

III, 38 *Letter from Yeshū'ā b. Jacob to Abraham Ben Yijū About the Death of Maḍmūn*

Dhū Jibla {1151}

TS 10 J 13, f. 6

Although not being on speaking terms with Maḍmūn's family, Yeshū'ā expresses sympathy on Maḍmūn's death to Abraham Ben Yijū.

For this letter and its connection with III, 31 and III, 33, see the introduction to III, 31. As Ḥalfon, Maḍmūn's son, acknowledges a letter of condolence on the death of his father in October 1152 (II, 62), Maḍmūn's death, reported in this letter, occurred earlier that year or in late 1151.

The letter opens [A] with a preamble in Hebrew, similar to that of III, 33 (lines 1–13).

{As noted in the introduction to III, 31, at the time Yeshū'ā wrote this letter from Dhū Jibla (see margin), Ben Yijū was in Yemen but not in Aden. A novice at trade, residing in a foreign land, informs his correspondent of Maḍmūn's death on October 12, 1151 (VI, 3). Accordingly, the death must have occurred earlier that year.}

#### Translation

#### [B. Announcement of the death of Maḍmūn b. Japheth]

(13) I, your eminent excellency's servant, learned of the death (14) of the *late*<sup>1</sup> master and lord Maḍmūn, *the Mordecai of our time*, (15) *the eminent pillar, the Nagid (Prince) of the land of Yemen, the leader (16) of the congregations, the pride of the communities*<sup>2</sup>—*may his soul be bound up in the bundle of life together with the righteous and pious!*<sup>3</sup>—(17) *son of his honor, great and holy master and lord Japheth—may he rest in Eden!*

<sup>1</sup> Hebrew *ḥay*; see 394, n. 31.

<sup>2</sup> These epithets are partly official titles and partly honorific by-names quite frequently found, as, for example, the expression 'Mordecai of our time,' for which cf. Mann, *Jews*, 2:420. {Cf. Friedman, *Yemenite Messiah*, 195.

<sup>3</sup> The beginning of the blessing is based on 1 Sam. 25:9. 'With the righteous and pious' appears in the blessing of the dead in II, 71, line 15, and in VI, 3, line 13, where it also applies to Maḍmūn. It is found on contemporary tombstones from Aden, as well. See Subar, "Tombstones," 302; Klein-Franke, "Tombstones," 174.}

I, the servant of (18) your excellency, was informed of this by other people, not from a letter that reached me, the servant of (19) your excellency, either from his excellency, my master,<sup>4</sup> or one from their excellencies, (20) my lords and masters, *our master and lord Ḥalfon—may his Rock preserve him!*—and *our master* (21) *and lord Bundār—may the Merciful keep him!*—*the sons of our master Maḍmūn—may he rest in Eden!* (22) But there arrived a letter from the two brothers {lit., 'from their two excellencies'} to friends of mine {alt. tr.: our coreligionists}, (23) which, however, I, the servant of your excellency, have not read. For you—may (24) God make your honored position permanent!—know that their correspondence with the lamented—may God (25) favor him with His preference {read: sanctify his soul!}<sup>5</sup>—was separate from mine {alt. tr.: their correspondence concerning he who may God sanctify his soul was kept separate from me}, your excellency's servant.<sup>6</sup> However, (26) I wrote to his two sons {lit., 'the two eminent excellencies'} that their noble letters (27) should reach

<sup>4</sup> Obviously something {someone else's name after 'master'} is missing here, as the writer can hardly mean to say that he has not received the tidings of Maḍmūn's death from the addressee. Nor is it feasible to complement *min kitāb (ittasala)*, 'a letter addressed to.' For, it would be strange to assume that Ben Yijū had asked the writer to read the letters addressed to him. {The writer may have been uncertain whether or not Ben Yijū already knew of Maḍmūn's death. Thus while he conveyed the news, he commented that he would have expected to have been informed by Ben Yijū, had the latter heard of the death earlier.}

<sup>5</sup> Arabic *mimman qaddama 'llāhu laṭīfahu*. The same eulogy over a dead person appears in {II, 61, line 11, margin, line 2 and} TS 16.250, line 28, published by Goitein, "New Sources," 151a [= Goitein, *Palestinian Jewry*, 292]; *laṭīf* stands here for *laṭīf al-makān*, 'qui jouit d'un grand faveur,' Dozy, *Supplément*, 2:532b; *qaddama* here in the sense of 'to prefer,' Dozy, *ib.*, 2:315b. {Read *qaddasa*, and translate 'may God sanctify his soul.' The expression is to be compared to the common blessing for a dead saint in Arabic, *qaddasa 'llāhu rūḥahu*. *Laṭīf*, literally 'fine, delicate,' etc., does not appear in the dictionaries as denoting 'soul.' Evidence that it has this meaning can be adduced from a poem in Abu 'l-'Alā al-Ma'arri's *Luzūmiyyāt: Al-rūḥ shay' laṭīf*... "The spirit is a delicate matter," etc. I would like to thank Prof. Werner Diem for his suggestion, in a private communication, concerning the reading and the phrase's meaning and for the citation from Abu 'l-'Alā al-Ma'arri's poem. Prof. Joel Kraemer calls my attention to the fact that this depiction of *rūḥ* as a delicate matter is derived from Galenic medicine and cites Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 48–49. Also see Calverley and Netton, "Nafs," and note there, for example, the summary of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's *Kitāb al-Nafs*. Lexicographers have not always understood the parallel expression *qaddasa 'llāhu sirrahū*. Wehr, *Dictionary*, 405, 747, translated this *sirr*, 'secret,' though it clearly means 'soul,' as already correctly translated by Lane, *Dictionary*, 1338.}

<sup>6</sup> The very involved sentence seems to mean that Maḍmūn addressed the writer only on official business and did not entertain with him a correspondence on personal matters. 'Their correspondence' refers to that of the writer's friends. {As I understand the sentence, the writer says that Maḍmūn's sons wrote only other people concerning their father's death and did not inform Yeshū'ā thereof.}

the most beloved {alt. tr.: devoted} servant of their father {lit., 'his excellency'}, (28) to inform you of this, for you are one of the most beloved {alt. tr.: devoted} (29) servants of his excellency.<sup>7</sup>

[C. Greetings and request for information on travel plans.]

To your excellency and to all those embraced (30) by your care, the best greetings. Kindly send me—may God make permanent [Margin] your honored position!—your esteemed letter notifying me whether you will come to Dhū Jibla or travel on the sea...<sup>8</sup>

[D. Address]<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> 'I wrote,' etc. {Arabic *kātaba ḥaḍratahumā al-sāmiya liyattaṣila bi-kutubihimā al-sharifa aḥbabu (!) mamlūk ḥaḍratibi muṭāla'atahā...*} The subject of *kātaba* is *mamlūk*, while the subject of *liyattaṣila* is *aḥbabu*, defined in line 28 by *muṭāla'atahā*. The writer's syntax is somewhat shaky. He obviously wants to say that he had informed Maḍmūn's sons of Ben Yijū's whereabouts, so that they could write to him directly. {Cf. IV, 15-II, 42, margin, line 3 where the words *aḥabba* (spelled: 'ḥbb) 'abduhu muṭāla'atuhu bi-dhālika mean 'your servant wanted to inform you of this.'}

<sup>8</sup> The rest of the letter contains a medley of wishes, among them the wish of compensation for a loss, which obviously refers solely to Ben Yijū's bereavement of Maḍmūn and not to any material losses. After greetings to Ben Yijū's children, the writer concludes: 'may He strengthen their arms *wayumaḥḥil lahu qurabahu* and make strong his relatives'—a phrase not found by me so far elsewhere. {Perhaps *ikblāf 'alā* refers here not to 'compensation for a loss' but to 'satisfy,' 'multiply' good; cf. Dozy, *Supplément*, 1:396. As for 'make strong his relatives,' cf. III, 37, margin, line 2, *wa-tushiddu wasatāka*, 'and strengthen your surroundings.' Similarly, perhaps vocalize here *qurabahu*, 'his environs.'}

<sup>9</sup> The writer's predilection for Hebrew rhymed prose induces him to begin the address of this letter, which is exclusively devoted to the announcement of Maḍmūn's death, with the words: 'May this letter reach in speed and joy...' {Writers often adhered to the conventions of correspondence even when not congruent with the contents of the letter. In II, 61, Maḍmūn's sons begin their (Judeo-Arabic) letter to Sulaymān b. Abū Zikrī Kohen with a florid description of their joy in receiving his letter, in which they learned of the death of his father. Also note the incompatibility between the style and contents of II, 64.}

III, 39 *Letter from Abraham Ben Yijū on the Way to Egypt: Distrust between Associates and Disruption of Family Life*

'Aydhāb, probably 1152

TS 8 J 21, f. 10

Letter from 'Aydhāb (spelled 'Adhāb, 'tribulations'),<sup>1</sup> in which Ben Yijū describes the yearning of his little daughter for the family in Aden with which she had stayed (see III, 41 and III, 50). He would return to Aden, if he were successful in selling his goods in 'Aydhāb.<sup>2</sup>

{After leaving India in 1149, Ben Yijū returned to Yemen, where he stayed about three years. He arranged a marriage for his daughter Sitt al-Dār with a distinguished family in Aden. But then his beloved son died, and he resolved on a reunion with his own kin, then residing in Sicily. He wrote them to join him in Egypt and promised to give Sitt al-Dār in marriage to one of his nephews and leave them all his wealth (III, 41).}

After departing Aden, Ben Yijū writes from the Sudanese port of 'Aydhāb that his daughter cries day and night over her separation from the addressee's family. Obviously she had fallen in love with her intended groom, the son of Khalaf b. Bundār (see line 17; III, 41, line 21 and III, 50, line 6), in whose home she had lived for three years.

Using a conciliatory tone in addressing his correspondent (evidently a member of Khalaf's family) in Aden, Ben Yijū emphasizes that he is not fleeing because of a debt. The money he owes is not worth talking about, and, if he succeeds in returning to Aden, he will pay it in person. The letter is discontinued in the middle of the sentence, and this paper was obviously never sent to Aden but stayed in Ben Yijū's possession.

His hasty departure with Sitt al-Dār evidently led his time-tested associates to conclude that Ben Yijū could no longer be trusted for even a small debt. As we know from other documents, his decision to break the engagement and return to Egypt was deliberate and absolute. This letter suggests that he may have intended to conceal his true intentions. Perhaps

<sup>1</sup> {In lines 6 and 9. The same spelling occurs in III, 40a, line 5; VI, 1, line 13; VI, 31v, line 3. In VI, 1, line 13 the writer makes the pun explicit: *wasatru ilā 'Aydhāb bil-ḥaḡiq innahā balad al-'adhāb*, "I arrived in 'Aydhāb, which truly is the city of 'adhāb (tribulations)." Accordingly, the spelling without *y* in the other texts is not an error but an allusion to the same pun. This, in fact, as called to my attention by Prof. Joel Kraemer, was found in contemporary Arabic sources as well. So in the twelfth century al-Wahrānī, *Manāmāt*, 19: 'Aydhāb bi-kull naḡma wa-'adhāb, "Aydhāb, in all affliction and 'adhāb (tribulations)."

<sup>2</sup> Goitein identified this text, prepared a draft transcription and wrote this brief description; otherwise, no edition was prepared.