

III, 50 *Letter from Peraḥyā Yijū to the Nagid, Complaining about Abraham Ben Yijū*

Egypt {probably early 1156}

ENA NS 4, f. 13

In a fragmentary letter Peraḥyā copies a complaint that he wrote to the Nagid about his uncle Abraham Ben Yijū, who treated him with contempt for being lackluster and inept. Peraḥyā had left his position (as a teacher in Sicily),¹ and, following his uncle's invitation to join him and marry his daughter, faced the dangers of a sea voyage. Khalaf b. Bundār of Aden had offered to provide for the same girl a marriage gift of 500 dinars—an absolutely exceptional sum—plus household equipment, etc., offers with which Peraḥyā, of course, could not compete. See III, 54, the marriage agreement between Peraḥyā and his bride.

{In his letter III, 49v, lines 15–20, Joseph Yijū had written to his sons Peraḥyā and Moses, and urged them to appeal to the Nagid Samuel b. Ḥananyā to help Joseph travel to Egypt. At the end of the copy of an earlier mostly illegible letter (see below), Peraḥyā copies—or writes a draft—of the body of another letter to *sayyidnā*, 'our lord,' undoubtedly the same Nagid. Here he appeals to the Nagid for assistance against his uncle Abraham Ben Yijū. In doing so, he quotes Abraham's letter to his father Joseph, where the 500 dinars and other wealth were, in my opinion, likely to have been the reward promised Peraḥyā for coming to marry Abraham's daughter, rather than the marriage gift offered by Khalaf b. Bundār for his son. The qualities, his lack of which caused his uncle to hold him in disdain, were, according to Peraḥyā, 'hollow pomp and pushiness.' Abraham, contrariwise, must have defined them as dignified bearing and assertiveness.

The old India trader probably had hoped that his nephew and intended son-in-law would continue his business activities. To his disappointment, he saw in Peraḥyā nothing more than a naive, mediocre scholar. Abraham repeatedly delayed the wedding, which was not celebrated until after his death; see III, 54.

Goitein prepared a draft copy of the text of III, 50 and in his Summaries, provided the description, which is largely reproduced above. But he did not translate the letter or otherwise comment on it.

¹ {This is not stated explicitly here in line 11, which is fragmentary; but cf. III, 43, margin; III, 57, line 18.

A further note is in order concerning the primary document, on the blank space of which III, 50 is written. Recto of the manuscript contains the lower right-hand corner of a letter in Peraḥyā's hand. Verso contains the right side of the letter's last few lines, in which greetings were extended. Below this, Peraḥyā later wrote the draft or copy of his letter to the Nagid. The primary document is a family letter. While several words can be deciphered with a reasonable degree of certainty, the whole is too fragmentary and effaced to attempt an edition. As a working hypothesis, I suggest that it may be a copy of a letter from Joseph Yijū (penned by his son Peraḥyā) to his sister (line 3, *yā ukhtī* [?]) and her family (the masculine is used in addressing the recipient). Marwān is mentioned (line 5), and this could be Marwān b. Zikrī, the brother-in-law to whom Abraham Ben Yijū sent greetings (III, 29, line 25; III, 41v, line 5). On verso, line 3, the writer sends regards from 'my wife (*ahli*) the mother of Abu 'l-Surūr (?).' If the reading of the last word is correct, this would be Joseph's wife called by the honorary by-name Umm Abu 'l-Surūr, after Joseph's firstborn son, Peraḥyā (= Abu 'l-Surūr). The first word in verso, line 2, is *bil-intiqāl*, 'for moving,' which hypothetically could refer to Joseph's request that his sister and her family move to join him, perhaps from Tunisia to Sicily (he mentions Mes-sina in the margin on recto). But of course, all of this is speculative.

Translation

(1) I inform our lord—may God protect you!—[. . . that I have] (2) an uncle [who had been] in India, named Abraham b. [Peraḥyā Ben Yijū, . . . who came] (3) to Fustat. He² received letters from [Yemen . . .] (4) in which he³ told him:

I have arrived at⁴ [. . .] (5) 500 dinars, household equipment and gold⁵ and [. . . I agreed to marry] the son of Sheikh Khalaf b. Bundār to [my daugh-

² My father. Peraḥyā must have mentioned his father Joseph in the missing part of line 2. The syntax in the fragmentary lines 3–4 is elusive. On the basis of this document alone, one might assume that Peraḥyā wrote that his uncle Mevassēr arrived in Fustat and there received letters from Abraham, who was in Yemen, inviting Joseph to send Peraḥyā to marry Abraham's daughter Sitt al-Dār.

³ My uncle Abraham.

⁴ Cf. III, 29, line 3; III, 41, line 10. Abraham announced his arrival from India to Yemen and Egypt.

⁵ As in his introductory remarks here, Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 3:137, 456, n. 97, cites the 500 dinars mentioned here as the marriage gift promised by the son of Khalaf b. Bundār,

ter... But when I heard about] (7) your son, I disengaged her from him⁶ in deference [to your son⁷...] (8) This money⁸ [for] which [I] have toiled will be [his...] (9) Do not let him tarry o[ne] moment [...]⁹

[...I set out] (10) traveling by boat on the open sea¹⁰ in the Mediterranean, and [I] wrote¹¹ [...] (11) of this. And I abandoned the station which [I had...] (12) And people have much regard for me [...] [Margin] And be looked down on me in view of my having little hollow pomp and little pushiness,¹² in which I have no aptitude. And he puts [me] off [...]

whose name appears in the next line, for the hand of Ben Yijū's daughter. In 4:413, n. 279, Goitein adds a correction concerning the sum: which, no doubt, was in Adenese dinars, each worth approximately one-third of the Egyptian dinar. In any event, I suggest that the wealth spoken of in this line refers to Abraham b. Yijū's fortune which he promised to share with his family and give to his future son-in-law in his letter, III, 41, lines 13, 18 ff. (cf. III, 29, lines 5, 14–16, 21–22, 27–28), only after which, in lines 21 ff., did he mention the engagement to Khalaf b. Bundār's son that he had broken off.

⁶ From Khalaf's son.

⁷ Cf. III, 41, lines 22–24.

⁸ Arabic *dirhām* (dirhem). Abraham Ben Yijū uses the same expression in his letter to his brother, III, 29, line 27; see 684, n. 33.

⁹ Cf. III, 41, lines 32–33.

¹⁰ Arabic *mawṣaṭa* = *mawṣaṭa*. For this meaning, see Maimonides, *Responsa*, 2:410, n. 213, n. 4. This might imply that the ship sailed directly across the Mediterranean from Sicily to Egypt, rather than along the coast, as was usually done. If so, Perahyā intended to emphasize the dangers he endured to make the trip.

¹¹ Or: he wrote it (*wa saṭara[hu]*). Line 10 is a later insertion.

¹² Arabic *bahraja*... *ṣitiṣatt*. *Lisān al-'Arab*, 2:52, defines *ṣatta* 'push with force, strike with a hand'; Piamenta, *Dictionary*, 277: 'to yell, to make a fuss.' *Satta* also means 'pick a quarrel.'

III, 51 *Calendar for the Years September 1153–September 1156 for Abraham Ben Yijū's Private Synagogue*

Egypt, 1153–56

TS 10 K 20, f. 1

Published in Mann, *Jews*, 2:291–92.

Calendar in Abraham Ben Yijū's hand for the years September 1153–September 1156, in which he assigned for each year in advance the monthly expenses for the illumination of a synagogue to a number of persons, including Abraham himself and his brother-in-law Abū 'Alī. Thus, September 1155 is the last date on which Abraham Yijū is known to have been alive. He was probably staying in a place other than Fustat (where private synagogues were not tolerated).

{The above statement concerning the opposition to private synagogues and the conclusion that Ben Yijū was not staying in Fustat, is to be compared with Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 2:166 (555, n. 45), with reference to this document:}

While the formation of secessionist congregations was vehemently opposed, small, private places of worship must have been common and were tolerated because of their transitory character... A scholarly India trader who had been away in the East for over two decades and had brought back from there his native in-laws perhaps felt more comfortable keeping a little private synagogue for a certain period of transition. (He kept the place for at least three years. Later on we find him in another town)... An in-law from India contributed to a public appeal, proving that small temporary places of prayer did not interfere with the regular activities of the community.

{Our document is discussed in detail by Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 2:480–81, no. 28, as one of many lists of contributors. Because of the relevance of those comments to Ben Yijū's biography, I quote a large portion:}

A booklet with a calendar for three years (Sept. 21, 1153–Sept. 6, 1159 {this is a misprint; read: Sept. 16, 1156}) indicating for each year the persons who donated the olive oil for the uninterrupted illumination of a synagogue of one month, a few individuals for two months...¹

The list is in the unmistakable hand of the Maghrebi India traveler Abraham (Ibn) Yijū, who returned from India to Aden in 1149 and from there to Old Cairo in 1151 or 1152. 'Abū 'Alī, the brother-in-law of Ibn

¹ {On the use of oil for illumination in synagogues, cf. Gil, "Supplies of Oil," with reference to this document on 64 (n. 8), 68 (n. 41), 71.