

II, 45 *Letter from the Scribe of the Yeshiva to Joseph b. Abraham*

{Cairo, ca. 1128–39}

ULC Or. 1080J 182

Draft of the first two pages of a letter to Joseph b. Abraham entered into the record book of the Jewish High Council of Jerusalem (then domiciled in Cairo). See II, 54.<sup>1</sup>

{The letter is written by the 'Scribe of the Yeshiva,' in Hebrew, mostly in rhymed prose. Its arcane florid style, with veiled allusions to biblical (and other literary) passages, renders much of the text unintelligible to the uninitiated. The writer's predilection for poetry is reflected in his style. He was not Nathan b. Samuel, judge and scribe of the Palestinian Yeshiva relocated in Cairo (dated documents 1128–53), who was also a poet,<sup>2</sup> since the handwriting hardly resembles his.<sup>3</sup> In these two pages elaborate blessings are showered on Joseph. Both he and his father bore the titles *hemdat ha-yeshivā* and *zeqan ha-qehillōt*, 'delight of the Academy' and 'elder of the congregations,' titles undoubtedly conveyed upon them on the occasion of the receipt of generous gifts, which they sent the Yeshiva in Egypt.<sup>4</sup> The writer apologizes profusely for not having written to 'the beloved elder' sooner. It is likely that this letter itself was occasioned by a gift sent by Joseph.}

<sup>1</sup> {Only this description and a draft of the transcription remain for this document in Goitein's papers.

<sup>2</sup> See Fleischer, *Diwān*.

<sup>3</sup> See the note to II, 44, line 30, where 'the Scribe of the *Rayyis*,' mentioned there as recipient of a gift sent by Joseph b. Abraham, is identified as probably being Nathan b. Samuel. Under Maṣliāḥ Gaon there were a number of scribes attached to the Yeshiva at the same time. 'The Scribes' of the Yeshiva are mentioned twice in the letters of thanks in II, 54. Similarly, in DK 192\* Maṣliāḥ sends greetings from the 'the Scribes' of the Yeshiva. In a letter of consolation to a Rosh Yeshiva, probably Maṣliāḥ, over the death of his mother, the writer sends greetings to the "Head of the Yeshiva of the Pride of Jacob [...] and its scribes," etc. (ENA 3130, f. 5, ed., Fleischer, *Diwān*, 194).

<sup>4</sup> For Abraham's gifts to religious dignitaries in Egypt, see II, 11a. For Joseph's, see the introduction to II, 43, 44. Abraham is referred to as 'Elder of the Congregations' in the postscript to II, 11a.}

{II, 45a *Letter from Joseph b. Abraham to Sulaymān b. Abū Zikrī Kohen Denying Misappropriation of a Deposit*

Aden, Oct. 31, 1152

ENA 4045, f. 9

This interesting document, which I have identified and added to Goitein's collection, provides supplemental data on the business activities of the Adenese merchants and their associates, who were active in the India trade. A number of issues remain to be clarified, and the edition is still tentative.

The top and bottom of the letter are torn away, and the names of the writer and addressee, written on verso, are missing. But it is clearly in the handwriting of Joseph b. Abraham. As with other letters sent to Abraham Ben Yijū, the verso contains liturgical selections (for Passover and Pentecost), and at an earlier stage of my research, I had assumed that he was the addressee. However, a careful examination of the handwriting on verso indicates that it is definitely not his. Besides, the addressee's travels reconstructed below can hardly be reconciled with Ben Yijū's biography.

Having assumed that the recipient of the letter copied the prayers on verso, I compared the handwriting there with that of Joseph's other correspondents enumerated in the introductory note to chap., sec. F (page 407). While none of these matched, other liturgical selections, written in the same hand as those on the verso of II, 45a and evidently copied from the same prayer book, were found on the blank spaces on the verso of the following letters: II, 32, II, 61 and V, 11. No. V, 11, was written by Joseph b. Abraham to Abū Zikrī Kohen b. Joseph. Maḍmūn b. Japheth wrote II, 32, and Goitein convincingly identified the anonymous recipient as Abū Zikrī. The anonymous writers of II, 61 were convincingly identified by Goitein as Ḥalfon and Bundār the sons of Maḍmūn and the recipient as Abū Zikrī's son Sulaymān. The yet-unidentified copyist of the prayer book evidently had access to Sulaymān's archive (the handwriting is not his) and made use of the blank spaces on his and his father's letters. Until matching liturgical selections are found on a letter written to someone else, it is logical to assume that II, 45a was written to either Abū Zikrī or his son Sulaymān. At first blush one might suggest that V, 11 (written to Abū Zikrī), on whose verso were written parts of the Additional Prayer of Passover, was the top of the same letter, whose continuation—after a break—comes in II, 45a, where on verso later portions of the Passover liturgy appear.

At this point, we must consider when II, 45 was written. The letter is dated the last day of the month of Rajab, "year 47." In light of the period of Joseph b. Abraham's activity, this abbreviated date could stand for 1447 E.D., corresponding to May 4, 1136 C.E., or 547 A.H. (the Muslim year), corresponding to October 31, 1152. Had the Seleucid era (E.D.) been intended, the writer probably would have retained the hundreds and abbreviated 1447 as 447. Accordingly, we can assume that the Muslim year was intended, which, of course, follows more naturally after the month of Rajab. This assumption is corroborated by reference to the 'late Maḥrūz' (lines 27–28), certainly Maḥrūz b. Jacob, who was still active ca. 1145.<sup>1</sup>

In II, 61 the writers (Ḥalfon and Bundār the sons of Maḥmūn) conveyed their and their ailing father's condolences to the recipient (Sulaymān b. Abū Zikrī) over the death of his father. Since, as we learn from VI, 3, Maḥmūn died some time before October 12, 1151, on the basis of the data presently available, we conclude that II, 45a, dated October 31, 1152, was most likely sent to Sulaymān—and did not continue V, 11. If our identification is correct, we learn furthermore, that Sulaymān, who was an accomplished trader, also traveled to India like his father before him.

Joseph b. Abraham writes an impassioned denial of accusations that he had misappropriated merchandise that had been left in the warehouse. He pleads with his correspondent, who had accused him of betrayal and embezzlement, to believe that he had found the package in question in his container but did not know how it got there. In any event, he never opened it and derived no benefit from it ("either in this world or in the hereafter"). He suggests that his correspondent's accusations stem from suspicion that Joseph bore him a grudge—which, by rights, he should have, but doesn't. The writer had fallen on hard times. We can only guess whether the trouble and grudge, to which he alludes, were connected with a business misadventure or with some other matter.

The data concerning the whereabouts of the correspondents is somewhat confusing. Joseph b. Abraham resided permanently in Aden. The general atmosphere of the letter, the description of the warehouse (line 8) and 'the community' (*al-jamā'a*, line 4), Joseph's return from a trip (line 14), the transaction with Maḥrūz (lines 27–28), the arrival of letters from the addressee for Joseph and his sons (line 29), while not conclusive, all suggest that the letter was written in Aden. On the other hand, as already noted, we see from this letter that Joseph also traveled abroad.

<sup>1</sup> See Introduction IIB1.

Two toponyms appear in the document, Barūṣ and Miṣr (= Fustat), where Sulaymān b. Abū Zikrī Kohen resided. Joseph writes that he found the package in question in his container after the addressee had set out for Barūṣ (line 12). The foreigners, who were traveling to Egypt, would confirm Joseph's innocence of the accusation of misappropriation (lines 26–27). The only way to make sense of this comment is that the addressee was also in Egypt. Barūṣ, however, is an Arabic rendition of Broach, the port city on the northern coast of India, often referred to in this book (usually spelled Barūj).<sup>2</sup> While other scenarios are possible, I suggest the following reconstruction: On his return trip from Broach to the West, the addressee sailed not to Aden but to some other South Arabian port, such as Mirbāt or Ghulayfiqa, and from there proceeded directly to Egypt, without traveling to Aden. The same had been done some fifty years earlier by Abu 'l-Faraj Nissīm and by Joseph Lebdi, and they (or members of their families) subsequently carried on correspondence from Egypt with the representative of merchants in Aden concerning merchandise left there.<sup>3</sup>

#### Translation

##### [A. Denial of embezzlement]

(1) [...on the package at] the top of the container<sup>4</sup> [there was a note] (2) in my handwriting, on which was written: "I found this package. I don't know who (3) deposited it with me. It will remain until its claimant arrives." Consequently, (4) the community knew that it belonged to your excellency.<sup>5</sup> I swear by He who created me (5) and created you and by He who decreed my safety on sea and land, where (6) I traveled and

<sup>2</sup> See Maqbul Ahmad, *India*, 59; id., "Hind," 406b.

<sup>3</sup> On Abu 'l-Faraj Nissīm's journey from Mirbāt to 'Aydhāb, see II, 4, line 14. On Lebdi's travel to Egypt via Mirbāt, see I, 14. For the Ghulayfiqa-India route, see page 334, n. 30; III, 9v, line 2; III, 12, line 38; III, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Arabic *safāt* is used in the Geniza papers for a case made of wood for packing certain goods for transport around the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean (Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:130, 386, n. 174). See the detailed discussion of this term by Sadan, *Mobilier*, 148–50. The word appears a number of times in the India Book, e.g., I, 1, line 8; II, 48, lines 9, 14. Here it evidently refers to a warehouse container of large dimensions (that belonged to the writer).

<sup>5</sup> Joseph's correspondent had written members of the community about his missing package, and because of the note they surmised that this was the package concerned.

arrived safely<sup>6</sup>—I had not been informed and (7) had no knowledge that it belonged to your excellency. No doubt you, my lord, laid it aside in (8) the warehouse, as you were accustomed to do, for the warehouse (9) was at your disposal and no one denied you access to it. No doubt the slave<sup>7</sup> (10) threw<sup>8</sup> the package in the container. I, your servant, know nothing about this. (11) And your excellency did not call attention<sup>9</sup> to it among the things that you had mentioned,<sup>10</sup> and I, your servant, had no knowledge (12) that it was yours. And when your excellency traveled to Barūš,<sup>11</sup> I searched (13) the container and found the package and wondered to whom it belongs. Therefore, (14) I wrote a note and left it inside. I, your servant, traveled and did not—(15) I swear by God!—open the package and did not see what was in it, because it was (16) bound by a rope—even if I, your servant, should have snatched<sup>12</sup> (17) it when I had that trouble.<sup>13</sup> (18) But God did not let me derive any blessing or wealth<sup>14</sup> from it, either in this world or in the hereafter.<sup>15</sup> (19) Your excellency only said these words, no doubt, because I (20) had dropped in your esteem, because of my trouble. And I, your servant—far be it (21) from your excellency!—I don't believe that you are capable of such a thing, not even (22) in your innermost thoughts.<sup>16</sup> Men may suffer, my lord, from injury and leprosy<sup>17</sup> (23) and the like. There is no escaping what God has decreed, (24) nor

<sup>6</sup> This is an appropriate oath for an international trader, who faces dangers on land and sea. It does not seem to appear elsewhere in the India Book. For a prayer to God for safety on both land and sea, cf. pages 157–58.

<sup>7</sup> The writer consistently refers to himself as the addressee's *mamlūk*, 'servant.' Here 'abd must refer to a slave in his (or his correspondent's) service.

<sup>8</sup> Arabic *ṭarāḥ* can also be translated 'left,' 'deposited'; see Piamenta, *Dictionary*, 301.

<sup>9</sup> For *ṭm'* (I) 'be familiar,' see Dozy, *Supplément*, 2:61. Here presumably the second form is intended, but I have not found it in any dictionary with this meaning. For a different use of *ṭm'*, see line 16.

<sup>10</sup> In an earlier letter of instructions.

<sup>11</sup> Broach. See the discussion above.

<sup>12</sup> Arabic *ṭama'* is used in a different sense here than in line 11 (where, as noted, it is probably in the second form). For the translation 'snatched,' see Piamenta, *Dictionary*, 308; 'coveted' is also a possible translation. For the syntax (*an yakūna... qad ṭama'a*), see Blau, *Grammar*, 185, 256.

<sup>13</sup> Trouble for which the writer held his correspondent responsible. For *ṭarā*, see Piamenta, 303.

<sup>14</sup> I understand 'mrh = 'umrān.

<sup>15</sup> The writer uses such phrases elsewhere, e.g., III, 10, lines 70–71: "without any liability for any risk on sea or land, in this world or in the world to come."

<sup>16</sup> Apparently the writer says that he cannot believe that his correspondent really suspects him of theft.

<sup>17</sup> Arabic *baraḥ*; the reading is unambiguous.

anything to do,<sup>18</sup> my lord, about intentions.<sup>19</sup> *Concealed acts concern the Lord our God; the overt acts [concern us], etc.*<sup>20</sup> (25) My lord, a man cannot praise himself. (26) But the foreigners traveling to Egypt and others know (27) about everything.<sup>21</sup>

[B. Information on a separate package of clothing]

As to the package of clothing,<sup>22</sup> the *late*<sup>23</sup> Sheikh (28) Maḥrūz<sup>24</sup> acquired it at a reduced price from the man who collected its proceeds from my sons.<sup>25</sup>

[C. Further appeasement]

(29) Likewise, your esteemed letter (to me) and letters to my sons reached me. (30) And they contained harsh words from your excellency. But my lord is absolved of any blame,<sup>26</sup> (31) for I, your servant, could not have written this letter<sup>27</sup> unless there remained (32) no grudge whatsoever

<sup>18</sup> For Arabic 'amal, probably read 'ilm 'knowledge': 'nor is there any knowledge of intentions.'

<sup>19</sup> Even if the writer had entertained thoughts of taking the package, such thoughts caused no damage.

<sup>20</sup> Deut. 29:28.

<sup>21</sup> The foreign merchants traveling from Aden to Egypt would confirm the writer's story. I am uncertain why he speaks specifically about 'foreigners' (*ghurabā*), which could hardly be translated 'Maghrebis'; perhaps to emphasize that his supporters were not only fellow Yemenites.

<sup>22</sup> A separate package left by the correspondent for sale.

<sup>23</sup> Hebrew *ḥay*; see 394, n. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Maḥrūz b. Jacob; see the discussion above.

<sup>25</sup> The writer had grown sons with whom his correspondent apparently had dealings as well. The exact nature of the transaction is not clear.

<sup>26</sup> Aramaic *bi-meḥil*.

<sup>27</sup> Arabic *hādhibi 'l-kitāb*. While Yemenites often treated *kitāb* as masculine—as in classical Arabic—in many of their writings the word is treated as feminine. See Piamenta, *Dictionary*, 425. Besides this case, I have noted examples in the following texts: II, 47, lines 17–18; II, 49, line 27, verso, lines 6, 11; II, 57, line 34; II, 61, line 10; II, 67, lines 10, 28–29 (uncertain); II, 71v, lines 55–56; III, 3, line 10; III, 4, line 20, verso, lines 1–2, 15–16; III, 6v, line 5; III, 9, margin; III, 11, margin; IV, 9, lines 4–5; IV, 10, lines 15–16, verso, 31; IV, 12, line 12; IV, 15–II, 42, margin; VI, 4v, line 22. In the following texts *kitāb* is treated both as masculine and feminine: II, 61, line 10; II, 67, lines 10, 28–29 (uncertain); II, 71v, lines 55–56. In IV, 11, lines 14–16, the writer uses the Hebrew *ketāv* as if it were feminine, obviously because of the Arabic.

against [you] in my heart. And you are absolved of blame in the broadest (33) sense of the word,<sup>28</sup> //in this world and the hereafter,// with a pure heart. Likewise, when you write an answer to me, your servant, (34) you should consider me forgiven in this world and in the hereafter. To err is only *human*.<sup>29</sup> (35) By God, my lord, my master, [I, your servant,] was saddened (36) by the paucity of your letters and [...]

[D. Date]

[Margin] (1) Written on the last day of Rajab, (2) year forty-seven.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Arabic *bi-hall wa-awsa' al-hall*.

<sup>29</sup> Arabic *fa'l-khaṣ' lam yakun illā li-vnē ādām*. The Judeo-Arabic-Hebrew wording of this fundamental axiom calls to mind the adage *errare humanum est*, 'to err is human' (cf. Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*, 133).

<sup>30</sup> See the introduction to the document for the reconstruction of the date.

II, G. *Khalaf b. Isaac b. Bundār, Maḍmūn's Cousin\**

II, 46 *Letter from Khalaf b. Isaac to a Merchant in Egypt: Attack on Aden by the King of Kīsh*

Aden, 1135 {ca. 1136}

TS 18 J 5, f. 5

The following is taken, with slight modifications, from Goitein "Kīsh," 247–57 (on 255 there is a partial publication of the text, transcribed in Arabic characters), for which the brief discussion in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:67–69 should be compared.<sup>1</sup>

Arabic documents containing eyewitness reports on historical events are very rare. They are the more welcome when they complement and illustrate the often very meager literary sources. This is the case with the excerpts from two business letters from the 12th century, one II, 21–24, sent from Aden to India and one, II, 46 from the same town to Cairo. Both passages describe one and the same event: the attack on Aden by a fleet sent by the King of Kīsh with the aim of taking the town or at least a part of it.

Kīsh (Qays)<sup>2</sup> is a small island in the Persian Gulf, situated near the mainland of Iran exactly below 54 E and 26.30 N, being the last island of any size before one reaches the Strait of Hormuz, as one sails from

\* See his letters to Abraham b. Yijū, III, 10–16; Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel, IV, {1, 5–8,} 11–14; Abū 'Imrān Mūsā b. Sadaqa Ibn Nufay', VI, 37; 'Allān b. Ḥassūn, VI, 14.

<sup>1</sup> Note that TS 18 J 5, f. 5, in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 2:588, n. 37, is a misprint for TS 18 J 3, f. 5 and is not related to this document.

<sup>2</sup> This Persian name, which appears today on the maps as Qays, is very differently spelled in Arabic and European sources. See the detailed analysis in Streck, "Qays." In the documents dealing with the events described here, the island is invariably called Kīsh. However, in the literary sources recounting it, the name is spelled *qys* in the narrative and *ks* in the quotation of the words of the sailors coming from that island. This change is obviously intended to show them as speaking Persian. *Q* in *qys* was no doubt pronounced in the Bedouin-South Arabian way as a *g* formed very far back, while *k* in *ks* also represents a *g*, the Persian *g* being written as a *k* with three dots or a stroke superscript, these diacritics, however being often omitted. Thus the actual name of the island probably was 'Guess,' and so indeed it is spelled in some of the accounts of the European travelers who first visited it. See Streck, s.v. A full discussion of the medieval sources on this island is found in Wilson, *The Persian Gulf*, 95–100. {As far as I have seen, the name appears only in II, 23, line 10, and as the pointing of *ψ* indicates there, it was pronounced Kīs (or Kays); see 341, n. 10.}