

*Linguistic Hybridity and the Muslim-Jewish Imaginary in
Benjamin of Tudela's Description of Baghdad*

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Introduction

As stated in the anonymous preface to his *Sefer ha-Massa 'ot* (Hebrew: Book of Travels; henceforth *Massa 'ot*), the twelfth-century Jewish traveler Benjamin bar (son of) Jonah hailed from the north-Iberian city of Tudela on the Ebro River. According to the same prologue, he returned from his peregrinations in 1173—the only firm date that is known for him. In 1119, i.e. a generation before Benjamin's own lifetime, the Christian Kingdom of Navarre captured Tudela (Arabic: al-Tuḡīla), which had been ruled by Muslims ever since the eighth century. This relatively recent change of power allows for the assumption that Benjamin had a 'hybrid' cultural background. In all likelihood, he was multilingual by upbringing and knew Arabic, Romance vernacular, and Hebrew (to various degrees)—knowledge that would prove helpful on his far-flung journey. In the absence of any external sources referring to him, this is almost all that can be securely known about the Jewish globetrotter.

Even the trajectory of Benjamin's peregrinations that seem to have led him as far as Iraq and their detailed chronology are far from clear as *Massa 'ot* does not provide any further dates (besides 1173). But this lack has not deterred scholars from trying to determine the exact timeframe of his travels. More than a century ago, Marcus Nathan Adler believed that the Tudelan's voyage fell into the years 1166 to 1173, while David Jacoby has recently argued for 1159/1160 as the start of Benjamin's journey.¹ In any case, both scholars assume that *Massa 'ot* offers identifiable historical references from

which they derive pinpointed dates for the traveler's various stations along the way.

However, this approach seems questionable to me due to the rhetorical nature of many of these references, as *Massa 'ot*'s chapter on 'Abbāsīd Baghdad—which I translate in the following—amply exemplifies.

Although his Hebrew book includes a fair share of Arabic phrases, terms, and toponyms (transcribed in Hebrew characters, as it was common among medieval Jews) this only indicates that Benjamin spoke the Andalusian dialect of Arabic. Given *Massa 'ot*'s rather pedestrian style, however, it seems doubtful that much of the literary (Arabic and Hebrew) legacy of al-Andalus was bequeathed to the Jewish traveler from the north-Iberian borderlands. Notwithstanding a certain geographical overlap and the fact that quite a number of *Massa 'ot*'s narrative motifs also turn up in medieval Muslim-authored works of travel and geography—most notably that of his near contemporary Ibn Jubayr of Valencia—it would seem quite a stretch to claim that the book was 'influenced' by the Arabic *riḥla* literature. Such resemblances seem to hint at a common store of oral traditions, some of which Benjamin will have picked up on his extended travels while others may have circulated in twelfth-century Iberia, beyond the porous boundaries of Muslim-held regions.

Benjamin's account of Baghdad is one of the principal units of *Massa 'ot*, as no other city—Jerusalem included—merits such a long description. However, like in most of his book, the author stays totally absent. Whether he actually visited the seat of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate (from 762 to 1258) or simply culled information about the city from other (most likely oral) sources, Benjamin's chapter on Baghdad focuses on the caliph and his court in their capacity as a symbol of political, social, and religious order.² Given

his own Iberian background, Benjamin's idealized depiction of twelfth-century Baghdad seems to me to echo a sense of nostalgia for the bygone times of the Andalusian caliphate, as viewed by later generations of Jews living in Christian Spain (a point I will expand on in the talk).

My translation is based on the Hebrew text of Marcus N. Adler's critical edition of the *Massa'ot* (London, 1904),³ which uses a fourteenth-century Ashkenazi manuscript (now housed at the British Library) as its base text. However, I do not follow Adler's (otherwise rarely scrutinized) translation, for it substantially recasts the texts in the spirit of the Victorian age and smoothes over potentially offensive passages, such as religious polemics (see below). In addition, I will highlight here the Arabic phrases and loanwords (henceforth marked by A) that are interspersed throughout the Hebrew text (H stands for transliterated Hebrew terms).

Translation: Benjamin of Tudela's Description of 'Abbāsīd Baghdad

“From [‘Uqbarā] it takes two days [of travel] to Baghdad. It is the great city and capital of the kingdom of the caliph [A: *khalīfa*], commander of the faithful [A: *amīr al-mu'minīn*], [a member of] the ‘Abbāsīd [A: *al-'abbāsī*; dynasty], from the family of the madman [H: *ha-meshuga'*, i.e. the Prophet Muḥammad]. He is appointed over the religion of the Ishmaelites [Muslims] and all the kings of Ishmael acknowledge him, and he is like the pope over the Christians [*noṣrim*]. He has a palace in Baghdad that extends over three miles. Within the palace is a large forest with trees from all over the world, some of them fruit-bearing and others non-fruit-bearing; and there are all kinds of animals. The entire [expanse] is surrounded by a wall. Within the forest is a pool whose waters come from the River Ḥiddekel [the biblical name for the Tigris]. Whenever the

king [the caliph] wishes to take an outing, feast and drink, they [his servants] hunt birds, game, and fish for him. He comes to his palace with all his advisors and ministers; and the name of the great king is *al-‘Abbāsī Ḥāfiẓ*.⁴

He loves the Jews [literally: Israel] very much and has many Jewish servants; he knows all languages, is well-versed in the Torah of Israel, and reads and writes in the holy tongue [Hebrew]. [...]

The Ishmaelites only can see him once a year when the pilgrims [H: *to ‘im*, lit., errant ones]⁵ coming from distant lands to go to Mecca, which is in the land of *al-Yemen* [sic], wish to see him. They shout in front of the palace: ‘Our Lord, light of the Ishmaelites and splendor of our Torah [the Qur’ān], show us the effulgence of your countenance.’ But he pays no regard to their words. Then the ministers serving him approach him saying: ‘Our Lord, spread forth your peace unto the people coming from distant lands who desire to take refuge in the shadow of your graciousness.’ At this moment, he rises and lets down the hem of his robe from the window 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 Muḥammad]. [...]

Within the palace of the great king are large buildings of marble and columns of silver and gold, and mosaics of precious stones cover the walls. In his palace are great riches and towers full of gold, silk robes, and every kind of precious stone. He leaves his palace only once a year, on the holiday that the Ishmaelites call *al-‘īd ba‘d ramaḍān* [A: the festival after Ramaḍān, i.e. ‘Īd al-Fiṭr]. On this day they come from distant lands in order to see him. He rides on a mule dressed in royal robes that are made of silver, gold,

and linen; on his head is a turban studded with precious stones of priceless value; but [spread] over the turban is a black shawl as a sign of modesty, as if to say ‘Look! Darkness will cover all of this glory on the day of [the caliph’s] death.’ He is accompanied by all the leaders of Ishmael dressed in fine robes and riding on horses, [including] the princes of Arabia, Turkey, Daylam, the princes of Persia, Media, and Ghuzz, and the princes of the land of Tibet [H: *TWBWT*], which is [a] three-months’ [journey] to the west of the land of Samarkand.

[The caliph] proceeds from his palace to the large prayer house [H: *bet ha-tefillah*, here: mosque] at the Basra Gate, which is the grand prayer house [Congregational Mosque] of the Ishmaelites. Along the road that he takes to the prayer house, all the walls are adorned with garments of silk and purple, and men and women sitting in the street sing all kinds of songs and dance before the great king whose name is *al-khalīfa* [A: the caliph]; and they greet him in a loud voice saying: ‘Peace unto you, our lord the king and light of the Ishmaelites. Then he kisses his robe and gives them a sign of greeting—touching his robe with his hand. He then [goes]⁶ to the courtyard of the prayer house and ascends a wooden tower [i.e. a *minbar* or pulpit] and expounds on their Torah [the Qur’ān] to them. Then the sages of the Ishmaelites rise, pray for him, and praise him for his greatness and piety, and all respond with Amen. Afterwards he blesses them and they bring him a camel which he slaughters; and that is their Passover slaughtering [H: *shehitat pisham*]. He gives [it] to [his] ministers and they send [pieces] of it all over the country to taste from what their holy king has slaughtered with his [own] hand. And they rejoice in this. [...]

He [the caliph] is a righteous man and built a palace [hospital] on the other side of the river, on the banks of an arm of the Euphrates [sic] that is on the other side of the city. There he built large buildings, markets, and hospices [H: *pundeqa'ot*, from A: *fanādiq*] for the sick poor who come [there] to be healed. There are about sixty physicians' stores, and they all receive their drugs [literally: spices] and all their needs from the king's house. Every patient who comes there is maintained by the treasure of the king; and they heal them. There is a palace which they call *dār al-māristān* [A: hospital]. In this palace they chain all the insane, who in summer are to be found all over the city due to the excessive heat. They fetter each of them in iron chains until they return to be reasonable in winter. All the time they spend there they are being provided from the king's house. When they return to be reasonable, they are set free and each one returns to his home and honor. [...] All this the king does out of charity for all who come to the city of Baghdad, whether they are sick or insane; for the king is a righteous [H: *ḥasid*] man and his intention is good in this respect.

There are about forty thousand⁷ Jews in Baghdad and they live in peace, tranquility, and honor under the great king. Among them are great sages and leaders of academies [H: *rashe yeshivot*], who are engaged in the study of the Torah. [...] At the head of all [the Jews] is Daniel ben Ḥisdai, who is called our lord the head of the diaspora [H: *rosh galut*, exilarch] of all of Israel; he has a written pedigree going back to David King of Israel; and the Jews call him our lord the exilarch [H: *rosh ha-golah*], and the Ishmaelites call him our lord son of David [A: *sayyidnā ibn dāwūd*]. He possesses great authority over all the communities of Israel at the hands of the commander of the faithful [A: *amīr al-mu'minīn*, the caliph], the lord of the Ishmaelites, for thus the madman

[Muḥammad] commanded his descendants [the ‘Abbāsids, to do]. He gave [the exilarch] a seal of authority over all the holy congregations [of Israel] who are living under his jurisdiction [lit., Torah]. [The caliph] decreed that everyone, be they Ishmaelite or Jew, or belonging to any other nation within his kingdom, should rise up before [the exilarch] and greet him. But whoever does not rise up before him should receive a hundred lashes.

Horsemen, non-Jewish and Jewish, escort [the exilarch] every 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 his due.’ And they say in their [Arabic] language: *i‘amalū tarīq li-sayyidnā bin dāwūd* [Make way for our lord the son of David]. He rides on a horse and dons garments of silk and embroidery, along with a large turban on his head. On the turban is a large white shawl bearing a chain with the seal of Muḥammad written on it.⁸ He appears before the king and kisses his hand. Then the king rises before him and places him on the throne that Muḥammad ordered to be made in his honor. And all the kings of the Ishmaelites who come to pay a visit to the king rise in front of [the exilarch]. The exilarch is seated on his throne opposite [the caliph], for in this fashion Muḥammad commanded 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’ [Genesis 49:10]. [...] On the day that the king [caliph] invests [the exilarch] with authority, they have him ride in the viceroial carriage [H: *mirkevet ha-mishneh*; cf. Genesis 41:43]. And they accompany him from the palace of the great king to his [own] residence with drums and dances.”⁹

¹ *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary*, ed. Marcus N. Adler (London: H. Frowde, 1907), English part, 1-2, note 2; David Jacoby, “Benjamin of Tudela and his ‘Book of Travels’,” in *Venezia incrocio di culture: Percezioni di viaggiatori europei e non europei a confronto: Atti del convegno Venezia, 26-27 gennaio 2006*, ed. Klaus Herbers and Felicitas Schmieder (Rome: Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani, 2008), 144-49.

² See my discussion in “From Lofty Caliphs to Uncivilized ‘Orientals’—Images of the Muslim in Medieval Jewish Travel Literature,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (2011): 64-90, particularly pp. 72-82.

³ See note 1.

⁴ Adolf Asher’s edition, which is based on the 1556 Ferrara print of *Massa ‘ot*, reads here *Aḥmed*; *The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela*, ed. and trans. Adolf Asher, 2 vols. (New York: Hakesheth, 1840–41), vol. 1, Hebrew part, 55.

⁵ Hebrew *to ‘im* (singular: *to ‘eh*) can mean “wanderers” and may recall the Latin *peregrinus* (the root of English “pilgrim”), but it also carries the polemical connotation of the “errant” or “mistaken” ones, indicating that Benjamin considers the Ḥajj to be a misguided pilgrimage. In the same vein, he calls Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem’s Holy Sepulchre *to ‘im* (*Itinerary of Benjamin*, ed. Adler, Hebrew part, 24).

⁶ *Itinerary of Benjamin*, ed. Adler, Hebrew part, 37. Instead of *hozer* (“returns,” MS London), I read here *holekh* (“goes”), with MS Rome (Casanatense Library, fifteenth century) and Asher’s edition, *Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin*, vol. 1, Hebrew part, 58.

⁷ Asher’s edition reads here “a thousand,” which may be explained as an omission; *ibid.*, 59.

⁸ In translating “chain,” I follow Asher’s reading (*ibid.*, 62): *ravid*; whereas MS London has *redid*, “scarf,” “veil” (*Itinerary of Benjamin*, ed. Adler, Hebrew part, 40). Notably, no substitute is used here for “Muḥammad,” which may be a hint at different sources used by Benjamin (or his editors); alternatively, the different terminology could be the result of a scribe’s inattention.

⁹ *Itinerary of Benjamin*, ed. Adler, Hebrew part, 35-41.