

MORMONS IN THE LIGHT OF THE OTTOMAN ARCHIVE DOCUMENTS: THE AWARENESS OF THE RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AT THE AGE OF CRISIS¹

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Osmanlı Arşiv Belgelerinde Mormonlar: Bunalım Çağında Dinsel Farklılık Bilinci

Öz: Osmanlı devleti farklı din ve kültür mensuplarının uyum içerisinde idare edildiği önemli bir standart geliştirmiştir. Daha sonra millet sistemi olarak ifade edilen bu standart içerisinde resmen tanınan gayrimüslim azınlıklara önemli haklar tanınmıştır. Çoğulcu uygulama Osmanlı devleti yıkılana kadar devam etmiştir. Bu sistem Osmanlı'nın son döneminde Hıristiyan misyonerlerin işini kolaylaştırırsa da taviz verilmeden yürütülmüş ve farklı dini cemaatlerin sosyal hakları ihlal edilmemeye çalışılmıştır. Bu konuya dair uygulamalar Osmanlı arşiv belgelerinde kayıt altına alınmıştır. Bu belgeler Osmanlı devletinin siyasi buhran ve çöküş döneminde dahi farklı dini gruplara karşı olumlu tutum ve davranış içinde olduğunu kanıtlamaktadır. Bu makalede ele aldığımız arşiv belgeleri, millet sistemi üyesi olmasalar da Mormonların Osmanlı devleti içindeki misyonerlik faaliyetlerine rağmen dengeli ve adil bir tutum ile karşılaştıkları gerçeğine ışık tutmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı Devleti, Osmanlı arşivleri, millet sistemi, Mormonlar

Abstract: The Ottoman state has developed an important standard of harmony by the management of different religions and cultures. So, non-Muslim minorities were formally given important rights, which are expressed in the *millet* system. This practice continued to strengthen until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This system was carried out without any compromise and under this system violation of social rights was not attempted on different religious communities although it facilitated the work of Christian missionaries during the last period of the Ottoman Empire. Practices and applications on this issue were recorded in the Ottoman archive documents. These documents show the positive attitudes of the Ottoman Empire towards different religious communities in the situation of political crisis. In this article we have discussed the issue through the archive documents, especially on missionary activities of Mormons while they were not the members of the *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire. We have shed light on their balanced and the fair attitudes towards Mormonism.

Key Words: Ottoman Empire, Ottoman archives, *millet* system, Mormonism, Latter-Day Saints

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Introduction

In the beginning of the 19th century, the United States of America (U.S.) came across a new religious movement founded by Joseph Smith (1805-1844) based on the different understanding of Jesus Christ. This religious movement, which is known as Latter-Day Saints or Mormonism, bases itself on ancient times to define itself as an independent religion. The representatives of this new religious movement, which became the subject of a major conflict in the U.S. because of its views about history and theological teachings, extended it to the Ottoman lands soon after its formation.

We can mention two important reasons that attracted Mormons to the Ottoman Empire: Firstly, Mormons tried to get followers and to formation of their missionary work for their movement. For the eastern societies within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire, especially the members of the eastern Christian churches were clear targets of their mission. Secondly, political and religious conditions of the Ottoman Empire, because of profound chaos and crisis, had offered a quite favorable geography for Mormon missionary work. In this article, after defining the historical and theological context of Mormonism, their exhibited missionary activities within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire and the political attitudes of Ottoman state towards this, will be examined. In this study, we will take advantage of the Ottoman archive documents for dealing with this issue. Furthermore, in the era of crisis and rulers of an empire in decline facing many problems such as living in the territory with the members of different religious traditions and confronting some political separatist attitudes against the empire will be enlightened. Also, it will be put forth that the rulers were looking for a proper way to solve the problem in the light of Islamic tradition as well as will be discussed the fundamental human rights, here.

Mormons (Latter-Day Saints)

The history of Mormonism is said to begin in 1820s with the divine experience of Joseph Smith who is believed to be the founder of this religious movement. According to the story, God, through the angel Moroni, delivered a gold plate with written text on it to Smith. According to him, this text is the authentic version of the Bible and it consists of the story of two Jews tribes, which escaped from the Babylonian exile to the American continent. This story had been excluded from the text, which had been tampered by Christians. In this way, Smith acquired an authentic Bible unlike the common one and also claimed to

gain legitimacy of Jewish heritage. Thus Mormonism, which aimed to repair the ancient Christian tradition, expressed itself as a “new” belief (May, 2001: 47). Revelation to Smith was written in the book with the name of “Book of Mormon”. This became very famous in the Mormon community and after that in the “Salt Lake City” in the state of Utah; the U.S. appeared as a major center for this movement.

Even though Mormonism contains many detailed theological teachings, we will highlight relevant parts of it, here. This religious movement had many similarities with the teachings of the Islam. Most noteworthy aspect is expressed to be similarity of many sayings of Smith with the Prophet Muhammad (Schmidt, 2013). The reason of Smith’s attribute to the Prophet of Islam is the historical process and teaching, which were based on the similarities between Mormonism and religion of Islam. In this context, Smith received the revelation from an angel just like the Prophet of Islam, earlier tempered religious discourses were abrogated with new revelation and by this way he brought a new religion, so through the Judeo-Christian tradition, Abrahamic heritage emerged again by him. However, the main reference point to reflect such similarities with Muslims is the practice of polygamy. Smith, who considered the Mormons as the holy sons and daughters of the God and said that they have to be married because their proliferation proposed as they are the heirs of God. Consideration of the polygamy in the history of Prophets has been advocated as an important religious behavior (Kirkland, 2008). That’s why, especially these points are considered as one of the top reason for simulated Mormonism with the Islamic tradition. Essentially Mormonism, which considered itself a product of the Abrahamic tradition, emerged after the Islam and defined itself as a last religion. It is important that after this it succeeded to get the position of an independent religion. Nowadays, the official authorities of Mormon acknowledge Islam as an approved religion from God with still its validity. Nevertheless Mormons claimed that Islam is also tampered like other religions and that’s way they included it as well in their restoration project (Aktay, 2004: 98).

Mormonism established a disciplined and a solid community with strong missionary organizations to tell other communities the divine message of Smith. With divine promises, especially the members of younger generation kept a high level of belief and the generous donations of members of Mormonism with an effective mission of the organization provided both human and financial resources. Mormon missionaries accessed to the overseas countries for intended missionary work in a short time. In the context of mentioned international mission projects, Mormons have reached to the Ottoman Empire.

Mormons In The Ottoman Empire

The first missionary activities in the Ottoman Empire, was started by Catholic missionaries in 16th century. After that the activities of Protestant missionaries also became much stronger until 18th century. Especially, the U.S. based Protestant missionary groups achieved great advancement in a short time in their mission for the Eastern Christians, who live in the Ottoman Empire.

In 19th century, when Mormon missionaries reached the region, the political turmoil in the Ottoman Empire in that period was too high. During this period the Ottoman Empire faced significant political losses against Western countries. As a result of that the country's non-Muslim communities consciously attempted to separate from the Ottoman Empire and the state entered into an intensive process of decomposition. It is obvious that Protestant missionaries especially from the U.S. played an important role to provoke non-Muslim communities of the Ottoman Empire during that period through abusing their ethnic and religious differences.

Essentially Mormons are refers as subsequent missionary group to the Ottoman lands. The first Mormon mission in the Ottoman land was inaugurated on December 31, 1884 in Istanbul. The Ottoman land presented a hope for Mormons more than just a devoted missionary adventure. Their attitude was based on the divine experience and knowledge of revelation of the founder of Mormonism that also encouraged the polygamy and prohibited from the bad habits such as tobacco and alcohol. These Mormons teachings were observed as the ideal of theocratic state and because of it they were prosecuted by the U.S. administrators. For this reason, the Ottoman Empire can be thought to be attractive for the Mormons; those were almost in the search of a homeland. Indeed, the Ottoman Empire gave hope to Mormons that non-Muslim communities can live freely within the *millet* system with acknowledgment of legitimating polygamy and forbidding alcohol on the lands of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman lands were seen as an important source for missionary work to increase the number of supporters too. Indeed Mormons had the same mission towards the Ottoman Armenian communities as they were also converted by the missionary efforts of other Western Protestant churches in the past (Akgün: 2002, 886).

Mormon presence in the Ottoman Empire, which was developed as a Christian missionary project, became a major problem. Especially Protestants made an effective missionary work on other Chris-

tian communities within the border of the Ottoman Empire. The missionary organizations, which were aware of the strengthening powers against the Christianization of the Muslim population, focused their missionary activities on the eastern Christian church communities. On the other hand, Ottomans became suspicious from time to time for missionary movements being centered in the U.S. and Europe. Indeed, the Ottoman administrators also realized that the missionary work is not only having religious purposes but political as well. Thus, wishing for a common quest of religious identity for Christians by missionary board highlighted the diversity conscious of non-Muslim communities in the Ottoman Empire. For this reason, the Ottoman administration was left in a situation to prohibit the non-Muslims of the country to convert in different Christian sects within their own religion.

The appearance of the Ottoman land was like aforementioned, when Mormons reached. During that period Mormons missionary activities started in the Ottoman Empire with opening the first official missionary center in Istanbul. When it was recognized that Istanbul was not fertile area for Mormons, they selected Antep, which is a southern Anatolian city as a mission center. Around that center, Mormons did the missionary work in Sivas, Mardin, Diyarbakır, Iskenderun, Haifa and Humus, which were related mainly to Armenians and to Eastern Christian Church members.

The most fundamental issues during these activities of Mormons were the absence of an approved status of denominations by the Ottoman government in the context of the *millet* system. The Mormons found the practical solution of this problem under the name of "Protestant community" which was officially recognized by the Ottoman Empire since 1850. In this way, Mormons started their missionary work under the name of "Protestant" in Anatolia and surrounding cities of the southern east region.

Mormons In The Archive Documents

The Ottoman Archives of the Prime Minister's Office (hereafter BOA) contains important documents which include some clues about Mormons missionary work for non-Muslim population of the Ottoman Empire and their relation with Ottoman government. The mentioned documents had been generally recorded between 1887-1906. The information contained in documents of the Ottoman archives about Mormons can be sorted out in the following way:

1. Issue of officially recognition

It is well known that the non-Muslim minorities of the Ottoman Empire were represented by their community leaders in the *millet* system. Initially, Greek Orthodox, Jewish and Armenian communities took their place within the *millet* system and were privileged by this system. After that with some political changes, Protestant churches within the border of the Ottoman land entered into the *millet* system. The non-Muslim groups in the *millet* system had got right to spread their beliefs and implemented their civil law in the social structure of the Ottoman Empire. However, when Mormons missionaries reached the Ottoman Empire, they put their efforts to obtain the basic rights of non-Muslim communities but they did not get privileged from the *millet* system for being outside of it.

Mormons demands for the privilege in the context of the *millet* system were reflected in the form of correspondence in the Ottoman archive documents. The members of the Mormon community also demanded the rights and privileges from recognized non-Muslim communities in the Ottoman Empire and implementations of 62nd article of the Treaty of Berlin (BOA., 472/88, ZB.; 370/130, ZB).³ Despite this request, Mormon missionaries were not allowed to work and prevention of their efforts in this direction were issued to local authorities (BOA., 1274/95536, BEO; 73/1316/L-45, İ.HUS). Despite the relevant article of the Treaty of Berlin in the favor of Mormons, they were prevented from their missionary activities by the government for not being officially recognized community. With this decision, it was stated that new foreign missionaries from outside of the Ottoman Empire should not be allowed to do the propaganda of their beliefs like Mormons (BOA., 472/88, ZB.; 370/130, ZB). However, it was expected from the Imperial ruler to make clear decision about officially unrecognized non-Muslim groups for their recognition like *Septiyyûn* and Mormons by local authorities (BOA., 67/5, DH.TMIK.M.; 1375/103103, BEO).

2. Problem of printing and distribution of the missionary books

Mormon missionaries in the Ottoman Empire were planning to publish and distribute the basics of their beliefs and translate the religious propaganda texts into local languages for publicizing the princi-

3 With the Article 62 of Berlin Treaty, which was signed between the Ottoman Empire and Western countries in 1878, insured that everyone can fulfill their religious freedom. In addition, this treaty has been guaranteed freedom to the protection of community structures of different faith groups and administrative freedom for the communities of religious leaders. Especially pilgrims of the all church members and priests, which belonging to the whole region located in Europe and Asia under the Ottoman Empire, were decided to give all rights of travel and ownership of their groups, benefits and privileges.

ples of the basic beliefs of Mormons. However, due to aforementioned problem of not having official recognition, they encountered some problems of getting necessary permits regarding printing and distribution of their books. According to archive documents, the governmental authorities discussed about the printing and distribution of books containing the basics of Mormons faith and worship system during their missionary work. Mormon missionaries desired to notify Ministry of Education first regarding the publication demands of these kind of books (BOA., 26/33, MV). Even publication and distribution of belief books on Mormonism were expressed illegal for not being the officially recognized religious group within the boundaries of Empire (BOA., 28/50, MV). Despite this traditional condition, printing and distribution of Mormon missionary publications were given the permission for not observing any harm against the Muslim faith. (BOA., 96/83, MF.MKT.; 28/50, MV.; 95/4054, İ.MMS.; BOA., 1383/103725, BEO). But in another document, it has been said that books dealing with Mormon beliefs were not given permission for printing in German, Armenian and Greek books (BOA., 26/33, MV). Even publication and distribution of belief books on Mormonism were expressed illegal for not being the officially recognized religious group within the boundaries of Empire (BOA., 28/50, MV). Despite this traditional condition, printing and distribution of Mormon missionary publications were given the permission for not observing any harm against the Muslim faith. (BOA., 96/83, MF.MKT.; 28/50, MV.; 95/4054, İ.MMS.; BOA., 1383/103725, BEO). In fact, it is mentioned that restrictions regarding printing and distribution of Mormon missionaries' text were not applied too rigidly and a flexible official stance against such missionary activities was seen in the archive documents. In this context, thousands of printing material to be used in the missionary work, translated with Armenian alphabet from Western languages into Turkish was sent to northern Syria and Anatolia (See, Yıldız, 2003: 227).

3. Judicial monitoring of Mormon missionaries

Missionary work of Mormons went through judicial proceedings time by time in the Ottoman state for not being involved among the recognized Christian communities of the *millet* system. The coming of Mormons to the Ottoman lands for missionary activities became the reason for questioning about the other people in communication with them and their purposes of presences in this country and was also closely monitored. In this regard, responsible persons for monitoring the missionary work of Mormons, for controlling the publications, which they brought with them and for passing such kind of missionary books without any custom, had been asked for judicial proceed-

ings (BOA., 472/88, ZB.; 370/130, ZB). Even, those were determined to spread the Mormon faith missionaries were taken into custody by administrators. (BOA. 863/12, DH.MKT)

Mormons in the Ottoman lands were known to become the victim of verbal prosecution as well as physical harassment. However in this regard, it was made clear that other Protestant missionaries those rivaled Mormons, constructed some negative convictions in the eyes of the Ottoman government about Mormons, which became an important reason for aforementioned attitude of the Ottomans towards them (Kern, 2011: 124). This subject will be addressed below in the framework of an important Mormons source.

4. The main target of Mormon missionary: Armenians

Mormon missionaries just after their arrival to the Ottoman lands confronted with two difficulties; the first, missionary activities for the Muslim peoples of the Ottoman Empire were absolutely impossible. Secondly, other American oriented Protestant missionaries were at institutionalized status in the Ottoman Empire with schools based on non-Muslim nature and with services such as orphanages. Hereupon Mormon missionaries turned to non-Muslim elements of southern regions in the Ottoman Empire around their head center of Antep.

However, Mormons saw Armenians as the most open non-Muslim group that had tendency for the efforts of proposed mission. In this manner, Armenians as a non-Muslim group who could easily give positive response to Mormon missionaries, reflected as an ironic tone in the press of Mormons in the U.S. According to the author of this paper, Armenians are defined as persons who have faith but no spiritual depth. Even many Armenians were said to be in the expectation of financial forecast in return of conversion to Mormonism (See, Akgün, 889). This issue also became the subject in the Ottoman archive documents and Mormon missionary work to spread their faith mainly in the Armenian-populated areas, also been expressed in the documents. Even the significant number of members working in the Mormon mission centers are reported to be the Armenians (BOA., Y. MTV. 242/43).

The primary goal of the missionary movements in the Ottoman Empire was the Armenians because this congregation occupies a privileged position with the status of the *millet* as a Christian denomination under the Ottoman administrative system. All Christian missionaries, mainly Mormons, wanted to take advantage of this privileged status of Armenian group (Akgün, 1992: 2). Even in this process important conflicts occurred among the different missionary groups. For instance,

other Christian missionaries based in the U.S. rivaled Mormons and stated to be found in some accusations and charges against Mormons to the Ottoman administration.

According to this, Protestant groups made an important claim that separatist Armenian communities were supported and provoked by Mormon missionaries in that critical political environment in the country (Kern, 2011: 123). Likewise, members of other Protestant groups also became partly responsible for some violence against Mormons missionaries in the Ottoman lands. In 1899, an incident that occurred in Antep constitutes an important example of this issue. As a result of missionary work, Mormon preachers who wanted to preach members of different Christian churches along with converted Armenians to Mormonism were attacked by a Christian group, which had not adopted Mormon faith. At that time, Mormon preachers were rescued by Muslim soldiers of region from the hands of angry Christian group. This event "A day in which a group of Muhammad's brave sons saved the Mormon missionaries" is reported to be entitled among the records of Mormons (Charles, 2001: 237). Hence, the competition between Christian groups in the missionary work is one of the major reasons for strengthening the Mormons activities in the Ottoman land.

5. Intended doubts for Mormon faith and problem of officially attitude

The Ottoman administrators experienced difficulties in identifying the principles of the Mormon faith. Indeed, they even evaluated that it is different from the main stream Protestant faith. The Mormons were evaluated different from Protestants by the Ottoman administrative authorities whereas Mormons provided possibilities to Protestants by using their name as Protestants for defending their faith. Even they were expressed as far away, from the religion of Prophet Jesus. According to archive documents, Mormon missionaries while expressing their sect to the other Christian communities expressed their beliefs as deviant thoughts and different from the religion of Jesus (BOA., 472/88, ZB.; 370/130, ZB).

The attitude towards Mormon missionaries became the subject of correspondence between the local authorities and prime ministry of the Ottoman Empire. Firstly, prevention of the missionary and religious propaganda of Mormons was very legitimate for not being an officially recognized religion of the state. Most importantly state had not allowed new denominations of foreign missionaries like Mormons among the native Christians of the Ottoman lands to spread their beliefs (BOA., 1383/103725). Nevertheless, legal outcome and prosecution of Mor-

mons was wanted to inhibit their missionary activities in fair manners and warned local administration of the Empire (BOA. 863/12, DH. MKT). However, most of emphasis regarding this subject in archive documents shows that these local administrators consulted to headquarter about what kind of method should be followed to prevent Mormon missionaries and to ban missionary publications and distribution of any group who would violate the treaty and they had to ask how to penalized foreigners who make propaganda of Mormonism (BOA., 1383/103725).

6. The reports concerning problems of Mormons in the United States.

One of the interesting documents in the Ottoman archive related to the subject is that the reports were delivered to Foreign Ministry of Ottoman by the U.S. ambassador of the Ottoman Empire. It is stated that one of these reports conducts the views of U.S. administrators, particularly on teachings of Mormons about polygamy and judicial and administrative proceedings for their multiple marriages (BOA. 44/33, HR. YS). In this report, it is mentioned that a Mormon committed a polygamy offense and after the process of judicial execution he faced the money and prison sentence. The present case was intensively processed in the U.S. press and also in the media environment of that time. The story of this judgment has long been discussed (Alexander, 1996).

It is reported that in the subsequent report submitted by the U.S. embassy of the Ottoman Empire also stated that U.S. media had experienced intense debate regarding the Mormon polygamy (BOA., 59/33 Hr. YS). It was not only around the media but also discussed in the congress as the most important issue of that period. Mormons remained in the agenda of Congress in the aspect of their multiple marriages and increasing growth of their community in the center of Utah. In this context, by determining and implementing specific policies in the region of Utah such as increasing non-Mormons population to decrease Mormons effects in that state had been expected.

Conclusion

After the emergence of Mormon sect in the U.S., it reached the Ottoman Empire within a short period of time. The most important reason of it was that it gives a strong stir and idealistic feelings to its followers as compared to other Christian denominations. Unlike other Christian denominations, they also put their effort to establish the legal system and social organization in compliance with the religious

teachings of Mormonism that were based on the stir and emotions. Because of thoughts like legitimating of polygamy law and prohibition of alcohol by founder Smith, Mormons searched for a brighter future in the Muslim Ottoman territory was a common conviction.

Indeed the Ottoman Empire had appeared as a fertile place for the Mormons, which were subjected to judicial proceedings in the U.S. due to their religious teachings and social practices. Because of this reason, the Ottoman land provided a fertile geography for Mormons to increase their numbers and connections that could bring them to become a global power. Whatever the reason would be, the missionary methods in terms of Mormons were not different from other western Christian missionaries. This was the most ancient method of propagation and necessity of missionary activities generally in Christianity. Therefore, the reasons of arrival of Mormons to the Ottoman lands had been undertaken just because of their missionary purposes.

Initially Mormons had not taken place in the Ottoman *millet* system and therefore, were partially deprived from the privileges granted to non-Muslim communities under that system. In the U.S., the motherland of Mormons movement an interesting conclusion emerged after their encounter with judicial procedure. In the beginning Mormons suffered some restrictions in the Ottoman Empire but after what had happened in the U.S. by that they got an opportunity for freely mission. The main question directed by the local authorities to capital was about how to get an attitude against Mormons, which were deprived from certain rights for staying outside from the *millet* system. These questions indicate no injustice against Mormons as compare to other Protestants missionaries that were given the proposed rights. Anyway until the problem could resolve, the Ottoman lands turned into a legal environment as a result of the rapidly evolving political process in Empire. Therefore the Ottoman archive documents show a great sensitivity by creation of a legal standard for the members of different religions and traditions during the collapse of the empire even in a deep political chaos. Mormon experience in the Ottoman Empire is the best example of it.

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