

{III, 47a Letter from Moses Yijū to Abu 'l-Fakhr Ibn al-Amshāṭī, Fustat Alexandria, ca. June 29, 1155

TS 13 J 18, f. 13

Cited in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 3:473, n. 7, 474, n. 13.¹

Moses Yijū ("Moses son of his honor, our master and lord Joseph the teacher—may he live until the coming of the messiah!") writes a brief letter, almost complete, which is addressed to the family's patron Abu 'l-Fakhr b. Abraham but opens with salutations to 'the two esteemed brothers,' namely the addressee and his brother, here named 'Alī. Towards the end of the document greetings are sent to Abū 'Alī, who is evidently the same individual. Abū 'Alī Ibn Al-Amshāṭī is known from sources discussed in pages 103–4, and with the assistance of this letter he can be identified as Abu 'l-Fakhr Saadya's brother Ḥananel. Greetings are also extended here to an anonymous brother, apparently the third brother, Ḥayyīm. The letter thus not only testifies to the Yijū family's dependence on the Ibn al-Amshāṭīs but also provides additional information on members of that illustrious family.

The letter is almost certainly connected to III, 47. Moses decided not to rely entirely on his brother Perahyā to ask Abu 'l-Fakhr's advice on what to do with the lac that he wanted to sell in Alexandria, as implied in III, 47*v*, lines 1–3, and addressed that important merchant directly:

(14) I have attached² these few lines to you to inform you of my condition and what happened (15) to me on disembarking. Your eminent excellency is well aware of (16) travel to Alexandria.³ I don't know what to do. (17) Should I sell that lac or leave it?⁴ I request (18) sound advice. Please do this act of complete kindness for (19) me, your servant, who is staying here.}

¹ {The citation in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 3:433, n. 69, is a typographical error, and should read TS 13 J 8, f. 13. There is a mistake in citing the incorrect page number in Reif, *Bibliography*, 157, 165, and subsequently Goitein, *ib.*, 6:179. Goitein did not prepare an edition of this document or relate it to the documents in this book.

² Arabic *'allaqtu*. Moses evidently attached this letter to the letter he had written his brother Perahyā, III, 47, which deals with the same matter. The same usage appears in Perahyā's letter, III, 45, line 1.

³ The difficulties Moses suffered upon disembarking from the ship in which he traveled to Alexandria preoccupied him, and therefore he said he would begin his letter by describing them. Upon consideration, he decided that a hint would suffice. More details appear in his letters in III, 46, lines 30 ff., and III, 47, lines 17 ff.

⁴ Perhaps the lac should not be sold until it could fetch a better price. Cf. III, 47, lines 22 ff.}

III, 48 Letter from Samuel b. Joseph Yijū to His Brothers Perahyā and Moses, Alexandria or Fustat²

Mazara, late fall {or, summer} 1156

Bodl. MS. Heb. b. 11 (Cat. 2874), fol. 15

Ed. Zeldes and Frenkel, "The Sicilian Trade," 109–17; English translation: Simonsohn, *Jews in Sicily*, 1:412–15.

Childish, oblong letters, about 4 mm. high. Like his father—see III, 49 {and brother Moses}—Samuel puts in many *w*'s and *y*'s to express short *u*'s and *i*'s, e.g. *tdkwr* for *tadhkur*, line 7, or *ybm* for *'ilm*, line 16, of course, without consistency, compare *kwtkm* in line 6 with *ktbkm*, line 22, and *ktb*, line 24, and sometimes he omits the *matres lectionis* for long vowels, *hl* for *h'l*, line 10.¹ Like some other Maghrebi writers, Samuel puts a horizontal stroke over *g* to indicate that it should be pronounced *j*, lines 26 and 39, and a dot in final *k* to indicate that it should be read *k* and not *kh*, lines 12–13, 30, 45 and—most significantly—once, verso margin, in *kathira* a dot in *r*. Cf. Goitein, "Autographs," 398, n. 19 (in reference to such a *dagesh* in a word in IV, 36, line 6).² The name of the coin *rubā'ī* is mostly abbreviated *rb'*, with only half of the *alif* written.³

As to the date of the letter, Samuel mentions letters of his brothers Perahyā and Moses, which had arrived in the first ten days of the month of Tammuz of (4)916 A.M., corresponding exactly to the last ten days of June, 1156. This reference {to the year} clearly indicates that the letter was written after the beginning of another year A.M.; on the other hand, the contents show that it is an answer to those letters, i.e., it was written in the same year C.E., in time to be sent with the ships going out to the African coast. The year (4)917 A.M. began on 17 September, 1156. Thus, our letter must have been written at the end of September or beginning of October that year.⁴

¹ {See, however, the note there.

² On the doubling of *r*, see the discussions by Liebes, "Double *Reish*"; Morag, "Response"; Liebes, "Response."

³ The same abbreviation appears elsewhere, e.g., III, 45, line 7.

⁴ Mention of the year 4916 suggests that the letter was written after the beginning of 4917, but this is not conclusive. When referring to a letter that arrived in the previous year, Perahyā Yijū specifically writes 'last year, the year (4)911' (III, 30, line 8). In III, 48, line 31, Samuel mentions receipt of a slip of paper in 4915. The year 4916 may have been noted here for the sake of clarity, though this letter was written in the same calendar year. Elsewhere in his notes, Goitein dated III, 48: July 1156. Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:317 and 482, n. 36, comments that ships arrived in Egypt from Sicily in August, one after seventeen days at sea (cf. *ibid.*, 1:325–26), and that letters from Sicily dated in Tishre (September–October), the new calendar year, were probably sent to Tunisia and from there forwarded to Egypt by land. On the duration of voyages from Sicily to Alexandria, see also Udovitch,

As in spring 1156, Peraḥyā and Moses had sent separate letters to their parents; they certainly did not stay together. Moses most probably was still in Tyre or another place on the Syrian or Palestinian coast, as in III, 46 {or in Alexandria},⁵ Peraḥyā was in Fustat.

The events after III, 43 can be reconstructed as follows: The two brothers did not move immediately to Egypt, as Moses had been discouraged from doing so {III, 43, lines 21–22}; on the other hand, he refused to come home empty handed (see *ib.*). Thus, the brothers did business, perhaps in Greece, which then contained many flourishing Jewish communities, but perhaps also in Egypt, and, in the fall of 1154, sent home a considerable consignment, which, as we see here, sec. D, was sufficient to keep the family for at least two years. The capital for their undertakings most probably came from the assets of their father referred to in III, 45. A second consignment was carried home to Sicily by Moses himself. The ship in which he traveled was, however, attacked by pirates, described here as ‘those in the galleys’ {‘the men of the *shinīs*’}, line 18, and Moses, together with other Jews, was captured (for the sake of securing ransom—one hundred dinars for three persons captured.⁶ Why Jews only? Maybe the pirates were of the same nationality as the ship captured, but more probably our writer mentions only Jews because this was proof that his brother was among the captured. {Elsewhere in his notes, Goitein writes: “It was a Christian boat, therefore the Christian pirates took only the Jews.”} When the Normans took Corinth in Greece in 1147/8, they captured the Jews and the well-to-do,⁷ because it was well known that even poor Jews would be ransomed by their coreligionists.

The pirates themselves obviously were harassed, for they had to leave the ship, which safely arrived in Messina. There the commander of the port laid his hand on the cargo of the persons captured. As we clearly see, the Yijū family in Mazara earnestly hoped to get back the bales destined for them (see line 24 and in particular line 44).

“Time,” 510, 550; on 550–51, he suggests that there was no direct shipping line between Sicily and Alexandria, and the ships sailed via North Africa. Goitein, *Letters*, 256, n. 3, mentions a case where there was no boat sailing from Alexandria to Tripoli, and one had to take a boat to Palermo and from there continue to Libya.

⁵ See my note to III, 46, introduction, III, 46, lines 26–28 and note to line 28. Moses is likely to have been in Alexandria, as in III, 47, and accordingly the letter is addressed to Alexandria or Fustat. Also see the introduction to III, 49, end.

⁶ See Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:329.

⁷ See Amari, *Musulmani di Sicilia*, 3:441.

As no mention is made of Moses’ being ransomed with money (the sum would have been 133 {1/3} *rubāʿīs*), Norman ships on their way to Tyre most probably attacked the pirates, and freed their captives. Thus, we find Moses in that town, where he arrived half dead.⁸

No. III, 48 contains a number of points of general interest; see pages 725–26, 764–66 {several of the issues touched on here are clarified there}, and the notes below.

Contents

- A. Preamble (lines 1–5).
- B–D. See the translation below.
- E. The despair of the parents (line 45–verso, line 13).
- F. Request to ask the Head of the Jewish community in Egypt, the court physician Samuel b. Ḥananyā, to act on behalf of the passage of the Yijū family from Sicily to Egypt {see III, 49, sec. I} (verso, lines 14–20).
- G. Greetings, etc., and local news (verso, lines 20–36 margin and 37).
- H. Detailed address.

Translation of B–D

[B. Request for information on Moses’ capture by pirates and other matters referred to in Peraḥyā’s letters]

(5) In your letters (6), which arrived during the first ten days of Tammuz of the year (4)916, (7) you mentioned that Moses had been captured. The moment we read (8) the letter, we grieved and wept (9) very much. Father and mother *could not speak*⁹ from (10) sorrow about my brother Moses and about you {alt. tr.: because of what befell my brother Moses and your sorrow}.¹⁰ However, when we saw (11) the letter of Moses, *my*

⁸ See III, 46, lines 30–31. {Moses wrote there that he disembarked gravely ill and did not expect to live, but he did not specifically say that this was when he had arrived in Tyre. He may have been referring to his disembarkment at another port on the coast after having left that city.

⁹ Cf. Gen. 37:4.} Strong feelings are expressed in Hebrew (cf. line 12); see the introduction to III, 49.

¹⁰ {I assume Goitein read the Arabic *li-mā ʿazza ʿalā ḥal ʿalā akhi Moshe wa-ʿalā qalbika*, taking *ḥal* as a defective spelling for *ḥāl*; see the technical comments at the beginning of the introductory remarks. With some latitude this could be translated approximately: ‘because

brother and head,¹¹ which contained *biblical verses* that indicated that (12) he had been released, *we became consoled*.¹²

He did not explain how everything (13) occurred, neither how he had been captured, nor how he had been released, nor did (14) my brother Abu 'l-Surūr¹³ explain what (15) he was doing and what caused him not to mention his cousin [lit., 'the daughter of his paternal uncle'],¹⁴ (16) nor how much [lit., 'how much merchandise'] had been lost.

We had had no knowledge that (17) my brother Moses had been captured. Only some people¹⁵ reported that (18) Jews had been captured and that the pirates¹⁶ had taken the Jews (19) and their light baggage,¹⁷ while

of his sorrow over the condition, that is of my brother Moses and of your heart.' Obviously there is something out of order in the text. Zeldes and Frenkel, "The Sicilian Trade," 109, supply the word *mā* and evidently vocalize *li-mā 'azza 'alayya <mā> ḥalla 'alā akhī Moshe wa-'alā qalbika*, translating (p. 114, in Hebrew) 'because what befell my brother Moses and your heart was hard on me.' But Samuel's parents' inability to speak was hardly because of his reaction to the bad news but rather because of their reaction to it. I suggest that Samuel had intended to write *li-mā ḥalla 'alā akhī Moshe wa-'azza 'alā qalbika*, but in his haste he wrote the phrases out of place. Alternatively, the wording reflects an afterthought in phraseology: *li-mā 'azza 'alā—ḥalla 'alā—akhī Moshe wa-'alā qalbika*, 'because of the sorrow at—of what befell—Moses,' etc. From verso, lines 23 ff. it is evident that his father Joseph dictated the letter to Samuel, and this may have contributed to the irregularities in wording. The clause discussed here parallels III, 49, lines 26–27: '*alā mā jarā 'alā* [...] *Moshe wa-qalbihi wa-'alā mā laqā qalbaka*, 'because of what happened to [...] Moses and his heart and what befell your heart.'

¹¹ This strange expression, which is found also in III, 49v, line 29, has its origin in Gen. 46:21, where these words designate names, explained, in the sense translated here, in Ber. R., 3:1179. {The Hebrew reads *ehi* (the *aleph* is pointed *e*) *wā-rōsh*, lit., 'Ehi and Rosh,' the names listed in Gen. 46:21. Zeldes and Frenkel, "The Sicilian Trade," 109, 110, n. 11, did not notice the vocalization of the *aleph*, read *ahī* and rendered: 'the brother of Warāsh' (similarly, Simonsohn, 413), which they took to be the name of Perahyā's cousin and intended bride, Abraham Ben Yijū's daughter (see line 15), none of which makes sense.}

¹² Instead of describing the events, Moses had expressed his gratitude to God for his rescue by many quotations from the Bible. {Cf. III, 46, line 3, where Moses quotes Ps. 68:7. While that letter was addressed to his brother Perahyā in Fustat, Moses must have included similar verses in the letter he wrote to his family in Sicily.

¹³ I.e., Perahyā.}

¹⁴ I.e., the bride. See pages 81–82, 726.

¹⁵ {'Some people' translates *al-nās*, which in these letters often means 'merchants' or 'traveling merchants.' See 239, n. 4.

¹⁶ Arabic *aṣḥāb al-shawānī*, lit., 'the men of the *shinīs*.' See Goitein, "Glimpses," 395, where this document is cited; similarly, id., *Med. Soc.*, 1:477, n. 13, where *shinī* (pl. *shawānī*) is defined as a war galley and *aṣḥāb al-shawānī* as pirates or raiders. Cf. Christides, "Shinī"; Bosworth, "Safīna," 810a. Zeldes and Frenkel, "The Sicilian Trade," 110, suggest the historical background intended here. Also see Maimonides, *Responsa*, 1:153, no. 93 (cited by Zeldes and Frenkel), concerning a merchant who sailed to Sicily and was taken captive when *al-shawānī*, 'pirates,' attacked his ship. See also *shinī* in line 27. For *aṣḥāb al-markab*, 'sailors,' cf. page 142.

¹⁷ Arabic *khiff*. See 260, n. 6.}

the heavy cargo had remained in the ship. (20) When the ship arrived in Messina, part of the cargo {alt tr.: 'the merchandise'} was sequestered¹⁸ by the (21) commander Mubashshir.¹⁹ However, we had no details about Moses {alt. tr.: we were unable to verify Moses' situation}, until (22) your letters arrived. This is what they said concerning the heavy items, (23) that they had been sequestered. No one came and said: I was there or I saw. (24) We sent a number of letters to Messina with the request that someone send us back (25) an answer, but no one replied.

[C. Warning not to travel that year, owing to the threat of war]

We sent you, in (26) the ship of Janūnayn,²⁰ two letters and another letter to Tripoli²¹ (27) this year, for we had heard that forty galleys²² (28) of the adversary²³ had arrived at Bijāya²⁴ and some arrived (29) at other places, which might be dangerous {lit., 'are to be feared'}. Please, brother, (30) neither of you should travel. *The Lord will guard your* (pl.) *going and coming!*²⁵

¹⁸ Arabic *'uqila*, an expression very frequent in papers from the Mediterranean, referring to seizure by a ruler or his representative. {The word appears twice here, the second time in the active, *'aqalahu*, 'he sequestered it'; see also line 23. For its use in a letter from Alexandria in reference to the Jewish representative of the merchants in Aden, see 292, n. 6. 'Merchandise' here translates *shay*, so defined by Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:452, n. 1.

¹⁹ On Mubashshir and the Muslims in service of the Norman kingdom in Sicily, see III, 49 introduction and verso, line 17 (pages 766, 768).

²⁰ For the name Janūnī-Guenoun, see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 3:491, n. 58. Here the dual is used, the two Janūnīs-Guenouns. For this family of traders and ship owners, see Zeldes and Frenkel, "The Sicilian Trade," 111, n. 26, where reference is also made to Ben-Sasson, *Sicily*, 695; cf. Gil, *Ishmael*, 4:847.}

²¹ Tripoli, as most of Eastern Tunisia, was at that time in Norman hands, and Perahyā certainly had expressed in a previous letter his intention to travel there. It is not difficult to imagine why he did so. His uncle and prospective father-in-law, Abraham Ben Yijū, certainly visited his homeland, Tunisia, after having come back from India, and we may assume that he had asked his nephew to join him there. {Goitein seems to have discarded this suggestion in later writings; see 731, n. 32. There is no evidence that Ben Yijū made that trip, and had he done so, in light of his disenchantment with his nephew Perahyā (see III, 50), it is unlikely that he would have invited him to join him. See above, n. 4, concerning forwarding letters sent from Sicily to Egypt via Tunisia. Perhaps here the writer alluded to an extra copy of a letter to Egypt sent by that route, as a precautionary measure.

²² Arabic *shinī*. See note 16.}

²³ Obviously, the Almohads {adversaries of the Almoravids} are referred to, see pages 725–26. {Cf. Goitein, *Med. Soc.* 1:308, 478, n. 22, where this passage is cited; Zeldes and Frenkel, "The Sicilian Trade," 111, n. 28. The possessive is expressed here by Arabic *matā*; see 662, n. 13.}

²⁴ Bougie, Algeria.

²⁵ {Cf. Ps. 121:8.

[D. Report about the shipments entrusted to Ḥajjāj]

(31) In Marḥeshwān 915,²⁶ we received a slip (32) of paper²⁷ //from Ḥajjāj—may he be remembered [[for his deeds]]²⁸—// saying “Your sons have sent you (33) something {alt. tr.: some merchandise} with me; as soon as I unpack {it},²⁹ I shall send it to you.” He sent one hundred *rubāʿīs* (34) less eleven *rubāʿīs*.³⁰ We consumed them that year, for there was (35) great dearth {lit., ‘hunger’}, one *mudd* of wheat costing eight *rubāʿīs*,³¹ (36) and finally³² ten *rubāʿīs*. When the year was over, there did not remain of that sum (37) even the smallest balance {lit., ‘there remained only the smallest thing’}. Wanting to secure our livelihood, we sent (38) him a number of letters. After we had appealed for assistance from {alt. tr.: humbly appealed to}³³ Sheikh Abu (39) ʿI-Faraj,³⁴ who did not disappoint us—please send him a letter (40) of thanks—he³⁵ sent us another one hundred *rubāʿīs*, less ten *rubāʿīs*. (41) However, he did not forward to us letters,³⁶—although we had sent to him, (42) imploring him to do so—nor did he send us anything {alt. tr.: any merchandise}, so

²⁶ 4915 A.M. = October 9–November 7, 1154.

²⁷ The slip of paper referred to here is our III, 44.

²⁸ {In III, 49, line 38, Joseph writes ‘Ḥajjāj, may he be remembered,’ *yizzākḥēr*, omitting the usual continuation, *be-tōv(ā)*, ‘for good, favorably’ (for which see 682, n. 15). In his transcription of that text, Goitein noted that the missing word should be supplied. While III, 48 and III, 49, contain many errors, I am not convinced that this omission in both with reference to Ḥajjāj was accidental. The word *be-tōvā* appears in other blessings in III, 48*v*, line 34 and III, 49, line 10. Here the writer may have intended that Ḥajjāj be remembered for his misconduct but then decided to delete the word meaning ‘for his deeds.’ Mention of malefactors was followed by a vilification such as *yizzākḥēr be-maʿasāw hā-rāʿim*, ‘may he be remembered for his bad deeds,’ so TS 10 J 12, f. 1, line 10; *yizzākḥērū be-shamattā*, ‘may they remembered with a ban’, so, in VI, 31, line 4.

²⁹ Arabic *nanḥall*. Cf. 744, n. 9.

³⁰ It is not clear why Samuel writes here and in line 40, one hundred less eleven or ten respectively, while his father, referring to the same consignment, speaks of 90 (III, 49, line 42). The ten or eleven *rubāʿīs* may include both transport costs and broker’s fees (but could include a commission which Ḥajjāj took for himself).

³¹ The same statement appears in III, 49, line 6. The *mudd* had many different values; see Hinz, *Islamische Masse*, 45–47 [cf. Gil, “Masse,” 168]. In the Maghreb, it corresponded in the late Middle Ages to 4.32 liters.

³² Arabic *yaqūm bi-*. The translation is not certain. {In III, 49, line 6, Joseph writes that wheat cost eight *rubāʿīs*, without adding this remark.

³³ Arabic *taḍarruʿ*, lit., ‘humbling ourselves.’ Cf. line 42, *nataraddaʿu* (translated there ‘implored’). For the use of the verb *drʿ* in petitions, see Khan, *Arabic Documents*, 312.

³⁴ Ibn Masnūṭ, mentioned here verso, line 16 and III, 49*v*, line 26.

³⁵ Ḥajjāj.

³⁶ Your letters. {Clarified in III, 49, line 39.

that we do not know (43) the quantity {add: of the merchandise}.³⁷ Please inform us how much you had sent (44) with Ḥajjāj and what was lost,³⁸ how many bales {alt. tr.: items},³⁹ <<what sign was on them, how they looked, and whether your name was written on them>>. Maybe, God willing, some of them will be salvaged.

³⁷ Such a letter of appeal by Joseph Yijū, requesting information on the lost goods is found in III, 57.

³⁸ When Moses was taken off the ship in which the bales were carried.

³⁹ {Arabic *kam min qitʿa*. For *qitʿa*, see 168, n. 1.}