

## H

I gave instructions that my letters to you should be in the hands of the elder Abraham b. Joseph, . . . Ibn al-Baqqāl ("Grocer")—may God ordain his safe arrival. And, by God, come as quickly as possible to Aden.

And kiss the soil<sup>16</sup> before my lord, *our teacher* Labrat, the *Dayyān* (*Judge*), *son of his honor, our master and teacher* Moses, the *Dayyān*—*may he rest in the garden of Eden* (and convey to him) the best greetings; and to all my friends *of my age class*, the best greetings. *And Peace.*

## I

I heard what happened to the coastland of Ifrīqiya, Tripoli, Jerba, Qarqanna, Sfax, al-Mahdiyya, and Sūsa. No letter, however, from which I could learn who died and who remained alive, has arrived. By God, write exact details and send your letters with reliable people to soothe my mind. *And Peace.*

(Address, right side:)

This letter shall reach my dear brothers—may God prolong [their lives]—Joseph and Mevassēr, the sons of Perahya, . . . Ben<sup>17</sup> Yijū. God may recompense him that will be concerned to make an effort to transmit it into their hands, *and from the Lord he will receive good reward.*

Convey and get remuneration.

*This is a deposit entrusted.*

(Left side:)

Their brother, who is longing for them, may God unite him with them, Abraham, son of Perahyā, . . . Ben Yijū. To al-Mahdiyya, if God will, or anywhere else in Ifrīqiya.

<sup>16</sup> Used in reference to a judge, Muslim or Jewish. Yijū had no doubt studied under Labrat II (see no. 38, introduction, above), and was himself an accomplished talmudical scholar, as is evident from the many learned notes written by him on the reverse sides of letters received in his office.

<sup>17</sup> I leave here "Ben" (instead of "Ibn"), because Ben Yijū, especially in the French spelling Benichou, is still common among Jews of North African origin, of whom Paul Benichou, the author of *Morales du Grand Siècle* (6th ed., 1948) is particularly well known.

42 LETTER TO MOSES MAIMONIDES FROM  
HIS BROTHER DAVID  
WHILE ON HIS WAY TO INDIA

Ca. 1170

Tender love between brothers is one of the most attractive traits of the Geniza correspondence. (Several examples are included in my forthcoming book *Mediterranean People: Letters and Documents from the Cairo Geniza, translated with Introductions and Notes.*) This is what Moses Maimonides writes about eight years after his brother David drowned in the Indian Ocean.

The greatest misfortune that has befallen me during my entire life—worse than anything else—was the demise of the saint, (may his) m(emory) be b(lessed), who drowned in the Indian sea, carrying much money belonging to me, to him, and to others, and left with me a little daughter and a widow. On the day I received that terrible news I fell ill and remained in bed for about a year, suffering from a sore boil, fever, and depression, and was almost given up. About eight years have since passed, but I am still mourning and unable to accept consolation. And how should I console myself? He grew up on my knees, he was my brother, he was my student; he traded on the markets, and earned, and I could safely sit at home. He was well versed in the Talmud and the Bible, and knew (Hebrew) grammar well, and my joy in life was to look at him. Now, all joy has gone. He has passed away and left me disturbed in my mind in a foreign country. Whenever I see his handwriting or one of his letters, my heart turns upside down and my grief awakens again. In short, "I shall go down to the nether world to my son in mourning" (Genesis 37:35).<sup>1</sup>

The letter translated below shows David in his relationship to his elder brother. The complete absence of any formal language as accepted in the epistolary style of the epoch even between closest relatives, shows the degree of intimacy prevailing between the two brothers. On the other hand, the authority of the firstborn was paramount. It was he who directed the movements of his younger

<sup>1</sup> *Responsums and Letters by Maimonides* (Heb.), Leipzig, 1856, p. 37v.

brother, wherefore David excuses himself again and again for deviating from his instructions. Maimonides had ordered him to travel as far as 'Aydhāb, the Sudanese port, and not to embark on the passage to India. But David, who had just successfully completed a daring feat, namely, crossing the desert between the Nile and the Red Sea, accompanied only by a fellow Jew, and who did not find in 'Aydhāb goods worthwhile buying, was bent on traveling to India in order to make his voyage profitable.

Was this the trip on which David perished? There can be little doubt about this. The letter is dated the 22nd of Iyyar, and it says that the boat would sail probably in mid-Ramaḍān, and at the time the letter would reach the addressee, most of the way to India would already have been covered. The Maimonides family arrived in Egypt in, or slightly before, 1168.<sup>2</sup> The only years in which the 22nd of the Jewish month Iyyar was reasonably near to the beginning of the Muslim month Ramaḍān were 1169-1171. As from 1172, through the next three decades, Ramaḍān preceded Iyyar, 22. In the passage translated above Maimonides says that he was incapacitated by illness for about a year after having received the news of his brother's death. In August 1171, he already had been appointed head of the Jews of Egypt, a position which he could have hardly attained while confined to bed. Thus 1169 or 1170 (preferably the first) are the only years coming into consideration for the writing of our letter; no previous India travel could have been referred to here. The foolhardy crossing of a waterless desert infested by brigands, without proper protection by the tribes inhabiting it, also betrays a novice in the India trade.

Three large and two smaller holes have destroyed large sections of the letter. Yet what has remained is still full of interest. See the notes.

University Library, Cambridge, University Collection,  
ULC Or 1081 J 1, *India Book* 178.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> At least we know for sure that Maimonides was already in Egypt in that year. See his own postscript to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, ed. Joseph Qāfeh, Jerusalem, 1969, vol. 6, p. 738.

<sup>3</sup> The discovery of this letter is a fantastic story in itself. In 1954 I gave a lecture in New York on my *India Book* (which then comprised 130 pieces). Professor Saul Lieberman, who was present, remarked that it would be a fine thing if the Geniza could produce a letter from David, Moses Maimonides' beloved brother, who drowned in the Indian ocean. I replied that I could

To my beloved brother R. Mos[es, son of R.] Maimōn, (may the m(emory of the) r(ighteous be) b(lessed).

David, your brother who is longing for you—may God unite me with you under the most happy circumstances in his grace.

I am writing this letter from 'Aydhāb. I am well, but my mind is very much troubled, so that I walk around in the bazaar and do not know—by our religion—where I [am . . .], nor how come that I did not imagine how much you must worry [about m]e.

This is my story: I reached Qūṣ<sup>4</sup> and after Passover<sup>5</sup> I booked for 'Aydhāb in a caravan. (Five lines almost entirely lost. Luxor, famous today for its ruins, and "the desert" are mentioned twice. The writer must have explained here why he separated from the caravan.) So we traveled alone out of fear of him. No one has ever dared to embark on such a disastrous undertaking. I did it only because of my complete ignorance. But God [saved] us after many frightful encounters, to describe which would lead me too far afield. When we were in the desert, we regretted what we had done, but the matter had gone out of our hands. Yet God had willed that we should be saved. We arrived in 'Aydhāb safely with our entire baggage. We were unloading our things at the city gate, when the caravans arrived. Their passengers had been robbed and wounded and some had died of thirst. Among them was Ibn al-Rashīdī, but he was unharmed<sup>6</sup> [. . . . .] We preceded him only slightly and there was only a small distance between us and those who were robbed. We were saved only because we had taken upon ourselves those frightful experiences. All day long I imagine how you must feel

write a story about him, but would not dare to invent a letter. Back in Cambridge, England, I suggested to the Librarian of the University Library that I examine the so-called University Collection, that is, the Geniza papers acquired before Solomon Schechter's trip to Egypt in 1897, which had never been classified, let alone catalogued, and select from them all the documentary material. The Librarian kindly acceded to my request, and the results were the collections now bearing the marks ULC Or 1080 J, and 1081 J (J meaning "Documents"). The very first item fished out from those crumbling papers was this letter, which, therefore, bears the number 1081 J 1. Naturally, I recognized its real nature only after close study. What attracted my eyes immediately was the name of the Sudanese port 'Aydhāb.

<sup>4</sup> City on the Nile in Upper Egypt, where the caravans to 'Aydhāb set out from, a trip of seventeen days. See no. 10, above.

<sup>5</sup> About a month before the writing of this letter.

<sup>6</sup> "Of Rosetta." The man was personally unharmed, but robbed. See below.

when you hear about 'Aṭā' Allāh ("God's gift") Ibn al-Rashīdī, how he was robbed (lit., "eaten"), and you believe that I was in his company. Then God comes between me and my reason.

To make a long story short: I arrived in 'Aydhāb and found that no imports had come here [. . .] at all. I found nothing to buy except indigo. So I thought about what I had endured in the [des]ert [and how I was saved;] then it appeared to me an easy matter to embark on a sea voyage. I took Maṣūr as my travel companion,<sup>7</sup> but not Ma'ānī, for all my troubles came [only from him; *you know*] *the man and how he behaves*.<sup>8</sup> Once, if God will, I shall tell you [all that happened between us] on our way from Fustat to 'Aydhāb.

My company<sup>9</sup> in the Mala[bar] sea will be [. . .,<sup>10</sup> . . .], Sālim, the son of the (female) broker<sup>11</sup> and his brother's son, Makārim ("Noble character") al-Ḥarīrī ("Silk merchant") and his b[rother], and the brother of Sitt Ghazāl.<sup>12</sup> But Ma'ānī<sup>13</sup> embarked, together with Ibn al-Kuwayyis ("Nice") on another ship, and Bu 'l-'Alā remains in Dahlak,<sup>14</sup> since the ship in which he traveled foundered, but he was saved and absolutely nothing of his baggage was lost. Ibn 'Aṭiyya ("Gift"), however, was in another boat,<sup>15</sup> together with Ibn al-Maqdisī ("The Man from Jerusalem"). Their boat foundered and only their din[ars] remained with them.<sup>16</sup>

Now despite of all this, do not [worry]. He who saved me from

<sup>7</sup> About the institution of the travel companion (*rafiq*) see *Med. Soc.*, I, 347-348.

<sup>8</sup> II Kings 9:11.

<sup>9</sup> Merchants normally traveled in groups. But only two were *rafiqs*. See n. 7, above.

<sup>10</sup> In the hole there was space for two names. One of them might have been Maṣūr. See above.

<sup>11</sup> Female brokers were common. See *Med. Soc.*, I, 532, index, s.v.

<sup>12</sup> "Lady Gazelle," a name frequently found. Perhaps identical with the donor of the house mentioned in *Med. Soc.*, II, 419, sec. 36, dated 1184, and mother of the donor of a dinar called "Son of Lady Gazelle." *Ibid.*, 481, sec. 30.

<sup>13</sup> David's earlier companion, mentioned above.

<sup>14</sup> An island off the coast of Eritrea, Ethiopia, in those days a great harbor, as nearby Massaua is today.

<sup>15</sup> Ar. *jalba*, a type of boat, used in the Red Sea, repeatedly mentioned in the relevant Geniza papers. Again here, below.

<sup>16</sup> Altogether, twelve merchants are referred to here as David's original travel companions. Ibn al-Rashīdī—for whose name there is no space in the hole (see n. 10, above)—would be the thirteenth.

the desert with its [. . .], will save me while on sea. (Five lines lost, in which the word "desert" recurs once, and "sea" twice.) And, please, calm the heart of the little one<sup>17</sup> and her sister;<sup>18</sup> do not frighten them and let them not despair, for *crying to God for what has passed is a vain prayer*.<sup>19</sup> (Two lines, marred by holes.) I am doing all this out of my continuous efforts for your (pl.) material well-being, although you (sing.) have never imposed on me anything of the kind. So be steadfast; God will replace your losses and bring me back to you. Anyhow, what has passed, is past, and I am sure, this letter will reach you at a time when I, God willing, shall have already made most of the way. "*But the counsel of God alone will stand*."<sup>20</sup> Our departure will probably be around the middle of Ramaḍān.<sup>21</sup>

I shall trav[el with . . .<sup>22</sup> Tell this] to his uncle, and also that he is fine. Abraham is fine. [Best regards to you, to]<sup>23</sup> Bū 'Ali<sup>24</sup> and his brother, to the elder Bū Maṣūr and his brothers,<sup>25</sup> to my sisters<sup>26</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ar. *al-ṣaghira*. A young wife is always referred to thus, as opposed to *al-ḥabira*, the old, or great one, meaning the grandmother, who was in command of the house.

<sup>18</sup> I can explain this only by the assumption that Moses Maimonides was married to the sister of David's wife. Maimonides' own sister was married to his brother-in-law Abu 'l-Ma'ālī.

<sup>19</sup> Mishnah Berakhot 9:3. See what follows.

<sup>20</sup> Proverbs 19:21.

<sup>21</sup> Ramaḍān is the Muslim month of fasting (and feasting) and had (and still has) a tremendous impact on the economy. Therefore it is often referred to in the Geniza letters, although these (like our letter) were mostly dated according to Jewish months.

<sup>22</sup> Probably a person mentioned before, and referred to here again in the section dedicated to greetings.

<sup>23</sup> David had arrived on the very bottom and had to use the margin for regards to persons other than his brother.

<sup>24</sup> The husband of one of Maimonides' sisters, who are greeted later.

<sup>25</sup> Another brother-in-law of Maimonides. Maimonides' wife had five brothers (see Mann, *Jews in Egypt*, II, p. 319, with my corrections on p. xxxv). Our text has *akhawayh*, which would mean "his two brothers," but they used the dual for the plural and vice versa.

<sup>26</sup> In classical Ar. this would mean that at least three of his sisters had come with Maimonides to Egypt, but in middle Ar., as explained in n. 25, dual and plural were not strictly differentiated.

Miriam, a sister of Maimonides, had remained in the Muslim West and wrote him from there. See S. D. Goitein, *Tarbiz* 32 (1963), 188-191, where her letter is edited.

and the boys,<sup>27</sup> to all our friends, to the freedman,<sup>28</sup> and Maḥāsin ("Favors").<sup>29</sup>

Written on the 22nd of Iyyar, while the express caravan<sup>30</sup> is on the point of leaving.

#### 43-44 TROUBLES IN ADEN, SOUTH ARABIA

#### 43 FORCED CONVERSION OF THE LOCAL JEWS, BUT BUSINESS AS USUAL

August 1198

Only the lower part of this interesting letter, still containing 59 lines, has been found thus far. The events described in its first section were preceded by a long period of crisis. Muslim religious propaganda had become extremely aggressive, while the Jews feverishly expected the immediate coming of the Messiah, and a simple-minded, pious man had indeed declared himself messiah and found followers.

In this period Moses Maimonides wrote his famous "Yemenite epistle," or rather epistles, in order to strengthen the faith of his brethren, but also to unmask the futility of their expectations.<sup>1</sup>

Things came to a head when the eccentric nephew of the great Saladin, al-Malik al-Mu'izz Ismā'il, ruled Yemen (1197-1201). He had the audacity to style himself "caliph," although a caliph sat on the throne of the Abbasids in Baghdad at that time. His unorthodox

<sup>27</sup> Meaning the children of his sisters.

<sup>28</sup> The family had brought with them a slave whom they liberated, but who remained in the household.

<sup>29</sup> Probably also a factotum in the extended family of Maimonides.

<sup>30</sup> Text *kj'r*, which I take as Turkish *kaçar*, "running," designating either special couriers or an express caravan, which would carry only mail and light, but precious goods, such as pearls.

<sup>1</sup> Scientific edition by Abraham S. Halkin, with an English translation by Boaz Cohen, New York, 1952. Halkin, following others, thought that the "Epistle to Yemen" (as he calls it) was written in 1172.

ways are also evident in the forced mass conversions described in our letter, for Islam regards such conversions as illegal and invalid.

Mosseri Collection, L-12.<sup>2</sup>

#### A. FORCEFUL CONVERSION OF THE LOCAL JEWS

[. . . to] Aden. Immediately after his arrival [he was brought before the caliph?], who said to him: "Become a Muslim, or you will cause the death of [your] brethren." [. . .] He cried bitterly, but there was no other way for him [. . .] except to embrace Islam. Before his arrival in Aden, all those who were with him on the mountains had *apostatized*;<sup>3</sup> the physician (known as) the Efficient, and everyone on the mountains apostatized; only the Jews of Aden remained. But the elder Maḍmūn<sup>4</sup> accepted Islam on Wednesday, the first of Dhu 'l-Qa'da.<sup>5</sup> On Friday, the third, the bell (of the market-crier) was rung: "Community of Jews, all of you, anyone who will be late in appearing in the audience hall<sup>6</sup> after noon, will be killed." None of the Jews remained, all went up to the audience hall. Moreover, he (the caliph) ordered that anyone returning to the Jewish faith would be killed. Thus all apostatized. Some of the very religious, who defected from Islam, were beheaded.

#### B. THE FOREIGN JEWS

As to us, do not ask me what we felt, witnessing horrors the like of which we had never seen.

But with us God wrought a miracle and saved us, *not through our might and power*, but through his grace and favor. For when we went up with them to the audience hall, the foreigners assembled separately, and the caliph was consulted about them. God put these

<sup>2</sup> *India Book* 348. The part dealing with the forceful mass conversions was edited, with omissions, by Bernard Chapira, "Lettre de Maimonide aux Juifs du Yemen," *Cahiers Juifs*, vol. 2, 3d year (1935), p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> The Heb. term used here, and in the Geniza in general, is *pāsha'* (not *rāsha'*, as in Chapira's text; see n. 2), lit., "to renounce one's allegiance." See *Med. Soc.*, II, 300.

<sup>4</sup> Maḍmūn b. David, the head of the Jewish community, who wrote no. 44, below. See *ibid.*, n. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Corresponding to August 25, 1198.

<sup>6</sup> Ar. *manḡar*, in Yemen a room on the upper floor, open to the fresh air.