

III, 40c *Letter in Abraham Ben Yijū's Hand in Support of Victims of Persecution and Proselytes*

TS 12.458

Ed. Assaf, *Texts*, 149–51 (see *ibid.*, 144–46). Written on verso.

Draft of a letter from one community leader to another with an appeal to contribute towards the support of persons displaced by Christian persecutions (it was Crusader times) and heaping curses on anyone informing against proselytes. (Under Islam, only conversion to the ruling religion was permitted.)

Although Ben Yijū, whose wife and brother-in-law were converts,¹ had a stake in this matter, and although India and Yemen are mentioned, among others, as countries to which copies of the letter should be sent, it seems that this draft was not conceived by Ben Yijū, but dictated to him long before he traveled to the East.

{See Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 2:305 (592, n. 29), on the puzzling nature of this text. Perhaps it was composed in the aftermath of the Norman invasion of the East, which began in 1153.}

¹ {See III, 17 and 639, n. 17.}

III, F. *Reunion of the India Trader with his Extended Family**

Introduction

Joseph Yijū's Family Settles in Egypt

In III, 43, Perahyā, accompanied by his brother Moses, writes to his parents {Joseph, the brother of Abraham Ben Yijū, and his wife} from Messina, Sicily, from where he intended to embark on his journey to the East. In III, 45, Moses is sent back to Mazara via Palermo, in order to get from his father a power of attorney for the claim of certain debts. No. III, 49, written about two years later, is a diffuse letter of about a hundred lines, in which Joseph urges his two sons, whom he believes to have arrived in Egypt, to arrange for the transfer of the rest of the family to that country. No. III, 46, is a letter (dated April 14, 1155) by Moses, who had been captured by pirates and subsequently released, from Tyre or another town in Syria or Palestine, to Perahyā in Egypt, expressing the hope to take part in his forthcoming wedding. No. III, 44 is a short note by one Hajjāj notifying Joseph of a consignment sent to him by his sons. No. III, 48, diffuse and in the same vein as III, 49, written by Samuel, Joseph's third son, warns his brothers, whose exact whereabouts were still not known to the family in Sicily, not to travel owing to the danger of war in the Mediterranean (fall 1156). Finally, III, 55 proves that the Yijūs actually had succeeded in getting to Egypt. For here Perahyā writes to his brother Samuel, who obviously occupied an important position at the rabbinical court of Fustat {to be more precise, was a teacher there},¹ greeting his mother, who lived with the latter, and sending regards from his own wife and two children, the elder bearing the name Joseph after his meanwhile deceased father.

As at least one member of the family had settled in Fustat and was connected with the rabbinical court there, it is not surprising that all these letters had found their way into the Geniza. Still, it is significant that even letters of such transitory importance as III, 45 were not only preserved for such a long time, but also carried overseas on the journey from Sicily to Egypt.

In the addresses of III, 30, III, 43, III, 45, III, 46 and III, 48, Joseph Yijū is called *melammed*, schoolmaster, and in Hajjāj's letter, III, 44 *hazzān*, cantor, and appears as a poor man without regular income.

* {This is a partial introduction to sec. F. Goitein's remarks refer only to III, 43–46, 48–49, 55, since he wrote them before adding the other documents in this section.

¹ See III, 55 (page 785), n. 2 and III, 58.}

The troubles of the Yijū family on their way to Egypt are to be explained against the background of the insecurity prevailing in the Mediterranean in the fifties of the twelfth century. In addition to the continually precarious situation on the coast of Tunisia and Tripolitania, there were raids of the Norman fleet on the coastal towns of Egypt, one on Tinnīs in 1153/4 and one on Damietta, Tinnīs, Rosetta, and Alexandria in August 1155.² In addition, piracy was strife.³ Finally, there loomed the danger of a total war by the Almohads. The conquest of Tunisia and Tripolitania by these fanatic sectarians was accomplished only in 1159/60. However, Ibn al-Athīr reports that for their drive to the East, the Almohads stored up the crops of three years.⁴ No. III, 48 (lines 27–29) contains the interesting fact, obviously not yet noted in literary sources, that the Almohad fleet, too, was preparing for that great onslaught three years ahead.

Naturally, the financing of the family's move from Sicily to Egypt also presented a problem, as we see from various passages, e.g., III, 43, lines 19–20; III, 48*v*, lines 14–18; III, 49*v*, lines 17–20, especially the two latter, in which the help of the Head of the Jews in Egypt is solicited. One wonders why Abraham Ben Yijū did not provide for this, after he had invited his brother in such glowing terms. The fact that in all these letters, greetings are never extended to him, while his daughter, Sitt al-Dār, the bride, is greeted most affectionately (see {III, 46, margin, line 4–5} III, 49*v*, line 30) only adds to the puzzle. On the other hand, when Ben Yijū was mentioned (as III, 49*v*, line 29), no blessing for the dead was added, which would certainly not have lacked in these letters of utmost family attachment, had he died recently. {On the rift between Ben Yijū and his nephew Peraḥyā, see III, 50, and on the time of Abraham's death, III, 51 and III, 54.}

² See Amari, *Musulmani di Sicilia*, 3:433 and 477, who suggests that the first raid was perhaps directed against Tanas on the Algerian coast.

³ See III, 46 and III, 48.

⁴ Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, 11:159.

III, 41 *Letter from Abraham Ben Yijū to his Brother Joseph in Mazara, Sicily*
Fustat, September 1153 {1152}

TS 12.337

Ed. Simonsohn and Gil, "Sicily," 36–39; an English translation appears in Simonsohn, *Sicily*, 402–4. Written in Abraham Ben Yijū's best hand. Clearly, this is a copy of a draft made by him, for at the bottom of the page; one line had been dropped and was filled in by him afterwards with the sharp end of the pen and in characters of a narrower type.

The date of the letter can be fixed by the following considerations. In line 22, Ben Yijū states that his young daughter had remained for three years in the house of a Yemenite notable in Aden. He had arrived there in the fall of 1149 (see III, 29). When Ben Yijū's nephew—whom he invited to join him—was on his way to Egypt in the fall of 1154, he already sent certain goods to his father in Mazara, Sicily (cf. III, 48, lines 31 ff.). In III, 51, Ben Yijū made arrangements for the provision of oil for a little synagogue, certainly headed by him, as from fall 1153. All this taken together shows that Ben Yijū must have traveled from Aden to Cairo in spring or summer 1153, while the reference in line 34 to the Feast of the Cross indicates September as the time of the writing of our letter.¹

The letter is interesting for various reasons. It shows again, like III, 29, the strong family attachment of the Tunisian merchant. Although rich merchants, both in Aden and in Cairo, wanted their sons to marry his daughter, he preferred to save her for his poor, refugee nephew—of course, on one condition: that the future son-in-law should be '*learned in Torah*' (line 12). Ben Yijū had had opportunity to inquire both from his brother Mevassēr and from Sicilian merchants frequenting Aden and Fustat (see lines 26–27) about the prospective bridegroom. Having been favorably impressed by these reports, he invites him to come and marry his daughter. Surūr/Peraḥyā, Ben Yijū's nephew, certainly was a learned Jew, as his letters show. From III, 55 we learn that he became a

¹ {In Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:336: "around 1150"; 5:191: "ca. 1152." The first year must be seen as only a general approximation of the date, since it does not allow for the three years mentioned here, and it is also clear that Ben Yijū was in Yemen at the time of Maḍmūn b. Japheth's death in 1151 (see the introduction to III, 38). However, it is probable that Ben Yijū already arrived in Egypt in 1152. Note that according to verso, line 8, he had received a letter in Aden 'this year.' According to Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 2:480, no. 28, Ben Yijū arrived in Old Cairo in 1151 or 1152.