews' reaction to his conversion and asked for assistance and protection from the Prophet while also attempting to prove the Jews' deceptive and untruthful character, is highly unusual in the versions discussed here, where the negative Jewish response to conversion is generally absent. The questioning is, at a fundamental level, a test. And yet the deceitful nature of the Jews, attempting to prove Muhammad wrong, constantly doubting him and trying to catch him making a mistake, does not come across as a prominent feature. On the contrary, in all the versions discussed, making Ibnu Salam – and sometimes his followers – graciously accept the Prophet's words and acknowledge their truth.²⁹

²⁷PNRI, ed., *Āyira Macala*. verse 281 and *Samud*, Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, Jakarta, MS. Br. 504, respectively.

²⁸However, Muhammad refers to the Jews collectively as “experts in the scriptures” and a people “revered in the world” in the Tamil *Book*, Muhammad, ed., *Āyira Macalā* Verse 70.

²⁹Somewhat of an exception to this representation in the Indonesian context is found in a manuscript which Pijper refers to as the “Batavia edition”, now part of the collection in the National Library in Jakarta. “Somewhat of an exception” because, although this *Book* version is housed on Java, it is written in Arabic, not Javanese or Malay. Nonetheless it presented a different, atypical picture of Ibnu Salam's conversion to its local audience, whomever this may have comprised. In this edition, after Ibnu Salam adopts Islam he fears to admit it to the Jews. He asks Muhammad to conceal him, and then to call the Jews and invite them to Islam. This takes place but the Jews give an unwilling reply, wishing first to hear the opinion of their sheikh Ibnu Salam. The Prophet cautiously tells them that Ibnu Salam may have already converted. As they deny this Ibnu Salam appears, brings the change to light and tells them the story of his conversion, saying: “O people, I have asked Muhammad questions only God can answer, and he has answered all truthfully.” The Jewish reaction is not depicted. This particular episode, perhaps an oral tradition, appears to be based on the Ibnu Salam conversion stories in the canonical tradition rather than the more widely circulating conversion scene common to Javanese and Malay *Book of One Thousand Questions* versions. In the latter the conversion is accepted by all and concludes the story. The “Batavia edition” manuscript is catalogued in Van Ronkel's 1913 catalogue of Arabic manuscripts preserved in Jakarta as MS. Nr 553. The date is missing but, based on a preceding section written by the same hand dated 1123 Hijri (1711 A.D) it may well be that it was written at the same time. See Pijper, *Het Boek Der Duizend Vragen*, pp. 36. This is very significant in pointing to the possibility that an Arabic version of the *Book* may have been known in the archipelago by the early eighteenth century.

An additional element which appears in several Malay versions and involves the Jews collectively returns us to the opening part of the story.³⁰ Ibnu Salam announces to his people that he has received a letter from the Seal of the Prophets, whose coming had been prophesied in the Torah. He repeatedly invokes the name of Moses to convince the Jews of the authenticity of the new Prophet. The Jews remain doubtful and ask him how they may know for certain that they should leave their religion behind. They are described as *masygul di dalam hati*, sad in their hearts, confused, despairing. Ibnu Salam then invokes the solution of asking the Prophet one thousand questions as a test to Muhammad and the Jews all agree that if he is convinced they will follow suit.³¹ Here although the Jews are presented as doubtful and initially disbelieving, their leader is able to convince them that a test by questioning will provide the desired proof. The Jews are not depicted as evil or cunning so much as confused and open to persuasion.

Terminologies of Judaism

Related to these issues is the question of the terminology used for “Jews” or “Jewish” in the different *Book of One Thousand Questions* tellings. The Arabic term *yahudi*, appearing in the Qur’an, is used in Malay and Javanese versions. The Tamil word for Jews – *cūtar* – may derive less directly from Arabic although it too is not unrelated. Looking up the word in nineteenth- and twentieth-century dictionaries reveals an interesting, and perhaps telling phenomenon: the word *cūtar* refers to gamblers, deceitful people, deriving from *cūtu*, a Sanskrit name of a dice game. The other definition is “bards, singers”.³² Whether either of these definitions – and especially the former – is related to an attitude towards the Jews remains to be studied.

Also intriguing in relation to the question of how Jews were collectively imagined and understood is the phenomenon in several Javanese *Book of One Thousand Questions* versions of what appears as a conflation of Jews with Christians. In the 1884 *Serat Samud* from Yogyakarta Muhammad’s letter is explicitly addressed, no less than three times, to the *yahudi nasarani* (Jews [and] Christians).³³ This combination, which at present might imply a hyphenated term, may have referred to Jews and Christians while also addressing them as a single group – that is, they were seen as both conflated and separate – at least for the purpose of the events depicted.³⁴

³⁰These include *Hikayat Seribu Masa’il*, MS.PNRI ML 200; *Kitab Seribu Masa’il*, MS. PNRI ML 442; *Hikayat Seribu Masa’il*, MS.PNRI W83; Djamaris, ed., *Hikayat Seribu Masalah*, pp. 20–21.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²M. Winslow, ed., *A Comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary* (New Delhi, 1991, originally published 1862), pp. 494; P. R. Subramanian, ed., *Kriyāvin Tarkālat Tamiḻ Akarāti Tamiḻ Tamiḻ Āṅkilam (Dictionary of Contemporary Tamil (Tamil-Tamil-English))* (Madras, 1992), pp. 465.

³³*Serat Samud*, MS. PP St. 80, 11.48–49.

³⁴In a possible present-day incarnation of this phenomenon, James Siegel describes how, upon hearing of his Jewish origins, friends in Sumatra offered to take him to a co-religionist. When arriving at the designated house he saw through the window a large orthodox cross. Siegel sees this as a merging of Jewish and Christian religious identities in the eyes of his Muslim hosts. James Siegel, “Kiblat and the Mediatic Jew,” *Indonesia*.69 (2000).pp. 2. An even clearer contemporary example of this type of conflation, in the context of the story discussed, is found in the Indonesian magazine *al-Kisah*. In an illustration accompanying a re-telling of the early hadith about Ibnu Salam meeting the Prophet and converting, the Jew (I.yahudi) Ibnu Salam is seen wearing the garments of a Catholic priest and his face resembles that of Jesus in the popular imagination, long haired and bearded. In the text itself he is depicted as a *pendeta* (I. pastor, priest) and as teaching in a church. “Kuda Kecil Yang Menjadi Hamba Allah,” *al-Kisah*. (September 2007).

This element, to the best of my knowledge, does not appear in Arabic versions and is also not found in Malay and Tamil ones. Its absence in the latter languages may be a sign of proximity to Arabic sources and/or an indication that the differentiation between Jews and Christians was more clear. Certainly in south India, especially in its western region along the Malabar coast, there were ancient and significant Jewish and Christian communities. Perhaps Malay traders had also experienced more direct contact with Christians and Jews during their voyages and so the two remained distinct within the *Book's* narrative.

It is in any case difficult to deduce a clear conclusion from the appearance of the *yahudi nasrani* terminology in Javanese. Whether it represents a conflation of non-Muslims belonging to “the people of the book” or whether in these particular versions Muhammad was understood to be preaching to both peoples is impossible to determine with certainty, largely because definitions of what it meant to be Jewish or Christian – in the eyes of a Javanese author – are rare in the texts. An exception is found in the undated *Samud* where Samud Ibnu Salam, described as the guru of Jews and Christians (J. *guru ning wong yahudi lan ning srani*), a man of exceptional powers (J. *saktinipun kalangkung*), introduces himself to the Prophet as follows:

Yes my name is Samud/
 I am Ibnu Salam//
 indeed I follow/
 the religion of the prophet Abraham/
 of the descendents of Jacob/
 who are exalted/
 granted an authority in reading/
 the Torah scripture/
 by Him who sent /
 the prophets bearing it [to] me/
 indeed that which is/
 followed by all Jews /
 and Christians//³⁵

In this brief segment we find Ibnu Salam describing his own religion whose scripture, in the concluding lines, applies to both Jews and Christians. He traces his faith to the prophet Abraham (as do Muslims) and to his grandson Jacob. The Torah is presented as the supreme scripture, followed by adherents of Judaism and Christianity alike. We, as was true for the text's audience, are provided with a glimpse of what members of these faiths were assumed to believe in.

³⁵The Javanese reads: *Inggih Samud aran mami/ ibnu salam ingwang//inggih amba ingkang anut maring/kang agama/nabi brahim ika/anak putuné yakup rika/iku kang linuhung/kang kawasa amaca singgih/kitab toret punika/saking kang ngautus/nabi ambehta maring ngwang/iya iku/panutan ing wong yahudi/lan inasrani sadaya*. See *Samud*. MS. PNRI Br. 504, p. 212. The final lines could also read “followed by the Jews and Christians all”, emphasising their conflation into a single group. The same introduction of Samud and the definition of the Jews, almost word for word, appears also in the earliest *Samud* manuscript extant, but there we read (for line 6, above) “*ingsun kang linuhung...*” rather than “*iku kang linuhung..*”, that is “I am exalted, granted an authority in reading...” etc., referring specifically to *Samud* and not more generally to the Jewish people or their prophets. *Samud*, Leiden Oriental Manuscripts Collection MS. LOr 4001.p. 5.

Ibnu Salam's homeland

Ibnu Salam's place of origin in the different versions also offers an indication of his identity. In many Arabic versions Ibnu Salam is from Khaibar, a settlement which had a large and prosperous Jewish community in the seventh century. In the Tamil version he hails from Khaibar (T. *Kaipāri*) as well, and is mentioned many times as "king of Khaibar", "the wise man from Khaibar" and "Khaibar's protector", and the city itself is depicted as one that "flows with light of precious stones".³⁶ In Malay versions Ibnu Salam is also a leader of Khaibar. In Javanese versions, however, a wider range of possibilities emerges in regard to Ibnu Salam's place of origin, implying a more broadly defined identity for the story's protagonist and more flexibility on the part of the author.

In some Javanese versions Ibnu Salam concedes only that he is coming from "my land, my kingdom" (J. *saking nagari amba*), without supplying any details, geographical or otherwise.³⁷ Occasionally, as in the 1898 *Serat Suluk Samud Ibnu Salam*, nothing at all is mentioned about his origins, not even his Jewish affiliation.³⁸ An interesting option chosen by some writers for his homeland – both in versions in which he is Jewish and in those in which he is not – is the land of Rum.

Rum, referring in the narrow sense to Turkey or the Ottoman lands, has a special status in Javanese works. Although it may connote the historical region of the eastern Roman empire or Byzantium, where in the fifteenth century an important Muslim empire, which would survive into the twentieth century, developed, in Java it often refers to a Muslim domain, shrouded in mystery and glory. It is a distant land of kings and warriors, representing Muslim authority and dominance. Significantly, it is sometimes depicted as the land of origin of the first humans to ever have settled on Java, thus marking the Javanese as direct descendents of the people of Rum.³⁹

Depicting Samud Ibnu Salam and his followers as coming from Rum – especially when imagined as a faraway, unknown Muslim place – distances the story from an immediate Jewish-Muslim context. It may also be that designating Rum as Ibnu Salam's home made much sense to the audience, as it stressed his arrival from afar, his transformative journey to meet the Prophet long and arduous, yet worthy of its hurdles.

The fact that in Javanese versions Samud Ibnu Salam is depicted as coming from various places – but not Khaibar, his 'natural' home and the one that appears in early Arabic sources as well as Malay and Tamil *Book of One Thousand Questions* versions – may point to an attempt to also frame where the story itself, and its teachings, were coming from. The (unsettled) question of Samud's possible homeland may resonate here with the larger issues of the story's source and its transmission route, and in turn the source and route for Islam's arrival on Java.

³⁶See, for example, Muhammad, ed., *Ayira Macala*: Verses 1027, 663, 205 and 191 respectively.

³⁷*Samud*, MS. PNRI KBG 413. The same is true for *Serat Samud*, MS. FSUI CI 109 and a *Samud Fragment in Para Nabi Nerangkakan Bab Rijal Saha Sanes-Sanesipun*, Karaton Surakarta Library, Surakarta, inscribed 1823 [?].MS. KS 339.1.

³⁸*Serat Suluk Samud Ibnu Salam*, Museum Sono Budoyo Library, Yogyakarta, inscribed 1898, transcribed 1932. MS. MSB P173a.

³⁹This story appears, for example, in the *Serat Dyamasastra*, in which Ajisaka meditates on the shores of Java then populated by giants and other creatures, when the first humans arrive there from Rum. *Serat Dyamasastra*, Museum Sonobudoyo Library, Yogyakarta. MS. MSB P93.

A Jew on Java?

In many ways it is easier to explain the appearance of a non-Jewish, rather than a Jewish Samud, in Javanese versions. For instance, in the 1898 *Serat Suluk Samud Ibnu Salam*, the clearest example of this trend, there is no mention of Samud's Jewish identity, of his place of origin, his leadership within a community or his desire or decision to convert to Islam. Since there was no Jewish community on Java or its vicinity the questions of Muslim-Jewish relations remained, to a large extent, issues described in the Qur'an and other sources but not ones relevant to everyday life, including those of conversion, competition and inter-religious relations. As Javanese authors and translators adapted other stories to local concerns and models, the *Book* too shed this seemingly unnecessary or imposed element while continuing to be told in a way considered more locally appropriate. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Javanese authors took this trend a step further and transformed the *Book's* narrative into one depicting Ibnu Salam – no longer Jewish, no longer a disciple – as a Javanese Muslim guru instructing his sons.⁴⁰

The versions that did depict Ibnu Salam as Jewish, in Javanese and Tamil and Malay, remained more 'faithful' to the story as it appears in the hadith literature and in Arabic versions. Motivations for this tendency included preserving a strong link to Arabic traditions, including the cannon of Muhammad's deeds, and following their conventionalised, formulaic manner, as well as allowing the story to remain more firmly grounded in the Prophet's time. In doing thus, important elements of the story were retained, among them the victory of the Prophet over an opponent, the element of persuasion and the on-going connection with complementary knowledge about the Jews available in the Qur'an and hadith.

Indeed, the absence of "real Jews" on Java and in much of the Malay world and the Tamil region did not preclude the existence of deeply rooted perceptions and images of which they are a focus. As Siegel argues forcefully for the present in his article "Kiblat and the Mediatc Jew" an absence of Jews in Indonesia has not led to a lack of anti-semitism but on the contrary, in some ways such a lack makes holding on to negative perceptions all the more likely, as they cannot be countered by living experience, personal ties and familiarity.⁴¹

In this sense the Ibnu Salam story is but an element in the larger cultural picture addressing prior, as well as contemporary, Jewish-Muslim relations. This picture includes not only the Qur'an and hadith in Arabic or translation but also a variety of other texts, which can only be touched upon briefly here.

Jews and Judaism in additional sources

Alternatives to the peaceful conversion process depicted in the *Book of One Thousand Questions*, and closely associated with the story of Ibnu Salam as they, too, relate episodes in

⁴⁰These versions – titled *Suluk Seh Ngabdulsalam* – are beyond the scope of this article. However, it is of note that in them Ibnu Salam remains closer in his depiction to *Samud* – as portrayed in the earlier *Book* – than to portrayals of Muhammad, the teacher, although he assumes that role. Thus in *Suluk Seh Ngabdul Salam Seh Ngabdulsalam*, the teacher, is described as a yogi, sage and *alim*, presenting him as combining skills and attributes from different traditions but, fundamentally, retaining the features of the disciple Ibnu Salam. *Suluk Seh Ngabdulsalam*, Fakultas Sastra Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta, inscribed 1901.MS. FSUI PW 56.

⁴¹Siegel, "Kiblat and the Mediatc Jew".

the life of the Prophet, are found in the Javanese Pandhita Raib and Raja Kandak narratives.⁴² Pandhita Raib was a teacher of Judaism in the country of Khaibar, who drew that land's people away from Islam. The story relates the Prophet's struggle against, and eventual victory over, Pandhita Raib and his people. Raja Kandak, a king who refused to accept Islam, fought against the Prophet and his companions until his eventual death. Although Raja Kandak is not depicted as a Jewish king the text may well be a variation on the same theme. In the Malay *Hikayat Raja Khaibar*, once more, the king of Khaibar, in this case not a Jew but not yet a Muslim either, fights the Prophet's Muslim army and is defeated. His daughter Syaffiyah marries Muhammad and converts, paving the way for all of Khaibar's residents to do the same.⁴³

Another circulating story, appearing in early Arabic sources and translated from that language, is relevant to the discussion both in the more general sense of depicting the Jews and in its relationship to conversion. It recounts how a Jewish man captured a doe who had recently given birth. Muhammad, who came across the doe and heard her pleas, agreed to remain as hostage with the wicked Jew while she nursed her young. The fawns refused to nurse when they heard of the Prophet's plight and returned, along with their mother, to release him. Overwhelmed by the sight of the returning doe with her young the Jew embraced Islam on the spot.

This miraculous tale is cited in many classical Arabic sources and, interestingly, in them a Bedouin – rather than a Jew – captures a gazelle.⁴⁴ When and how the Bedouin was replaced by a Jew is not clear but today this story is at the centre of a very popular Egyptian ballad as well as the focus of a beloved Acehnese poem and perhaps additional versions of it in the archipelago.⁴⁵ Two points are important: the image that emerges is one of the Jew as greedy, voracious, untrustworthy, cunning and cruel, while the Prophet, on the contrary, is noble, humble, courageous and willing to sacrifice himself for the good of another of God's creatures. In addition, we again find the prophet's ability to persuade – here with his actions – and to overwhelm a Jew into conversion.

Among the most popular of tales that bring to the fore Jewish traditions which have been adapted within Islam, rather than a strict image of the Jews, are the traditions known in Arabic as *ḥadīth Isrā'īliyāt* (I. *ḥadis Israiliyya*), or Judaica. In his early biography of the Prophet Ibn Ishaq drew extensively on this body of stories about, and usually derived from Jewish and Christian sources. In the latter contexts the literary sources for *Isrā'īliyāt* were haggadic and midrashic treatises which explicated Scripture. One effect of their use by Ibn Ishaq was

⁴²Three copies of *Serat Pandhita Raib* (MSS. MN 297, MN 298 and MN 299), composed in Surakarta in 1792, are found in the Mangkunagaran palace in that city. For a synopsis of their content see Nancy K. Florida, *Javanese Literature in Surakarta Manuscripts: Manuscripts of the Mangkunegaran Palace*, vol. 2 (Ithaca, 2000), pp. 190–191. An example of the *Hikayat Raja Kandak*, MS. FSUI CI 54, is described in T.E. Behrend and Titik Pudjiastuti ed., *Katalog Induk Naskah Naskah Nusantara: Fakultas Sastra Universitas Indonesia* (Jakarta, 1997), pp. 170–171.

⁴³*Hikayat Raja Khaibar*, MS.PNRI W81, listed in T.E. Behrend, ed., *Katalog Induk Naskah-Naskah Nusantara: Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia*, vol. 4 (Jakarta, 1998), pp. 329. Four other Malay texts with this title are listed in the catalogue. Those dated are from the nineteenth century.

⁴⁴On these sources and a poetic adaptation sung as a ballad in contemporary Egypt see Kamal Abdel-Malek, *Muhammad in the Modern Egyptian Popular Ballad* (Leiden, 1995), pp. 69–71. I thank Anton Shammam for bringing the Arabic version of this story to my attention.

⁴⁵I thank Pak Yusny Saby of the State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN) Ar-Raniry in Banda Aceh for telling me this story and describing its popularity in Aceh.

to link his *Sirah* and the Qur'an to previous scripture through these stories, fostering the claim that Islam was the heir to Judaism and Christianity.⁴⁶ They include narratives regarded as historical, serving to complement the information provided in the scriptures, particularly regarding the prophets; edifying narratives placed within the chronological framework of 'the period of the ancient Israelites'; and fables allegedly, and sometimes actually, borrowed from Jewish sources.⁴⁷

In the Archipelago and south India such stories have been, and remain, very popular, being widely incorporated into the Islamic literary sphere. In Javanese, Tamil and Malay we find many accounts of the lives of the prophets, emerging from the often brief facts appearing in the New and Old Testaments, elaborated on in Jewish sources and embellished further by Muslim scholars and storytellers.

The narrative of Ibnu Salam's question and answer dialogue with the Prophet thus did not occur in isolation. Although it may be quite unusual in its consistently positive portrayal of the Jewish leader and in its denial of overt conflict, it forms an element in a much larger, longstanding and rich, tradition of engaging with and imagining Jews and Judaism.

Conclusions

Though Jewish communities were traditionally absent from the social landscape of the Indonesian-Malay world and the Tamil land of southeast India, and Jews were rarely encountered across these regions, they consistently appeared in religious and literary sources and played important roles in depictions of early Islam in Javanese, Tamil and Malay. Despite a physical absence their image – at times negative but often complex and ambiguous – was certainly present. The *Book of One Thousand Questions* provides us with insight into the multifaceted perceptions of the Jews across these Muslim societies.

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⁴⁶Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad*. p. 3.

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