

II, 64 *Letter from Abū 'Alī b. Bū 'Umar to his Family, Praising Ḥalfon b. Maḍmūn's Assistance*

{Upper Egypt, ca. 1167}

TS Arabic 40, f. 56

Brief passage quoted in Rabie, "Geniza Documents," 76.

Letter in Arabic characters from 'Aydhāb, praising Ḥalfon (called by the Arabic equivalent of his name, Khalaf) b. Maḍmūn for his help after the writer had been stripped of everything by the Ghuzz (a Seljuk contingent) and for an invitation to Aden, from which he would proceed to India. Ḥalfon also took care of a young woman of the writer's family, who had been divorced by her husband in Aden.

Abū 'Alī b. Bū 'Umar, known from another Geniza letter (III, 31, line 9), as having visited Ceylon (Sri Lanka), writes to his family, which most probably lived in Fustat. The letter is addressed to his son Abu 'l-Maḥāsīn. But when writing, he has in mind his wife, whom he addresses and to whom he sends regards first (verso, line 3), while regards to Abu 'l-Maḥāsīn follow later (verso, line 4). Abū 'Alī was accompanied by Abū 'Umar (verso, line 5), most probably a son of his, named for his father. As usual Abū 'Alī first tried to do business in Upper Egypt. When unsuccessful, he proceeded further at the advice of Abu 'l-'Alā b. Abū Naṣr, a merchant also known from other India papers.¹ Abū 'Alī was able to do so after having received 30 dinars from Ḥalfon b. Maḍmūn, the well-known representative of the merchants, who succeeded his father in 1151. However, the Ghuzz plundered Mīnya, where Abū 'Alī did business, and he lost everything. To make good for his loss, he had to undertake the long journey to India.

At the end of the letter, he refers to another matter: the marital difficulties between 'the little one,' most probably his daughter, or another close relative, and her husband in Aden, one Abū 'Imrān. The affair was brought before the Muslim authorities. Abū 'Imrān embraced Islam (it is noteworthy that the writer reports this fact without adding any vituperative remark) and divorced his wife. The girl was in Ḥalfon b. Maḍmūn's good care. All this the writer had learned from the latter's correspondence.

¹ {Abu 'l-'Alā b. Abū Naṣr *al-Miṣrī al-kōhēn*, is mentioned in II, 65, line 54, as traveling between Egypt and Aden, and a letter addressed to him is found in VI, 52.

The letter is written in exceptionally orderly and good Arabic characters, but displays the same orthographic particularities as those familiar from letters in Hebrew characters, such as omission of *alif wāṣila*, of *lām* before sun letters and of *alif* as a sign of length inside words.

The letter does not make the impression that it was dictated. Thus our merchant must have had a large Muslim clientele.²

{The document is a moving personal letter from a destitute and despondent merchant, who feels compelled to travel to India to improve his lot. It is addressed to his wife, whom he fears he may never see again. Needless to say, our interest is also in the most generous assistance and encouragement, both financial and psychological, extended to a merchant who fell on bad times by Ḥalfon b. Maḍmūn, who himself had earlier suffered shipwreck and loss (see line 22).

Etiquette precluded having the letter addressed and delivered directly to Abū 'Alī's wife (who was probably illiterate in any event), and it was accordingly addressed to his son. The fact that the text is written in Arabic characters, a matter of socio-linguistic interest, obviously lends itself to explanations other than Abū 'Alī's clientele.³ The exaggerated, standard expressions of humility of the writer and aggrandizement of the addressee, for whose kindnesses the writer expresses his gratitude, etc., which originated in petitions to authorities, are plainly incongruent with the style expected of a father writing his son. Abū 'Alī could have mechanically copied these phrases from his regular business correspondence, where they were commonplace. But it is also noteworthy that besides the names, with which we are familiar from other documents, there is nothing in the letter, either in vocabulary or content, which identifies its writer and his family as Jewish. Contrary to Goitein's impression, my working hypothesis is that Abū 'Alī did not pen the letter, but rather dictated it; and the writer, a professional clerk or Muslim business associate, used the customary expressions, irrespective of their incompatibility with the letter's content.

² Goitein left the detailed, provisional description of the document given above and prepared a draft of its transcription; he did not translate the text. See the brief description of the letter in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:245, where the writer's father's name is spelled 'Abū 'Amr (or Omar).' ('Amr would normally be written in Arabic with final *w*, missing here, but I am unaware of Judeo-Arabic texts, where the *w* is written.) According to Goitein, the merchant's presumed large Muslim clientele, with whom he was accustomed to correspond, explains his familiarity with Arabic script; cf. Goitein, *Letters*, 94, n. 13 (and see our following remarks).

³ For the use of Arabic script by medieval Jews, see Blau, *Emergence*, 38 ff., 243 ff.

Goitein's comment concerning the absence of any derogatory remarks in connection with the news of Abū 'Imrān's conversion to Islam complements his observation elsewhere that the lack of such remarks was the rule.⁴ This is not the place for a detailed analysis of this observation, an indication of the Jewish community's relative tolerance towards the apostate. Three brief comments are in order, however. In his discussion, Goitein refers both to voluntary apostates and those, who under threat to their lives, ostensibly converted, while continuing the covert practice of Judaism. As far as the lack of condemnation is concerned, these, of course, are very different phenomena.⁵ Secondly, an example of the condemnation of the convert can be cited from IV, 76, line 14, where the apostate who made life difficult for Judah ha-Levi in Alexandria, was referred to as *al-kalb al-pōshēā*, 'the dog of a renegade.' And finally, the suggestion that an Arab scribe wrote this letter for Abū 'Amr puts the absence of any condemnation of the apostate in a rather different perspective.

Ghuzz is a name applied in Arabic to the Turkish Oghuz people, of which the Seljuks were a family group or clan. The name is also extended to the Kurds, and it is possible that this is the meaning intended in our text. Since Ḥalfon b. Maḍmūn died in 1172 (on October 26),⁶ the assault by the Ghuzz on Minya obviously cannot be associated with the revolt of Upper Egypt against them in 1175 and its violent consequences. Perhaps it refers to the 1167 battle in the plain ten miles south of Minya in Upper Egypt led by Shīrkūh (d. 1169), one of Nūr al-Dīn's generals, against the Crusader king Amalric.⁷ In any event, the plunder of Minya mentioned in our letter (line 19) adds a documentary dimension to the historical records, while the latter place the Geniza manuscript in perspective and make it possible to fix its approximate date.

Some further words are in order on the format of the letter, in particular the address written on verso. Unlike the vast majority of Geniza letters in

⁴ Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 2:302 ff.

⁵ On the lack of condemnation of the covert apostate under pain of death, see Friedman, *Yemenite Messiah*, 35 ff.

⁶ Subar, "Tombstones," 305, published an English translation of Ḥalfon's tombstone, dated 6 Marḥeshwan, (1)484 (Sel.), on 'Thursday night' (a translation of *lel ḥamishi*, i.e., Wednesday evening when the fifth day of the week begins according to the Jewish calendar; Goitein, *Yemenites*, 81, understood the sixth day of the week, but 6 Marḥeshwan fell that year on Thursday and never falls on Friday). See now the photo in Klein-Franke, "Tombstones," 174, fig. 23 (the caption needs correction).

⁷ Based on the following studies: Cahen, "Ghuzz"; Bosworth, "Saldjūkids"; Woidich, "al-Sa'id"; Richards, "Shīrkūh"; Lane-Poole, *History of Egypt*, 181. On the Ghuzz, see also Gil, *Palestine*, 1:337; id., *Ishmael*, 4:887 (index).

this book and elsewhere, in which the name of the sender is added (in the original usually in a parallel column to the left), here only the name of the addressee appears. Among the documents in chaps. 1–3 other examples are found in II, 65, III, 53, III, 55, III, 56. In all of these the address is written in Arabic characters. The Arabic business letters recently discovered in Quṣayr, from the same ambience (a Red Sea port town east of Qūṣ, connected with the India trade, first four decades of the thirteenth century), also have in their addresses on verso only the name of the recipient, but not that of the sender.⁸ The use of the Arabic alphabet is not a decisive factor, however, as most of the Geniza letters, in which the address is written in Arabic characters, contain the name of the sender, while several of the letters in which the address is written in Judeo-Arabic, in Hebrew characters, lack the name of the sender: III, 56 and a number of items in chaps. 4–7 (in chap. 4, many of these emanate from the Spanish circle of Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel and Judah ha-Levi); some additional examples are found elsewhere in the Geniza. Such an item is VI, 15 (written in Quṣ in the mid 12th century). In his edition of that document, Goitein suggested two explanations for the absence of the sender's 'signature' there:

As so often happened, the person prepared to carry the letter was in a hurry to leave. Not signing a letter was an expression of intimacy and friendship. I am not sure that this was intended here.⁹

While the courier's urging to finish the letter is often noted as a reason for abbreviating an epistle,¹⁰ this could hardly be taken as the cause for omitting the sender's name at the very end of the address on verso, even if VI, 15, were the only known example, let alone for the multiple cases referred to here. The second explanation is certainly plausible, and it would apply to several of those cases. A letter would arrive folded and sealed (as noted in II, 61, line 3),¹¹ and when the sender's name was written with the address on verso, the recipient knew who he was before opening the letter. In some of the letters in which the name is missing there, it appears in the body of the letter (as in II, 64), something usually not done. In other cases, it can be assumed that the recipient recognized the sender's handwriting or otherwise was easily able to identify him from the contents of the letter. These practices merit further investigation.

⁸ See Guo, "Quṣayr Letters," 167.

⁹ Goitein, "Portrait," 464, n. 86.

¹⁰ See Friedman, *Yemenite Messiah*, 45, 188; Kraemer, "Women Speak," 199. Additional examples can be multiplied; some will be listed in the note to IV, 4, line 2.

¹¹ For the sealing of letters see Sadan, "Clerks," 50.

Translation

[A. Typical opening of petitionary letter]

(1) Thankful of his kindnesses, (2) Bū 'Alī b. Bū 'Umar.¹²
 (3) In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate.
 (4) My letter (to you)—may God give long life to your excellency, my lord, the most illustrious sheikh, the master, and prolong (5) His support of you, your elevated position, high rank and prominent station, and not deny you (6) His gift of superior success, crush those envious of you and destroy your enemies!—is to enquire about information (7) concerning your situation and news about you, and the conduct of your affairs—may God, may His praise be glorified, conduct them as (8) you choose and to attain your goals! Were I to proceed to explain in detail even part of the (9) longing and yearning for you, which I feel, the letter would not encompass it nor would speech contain it. (10) But I pray to Him whose power and might are to be glorified to grant (11) quickly that I be reunited with you in the best of circumstances, in fulfillment of the most excellent hopes (12) soon, God, the Exalted, willing.

[B. Halfon's assistance and the plunder by the Ghuzz]

This is to inform you, my dear son—may [God, the Exalted,] streng[then you]!—(13) that I wrote you (pl.) a number of letters, but I have not received any answer from you (pl.).¹³ However, (14) I know of news of you (pl.), but hear it only from (other) people.¹⁴ The situation, which I am undergoing, (15) namely the dearth of my possessions, is not something, which can be described, because of heartache (16) and how little I have. I remained perplexed by my situation, until I received from (17) Sheikh Khalaf b. Maḍmūn thirty dinars, delivered by Sheikh Abu 'l-'Alā b. (18)

¹² Here and in the continuation, the writer uses the third person in addressing the recipient, mostly the third person singular feminine, referring to 'his excellency,' a feminine gender noun in Arabic. The style of a petition, in which the 'thankful' petitioner writes his name in the upper left corner, as here, hardly suits a father writing his son; see the discussion above. In the continuation, as noted, the writer uses the plural for the addressee.

¹³ The writer transfers here to the second person plural because the letter is intended for the whole family, especially his wife.

¹⁴ Arabic *a-nās* (= *al-nās*). This term is used regularly in the documents of this book for 'merchants' or 'traveling merchants.' See 239, n. 4.

Abū Naṣr. He is urging me to set out on a journey.¹⁵ I purchased the requisite (19) provisions for travel; then the Ghuzz swept down and plundered Mīnya. We departed naked, without (20) a covering. I remained with a brick under my head, hungry, passing the night in grief, worn out.¹⁶ (21) Thank God, had my life been in my hands, I would have given it up.¹⁷ (22) But Ibn Maḍmūn heard (23) of my dire situation and sent me letters, in which he said, "I have been afflicted by the same thing that you are enduring."¹⁸ (23) Set out and come up to me."

[C. News of 'the little one' whose husband apostatized]

He (Khalaf b. Maḍmūn) informed me what had happened to the girl ('the little one') with (24) Abū 'Imrān, namely the hardships she had suffered with him. Had it not been for God and the assistance of the Sheikh (Khalaf), (25) who looked after her rights, she would have been lost.¹⁹ Their crisis reached the sultan, and Bū 'Imrān (26) converted to Islam. The malice between them increased, and he divorced her. [Margin] (1) She remained with him²⁰ in the best possible situation.²¹

[D. The journey to 'Aydhāb and intention to set out for India]

Nothing remains for me but the journey. I traveled to 'Aydhāb, terrified and frightened by the ill-fated²² trip, but God (2) decreed my safe arrival.²³

¹⁵ According to Goitein's comments cited above, the advice was Abu 'l-'Alā b. Abū Naṣr's. I presume it could also refer to Halfon b. Maḍmūn.

¹⁶ Arabic *bayyūt khalāq* (vocalized by Goitein). For *bayyūt*, see Lane, *Dictionary*, I, 281.

¹⁷ Thank God that my life is in His hands and not mine. This line is quoted in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:245, as part of a discussion on the attitude towards suicide in the Geniza papers.

¹⁸ Arabic *qad ghammanī mā jarā 'alayka*. Halfon suffered tremendous business losses, when a ship of his loaded with his wares sank (see II, 71, line 30), yet he made a remarkable comeback. He thus reassured Abū 'Alī that he could do the same.

¹⁹ The last phrase, the apodosis of the sentence beginning with *lawlā*, is not expressed here. Cf. Wright, *Grammar*, 2:8.

²⁰ With Halfon b. Maḍmūn (Goitein).

²¹ Arabic *'alā aḥsan qaḍīya*. The same expression appears in II, 66, line 23. Cf. Dozy, *Supplément*, 2:363, *'alā adnā qaḍīya*. For this section of the letter, see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 3:264, 485, n. 94, where he comments that Halfon's intervention secured the bill of divorce.

²² Arabic *naḥs*, which can mean both 'disastrous' and 'ill-omened.'

²³ Rabie, *The Financial System*, 101, n. 1, cites this document as a Geniza letter which complains of the lack of safety on the road between 'Aydhāb and Qūṣ, but the text does not describe the journey south of 'Aydhāb.

Now I intend to set out²⁴ for India. May God, may He be praised, make the outcome good again!

[E. Painful separation from wife and closing greetings]

Everything that I have heard about what you (pl.) are undergoing and your circumstances (3) increased my distress over you.²⁵ [Verso] (1) Do not cut me off from news about you. I am traveling in faraway places.²⁶ I hope that we shall be able to be (2) in one town until God decrees the appointed time (death) for me or for you. By God, by God, do (3) no cut off (sg. f.)²⁷ your letters from me. We will not be reunited unless God wills. Accept for yourself (sg. f.) (4) profuse wishes for your complete well-being. And profuse wishes for Sheikh Abu 'l-Maḥāsīn's complete well-being.²⁸ And Peace. (5) And Abū 'Umar²⁹ sends everyone profuse wishes for complete well-being.

[F. Address]

(1) (To) His excellency, my dear son, master (2) Abu 'l-Maḥāsīn b. Abū 'Alī. May his grace be permanent!³⁰

²⁴ Arabic *a-dukhūl* (= *al-dukhūl*). In contrast to *khurūj*, which means the opposite (see 372, n. 4), *dakhal*, *dukhūl*, literally, enter, means travel abroad (to India), i.e., enter the sea. See Piamenta, *Dictionary*, 145; II, 66v, line 21. The writer's experiences merit comparison with those described in a contemporary letter by David Maimonides (VI, 4); see above, page 157.

²⁵ After having complained about his suffering various trials and tribulations on the road, the husband remembers towards the end of the letter to commiserate with his wife and family over their dire circumstances in his absence, of which he had heard. On the complaints of the distant husband's wife and his responses in Geniza letters, see Kraemer, "Women Speak," 193–95.

²⁶ Arabic *fa-qad ba'uda al-mazār*, lit., 'the visiting place has already become distant.' A similar phrase is used for one traveling in distant places in IV, 13, line 17: *ṭūl asfāriḥ wa-bu'd mazāriḥ*, 'the length of his travels and distance of his visiting places'; IV, 18, line 16: *mā huwa 'alayhi al-mazār min al-bu'd*, 'the distance of his visiting places.'

²⁷ Obviously the writer intends his wife, and not the rest of the family, in the previous remarks as well, but he only begins to address her with the feminine singular here.

²⁸ As stated explicitly in the address, Abu 'l-Maḥāsīn was the writer's son, who was home with his mother.

²⁹ Abū 'Umar was the writer's older son, who accompanied him.

³⁰ On the absence of the sender's name, see the introduction to the document.

II, 65 *Letter to a Merchant Away in the Far East, whose Interests were Protected by the 'Nagid David'*

Aden, ca. 1180

TS Misc. 28, f. 187

This letter from Aden (sent to India) reflects the situation in the town at the time of 'our Nagid' David,' probably the son or other relative and successor of Ḥalfon b. Maḍmūn. The letter is written by a merchant to an India trader out in the Far East, probably India {see below}, who had taken loans from merchants in Aden, including one Ibn/Abū (al-)Daghīsh.² The latter took the law into his own hands and seized goods from the warehouse of the absentee debtor. The addressee's business partner or representative, Makārim b. al-Ṭayyib, came to an agreement with Ibn/Abū (al-)Daghīsh, in which the latter promised to pay 150 dinars for a release from any claim resulting from the unlawful seizure; but he subsequently used his connections with some VIPs in Aden to avoid payment. Word of the dispute spread among other creditors, one of whom, who was in Egypt, obtained a ruling from the Qadi Ibn al-Jazūlī,³ which allowed him to take part of the seized goods in payment of his loan. The writer had informed the Nagid David of the events, but because of the absence from Aden of important traders, the Nagid instructed the writer not to take any action until Makārim arrived from Egypt or until the addressee himself returned in the following year from India. The writer emphasizes the wisdom of this advice, rather than acting in a highhanded fashion, as the addressee had wanted.

The Nagid David is probably the father of the Nagid Maḍmūn/Shemaryā b. David, whom we meet in the following documents.⁴

{The fragmentary address on verso, written only in Arabic characters (the letter itself is in Judeo-Arabic) clearly contained only the name of the addressee and not that of the sender.⁵ The letter was sent to Lawāmanda

¹ {See the note to the translation of line 35 below on whether he was 'Nagid.'

² Not a proper name but a pejorative by-name. Daghīsh is registered as a (by-) name in Ibn al-Zubayr, *Asmā'*, 1587, and means 'Scoundrel, Aggressor.' The diminutive Dughaysh also appears there, and that vocalization could be intended here as well.

³ The name comes from a Berber tribe in southern Morocco. See Colin, "Jazūla."

⁴ See Goitein, *Yemenites*, 81–8 {and above, Introduction IIB} on the Nagids. {The preceding remarks are based on various comments in Goitein's papers to II, 65. He did not translate the document.

⁵ On this practice, see pages 498–99.