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## **Review of Jacobs, M. (2014) Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World**

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## Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World

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by his comprehensive treatment of the *tafsīr* tradition on this pericope. Still, one cannot help but feel that the sample of literary material is actually too narrow; the exclusive focus on *tafsīr* seems artificial, omitting as it does any discussion of major authors who addressed the narrative outside of this genre. The story of David and Bathsheba was seen by some authors as an important proof of the corruption of the Bible, as it defamed a prophet; it is one of the prime cases cited by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) in his account of the corruption of the Torah in his *Iḥām al-Yahūd*. Some consideration of this polemical discourse, in which theology impinged so dramatically on exegesis, would have been helpful. Moreover, Mohammed could have broadened his inquiry still further, to treatments of David in works outside the genre of Qur'an commentary, such as chronicles, *belles-lettres*, *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, and so forth, where one would undoubtedly find significant deviation from the overall trajectory of development in the *tafsīr*.

Mohammed's monograph unfortunately falls short on a number of other counts as well. A very large amount of introductory material is included, to the extent that the specific analysis of texts is often overwhelmed. The four main chapters each begin with short biographies of the exegetes whose views are discussed, and conclude with lengthy translations from some of their commentaries. The introductory material is usually clear yet sophisticated, and some of the translations might have some utility in a classroom setting. But this reviewer is uncertain whether the conclusions the book draws are substantial enough to merit a specialist's prolonged attention.

Another weakness is the book's lack of robust comparative analysis. The brief discussion of Jewish and Christian approaches to David's sin in Chapter 6 raises significant issues. However, given the repetitive nature of much of the *tafsīr* material, as well as the obvious pertinence of parallel traditions of apologetic in rabbinic sources in particular, Mohammed's study would clearly have benefited from more discussion of Jewish comparanda, as well as from locating this material at the beginning of the book and not at the end. Further, while I agree with his overarching argument that one must read both the qur'anic account and the rewritings of the story in the *tafsīr* with a deep appreciation of the very different narrative priorities that prevail in these texts and in the Bible and midrash, Mohammed's navigation of the complex and difficult issues that emerge in the comparison of Bible and Qur'an in his conclusion is unsatisfying and will prove confusing to the uninitiated.

Finally, the book suffers from a host of technical problems, including prolific typos. Not all of these problems can be laid at the author's feet, but overall, the book feels as if it was rushed to publication, and could probably have been significantly improved with some editorial guidance regarding not only technical issues but also basic considerations of approach, organization, clarity of argument, and potential audience.

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**Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World**, by Martin Jacobs, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014, 344 pp., \$65.00/£42.50 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8122-4622-3

Martin Jacobs' latest book is well researched and well written. It is the first to discuss the literature produced by medieval Jewish travelers to the Orient. The journeys of Christian

travelers of the same period and with the same destination are well documented, with such classics as Marco Polo's travelogue and the *Book of Mandeville*. In contrast, Benjamin of Tudela, who lived a century earlier than Polo, and who also wrote a *Book of Travels* (*Sefer ha-masa'ot*), has attracted less attention. Although his work has been edited and analyzed, no attempt had been made, until Jacobs' book, to draw a broader picture and answer such questions as how a Jew from Navarra viewed the great events of his time, the Crusades, the war between the major religions, and whether, and in what way, his view of Islam was different from that of Christian travelers. Did he, and other Jewish travelers, describe the Islamic world in the same way as their Christian colleagues? In other words, did they have the same 'Western' view of Islam? To what extent did the existence of Jewish communities in the Orient render these parts less 'alien'? Where, in the eyes of Jewish travelers, was the Diaspora (*galūt*) located? What was the center of their universe, Europe or Palestine? The Christians in the West looked on the Jews as 'aliens' and 'Orientals': did this affect the Jewish view of the Orient?

As becomes clear in this book, the old pairs 'Europa-home' as opposed to 'Orient-exile' are not valid for Jewish travelers: Europe was not necessarily the center of their world, neither was the Orient exotic. In their descriptions, the models become more complex and complicated.

The period under discussion is 1150–20. The Ottoman conquest of the Middle East during 1516–17 serves as a limit. After the sixteenth century, the texts become less diverse and more standardized as certain existing texts came to be used as models from that period onwards. Also, many texts from that period are reports of pilgrimages, which by their very nature are full of ritualized events and experiences. The geographical space is the Middle East, taken here to extend from Egypt to Iran.

Most travelers in this era and region were heading east from the west; there are hardly any cases of travel in the opposite direction. Jews started traveling and writing travelogues as a result of the Crusades. They wrote in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic and usually described pious journeys to the Levant – pilgrimages. They rarely wrote about Egypt or Mesopotamia. Given the historic context of the Crusades, we find a lot of anti-Christian polemics in the writings, while Muslims tend to be depicted more positively, sometimes as 'benign rulers.' Their world was viewed as an alternative world, about which the travelers had little or no information. In his Introduction, Martin Jacobs therefore tentatively proposes that Jewish travelers idealized the Islamic world and thereby tried to adjust the predominant (Christian) view. At the same time, they tried to challenge Christian claims to the Holy Land.

Apart from travelogues, another important genre is travelers' letters sent home from abroad, and a large number of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century letters from Italian Jewish pilgrims and merchants have been preserved. Many travelers departed for the eastern Mediterranean by sea from the city states of northern Italy. The letters, unlike the travelogues, sometimes display a condescending attitude toward the Islamic world. The merchant Meshullam of Volterra (Tuscany), for example, uses stereotypes in his description of Orientals, although the famous rabbi Obadiah Bertinoro, who had become a resident of Palestine, is more objective in his descriptions of both Muslims and Jewish communities. Does this render Meshullam's travelogue 'Orientalist' (in Edward Said's sense of 'Orientalism') and does Obadiah Bertinoro, who knew Meshullam's work, consciously distance himself from that view? As becomes apparent in this book, the distinction is not so easily made.

The texts covered in Jacobs' book have till now attracted little academic interest. If they have been studied at all, it has been not for their own merit, but in order to derive geographical information and deduce pilgrim routes. In his Introduction, Jacobs explains that travel literature, with all its internal inconsistencies, errors, wonder and fantasy, demands a special

approach. The researcher should be aware that it is a mixture of reality and myth. The approach Jacobs chooses is that of a postcolonial theoretician who regards the exotic elements as parts of the 'otherness' and acknowledges that the authors' religious view of the world was one in which wonder formed part of daily reality.


With this in mind, Jacobs tries to answer questions such as: How did medieval Jews from Europe engage with foreign, in this case Middle Eastern, cultures? In their relations with foreign cultures, were they influenced by (fictitious) travel accounts? What models did they use when describing foreign cultures? Do the views of the Islamic world taken by different authors differ significantly? Did Oriental travel influence the way Jews regarded such things as identity, community and home?

One might ask what makes Jewish travel literature Jewish? The texts under discussion were all written by Jews – always men – for Jews. Being pilgrim texts, they have as their subjects places that play a role in the Jewish collective memory. These places may have become Christian or Muslim in the meantime, but the Jewish authors re-appropriate them for their intended audience. Other features are the use of the Jewish calendar as a reference for planning the journey, the choice of Jewish communities and houses for stopping places, and relations with family relatives and fellow pilgrims on the road.

The use of Hebrew obviously adds to the Jewish flavor, as do citations from the Scriptures and Rabbinical texts. More specifically, it appears that the authors view the world they encounter through the eyes of the rabbis and in many cases they adjust reality to tradition (in this respect, *mutatis mutandis*, Jewish travel literature does not differ so much from Christian). Another question posed in this book is thus whether traveling really changed the views people held, or whether it merely served to confirm what the authors (thought they) already knew.

The book's main part starts with an Introduction (1–17), in which important methodological observations are made. In Part 1, 'Travels and Travel Narratives' (19–80), the various travelers, their travels and works, and their environments are introduced. Benjamin of Tudela, Meshullam of Volterra and rabbi Obadiah Bertinoro are perhaps the best-known travelers, but others, such as Yitgaddal the Scribe and Petahyah of Regensburg, also play an important role. In Part 2, 'Territory and Place' (81–146), the author describes the important places that figure in the texts, their actual situations and the way they are 'seen' by the travelers: the Land of Israel as a whole, first under Christian and later under Muslim rule; Jerusalem, 'the ruined city,' and more specifically the Temple Mount. Holy tombs and the way they were being used by the various religious groups are also discussed here, as are three major Muslim cities outside the Land of Israel – Baghdad, with its glorious Jewish past, Damascus and Alexandria – with reference to the way they are depicted in medieval travel writing. To conclude, Part 3, 'Encountering the Other' (147–205), describes the representation of 'other' people in the accounts: Muslims, Christians, Near Eastern Jews, and the non-rabbinic Karaites and Samaritans, to mention the main groups.

A conclusion, an impressive number of notes and an extensive bibliography complete the book, and a list of maps, a chronology of travelers and works, and a glossary are helpful tools for the reader.

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