Chapter 4

The History of the Text, 1581–1595

The Moroccan Edition of the First Dialogue, 1581

Precious hints on the textual history of the Marrakesh Dialogues can be gathered from the two preliminary texts, the “Argument” and the “Prologue,” which the author appended to his work when it was still incomplete. They allow us to conclude that the clandestine manuscript publication from which all extant copies are derived was preceded by at least two lost manuscript editions.

The first version of the work must have been written on the spot in Marrakesh and contained a primitive recension of the First Dialogue. This is explicitly stated in the prologue (hallándome en Marruecos en tiempo que allí había embajadores [...] ordené y compuse este diálogo, 204.6–15). Though the prologue leaves open whether this primitive version of the First Dialogue was diffused or not, it can in all likelihood be identified with the “Treatise” that Menezes attributed to Estêvão Dias, in which the latter “justified his conversion from the faith in Jesus Christ to the side of Judaism by eliciting all the doubts he had in Jesus Christ’s law.” According to Menezes, this text already circulated widely among the Moroccan Jews during Brother Thomas’ lifetime.

This first edition being directed against Brother Thomas, it must have been written between the latter’s arrival at the ambassador’s residence in Marrakesh in late 1579 and his death in April 1582. Dias started the controversy after the Portuguese nobles had left the city in November 1579, as the author makes Obadiah speak in the past tense about “the fidalgos” (240.17–19). However, the prologue states that the debate took place before the departure of the European ambassadors, that is, before November 1581. The resulting time frame of two years can be narrowed down a little further.

Given that the Andrade-Dias controversy could count on a considerable audience among European merchants, we must first take into consideration the fact that the presence of Europeans in Marrakesh fluctuated considerably throughout the year. During the second half of the sixteenth century, their arrival followed in general the rhythm of the sugar harvests. The ships from the English, Norman, and Flemish harbors anchored at Safi each year at the beginning of the dry season, that is, during the month of May. The Europeans then transported their merchandise to Marrakesh, mainly woollen and linen textiles, and sold it there. They then sailed their empty vessels south to Agadir, where they stayed during the months of June, July, and August buying sugar,
hides, wax, and indigo. Moroccan exports and sugar boiling facilities belonged
to a royal monopoly of which the indigenous Jews were, since 1567, the exclusive administrators. This explains the close relations between European merchants and Moroccan Jews, which even included the common attendance at a Catholic sermon in the Portuguese ambassador’s residence.

Andrew’s arrival on a Flemish merchantman and his presence in a crowd of Catholic merchants at a sermon for Trinity Sunday could not correspond better to the calendar of these commercial exchanges. It is likely that Brother Thomas’ sermon took place in historical reality, as it is described in all its concrete details as the event that triggered the literary controversy. The Augustinian friar was in Marrakesh on two Trinity Sundays: May 29, 1580 and May 21, 1581. The latter date is the more probable one because of the preceding mention of the Lisbon plague, which had only peaked in the summer of 1580.

The text portion that presumably corresponds to the primitive version of the First Dialogue hardly quotes other textual sources than the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Quotations from the Old Testament are based upon the so-called “Ferrara Bible” of the Portuguese Jews, published under the title Biblia en lengua española traducida palabra por palabra de la verdad Hebraica (Ferrara, 1553), whereas those of the New Testament are mainly derived from the “Bear Bible” of the Spanish Lutherans, translated by Casiodoro de Reina under the title La Biblia, que es, Los Sacros Libros del Viejo y Nuevo Testamento (Basel, 1569).

When writing his first version, Dias must have had access to some Jewish texts as well. The anonymous author seems to possess a reasonable acquaintance with the controversy handbooks written by his Jewish predecessors, though he never lets this erudition show through the argument of his ingenious protagonists. Conducting his defense of Judaism via an attack on the Gospels, he follows the method and argument of medieval Jewish polemicists such as David Kimhi, Joseph Albo, and especially the Catalan Jewish philosopher Isaac Profiat Duran “Efodi,” whose polemical work Kelimát ha-Goyim