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“The Scepter Shall Not Depart from Judah”:
Jews and Imperial Power in Benjamin of Tudela’s Book of Travels

In the introduction to his 1907 English translation of Sefer ha-Masa’ot (lit. “the book of travels”)—rendered in translation as The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela—Marcus Nathan Adler summarizes the history of the “civilized world” from the fall of Rome to his own time as “the struggle between Cross and Crescent.”¹ While such a statement may be misguided (on several levels), it is understandable why Adler chose to introduce Sefer ha-Masa’ot with the notion. The travel account chronicles a twelfth-century journey from the Iberian Peninsula to the furthest reaches of the medieval European ecumene in Asia and Africa, with a particular focus on the Jewish communities—most historically real, some entirely imagined²—along the route. These communities were variously under the rule of either Christian or Islamic empires; some, like Benjamin’s own Tudela, newly Christian-rulled, lay at the intersection of these worlds.


This paper seeks to explore the relationship between Jewish communities and the empires to which they were subject as represented by Sefer ha-Masa’ot. (I will be defining “empire” somewhat broadly as a political structure in which a ruler has sovereignty over multiple national groups and territories.) Much of the previous work on the text has analyzed it as a largely factual historical source, putting it to use primarily as a resource for understanding the medieval world; more recent scholarship has highlighted that this positivist approach is misguided. In a recent paper on spatial and geographic imagination in Sefer ha-Masa’ot, Martin Jacobs describes the text, much in line with other travel literature of its era, as discursive and imaginative, having “a ‘hodological’ organization in the form of an itinerary” which “represents an attempt to organize and interpret heterogeneous knowledge about the then-known world.” That is to say, painting an “accurate” historical picture is not the purpose of Sefer ha-Masa’ot; rather, it seeks to make sense of various types of knowledge about the world and place of Jews within it.

So, while questions of historicity are longstanding, they are not the main focus of this paper. Rather, I am addressing Sefer ha-Masa’ot as a work of travel literature which reflects knowledge and categorization of the world known to medieval European Jews—and as an extension, a reflection of the values, beliefs, and anxieties of those Jews. When discussing “Benjamin of Tudela” and his writing or travels, I am similarly referring to a received text, which doubtless includes many editorial additions; I do not

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make assertions about a singular original author or his life, although textual clues may point us in that direction. Ultimately, while questions of fact versus fiction may illuminate the context in which the world of Sefer ha-Masa’ot is constructed, clear answers are not strictly necessary for this type of literary analysis.

This investigation of Jews and imperial power in Sefer ha-Masa’ot centers on two locations featured in the text: Rome and Baghdad, the cities of the Pope and the Abbasid Caliph. Here are Adler’s “Cross and Crescent,” the twin cores of Benjamin’s imperial world. The section on Baghdad is later in Benjamin’s journey as well as the longest description of any other location in the text—notably longer than even the section on Jerusalem. He details the mighty yet modest Caliph (a great ally to the Jews), the great palaces and public hospitals of the city, and—perhaps most relevantly for these purposes—the role of the Exilarch (rosh ha-golah). A brief excerpt of Benjamin’s extensive description of the Exilarch is as follows:

Baghdad is the great city and capital of the kingdom of the Caliph [Arabic khalīfa], Commander of the Faithful [amīr al-mu’mīnīn, who is called] the Abbasid [al-‘abbāsī], of the family of the Madman [Hebrew: meshugga’, i.e. Muhammad]. He is appointed above the religion of the Ishmaelites [Muslims] and all the kings of Ishmael acknowledge him and he is like the Pope over the Christians.

. . . The Ishmaelites [Muslims] only can see him once a year when the pilgrims [Hebrew: to ‘im] who come from distant lands to go to Mecca, which is in the land of al-Yemen [sic!], are anxious to see him. They shout in front of the palace, “Our lord, light of the Ishmaelites and splendor of our Torah [i.e., the Qur’an], show us the effulgence of your countenance.” But he pays no regard to their words. Then the ministers serving him come and say, “Our lord, spread forth your peace unto the people coming from distant lands who desire to take refuge in the shadow of your grace.” At this moment, he rises and lets down the hem of his robe and the pilgrims approach to kiss it. And a minister tells them,
“Go in peace, for our Lord, the Lord of the Ishmaelites, has already granted you peace.” And he is regarded by them like the Madman [the Prophet Muhammad].

This is a remarkably positive picture of a non-Jewish sovereign; Jacobs adds that the Jewish epithet of ha-meshugga was normative for its time and reflected a world to which theological pluralism was foreign. To briefly skip over Benjamin’s account of the city itself, he goes on to describe the Exilarch, onto whom this great Caliph confers much power over the Jews in his realm. He describes the Exilarch as the rosh galut shel kol yisrael (head of the exiles of all Israel), a descendant of King David who is granted power over all the Jewish subjects of the Caliph and revered by Jews and non-Jews alike. His relationship with Jews, non-Jews, and the Caliph himself is described as follows:

Horsemanship, non-Jewish and Jewish ones, escort him each Thursday when he goes to pay a visit to the great King [the Caliph], and proclaim in advance, "Make way for our Lord, the Son of David, as is due unto him. And they say in their [Arabic] language, “iʿamalū ṭarīq li- sayyidnā bin dāʿūd, [i.e., make way for our Lord, the son of David].” He rides on a horse and wears garments of silk and embroidery with a large turban upon his head. On the turban is a large white shawl upon which there is a chain with the seal of Muhammad written on it. He appears before the king and kisses his hand. Then, the King rises before him and places him upon the throne that Muhammad ordered to be made in his honor. And all the kings of the Ishmaelites who come to pay a visit to the King, all of them rise in front of him. The Exilarch is seated on his throne opposite him [the Caliph] for

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5 Jacobs, “From Lofty Caliphs to Uncivilized ‘Orientals,’” 78.

thus commanded Muhammad to uphold what is written, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet; until Shiloh comes and the homage of peoples be his.”

Benjamin thus ties the Exilarch to both the Jewish tradition and the authority of Islam, linking the two by claiming that Muhammad decreed the office of the Exilarch (which in reality was pre-Islamic in origin) in order to honor the biblical blessing given by Jacob to his son Judah. (Though whether this shift from “ha-meshugga” to simply “Muhammad” was intentional or merely a matter of divergent sources is anyone’s guess.) Further, this description of the Exilarch illuminates that of the Caliph, who in light of the Exilarch’s power emerges as a latter-day Cyrus the Great figure: a non-Jewish ruler with far-reaching power, worthy of near-unconditional praise, who grants Jews the power they are due under the circumstances—in this case, seemingly as much power as Jews can be granted before the dawn of the messianic era.

However, the extent of that power—of both of the Exilarch and the Caliph himself—is greatly exaggerated; the Abbasid Caliphate’s power had significantly diminished by that point, as had the power of the Exilarch to, for instance, appoint

7 Jacobs, “From Lofty Caliphs to Uncivilized ‘Orientals,’” 78. For original Hebrew see IBT, ed. Adler, Hebrew part, 40.

Here, Jacobs differs from the Jewish Publication Society’s translation of עד כי יבוא שילה, which JPS renders “so that tribute shall come to him” (Genesis 49:10 [JPS]). Choosing to render it instead as the (also widely accepted) “until Shiloh comes” remains faithful to the context of the quote in Sefer ha-Masa’ot, in which it is clearly a messianic reference.

8 The Caliph is introduced only as “Amīr al-Mu’minīn al-‘Abbāsī” (“commander of the faithful, the Abbasid”). Based on typical estimates of Sefer ha-Masa’ot’s timeline, this would have been either al-Mustanjid (ruled 1160-1170) or al-Mustadī (1170-1180), though it is never specified.
rabbis in all of the communities over which he is said to have power. Significantly inflating both the highest office of self-government a Jew could hold and the non-Jewish power that upheld it could provide Jewish readers with an image of dignity and honor—particularly European Jewish readers, who largely lacked the firsthand experience to contextualize this account. This diaspora power fantasy of an Exilarch whose honor is second only to the Caliph—and whose power is legitimized by a prophecy which also foretells future messianic redemption—is enabled by an intended audience who cannot meaningfully prove otherwise.

European Jewry, however, was almost exclusively under Christian rule at that point, with Jews formerly living in Al-Andalus having largely fled the Almohad Caliphate. The clear European counterpart within Sefer ha-Masa’ot to the Caliph in Baghdad is the Pope in Rome—the section on Baghdad, quoted above, even describes the Caliph as being “like the Pope over the Christians” (again pointing us to the intended audience, for whom such an analogy would have been helpful). This much is obvious. I would also argue, however, that there is also a similar, if more subtle, parallel between the Exilarch and the Pope’s Jewish steward. The city of Rome is introduced as follows:

And from there one travels six days to the great city of Rome. And it is the head of the kingdoms of Edom [Christianity], and there are about two hundred honorable Jews, and they do not pay a tax to any man. And among them are the servants [meshartei] of Pope Alexander [III], the chief hegemon [hegmon ha-memunah] over all Edom. And there are great sages, and at their head are R. Daniel the rabbi and R. Jehiel, the servant [mesharet] of the Pope. And he is a

9 See Jacobs, “From Lofty Caliphs to Uncivilized ‘Orientals,’” 81-82.
10 To be more specific, Jacobs notes within Sefer ha-Masa’ot “a certain partiality for southern French communities, hinting at its intended audience.” (Jacobs, “A Day’s Journey,” 214-15.)
fine young man, wise and intelligent, and he goes out and comes into the house of the Pope, and he is the official [pakid] of his house and all that is his. And he is a grandson of R. Nathan, who created *Sefer ha-Arukh* [a dictionary of Talmudic and Midrashic terms] and its commentaries.\(^{11}\)

Here, Jews living in the Christian imperial core enjoy an honorable status and do not pay a special tax. The community is headed by a rabbi and—interestingly—the Jewish steward of the Pope. The latter is hardly an Exilarch, yet the image of a high-ranking Jew in service of a non-Jewish sovereign might incline one to make that link, especially when the servant is described in such lofty terms. It is interesting that while R. Jehiel is described as one of the “heads” of the local community, it is his service to the Pope that warrants further description. Perhaps it is simply that readers would have already been familiar with the duties of a Jewish community leader—but then, one must also question how such an individual would have had time to lead the Jewish community while also attending so closely to the Pope! (One might argue that “head” [rosh] might not refer to a literal administrative or leadership role, but that seems to be its normative use throughout the text.)

My point, in essence, is that regardless of how realistic the picture painted by *Sefer ha-Masa’ot* may be, R. Jehiel is—to a limited degree—to the Pope what the Exilarch is to the Caliph. In addition to the honorable status of Roman Jewry overall, this provided Jews without an Exilarch figure toward which to look with a sense of dignity, honor, and recognition bestowed by a non-Jewish ruler to which they were

\(^{11}\) *IBT*, ed. Adler, Hebrew part, 6-7. Translation mine; compare English part, pages 5-6. I have chosen to translate this as directly and literally as possible. I have also preserved in brackets the Hebrew terms pertaining to power and status in order to contextualize my translation.
subject. Further, that he is said to be the grandson of Nathan ben Jehiel may not be a coincidence. While this may simply be a matter of tying him to the prominent Anaw (Italian *degli Mansi*) family of Rome—or indeed, one must concede, of historical fact— I find this explanation not entirely sufficient. Of note is that he mentions not the family’s high standing but rather Nathan’s master work of *Sefer ha-Arukh*.

Nathan ben Jehiel learned under Matzliach ibn-Batzak, a student of Hai Gaon, the last of the Geonim of the Pumbedita rabbinic academy—which, as it happens, had been relocated to Baghdad in Hai Gaon’s time. Nathan’s mastery of “Babylonian” exegesis and numerous references to Hai Gaon in the *Arukh* led many to believe that he himself had been educated at the academy of Pumbedita-Baghdad. To return to Jacobs’s hypothesis that Benjamin’s descriptions of Jewish communities in southern France hint at a more specific audience: the students of the Narbonne academy from which “the Torah goes forth to all lands” were most certainly aware of this and were also the most likely of any sector of Jewish society to be consuming Hebrew literature. As

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12 I find the idea that this is an accurate account of an individual Benjamin actually encountered rather unlikely, however. All other relevant sources I have found tracing the lineage of the Anaw family seem to have relied on *Sefer ha-Masa’ot* as a primary source, many conflating him with Jehiel ben Abraham, Nathan’s nephew. See, for one example, The Jewish Encyclopedia, online ed (1901-1906), s.v. “ANAW,” https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1483-anaw.

It might also be noted that the near-consensus of scholars seems to be that none of Nathan ben Jehiel’s children survived to adulthood; one major exception seems to be Rabbi Alexander Kohut (1842-1894), who in his critical edition of *Sefer ha-Arukh* claims that Nathan had a surviving son named Reuben, based on a reading of one of Nathan’s poems. (See Natan ben Yechiel, *Sefer ha-Arukh ha-Shalem* [Hebrew], ed. Alexander Kohut [Vienna: Buchdruckerei von Georg Brög, 1878].) Many thanks to Gershon Klapper for sharing this source with me in the “Ask the Beit Midrash” Facebook group.

13 As Jacobs suggests it should be called after its relocation from historic Pumbedita (modern-day Fallujah) to Baghdad; see Jacobs, “From Lofty Caliphs to Uncivilized ‘Orientals,’” 82, n. 61.

14 See footnote 10.
such, we might see this framing as not just a reference to a work of literature with which readers would have been familiar, but also quite possibly an intentional linking of Roman and Baghdadi Jewish authority.

Either way, we can certainly say that Sefer ha-Masa’ot presents readers with a medieval Jewish world in which Jews were legitimized and honored by the non-Jewish imperial powers that governed them, and explicitly regards Rome and Baghdad as similar centers of power. The linking of these two centers allowed medieval (European) Jews to understand the major religious and political forces of Christianity and Islam as similar “types” of forces, to which Jews could relate in (relatively) similar ways. Thus, the two separate worlds of power, rather than being diametrically opposed—as they often were in reality as competing empires—are instead made comprehensible as either benevolent or at least benign political forces.\(^{15}\)

However, this still does not answer the question of how these choices fit in with the larger raison d’être of the text. It is true that Jews living under non-Jewish rule desired honor, dignity, and a clear way of thinking about the power to which they were subject. But a more rigorous answer must delve further into Sefer ha-Masa’ot’s historical and political context. Michael A. Signer, in his introduction to a 1983 reprinting of Adler’s translation, describes it as a contribution to the “literature of consolation” for an exiled and disempowered Jewish people. Emphasizing the centrality

\(^{15}\) Benjamin’s account of Rome, while largely positive, still does not simply gloss over the fact that Rome is also a city of Jewish tragedy; for a discussion of the Roman Jewish polemic against Titus found in the text, see Daniel Stein Kokin, “‘Arch’- Enemy: The Polemic against Titus in Benjamin of Tudela’s Book of Travels,” Hebrew Union College Annual 93 (2022): 31–116, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48736058.
of biblical narrative to Jewish national aspirations, he argues that *Sefer ha-Masa’ot* served as reassurance of eventual redemption at time when “[p]olitical reality must have made this hope seem very dim.”

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16 Michael A. Signer, introduction to *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, trans. Marcus Nathan Adler (Joseph Simon Publisher, 1983), 28. To my knowledge, this view Signer expresses of *Sefer ha-Masa’ot*’s goals has not been directly challenged; the secondary literature as a whole is surprisingly slim.
I would argue quite to the contrary, however: because normative Jewish eschatology requires that redemption arrive only after the war of Gog and Magog and the “birth pangs of messiah” (chevlo shel mashiach), Jews were far more likely to believe it was on the horizon in times of desperation. The realities of “faith” and that of “politics” were not two separate worlds with the latter having power to supersede the former; rather, the two informed and co-produced each other to the point that they cannot be meaningfully distinguished. With the Golden Age of Jewish culture at a close after the rise of the fanatically intolerant Almohad Caliphate, and the first two Crusades still a fresh wound in Jewish memory, this was precisely the time Jews might begin to expect a messiah to appear.

This, I would contend, is precisely why Benjamin of Tudela insists otherwise. The Rabbinic tradition (historically) frowns on direct political action to bring about national redemption; false messianic claimants could be politically ruinous. Benjamin’s similar aversion is made obvious by his account of David Alroy, a messianic claimant from Amadiya who was reportedly assassinated for his activities. The account is fascinating: ten years prior, a Jew by the name of David Alroy conceived of the idea to rally the local

17 The “birth pangs of messiah” are expounded upon in Rabbinic literature; see for example BT Sotah 49b, in which Rabbi Eliezer the Great lists the hardships and social decline that will precede the coming of the messiah, or BT Sanhedrin 98a, in which Rabbi Yohanan provides scriptural proof that social and religious decline are signs of impending redemption.

18 The most obvious example from the early Rabbinic era is Simon bar Kokhba, whose revolt ended in the mass slaughter of Jews (though the specific number of casualties remains disputed), but this trend of recognizing the dangers inherent to messianism continues throughout the history of Rabbinic Judaism. For a contemporary of Benjamin of Tudela, see Maimonides, Iggeret Teiman (epistle to Yemen), warning the Yemenite Jewish community against following their messianic claimant.

19 It is interesting to note that Sefer ha-Masa’ot is our primary source for the details of David Alroy’s life, and seemingly the earliest written source to which we have access.
Jews, rebel against the Persian king, and march forth to capture Jerusalem. To skip over some less immediately relevant details, he is imprisoned and escapes by means of his magical powers, and word is sent to the Caliph (as before, the Amīr al-Mu‘minīn of Baghdad). The Persian king says that if Alroy is not restrained from executing his plans, he will slay every Jew in his empire. The Exilarch and head of the Pumbedita-Baghdad rabbinic academy sent to Alroy, saying: “Know that the time of redemption has not yet arrived. For our signs we have not seen, for by force no man will prevail. And we decree upon you that you cease your actions like this, and if not, you will be excommunicated from all Israel.” Alroy does not heed their warning, and is slain by his father-in-law, who was bribed to do so.

This is a window into a very different world of imperial power; while Jews of honorable status in prosperous communities obey the will of non-Jewish rulers and maintain the delicate balance of their world, Jews who challenge that power—even in the name of redemption—bring nothing but tragedy to the Jewish people and themselves. In addition to the aspirations, we saw earlier, this brings to light the deep anxieties and genuine fears that coexist with images like that of Baghdad. As such, we must view the account of Baghdad—and, as I have argued, to a lesser extent Rome—as more than just a reflection of desires for dignity, honor, and legitimacy. They are part of a complex matrix of attitudes towards imperial power, including aspiration, fear, and (as the tale of David Alroy indicates) strategically suppressed antagonism.

Displaying these multifaceted attitudes in different contexts is one of the ways in which *Sefer ha-Masa’ot* categorizes and makes sense of the political world of medieval Jewry, which was often less than favorable and even further from ideal. The linked twin cores of Rome and Baghdad are presented as places in which Jews can attain great honor and high status—a charmed reality which Jews must nonetheless be warned against challenging. Benjamin of Tudela exaggerates the good fortune and honor of Jewish communities to construct a world in which rebellion against its dominant powers cannot be reasonably justified, in service of maintaining a fragile yet survivable status quo. Benjamin’s Jewish readers are consoled—indeed perhaps placated—by the image of a fundamentally tolerable, even idealized version of exile . . . until Shiloh comes, and the homage of peoples be theirs.
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