Rachel Li

Expository Writing

Nathan Daniels

Writing Assignment 1.3

KINGS AND CALIPHS: A CLOSER LOOK

AT JEWISH LIFE IN BENJAMIN OF TUDELA’S *ITINERARY*

1. In his *Itinerary*, Benjamin of Tudela recounts his travels to Jewish communities across the Mediterranean and Middle East in the late 1160s. Throughout his journey, he provides detailed information about these communities including their numbers, leaders, and relationships with the non-Jewish residents of their cities, as well as many stories and religious tales that he hears along the way. Benjamin begins the journey in his native Spain and travels through Europe before coming to Constantinople. Here he juxtaposes the city’s glory and wealth with its poor treatment of Jews, while claiming that the Jews “bear their lot with cheerfulness” (72). In contrast, the rest of the *Itinerary* presents an overall image of religious tolerance, where Jews are often found in positions of power and endowed with trust from their city’s authorities. Benjamin continues his travels to the holy land of Jerusalem, then arrives in Baghdad, where he describes the city’s great wealth and the kindness of its Caliph toward Jews. He portrays the Exilarch, the leader of the Jewish community, as having power second only to the Caliph. Beyond that, he visits the cities of Babylon, Susa, Cush, and Alexandria, among others. Upon his return to Europe, Benjamin expresses his desire for the “gathering of Israel” though he claims the appointed time has not yet arrived (138). Overall, the *Itinerary* emphasizes the extent of communication between the scattered Jewish communities, supporting the belief that someday the Jews would reunite and return from exile to their homeland of Israel.
2. Benjamin devotes much attention to describing the greatness of cities and their rulers, and mentions only the most powerful Jews in each place he visited. While he spends excessive amounts of time describing the Caliph and Exilarch, there is little mention of the larger Jewish community besides the heads of the ten Academies of Baghdad (99). Additionally, the stories he includes all center around kings or other powerful officials. Why does he spend so much time describing the rulers of each city and practically no time describing the lives of common people, whether Jewish or non-Jewish? At first glance, there appears to be a straightforward explanation, since rulers are more significant and lead more interesting lives than the common people, or perhaps Benjamin’s high level of education makes him more interested in the governmental and scholarly elements of each city. However, it seems that he was writing for a general Jewish audience, so why did he not include more details about the lives of ordinary Jews? What drove his decisions to include and exclude certain information, and what does this reveal about his purpose in writing the *Itinerary*? In this paper, I will explain how Benjamin’s choice to disproportionately focus on the lives of the rich and powerful was intended to convey his message regarding the reunion of the Jews. Answering these questions will shed light on the nature of medieval Jewish life and the accuracy of Benjamin’s account, and may provide insight into the effect this work had on its audience.
3. We will first examine how Benjamin typically describes cities along his route. In each place he visits, He diligently lists the population of Jews living there, specific rabbis that lead the community, and religious places such as synagogues and sepulchers. He portrays these communities in an overwhelmingly positive light, often claiming that they include many “learned and rich men” (91). While he provides no other information about many places, there are notable sections where he breaks this formulaic structure to highlight certain aspects of a city. For example, Benjamin describes in much detail the wealthy lifestyles and lavish palaces of numerous kings. In particular, he admires the residence of the Caliph of Baghdad, noting “great buildings of marble” and “towers filled with gold, silken garments, and all precious stones” (97). He emphasizes how the Caliph is beloved by Muslims and Jews alike, claiming he is “well versed” in the language and law of Israel and ensures that Jews “dwell in security, prosperity and honour” (99). Benjamin also discusses the most powerful Jews in each city, such as the Exilarch, who is invested with authority over all Jewish congregations (100). Like with the Caliph, Benjamin devotes much energy to detailing the Exilarch’s power and elaborate synagogue (102). Not only does Benjamin excessively focus on these powerful leaders, but he probably also tends to exaggerate their glory. In contrast, there is an overall lack of information about the lives of common people, and the few accounts present are overshadowed by discussions of more high-profile Jews.
4. A possible explanation for Benjamin’s fixation on the rich and powerful is simply that they were the main distinguishing features of their cities. Undoubtedly, after traveling around the region for years, all the towns must have begun to look somewhat the same, and the common people everywhere likely engaged in similar activities. This would explain why he uses such repetitive language and only spares two or three sentences to describe minor cities; for example: “And from here it is two days to Kales. Here there are about fifty Jews, at their head being R. Jacob and R. Judah. From here it is two days’ journey…” (72). In contrast to this factual report, Benjamin seems to be in awe of the displays of wealth found in larger cities and describes them with much richer language. Although the element of uniqueness surely contributes to his focus, the underlying reason is that these rulers were all highly tolerant of Jews. With only two exceptions that I will discuss shortly, Jews live comfortably and peacefully in all the cities he recorded. It seems unlikely that in the entire Mediterranean and Middle East, Benjamin only encountered two cases of oppression, which suggests that he might have excluded cities where the leaders did not respect Jews. Presumably, Benjamin exclusively mentioned rulers whose policies resulted in the favorable treatment of Jews, praising them since he admired their benevolence towards his people.
5. Interestingly, the main circumstance in which Benjamin describes the lives of common people is when the Jews are being oppressed. For example, he reports that in Constantinople the Jews are segregated from the rest of the city and there is much hatred against them–– they are beaten in the streets and their quarter defiled by dirty water from the tanners (72). But then, instead of further describing the plight of the Jews, Benjamin seems to try to cover it up by focusing on the positive aspects of the situation. Specifically, he states that through R. Solomon Hamitsri, the king’s physician, the rest of the Jews “enjoy considerable alleviation of their oppression” (72). He even asserts that the Jews are “kindly and charitable, and bear their lot with cheerfulness” (72). Given the severity of their oppression, however, it seems strange that the Jews of Constantinople would remain cheerful. This calls into question the accuracy of Benjamin’s portrayal, and whether he is putting his own slant on the events in order to further his purpose since despite the mistreatment, Constantinople is too important to omit from his travelogue. Here Benjamin instead uses the strategy of directing his audience’s attention away from the extent of the oppression. Furthermore, this is not the only case where Benjamin fails to depict the magnitude of the injustice toward Jews. In the city of Rudbar, which supposedly has 20,000 Israelites, Benjamin reports that “the Jews live there under great oppression” (110). Naturally, the reader would want to know more about this important issue, especially if Rudbar truly had 20,000 Jews–– keep in mind Constantinople only had 2,500–– but Benjamin immediately moves on to the next city and never mentions this again. Besides these two instances, there is no other hint of Jewish oppression in the entire text. Why does Benjamin repeatedly gloss over the mistreatment of Jews?
6. Benjamin’s reasons for this trace back to his position regarding the reunion of the Jews. Like most other Jews at that time, Benjamin wanted them to return from exile to Israel, and he references this goal multiple times throughout the text. However, as we will see later, his primary message is that the time for gathering has not yet arrived and it is too soon to attempt a reunion. Benjamin’s focus on important leaders and his passing mentions of oppression both serve to advance his point that the Jews are fine where they are currently, and there is no pressing need to change the situation. This explains why he generally portrays the Jews as satisfied with their lives, and why he spends so much time introducing powerful Jewish leaders and rulers who treat Jews well. He wants his audience to come to the conclusion that Jews are faring well in their current communities across the region, since they live under benevolent rulers and can easily achieve high societal positions. Even when they are oppressed in Constantinople, they are still able to maintain an optimistic attitude since the physician is in an important enough position to be able to lessen their suffering (72). Benjamin’s purpose is also evident in his depiction of the Exilarch in Baghdad as more powerful than he actually is. At first, readers might be under the impression that the Exilarch has nearly as much power as the Caliph, but upon closer examination it is clearly just a figurehead position. The Caliph must invest him with authority, and the Exilarch must pay a considerable sum of money to the Caliph, princes, and ministers (101). Although the Exilarch does not have any real authority of his own, Benjamin propounds the idea that he is second only to the Caliph in order to make the Jews’ status seem higher than it truly is.
7. Since Benjamin believes that the Jews’ living conditions are perfectly acceptable, he tries to persuade his audience to wait until the time is right to return. He explicitly states this at the end of the *Itinerary*: “If we were not afraid that the appointed time has not yet arrived nor been reached, we would have gathered together” (139). Here Benjamin clearly expresses his desire for the reunion of the Jews, but also expresses his belief that it is not time yet. His travels have convinced him that the current situation of the Jews is bearable for a while longer, and he wants his audience to realize the same thing. Furthermore, he cautions against trying to reunite too early through the story of David Alroy, a Jewish scholar who claimed to be the Messiah and tried to rebel against the king of Persia. The king imprisoned Alroy, who was able to escape by performing miracles. The king then threatened to slay all the Jews of Persia, but Alroy did not stop his rebellion until he was killed in his sleep (112). This story hints at some of Benjamin’s reasons for wanting the Jews to wait. It can be interpreted as a warning against using violence as a means to achieve their goals, since David Alroy attempted to arm the Jews but ended up dead in the end. The text also implies that Benjamin fears they would fail to throw off the yoke of the Gentiles if they tried too soon, which is evident when he notes “we dare not do so until the time… has arrived” (139). Combined with the sense that the current Jewish communities are prospering, these warnings prove to his audience that it is much safer to remain in place as they continue waiting for signs that the right time has come.
8. Throughout the *Itinerary*, Benjamin of Tudela presents descriptions and stories about kings and important leaders in order to clearly convey his purpose to his audience. Benjamin focuses excessively on powerful Jews as well as rulers who are sympathetic to Jews to convince his audience that there is no immediate need to return from exile, since their current condition is satisfactory and the risks in gathering prematurely outweigh the benefits. This purpose indicates that while Benjamin’s account is generally considered to be historically accurate, it nevertheless may not be a very reliable description of the treatment of Jews in the late 12th century. The *Itinerary* likely understates the oppression of Jews by other cultures and kingdoms, since Benjamin’s writings were almost certainly colored by his goal to keep them waiting peacefully for the time to reunite. There is potential for further investigation into the effect this travelogue had on its intended audience of Jews living around the Mediterranean and Middle East during this time. It would be interesting to evaluate how the *Itinerary* was received by the general Jewish population, and whether Benjamin’s work influenced the places he visited as much as his travels undoubtedly influenced him.