

Jewish Autonomy in Babylon
about 1168

THE Jewish settlement in the valley of the Tigris-Euphrates dates back at least as far as the Babylonian Exile (586 B.C.E.). Probably at a very early period the exiles were given considerable self-rule. In later centuries the political leader, reputedly a descendant of the House of David, was called the Head of the Exile, or Exilarch. The spiritual and religious guides, the chiefs of the academies, were called *Geonim*, "Excellencies," an abbreviated title for "Head of the Academy which is the Excellency of Jacob." The political leaders, the exilarchs, were given considerable authority to rule, tax, and to judge the Jews wherever the power of the reigning Gentile dynasty extended, and in the days of the califs of Bagdad, during the Middle Ages, the Jews affected to believe that Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, had granted their leaders many privileges. Though the exilarch was nominally the political leader of the Jews, he was often in conflict with a *Gaon* who sought power for himself. Despite the oppressive exactions of some individual exilarchs the Jews were very proud of their Davidic rulers who represented them as a people at the court of the calif.

The following account from the Hebrew itinerary of the Jewish traveler, Benjamin of Tudela in Navarre, describes the exilarchate in the twelfth century under the Abbaside califs. Benjamin was in Bagdad about the year 1168.

(In Bagdad there are about forty thousand Jews, and they dwell in security, prosperity, and honor under the great Calif [al-Mustandjid, 1160-1170], and amongst them are great sages, the Heads of the Academies engaged in the study of the Law. . . . At the head of the great academy is the chief rabbi, Rabbi Samuel the son of Ali. He is the "Head of the Academy which is the Excellency of Jacob." He is a Levite, and traces his pedigree back to Moses our teacher. [The *Gaon* Samuel ben Ali held office from about 1164 to 1193. After the death of the exilarch he became the real ruler of the Jews in the Near East. Nine other scholars who devoted their time to teaching and communal administration are next listed.] . . .

These are the ten scholars, and they do not engage in any other work than communal administration; and all the days of the week they judge the Jews their countrymen, except on Monday, when they all appear before the chief rabbi Samuel, the Head of the Academy Excellency of Jacob, who in conjunction with the other scholars judges all those that appear before him.

And at the head of them all is Daniel the son of Hisdai, who is styled "Our Lord, the Head of the Exile of all Israel." [Daniel, the Exilarch, was in office from about 1160 to about 1174.] He possesses a book of pedigrees going back as far as David, King of Israel. The Jews call him "Our Lord, Head of the Exile," and the Mohammedans call him *Saidna ben Daoud* ["noble descendant of David"], and he has been invested with authority over all the congregations of Israel at the hands of the Emir al Muminin, the Lord of Islam [the calif at Bagdad]. For thus Mohammed commanded concerning him and his descendants; and he granted him a seal of office over all the congregations that dwell under his rule, and ordered that every one, whether Mohammedan or Jew or belonging to any other nation in his dominion, should rise up before the exilarch and salute him, and that any one who should refuse to rise up should receive one hundred stripes.

And every Thursday when he goes to pay a visit to the great Calif, horsemen—non-Jews as well as Jews—escort him, and heralds proclaim in advance: "Make way before our Lord, the son of David, as is due unto him," the Arabic words being *Amilu tarik la Saidna ben Daoud*. 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 seal of Mohammed is engraved.

Then he appears before the Calif and kisses his hand, and the Calif rises and places him on a throne which Mohammed had ordered to be made in honor of him, and all the Mohammedan princes who attend the court of the Calif rise up before him. And the exilarch is seated on his throne opposite to the Calif, in compliance with the command of Mohammed to give effect to what is written in the Law: "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, as long as men come to Shiloh; and unto him shall the obedience of the peoples be." [Genesis 49:10. Many Jews interpreted this verse to mean that there will always be a Jewish ruler somewhere till the Messiah comes.]

The authority of the exilarch extends over all the communities of Babylon, Persia, Khorasan and Sheba which is El-Yemen, and Diyar

Kalach [Bekr] and all the land of Mesopotamia, and over the dwellers in the mountains of Ararat and the land of the Alans [in the Caucasus], which is a land surrounded by mountains and has no outlet except by the iron gates which Alexander made, but which were afterwards broken. Here are the people called Alani.

His authority extends also over the land of the Sawir, and the land of the Turks, unto the mountains of Asveh and the land of Gurgan [near the Caspian Sea], the inhabitants of which are called Gurganim who dwell by the river Gihon, and these are the Girgashites who follow the Christian religion. Further it extends to the gates of Samarkand, the land of Thibet, and the land of India.

In respect of all these countries the exilarch gives the communities power to appoint rabbis and overseers who come unto him to be consecrated and to receive his authority. [The *Hazzan*, or overseer, was then an important official of the synagogue.] They bring him offerings and gifts from the ends of the earth. He owns hospices, gardens, and plantations in Babylon, and much land inherited from his fathers, and no one can take his possessions from him by force. He has a fixed weekly revenue arising from the hospices of the Jews, the markets and the merchants, apart from that which is brought to him from far-off lands. The man is very rich, and wise in the Scriptures as well as in the Talmud, and many Israelites dine at his table every day. [Daniel the Exilarch, in a letter dated 1161, complains of his poverty, but that was seven years before Benjamin came to Bagdad.]

At his installation, the exilarch gives much money to the Calif, to the Princes and the officials. On the day that the Calif performs the ceremony of investing him with authority, the exilarch rides in the second of the royal equipages, and is escorted from the palace of the Calif to his own house with timbrels and fifes. The exilarch appoints the Head of the Academy [by placing his hand upon his head, thus installing him in his office]. The Jews of the city are learned men and very rich.

In Bagdad there are twenty-eight Jewish synagogues, situated either in the city itself or in Al-Karkh [the business section of greater Bagdad] on the other side of the Tigris; for the river divides the metropolis into two parts. The great synagogue of the exilarch has columns of marble of various colors overlaid with silver and gold, and on these columns are sentences of the Psalms in golden letters. And in front of the ark are about ten steps of marble; on the topmost step are the seats of the exilarch and of the princes of the House of David. The city of Bagdad is twenty miles in circumfer-

ence, situated in a land of palms, gardens, and plantations, the like of which is not to be found in the whole land of Babylon. People come thither with merchandise from all lands. Wise men live there, philosophers who know all manner of wisdom, and magicians expert in all manner of witchcraft.

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