

II, 66 *Letter on the Forced Conversion of Yemenite Jews, but Business as Usual*
Aden, August {1199}



Mosseri IV,7 (L 12)

Ed. Goitein, *Yemenites*, 44–47. The following edition is based on the translation of the text in Goitein, *Letters*, 212–16. The part dealing with the forceful mass conversions was edited, with omissions, by Chapira, “Lettre de Maimonide,” 58. The first portion of the text, through line 25, is re-edited in Friedman, *Yemenite Messiah*, 160–67.

Only the lower part of this interesting letter, still containing 59 lines, has been found thus far. The events described in its first section were preceded by a long period of crisis. Muslim religious propaganda had become extremely aggressive, while the Jews feverishly expected the immediate coming of the Messiah, and a simple-minded, pious man had indeed declared himself messiah and found followers.

In this period Moses Maimonides wrote his famous “Yemenite Epistle,” or rather epistles, in order to strengthen the faith of his brethren, but also to unmask the futility of their expectations.¹

Things came to a head when the eccentric nephew of the great Saladin, al-Malik al-Mu‘izz Ismā‘īl, ruled Yemen (1197–1201). He had the audacity to style himself ‘caliph,’ although a caliph sat on the throne of the Abbasids in Baghdad at that time. His unorthodox ways are also evident in the forced mass conversions described in our letter, for Islam regards such conversions as illegal and invalid.²

{An unusual symbol is written in the original above the middle of the first line on verso, approximately , and I do not recall that such a sign has been discussed in Geniza research. Goitein did not mention it in his edition of this document. An almost identical sign appears, usually in the same position, in many of the roughly contemporary business letters from the Red Sea port of Quṣayr, as well as in some other Arabic documents. Two reproductions are given here as examples:  (from Guo, “Quṣayr Letters,” 174–75; id., *Commerce*, 113, where additional examples are found). In his preliminary study Guo (“Quṣayr Letters,” 176) specu-

¹ Scientific edition by Abraham S. Halkin, with an English translation by Boaz Cohen, New York, 1952. Halkin, following others, thought that the “Epistle to Yemen” (as he calls it) was written in 1172. {Contrary to what he wrote here (in *Letters*), Goitein, *Yemenites*, 44, refrains from taking a stand on the dating of the “Yemenite Epistle.” On this question, see Friedman, *Yemenite Messiah*, 42 ff.

² On the question of forced apostasy in Islam, see Friedmann, *Tolerance*, 121 ff.

lated that it might have been equivalent to ‘P.S.’ Alternatively, he suggested that the sign could have signified a phrase such as ‘to be continued on the verso’ (if so, however, it would have been written at the bottom of recto) or was perhaps a special code for the keepers of the archive at Quṣayr. In his final publication Guo (*Commerce*, 112), takes this ‘mysterious sign’ as an abbreviation of sorts of the *basmala* (*bism allāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*, ‘In the name of God, the Merciful the Compassionate’) or some form of the name of God or His blessing. In his transcripts Guo replaces the sign with the *basmala* and determines that the side on which it appears is recto of the document, even in cases where this is questionable (e.g., 212–13).³

In all likelihood this is the same sign written in II, 66v. Here the words below the sign are from the end of the sentence that begins at the bottom of recto. The sign clearly functions as an indication of the continuation. It has the same function in the Quṣayr documents. It appears at the top of verso or the top of a note or a page that was probably appended to another document or page. The Geniza documents and the Arabic manuscripts are thus mutually illuminating. The sign is probably the abbreviation of a word or phrase. I suggest that it is an abbreviation of the Arabic الآخر *al-ākhir* or آخره *ākhiruh*, ‘the continuation,’ etc.

I have no doubt that future Geniza research will identify more examples of these symbols that scholars have overlooked. Another instance can be cited from TS 8 J 10, f. 16v.⁴ Maimonides wrote similar signs on the leaves on which the text of some of his draft compositions continued (so on a page from the ‘Guide for the Perplexed’).⁵ The close chronological and geographical match between the letter from Aden and the Quṣayr documents is not a decisive factor, accordingly.

For the sake of completeness, I note that in some of the documents in chap. 4 and in a few other Geniza letters, a different practice is used to mark the continuation of a letter. At the top of an added page in IV, 74 and in IV, 76 (by chance, the first page has not been identified in both cases), we find, written in Hebrew characters, the Islamic phrase ‘*awnak yā rabb*,

³ Cf. Friedman, “Quṣayr.”

⁴ Amir Ashur calls my attention to the *L* symbol on the upper-right corner of CAJS Halper 379, a letter of a woman requesting assistance from the Nagid Samuel b. Ḥananyā (Egypt, 1140–59). The upper-left corner—where the name of the petitioner was probably written—is torn away, but the text seems to begin on this leaf (verso is blank). I assume that this letter was appended to another missive.

⁵ TS Ka4, f. 1v. Maimonides wrote two symbols at the top of the page, one in the right corner and one in the middle. The *L* sign is combined with a shape similar to the Hebrew letter b. I do not know if this is part of the sign (as it appears to be in the symbol in the middle of the page) or possibly marks the number (2) of the page (or quire).

'with Your help, O Lord!.' While at the top of verso of IV, 72 and IV, 78 (there abbreviated: 'awnak, 'with Your help') it continues the text on recto, like the symbols described above.}

Translation

[A. Forceful conversion of the local Jews]

(1) [...] to Aden. Immediately after his⁶ arrival [he was brought before the caliph?], (2) who said to him: "Become a Muslim, or you will cause the death of [your] brethren [...] {read: the death of most of the [Jews]}." (3) He cried bitterly, but there was no other way for him [...] {read: to e[scape]} (4) except to embrace Islam. Before his arrival in Aden, (5), all those who were with him on the mountains had *apostatized*,⁷ (6) the physician (known as) the Efficient,⁸ and everyone on the mountains; only the (7) Jews of Aden remained. But⁹ Sheikh Maḍmūn¹⁰ accepted Islam (8) on Wednesday, the first of Dhu 'l-Qa'da.¹¹ (9) On Friday, the third, the bell (of the market-crier) was rung: "Community of Jews, (10) all of you, anyone who will be late in {alt. tr.: will refrain from} appearing in the audience hall¹² after {add: tomorrow} (11) noon, will be killed." None of the Jews remained; all went up (12) to the audience hall. Moreover, he (the caliph) ordered that anyone returning to the Jewish faith {alt. tr.: refusing to accept Islam}¹³ (13) would be killed. Thus all apostatized. Some¹⁴ of the very religious, who defected from {alt. tr.: refused to accept} (14) Islam, were beheaded.

⁶ Maḍmūn b. David, mentioned in line 7.}

⁷ The Heb. term used here, and in the Geniza in general, is *pāsha'* {here spelled *bāsha'*} (not *rāsha'* {rather: *kāsha'* [!]} as in Chapira's text), lit., 'to renounce one's allegiance.' See *Med. Soc.*, 2:300. {Cf. Friedman, *Yemenite Messiah*, 273.

⁸ For the honorific *al-sadid*, see above, 274, n. 1.

⁹ This word is not expressed in the text.}

¹⁰ Maḍmūn b. David, the head of the Jewish community, who wrote II, 67. See *ibid.*, n. 1.

¹¹ Corresponding to August 25, 1198 {1199}.

¹² Arabic *manzar*, in Yemen a room on the upper floor, open to the fresh air. {Cf. Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 4:76, 370, n. 164. According to Ibn al-Mujāwir, *Al-Mustabṣir*, 111 (cf. 115, 116), the castle built by al-Malik al-Mu'izz on Mt. Ḥuqqāt was called *al-manzar*.

¹³ Arabic *ta'abba 'an al-*l*-slām*. Goitein, *Yemenites*, 42, gives the correct translation.

¹⁴ Or: two.

[B. The foreign Jews]

As to us, do not (15) ask me what we felt, (16) witnessing that day horrors the like of which we had never seen. {alt tr.: ... how much our hearts were pained. We have never seen a worse day.}

But God, the Exalted, wrought (17) with us *a miracle* and saved us, *not through our might and power* {alt. tr.: *not through our might* and by the strength of [our] me[rit]},¹⁵ (18) but through His grace and favor. For when we went up (19) with them to the audience hall, the foreigners assembled separately, (20) and the caliph was consulted about them. God put these words into his mouth: (21) "No foreigner should be molested."¹⁶ He ordered that everyone should (22) pay a third of {alt. tr.: triple}¹⁷ the poll tax.¹⁸ We disbursed this, and he dismissed us {alt. tr.: and we were delivered} (23) graciously {alt. tr.: in the best possible situation},¹⁹ thank God. This (24) is the upshot {add: of all} that happened. But, by the great God, I am really not able to convey to you (25) even part of what happened, for witnessing an event is one thing and hearing about it—quite another.

[C. New impositions on visitors to Aden]

(26) The merchants were outraged by {lit., 'suffered from the indignation of'} the new²⁰ (27) impositions promulgated. Finally, however, God, the Exalted, helped. He (the caliph) had ordered (28) that 15 out (29) of 100 dinars should be taken from everyone both at arrival and departure, but God helped, (30) and he {add: retracted this and} ordered that this Kārim²¹ should remain [Verso] {add: Continuation}²² (1) unchanged

¹⁵ Zech. 4:6. The original is difficult to decipher and seems to have a combination of Hebrew and Arabic.}

¹⁶ This shows that, at that time, the Jewish India traders must have been still of considerable importance for the economy of Aden.

¹⁷ {So, Goitein, *Yemenites*, 46.}

¹⁸ The poll tax of the non-Muslims was to be paid at their permanent residence. Thus, this imposition was illegal. But the travelers were content to buy their religious freedom with this price.

¹⁹ {Arabic '*alā aḥsan qaḍīya*'; cf. Dozy, *Supplément*, 2:363a.

²⁰ 'New' does not appear in the Arabic.}

²¹ This use of the term Kārim in the meaning of the totality of India travelers operating during one year is very remarkable. See 483, n. 28.

²² {For the symbol written here in the original and its suggested meaning, see my comment added at the end of the introduction to this document.}

with no rise in tariff. But everyone coming (2) later would have to pay 15 (3) out of 100 dinars from all goods, and also from gold and silver, from wheat and (4) flour,²³ in short, from everything. Such will be the earnings of anyone coming here next year.

[D. Prices in Aden]

(5) {Add: Prices:}

Pepper, a sack—sold (6) for 52, later went down to {alt. tr.: for 42, then it went back up to} 45²⁴

Cinnamon, a sack—45

(7) Brazilwood obtained different prices:

Good Āmiri,²⁵ a sack—18

(8) Middle quality—16

End pieces (*tr'f*), a sack—16

The long variety, (9) a sack—18

Indian Indigo, a piece—70 din.

(10) Clove—not to be had; the mediocre—45 {read: 65} the [...] {add: g[ood]}—(11) 44 {read: 65},²⁶ 10 (*manns*)

Celandine²⁷—not to be had

(12) New camphor—8½, a *mann*

The aromatic woods are of middle quality (13) and expensive.

The price of the copper was—²⁸

²³ Meaning that even from the provisions of the travelers 15 percent had to be turned over to the ruler of Aden.

²⁴ {This reflects a major rise in prices. About 65 years before this document, the highest price for a *bahār* of pepper in Aden was 37 or 38 dinars (see II, 20, line 19; IV, 15–II, 42, line 27, II, 65, margin, line 4).

²⁵ Arabic *l'mry*, apparently, from a place called Āmir. Yāqūt, *Geographical Dictionary*, 1:252–53, lists a number of place names with the consonants 'mr, including Amar in northern Arabia, Amr in Syria (Shām), and Amarr in the Syrian Desert (Āmir, Goitein's transcription, does not appear there), but I do not know if one of them was intended here.

²⁶ One of the numbers is evidently mistaken, and the notation 'not to be had,' also found in the next line, is suspect as well.

²⁷ Or swallowwort (which is an English rendering of the Greek word), a plant of the poppy family, serving as a tonic. See Maimonides-Meyerhof, 120, no. 241.

²⁸ Up to this point, our lists show goods imported from India or other eastern countries, which would be carried to Cairo and other places west. Here begins the list of imports from Spain and other western countries, which had been brought by these merchants. {Arabic *nahās*. For the meaning of this term, see 555, n. 11.}

Copper in fragments,²⁹ First—(14) 72, later it reached—85; in bars—70; later it reached 90

(15) Tin³⁰—70

Corals—11 {read: corals sell (well)}

(16) Antimony (kohl) of Shalwadh,³¹ a sack—17

of Madrid {read: Maghrebi},³² a sack—25

(17) The 'gray' perfume,³³ a sack—...

(18) Cinnabar³⁴—10 (*manns*) 18

Mercury—10 (*manns*) 17

(19) Please take notice of this, my lord.

[E. Conclusion]

I asked God for guidance³⁵ (20) and am traveling home³⁶ in the boat of Ibn Salmūn, the same (21) in which I made the passage out.³⁷ May God bestow safety upon it {add: in His mercy}! (22) My brother Abū Naṣr³⁸

²⁹ See Goitein, *Letters*, 86, n. 7: "Arabic *fajara* (cf. Dozy, *Supplément*, 2:242b), a common item in both the Mediterranean and the Indian trade. The opposite is *qaḍīb*, copper in large bars, as follows here." {According to Qāfiḥ, "Lāz," *fajara* is pure red copper.

³⁰ Arabic *qazdir*. See Shy, "Terms," 210.}

³¹ A locality in Spain. Yāqūt, *Geographical Dictionary*, 3:316, says that kohl was produced there from lead.

³² Reading doubtful.

³³ Arabic *al-ṭib al-shayba*. Maimonides-Meyerhof, 10, no. 11, and Dozy, *Supplément* 1:808a, probably refer to another product. I have not seen this expression elsewhere.

³⁴ Since Roman times a precious export of Spain.

³⁵ {For the *istikhāra*, see 256, n. 6.

³⁶ Arabic *wa-kharajtu*. See the following note.}

³⁷ In the language of the India traders *dakhal*, to enter (namely, the Indian waters), designates the way out, and *kharaj*, to come out (from the Indian Ocean), means going home. {For *kharaj*, also in line 22 (there *yakbruj*), cf. 372, n. 4. For *dakhal*, see 502, n. 24. Goitein's translation of *kharajtu* in line 20, 'I am traveling home' implies that the writer (identified as a merchant from Egypt by Goitein, *Yemenites*, 44.) was announcing his return to Egypt. The note to line 24 (n. 39), further suggests that the recipient of the letter was a Cairene judge. But if so and were the writer traveling to Egypt, the writing of this letter would seem to have been superfluous. Goitein, *Yemenites*, 47, translates *kharajtu* in the preceding line 'I shall return,' without 'home,' and may have rejected that interpretation. For an example of a trader writing to Egypt after his arrival in Aden from India and announcing his return trip there, see II, 56–57, lines 21–22, 34. But there the word *khurūj* is used specifically for the trip to Egypt. The linguistic inconsistency would be obviated, were we to assume that this letter was intended to be sent not to Egypt, where the writer was traveling, but to India. But see further n. 39.}

³⁸ No identification possible. My India card index, still incomplete, notes twenty-five persons of this name.

will be traveling with me. (23) I am {add: informing you of this after} kissing your hands (24) and feet.³⁹

(A P.S. of four lines, referring to several of the goods mentioned before, is too much effaced to attempt translation.)⁴⁰

³⁹ One kisses the hands of a senior relative and the feet of a judge. {This distinction was not always followed. In II, 53, margin, line 1, Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Manasseh requests that Khalaf b. Isaac kiss his father's feet for him (the father, Isaac b. Bundār was not a judge); and in VI, 54, line 3, a woman writes to her father that she kisses his hands and feet.} The writer might have been a relative of the judge Isaac b. Sāsōn, who was the Jewish chief judge of Cairo and a close associate of Maimonides, but also very active in economic fields. See II, 67. {See also 511, n. 37.

⁴⁰ A letter to a Sheikh Ḥasan seems to be mentioned there.

II, 67 *Letter from Maḍmūn b. David: Murder of the 'Caliph' and Return of Jewish Life*

Aden, July 9, 1202

TS 28.11

Ed. Baneth, "Letter from Yemen," 205-14, with an excellent introduction and most instructive notes. With one exception, deviations from Baneth's interpretation are not noted expressly. The following is based on Goitein, *Letters*, 216-20. A new edition of most of the document is found in Friedman, *Yemenite Messiah*, 167-78.

The sender of this letter, Maḍmūn b. David, was the head of the Jewish community of Aden. He is referred to in II, 75, as the Adenese counterpart of Abraham Maimonides, the head of the Jews in Egypt. Thus he is identical with the Maḍmūn of II, 66. The Hebrew equivalent of Maḍmūn, which means 'protected by God' was Shemaryā, and under this name, Shemaryā b. David, 'the Nagid (leader) of the Land of Yemen,' he appears both in Hebrew literature and in Geniza documents.¹

The aforementioned letter (II, 75) also contains the name of the recipient of our letter, *al-Muwaffaq*, 'the Successful,' a title which had become a proper name.² He had another title *Amīn (al-Dawla)*, 'Trustee (of the Government),' the like of which would be given to a Jewish representative of merchants {as well as a third title, *al-Sa'īd*, 'the Auspicious'}.³ The two {three} titles are contained in the untranslatable honorific epithets of the salutation, so characteristic for the artificial style of this late period.⁴

¹ Nos. II, 68 and II, 73. The famous Spanish Hebrew poet Judah al-Ḥarīzī dedicated to him his masterpiece *Tahkemōnī* (or, rather, a copy of it). See Mann, *Jews*, 2:338. {The text is published by Tobi, *Abraham b. Ḥalfon*, 25; cf. Schirrmann-Fleischer, *Poetry in Christian Spain*, 187, n. 177; Yahalom & Blau, *Wanderings of Alharizi*, 26. On the identity of Maḍmūn and Shemaryā, see the introduction to II, 74 (page 546). Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:568, n. 19, has deduced from VII, 58 that Maḍmūn b. David died 1226-28.

² *Muwaffaq* is a proper name. *Al-Muwaffaq*, remained a title. Accordingly, there is no reason to associate Sheikh *Muwaffaq* mentioned in II, 75 (see 550, n. 3) with *al-Muwaffaq* of our document. For this title, which can be an abbreviation of *Muwaffaq al-dawla*, 'the Successful of the State,' see al-Qalqashandī, *Subḥ*, 5:491 (cited by Baneth, "Letter from Yemen," 208).

³ The honorific *al-Amīn* was bestowed on various dignitaries; see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 6:10; Friedman, "Fragments of Maimonides' Responsa," 448-49; Cahen, "*Amīn*." *Al-Sa'īd* was often conferred on Jews. See al-Qalqashandī, *ibid.*; Friedman, *ibid.*, 449, n. 21. Compare Bilāl b. Jarīr's titles in page 362, n. 13.

⁴ For instance, instead of the title 'Trustee (of the Government), the salutation has what can literally be rendered approximately: 'Your Trusteeish Excellency.' {In other