

III, 31 *Letter from Yeshū'ā ha-Kohen b. Jacob to Abraham Ben Yijū, then in Aden*

Dhū Jibla, Yemen, 1150

ENA 1822 A, f. 75

As at least five lines are missing at the beginning, this sheet was longer than III, 33 and 38. The paper also is different: light grayish, very thick and wooly. The upper part, which also contained the address, was torn away unevenly, but the identity of the sender can be fixed with certainty by the very characteristic handwriting, which is identical in these three letters.

In the introduction to III, 22, a certain resemblance between the script used by the writer of that document, who once belonged to the rabbinical court of Aden, and that of our Yeshū'ā was noted. However, the latter writes far more beautifully. His characters are unusually large, with the tendency to being oblong and are similar to those used when copying books. The particularly long necks of the letter *lamed* occurring in the first line of a page (in III, 33 and 38) are a decorative embellishment used in biblical and other manuscripts.

Besides this document, the same writer sent III, 33 and 38 to Ben Yijū, and the three letters are considered here together. The sender of our letters is no doubt identical with Yeshū'ā, one of the three sons of Jacob ha-Kohen of Dhū Jibla, mentioned in II, 35 and II, 36 as complaining about Maḏmūn b. Ḥasan, the representative of the merchants in Aden. The identity is confirmed by the names of the man, his father and his family, as well as his domicile (for the latter, see III, 38, margin, line 4). No. III, 38 is also in conformity with II, 35 and II, 36, in so far as we learn from it that the writer did not entertain personal relations with Maḏmūn's family, although his father had once deposited money with Maḏmūn's brother.

Although III, 31 does not expressly mention Ben Yijū's name, there is little doubt that the letter was addressed to him. We find our sender in correspondence with him in III, 33 and 38. Here, he asks whether he should rent a house for him. In III, 33 he writes details about the house rented. Ben Yijū praised Maḏmūn for favors bestowed on him (see II, 37, vs. 53 ff. {and elsewhere}); this is referred to here, III, 31, lines 23 ff. {see note to line 25}. Finally, the very fact that this letter, sent from inland Yemen to Aden, has reached the Cairo Geniza, is best explained by the assumption that it was carried there by an India traveler who had sojourned for some time in Yemen and afterwards disposed of his corre-

spondence in the Geniza. So far, we know of only one person following this path, who stayed in Yemen for a considerable period: Ben Yijū.

The sequence of the three letters can be fixed according to the following considerations. No. III, 31 was written when Maḏmūn was alive, but some time after Ben Yijū's arrival in Aden. It seems that Ben Yijū had already visited Dhū Jibla, as even the children of the two men {Ben Yijū and Yeshū'ā} knew each other (margin, line 2), and Ben Yijū had already had opportunity to write to Yeshū'ā about Maḏmūn's benevolence. Considerable time must have elapsed between III, 31 and II, 33. In the former, the sender inquires whether Ben Yijū wants to come to his town, in which case he would rent a house for him, while in the latter, he reports about that house, after Ben Yijū had already gone back to Aden. No. III, 38 contains the news of Maḏmūn's death, which occurred in 1151 (or early in 1152).¹ At that time, Ben Yijū was neither in Aden nor in Dhū Jibla. Thus, the chronology of the three documents may be fixed as follows: III, 31: 1150; III, 38: 1151/2 {1151}; III, 33, later than III, 31, may precede or follow III, 38.

These short letters are not without interest in various respects. In III, 38, line 7, Ben Yijū is addressed as 'Head of the Congregation.' It is not difficult to surmise where Ben Yijū assumed that office during his comparatively short stay in Yemen. In II, 35, lines 7–8, we learn about Jews from three different towns who had settled in Dhū Jibla, the new capital of Yemen. According to all we know about the communal life of the Yemenites—and other Jewish communities described in the Geniza papers, each of these three groups almost certainly formed a separate congregation. To these was added another, led by Ben Yijū. It most probably consisted of Tunisian merchants who were on their way back from India but hesitated to return to their homeland owing to the Norman occupation of most of that country's coastal towns. These merchants were looking for a place to settle (cf. III, 29, lines 18–19); and some of them, including Ben Yijū, tried the newly founded town of Dhū Jibla, a natural choice.

Obviously, that trial was not successful. Ben Yijū left for Aden (III, 33), and after the death of his only {surviving} son, settled in Cairo. When we find him there again at the head of a small congregation (see the introduction to III, 41 {and III, 51}), we may safely assume that he

¹ {His death was in 1151; see the introduction to III, 38.

was followed to Cairo by some of the traders who had been with him in India and Yemen, an assumption which is corroborated by the names of some of the congregants.

{Translation²}

[A. End of preamble]

(1) [... Reading your letter] brought me joy, [because of the news of your well-being and the success] (2) of your affairs. I asked God—may He be praised!—[to increase] (3) for your excellency all that is good. And [I thanked Him] (4) and extolled Him for your well-being and the well-being of your (5) family; may God protect and guard them and make me (6) their ransom³ from all evil.

[B. Inquiry about Abū Sa'd b. Nethanel, son of the writer's paternal uncle, and Abū 'Alī b. Abū 'Amr of Ceylon]

Your excellency's servant (7) inquires of you as to the welfare of the most illustrious sheikh, my lord Abū Sa'd (8) b. R. Nethanel⁴—*may the Rock of Israel protect him!*—the son of my paternal uncle, and the welfare of (9) the most illustrious sheikh, my lord Abū 'Alī b. (10) Abū 'Amr [or: 'Umar] of Ceylon.⁵

² Goitein wrote a description of the document's contents and notes, but I have not found its translation among his papers.

³ Arabic *wa-ja'alani* [...] *fidā'abum*. A similar expression is used in addressing Ben Yijū in III, 32, line 6 (their: your ransom). With slight variations, it was common in the correspondence of very close people; the writer wishes that all evil, which had been destined for the addressee, befall him instead. According to Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 3:18, it is usually found in the correspondence of brothers and of parents and children (see also *ib.*, 480, n. 154) and when used by non-relatives, the writer intended to convey that he considered himself a member of the addressee's family and had a claim on his support. In my opinion, the frequency of the phrase in the correspondence of non-relatives might be greater than suggested there by Goitein. Additional examples in such letters can be cited in I, 17, line 7, IV, 12v, address, IV, 24, lines 4–5, IV, 42, line 5, etc.}

⁴ It is highly probable that this man is identical with Abū Sa'd the India traveler named in II, 55v, line 9 (in Broach, India), as we find him in Ben Yijū's company in Yemen, III, 27, line 1 and afterwards in Egypt, III, 51. {It is difficult to ascertain whether or not the same man was intended in these documents; see the notes to these references. The India trader Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel was also called Abū Sa'd.}

⁵ Abū 'Alī of Ceylon is almost certainly identical with the goldsmith Abū 'Alī who went to Ceylon according to II, 32, line 27. As he is expected here to be in Aden, he must

[C. Request to be notified whether Ben Yijū would come 'to the mountains' or remain in Aden]

Let me know, (11) your excellency, whether you intend to come to the mountains,⁶ (12) so that, were you to be coming, I would rent (13) a house for your excellency. And if the city is agreeable to you, (14) that is Aden, inform me thereof, (15) so that I can act accordingly. I shall have no difficulty (16) in traveling to Aden, God willing, (17) soon. Your excellency's servant has much longing (18) and yearning for you. *May God show me the countenance* (19) *of my lord soon!*

[D. Greetings]

For your eminent (20) excellency and their excellencies, the two children, (21) the best, most profuse greetings.

[E. Reference to Ben Yijū's report about Maḍmūn's kindness]

As to (22) what you expressed in your esteemed letter⁷ concerning (23) the action of our master *the Prince of the Lord's People*⁸ with you. May (24) his customary acts of kindness such as this never cease with (25) all mankind!⁹ May the Holy one blessed be He compensate him for (26) all with complete good! *Amen. May it thus* (27) *be willed! And Peace to you. May peace overtake* (28) *peace!*¹⁰ *And much salvation / from east and west.*

have been out in Ceylon for about ten years at least. {In II, 64, Abū 'Alī b. Abū 'Umar (or: 'Amr) writes from Upper Egypt ca. 1167 about his intention to set out for India.}

⁶ Arabic *al-jabal*, is a general designation for inland Yemen, as opposed to Aden. Here, more specifically, Dhū Jibla is meant, the writer's domicile, where he offers to rent a house for Ben Yijū.

⁷ {Arabic *ruq'a*. See 697, n. 7.}

⁸ 'Prince of the Lord's People' {*negid 'am y.*} was one of Maḍmūn's official titles, see {II, 37–40, and in reference to Maḍmūn II, cf.} II, 69, line 4 ff.

⁹ It is interesting to note that Yeshū'ā says about Maḍmūn that he showed kindness to everybody, despite the strained relations existing between his family and Maḍmūn, as reflected in II, 35, 36 and III, 38.

¹⁰ {For 'peace to you,' *we-shālōm lakh*, see III, 1v, line 21, and 563, n. 64, where other references are given. 'May peace overtake peace,' *shālōm yassig shālōm*, unknown from other sources, appears with slight variations also in III, 32 margin, lines 5–6, III, 37v, line 15 (see 715, n. 10); IV, 10v, line 33 (all Yemenite). As Prof. Y. Ratzabi suggested to me, 'may peace overtake peace' is probably an allusion to Lev. 26: 5.}

[F. Additional greetings from one Fayrūz, the writer's children and Ḥasan 'to all']

[Margin] (1) Similarly, your excellency's servant Fayrūz¹¹ extends greetings to your excellency. (2) And all the children and Ḥasan extend greetings to all the excellencies. May your (3) excellency's servant receive an unequivocal reply concerning what you would like me to do! *And Peace.*}

¹¹ A Persian name. This man probably was a slave who served as Yeshū'a's factotum and business agent. {Fayrūz or Firūz ('Turquoise') was a common name for slaves. See Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:138, 433, n. 50, 435, n. 83; Schimmel, *Names*, 71.}

III, 32 *Letter from Joseph ha-Kohen b. Meshullām to Abraham Ben Yijū, in Inland Yemen*

Aden, 1150–51

Bodl. Ms. Heb. d. 66 (Cat. 2878), fol. 61

The letter was written in Aden, as the details about the arrival of the ships and the activities of Maḍmūn b. Ḥasan, the representative of the merchants in that city, prove (cf. lines 18–22). It is addressed to inland Yemen, for the writer speaks about Ben Yijū's 'coming down' to Aden. Likewise, III, 38 was sent to Ben Yijū while he sojourned in inland Yemen. From III, 31, we learn that Ben Yijū, while staying in Aden—or having returned to it, considered leaving that town for the highland of Yemen. It is highly probable that Ben Yijū was the head of a small congregation of Tunisian merchants in the High Yemen (cf. the introduction to III, 31). Our letter, however, presupposes that he intended to return from there to Aden as soon as circumstances permitted.

This letter was written in 1150 or 1151, for Ben Yijū was still in Aden in September 1149 (see III, 29), while Maḍmūn died late in 1151 {see the introduction to III, 38}.

The *Dā'ī*, 'Missionary,' the official title given by the Fatimid caliphs of Egypt to the ruler of Yemen recognized by them, certainly refers here to Muḥammad b. Saba' (ruled 1139–53 or 1155), the most successful Sultan of the Zuray'id dynasty.¹ In 1150, he killed his last major rival, 'Alī b. Abu 'l-Ghārāt (cf. II, 51, line 13),² and in the same year (see Löfgren, *ib.*), he acquired by purchase twenty-eight castles as well as some towns, including Dhū Jibla, then the capital of Yemen. Clearly, our letter refers to these events, which contributed to the pacification of the country. The letter is interesting because of the reference to the high-handed ways of Maḍmūn and other details.

{See the introduction to II, 51, on the conflict between Muḥammad's father, Saba' b. Abū Su'ūd, and 'Alī. Another fragmentary Geniza letter, V, 9, probably refers to a battle between Muḥammad and 'Alī or other rivals and sheds light on the loyalties of the Jewish merchants of Aden. We have

¹ About him, see Strothmann, "Karam," and Löfgren, *Aden*, 2:217. {According to the chronicler 'Umāra al-Yamanī, in his *Ta'rikh al-Yaman*, Muḥammad b. Saba' died in 548 A.H. (March 29, 1153–March 17, 1154). Al-Janādī dates his death to 548, 549 or 540. See Kay, *Yaman*, 278, n. 70. Ibn al-Mujāwir, *Al-Mustabṣir*, 123, supports the 548 date.

² Both 'Umāra al-Yamanī (Kay, *Yaman*, 73) and Ibn al-Mujāwir (*Al-Mustabṣir*, 123) give 545 A.H. (April 30, 1150–April 19, 1151) as the year of 'Alī's death.