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“The Chain Upon Which the Cipher of Mohammed is Engraved”: An Investigation into the Narrative focus of *The Itinerary* and the Role of Baghdad for Medieval Jewish Communities

In the travelogue known as the *Itinerary*, Jewish rabbi and explorer Benjamin of Tudela records his personal experiences and first-hand accounts of far-away cities and lands as he travels from Europe all across the known Jewish world in the twelfth century. In his journey, Benjamin sets out from Saragosa, Spain and travels around the Mediterranean, bringing him to the lands of Greece and Byzantium. From there, the explorer continues his journey throughout the Middle East, visiting massive cities of the medieval period, such as Baghdad and Jerusalem; he continues his journey to cities like Alexandria in Africa and finishes with the kingdoms of Europe as he prepares for his return home. Astonished by the cultural and material wealth of these cities, which contain “columns of marble” and “pillars of gold and silver,” Benjamin records the beauty and magnificence of the cities as well as accounts of their rulers and histories as well (96, 70). Additionally, Benjamin also notes the conditions and “great oppression” that Jewish communities are subjected to in these lands, and when given opportunity the rabbi retells biblical tales and Jewish history (72). He thus continually records descriptions of not only the cities and lands he travels to, but also the condition of Jewish communities and their treatment as minorities. As Benjamin completes his explorations, he reflects back on his travels and draws conclusions regarding the fate of Judaism during the diaspora of his era: when the time is right, the Jewish community must reunite in the Holy Land, and it is the responsibility of the community to be prepared for this destiny.

Benjamin’s travels and ventures across the world bring him to countless cities and foreign lands; subsequently, the explorer records all of his encounters and experiences within each city visited. However, while most cities only receive brief statements and remarks, a select few locations are highlighted by Benjamin and depicted in great length and detail. A clear example of this is Benjamin’s portrayal of Baghdad, where he spends much time illustrating the wealth of the city and the benevolence of the caliph himself. One begins to wonder, why does Benjamin devote so much time and effort into the writings about a specific city like Baghdad? At first glance, a simple answer arises: Baghdad was the largest city of the medieval period, and thus Benjamin had significantly more source material to write about. However, after careful analysis of Benjamin’s rhetoric in his Itinerary, one is able to see that the reasons behind this focus are more complex. After considering this issue, we can better understand Benjamin’s own motives in writing his travelogue; thus, we can achieve a more careful reading of the work. Additionally, Benjamin’s emphasis on Baghdad reveals important attributes about the medieval world itself, helping historians to elucidate the role and scope of the prominent city of Baghdad.

To better contextualize this discrepancy of focus, we can first examine the cities that Benjamin briefly describes. As Benjamin leaves the city of Constantinople, he journeys through several smaller cities and records his observations: “From Constantinople is it two day’s voyage to Rhaedaestus, with a community of Israelites about 400, at their head being R. Moses, R. Abijah, and R. Jacob” (72). The only written comments from Benjamin regarding the city of Rhaedaestus are brief, numerical statistics on the Jewish population living in the city and their leaders. Benjamin presents no portrayal of the local rulers or communities, and he also fails to describe the city’s landmarks or activities. In direct contrast, Benjamin describes the mere palace of Baghdad in great length and detail, noting the “great park with all varieties of trees, fruit bearing and otherwise, and all manner of animals” within the palace that is “three miles in extent” (96). Benjamin continues to illustrate the grandness of not only the Caliph’s palace, which consists of “great buildings of marble and columns of silver and gold” (97), but he also explains the traditions and ruling might of the Caliph, writing that he is a “benevolent man […] [and] is a righteous man, and all his actions are for good” (98-99). Beyond simple numerical data and accounts of Jewish authority in the city, Benjamin details the yearly traditions and rituals of the Caliph, and he also provides lengthy accounts of his charitable and wise nature, enabling the Jews of Baghdad to “dwell in security, prosperity, and honour under the great Caliph” (99). As Benjamin interestingly chooses to focus in on not just Baghdad, but its benevolent ruler who is kind to the Jews, we can first begin to understand why Benjamin’s focus is on the city of Baghdad, and not on those like Rhaedaestus.

By analyzing observations that Benjamin makes of the Caliph, we begin to understand why he spends such great effort and time in portraying Baghdad as illustriously as he does in *The Itinerary*. Benjamin retells the story of how the Caliph built a free hospital, which is a complex “consisting of blocks of houses and hospices for the sick poor who come to be healed” with “about sixty physicians’ stores which are provided from the Caliph’s house with drugs and whatever else may be required” (98). From this account, we can observe the great charity and benevolence of the Caliph towards all people that visit and dwell in the city, even the destitute. The kindness of the Caliph is so great, that Benjamin notices the “blocks of houses and hospices” that the Caliph is able to provide for free for his people. Furthermore, the ruler of Baghdad is willing to supply these hospitals with his own resources, curing the people of Baghdad with “drugs” and anything that “may be required.” However, Benjamin is not only astonished and amazed at the great lengths that the Caliph goes in providing healthcare for his people, but he is also surprised at the religious tolerance and respect that the ruler of Baghdad has for the Jewish community. Benjamin illustrates this tolerance through the account of the Exilarch in Baghdad, a Jew of great authority who can appoint rabbis and local leaders. Benjamin writes that when the Exilarch “goes to pay a visit to the great Caliph […] He is mounted on a horse, and is attired in robes of silk and embroidery, with a large turban on his head, and from the turban is suspended a long white cloth adorned with a chain upon which the cipher of Mohammed [Caliph] is engraved” (100). As retold by Benjamin, the Exilarch makes routine visits to the Caliph in Baghdad, suggesting a great connection between the two leaders and a mutual respect between the two figures. The Exilarch is not only powerful but is respected by commoners, as he is “mounted on a horse” and dressed in fine “robes of silk and embroidery,” suggesting that he is above others and incredibly wealthy. More importantly, the Exilarch’s power and role is assimilated into the city of Baghdad and aligned with that of the Caliph himself, as the Jewish man is wearing a “large turban,” which is a cultural accessory of the Muslims. Furthermore, attached to this turban is a “chain” which is “engraved” with the “cipher of Mohammed.” The turban of the Exilarch is thus a symbolic gesture given to him from the Caliph; the Exilarch’s great power and role is only made possible by the benevolence of the Caliph. This “chain” that links the Exilarch to the Caliph is a celebrated one, however, as Benjamin points out the obvious success and harmony that the Jewish community enjoys in Baghdad. This observation provides an interesting answer to our initial answer; perhaps Benjamin of Tudela describes Baghdad so illustriously and magnificently because of the benevolence of the Caliph and the prosperity of the Jewish community living there.

If Benjamin truly seeks to emphasize the kindness and tolerance that the Caliph has towards Jews through a lengthy depiction of Baghdad’s glory and greatness, then we must also consider the other cities that Benjamin recounts. One city that we can investigate is Constantinople, which also receives a good amount of detail in its depiction by Benjamin. Similar to his account of Baghdad, Benjamin remarks that Constantinople possesses “wealth [that] is not to be found in…the world… there are pillars of gold and silver, and lamps of silver and gold more than a man can count” (70). Through the repetition of “gold and silver,” we clearly observe the apparent wealth and riches that Constantinople has. Additionally, Benjamin’s illustration of King Emmanuel of Constantinople’s palace mirrors that of the Caliph’s in Baghdad: “Close to the walls of the palace is also a place of amusement belonging to the king… the king gives a great entertainment there… men from all the races of the world come before the king and queen with jugglery and without jugglery, and they introduce lions, leopards, bears, and wild asses… No entertainment like this is to be found in any other land” (70-71). From this account, Benjamin also notes the grandness of King Emmanuel’s court, as he writes of the various exotic people and animals from “all races of the world” as well as the great entertainment that cannot “be found in any other land.” However, despite all these statements on the wealth and expansiveness of Constantinople, we cannot ignore a remark that Benjamin soon makes regarding the military strength of King Emmanuel’s army. Benjamin strangely comments that the people of Constantinople “hire from amongst all nations warriors called Loazim (Barbarians) to fight with the Sultan Masud… for the natives are not warlike, but are as women who have no strength to fight” (71). In this remark, Benjamin insults the pride and strength of King Emmanuel and Constantinople directly, claiming that they are weak and “have no strength to fight.” Benjamin further instigates that to even stand a chance against the Sultan Masud, King Emmanuel is forced to hire mercenaries and barbarians to do the fighting on behalf of Constantinople. This undermining of Byzantine military strength becomes even stranger when we compare this remark to a statement about the Caliph’s peace and reasoning, as Benjamin writes that the Caliph is “truthful and trusty, seeking peace to all men” (96). Here, when describing the Caliph of Baghdad, Benjamin takes a positive connotation to the ruler’s message on peace and prevention of bloodshed. Yet, when Benjamin writes of King Emmanuel of Constantinople, he instead attributes the ruler’s usage of foreign soldiers to weakness and lack of manliness.

As we explore this particular discrepancy upon the connotations of peace between portrayals of the Caliph and King Emmanuel, we will unravel the answer to Benjamin’s choice of narrative focus on Baghdad. After describing the military feebleness of Constantinople, Benjamin recounts the oppression and isolation that the Jews in Byzantine lands face. Benjamin observes that “No Jews live in the city, for they have been placed behind an inlet of the sea… they are unable to go out except… when they want to do business with the inhabitants” (72). From this account of Constantinople, we observe the discrimination towards Jews under King Emmanuel’s policy. The Jews are isolated and trapped in a small district outside the city, only allowed to leave their community to “do business with the inhabitants” and be exploited for their economic resources. The divide is felt even stronger through Benjamin’s definition of “inhabitants,” as the Jews are so isolated that they do not feel like citizens of Constantinople. Additionally, the Jews are not only isolated, but they are routinely harassed and subjected to poor conditions. Benjamin notes that “their condition is very low, and there is much hatred against them… the tanners… throw out their dirty water in the streets… and defile the Jews’ quarter. So the Greeks hate the Jews… and subject them to great oppression, and beat them in the streets” (72). Unlike Baghdad, where the Jewish community is prosperous and respected by other members of the city, the Jews in Constantinople are the victims of “great oppression.” The tanners go out of their way to “defile the Jews’ quarter” with their “dirty water,” which contains the blood of animals and breaks the kosher living of Jews, indicative of the great hatred that the people of Constantinople have towards the Jews. Thus, as a result of the “great oppression” and lowly condition that King Emmanuel subjects the Jewish community to, Benjamin retaliates against Constantinople with a snide remark on Byzantine military weakness. In contrast, to emphasize and perhaps thank the Caliph Mohammed for his religious tolerance and allowing the Jewish community under his rule to grow prosperous and powerful, Benjamin portrays Baghdad and the rule of the Caliph in only positive light.

Upon careful analysis of all cities described by Benjamin of Tudela in his *Itinerary*, we can now conclude that the great length in description and the illustrious recounting of Baghdad and its Caliph can be attributed to the tolerance and benevolence towards the Jewish community there. Benjamin’s own biases and background as a learned rabbi would cause him to naturally favor cities and rulers like the Caliph, who respect and work alongside the Jews, instead of oppressive and harsh rulers like King Emmanuel of Constantinople. However, as the *Itinerary* is also tailored to a Jewish audience, as evidenced by the numerical data regarding the Jewish communities and reports on their conditions, we can now appreciate an auxiliary reason for Benjamin’s choice in narrative focus. In the conclusion of the *Itinerary*, Benjamin states that the fate of the Jews is to reunite and gather in the Holy Land when the time is right. As a rabbi, Benjamin would be prompted to promote the reunification and strengthening of Jewish communities during a time of oppression and diaspora; thus, one can conclude that the *Itinerary* serves as a travelogue for Jews seeking to migrate and assimilate into larger, more prosperous Jewish communities, such as those living under the tolerant and benevolent rule of the Caliph in Baghdad. Benjamin’s choice of narrative focus is thus explained; he is emphasizing the prosperity and harmony found in Baghdad to encourage Jewish migration and settlement there, and to help catalyze the reunification and alleviation of oppression for Jews living under oppressive rulers like King Emmanuel of Constantinople. With a better understanding of Benjamin’s narrative focus, we are able to understand his intent and rhetoric throughout the entirety of his *Itinerary*. However, despite being offered a clearer reading of the text with these answers, many questions regarding the medieval period and Jewish history still arise. If Baghdad is as prosperous and magnificent as Benjamin recounts, why do other rabbis and Jewish leaders not attempt to catalyze migrations to this city? Limited to Benjamin’s sole publication, we are unable to tap into the opinions and minds of prominent figures of the time. Thus, the role of Baghdad in the Middle Ages, outside of a potential gathering point for a mass Jewish exodus, remains a mystery still to modern historians.