

Short Letter of Ḥalaf b. Isaac, Aden, to Ben Yijū, Mangalore, India

Month of Āv (19 July-17 August) 1148

National and University Library, Jerusalem, Geniza Ms. 6.

Described by Avinoam Yellin in Kirjath Sepher vol. 2 (Jerusalem 1926), p. 295.

Published (in Hebrew) by E. Strauss (now: Ashtor) in Zion vol. 7 (Jerusalem 1942), p. 148-51.

30x12.5 cm.

Soft, thick, and almost white paper. The double lines created during the process of the manufacture of the paper are clearly visible; they parallel the length of the sheet.

Written in Ḥalaf's own hand, see the Introduction to No. 56.

The backside is blank, except for the address, which is written in the same direction as the letter itself and not upside down, as usual. The reason for the normal procedure was to differentiate the address from the text, which, as a rule, overflowed to the verso. Here, where the verso bore no writing except the address, it was more convenient to write the latter in the same direction as the main text, so that the reader had only to turn the page without needing to turn it also upside down.

Normally, letters were not dated, as they were handed over in person to the addressee by the carrier who had received them from the sender. The special reason for dating this letter was perhaps that the usual yearly business letter had already been sent out to Ben Yijū by Ḥalaf, while our

short note was sent in response to B. Y.'s query about his brother, which was accompanied by presents, reciprocated here immediately.

As usual, only the month, but not the day, is noted, for normally, it took an unforeseeable number of days before the ship in which the letter was to be carried could set sail.

No reference is made here to some mistakes, misconceptions, and an omission made in the first edition of this document. Had its learned editor had at his disposal the material collected in this book, he would have made all the necessary corrections himself.

#### C o n t e n t s

- A. Acknowledgement of letter. (ll. 1-9)
- B. Details about addressee's brother. (ll. 9-14)
- C. Acknowledgement of the receipt of a consignment of betel-nut and bronze vessels. (ll. 15-16)
- D. Presents and greetings. (ll. 16-23)
- E. Regret that the addressee had not come out to Aden from India, as he had promised every year. (ll. 23-26)
- F. Date. (ll. 26-27)
- G. P.S. about a present consisting in paper (ll. 27-28)

#### T r a n s l a t i o n

A (1) In Y(our name), O Me(rciful).

(2) The letter of the "presence" of the most illustrious Sheikh, my

master and lord, has arrived, (3) may God preserve your prosperous state and make eternal your happiness. May He enhance (4) your comfort, raise your reputation and lift up your degree in the two worlds (5) and may He crush your enemies and enviers. You mentioned, my master, (6) your longing and concern - may God always concern Himself (7) in doing you good. May He avert from you sorrows and unite us (8) in complete happiness and in the best circumstances for which one can hope, with His favor (9) and might, if God will.

B This is to announce you - may God preserve (10) your honored position - that I enquired with regard to your brother Mevassēr and was informed that he was well and in good health. Furthermore, I enquired whether he was travelling (12) to Palestine, but the people asked said they did not know, but that he was well. (13) Had he come to Aden, I certainly would have taken care of him, even (14) without your instructions to this effect - God beware (that I should not take care of him).

C (15) There arrived what you kindly sent, my master, namely the betelnuts, the two locks (16) and the two wooden gas<sup>c</sup> a-bowls, and I have taken delivery of all this.

D I sent (17) you what has no importance or value, for (18) the children, namely two bottles of sugar, one of almonds and two of (19) raisins, altogether five bottles, all of them in the ship of Sheikh Maḡmūn, (20) which is going to Mangalore, through the bursar. Please take them from him (21) and accept for your honored self the best (22) greetings and give in my

name to my lord, your boy, the best greetings, (23) and likewise to the brother Bama the best greetings in my name.

E Every year (24) you write that you are coming out to Aden. However, nothing of this happens. God - may He be exalted - (25) may ordain a happy conclusion. If you have any order (26) or service, please honor me with it.

F Written in the month of Av of the year (27) 1459 of (the era of) the documents.

G I sent you also two sets of (28) Egyptian paper, please take notice of this, And Peace.

Verso. Address, right side:

(1) To the "presence" of the most illustrious Sheikh, my master, (2) Abū Ishāq Abraham, son of (3) h(is honor), g(reatness) and h(oliness) R(abbi) Perahya from al-Mahdiyya, (4) m(ay he rest in) E(den of the) ~~g(arden)~~ P(aradise).

Left side:

(1) His servant, who is grateful (2) for his favors, Halaf, son of (3) Isaac, God's) s(pirit) g(ive him peace).

C o m m e n t a r y

2 lord - Ar. mālikī, lit., he who owns me.

4 comfort - Ar. bastatahu, a rare expression which comprises the ideas

of both prosperity and contentment.

in the two worlds - in this world and the world to come.

8 Ar. wata<sup>c</sup>āhudihi (((ta<sup>c</sup>āhadahu))) ta<sup>c</sup>āhadahu. It is interesting that the writer deleted the first of the two words which were written erroneously twice.

9 This is to announce you - Ar. wamu<sup>c</sup>liman, an interesting, completely unconnected form.

10 Mevassēr - See the Commentary to No. 52, l. 16.

12 Palestine - Ar. Sha'm. Cf. W. Baohar, Schām als Name Palaestina's, Jewish Quarterly Review 18, p. 514-5; E. Strauss, Kiryath Sepher 16 (Jerusalem 1939), p. 453. Mevassēr, who had come from Tunisia and Sicily to Egypt, obviously had announced his brother that before joining him in India, he would like to make the pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The fact that Jerusalem was, at that time, in the hands of the Crusaders by no means acted as a deterrent, cf. S. D. Goitein, "New Sources on Palestine in Crusaders Days," (Hebrew with English summary), Eretz Israel 4 (Jerusalem 1956), p. 147-56.

14 God beware - Ar. ʿaziz ʿalā ʿabdihi bihi. Cf. Univ. Libr. Cambridge, T. S. 24, 72. published by S. D. Goitein in Yerushalayim, vol. 2/5 (Jerusalem 1955) p. 64, ll. 1, 10, 16.

15 the two locks - Ar. qflyn, to be read quflain. Similarly, Maqmūn thanks Ben Yijū in No. 24, l. 7 for two and in No. 26 verso, l. 28 for four locks sent to him from India. These were <sup>02 of</sup> ~~made of~~ iron ~~locks~~ and most probably

*either made of bronze, as is still the case in South-West India, see Census of India, vol. 28, Travancore (Trivandrum 1932), p. 446*

of the same particular type, which is still in use in Yemen, see the picture in Le comte de Landberg, Ḥaḍramout, Leiden 1901, opposite page 85; Carl Rathjens, Jewish Domestic Architecture in San'a, Yemen, Jerusalem 1957, p. 26 and plate X, photog. 17; and E. Brauer, Ethnologie der Jemenitischen Juden, Heidelberg 1934, p. 68. From many letters in this book, we learn that iron was imported from India. Here, we have, also, a product of the Indian iron industry, going westward.

16 The large qaṣ<sup>c</sup>a-bowls are frequently mentioned as a present sent from India, cf. No. 26 verso, l. 28 (together with locks, see above); No. 55, l. 2; No. 58, l. 36-8; No. 208 (60x), l. 35. It is most likely that they were manufactured from an Indian timber of a particularly good quality. No. 165 verso, l. 7, mentions two qaṣ<sup>c</sup>a as made of wood of the walnut tree in the possession of a merchant who died in Su'akin on the East coast of Africa. Today, in Yemen, the word designs the large flat wooden bowl, on which fodder is put before the cows, cf. S. D. Goitein, Jemenica, p. 179, No. 1401, and this was, perhaps, the original meaning of the word, as magāsi<sup>c</sup> in Yemen designs bunches of fodder (usually gaḍb, lucerne, for horses).

18 the children - besides a son, Ben Yijū had a daughter, see No. 73.

20 Mangalore - Cf. No. 28, l. 23, where details about this Indian head-quarter of Ben Yijū are given.

21 bursar - Ar. nāḥodā, see No. 56 verso, l. 2. Clearly, Maḍmūn himself did not travel on this ship. Otherwise, Ḥalaf would have expressed himself quite differently.

your honored self - The same queer expression No. 51 verso, l. 21;  
No. 56, l. 72, etc.

23 Bama - Ben Yijū's slave-agent, see No. 56, l. 74.

24 Actually, Ben Yijū travelled from India to Aden in the following year  
(1149), see No. 68.

26 As usual, the date is written in Hebrew. The era of the documents or  
the Seleucid era began 311 B.C., see vol. I, ch. Chronology.

27 sets of Egyptian paper - See No 51 verso, l. 12; No. 53, l. 10.

Address, right side:

3 from al-Mahdiyya - Ar. al-Mahdawī, which is, of course, not to be regarded  
as a fixed family name, for, normally, Ben Yijū is never designed as ori-  
ginating from al-Mahdiyya, then the capital of Tunisia.

4 in Eden of the <sup>Paradise</sup> Garden - This strange expression is found also in the  
letters of other Yemenites, see the addresses of Nos. 30, 70, and 72, and  
can be heard from Yemenites up to the present day. However, it was not  
confined to Yemen, as it occurs, e.g. in No. 69 (Ben Yijū's nephew, writing  
from Sicily) and in the signature of the famous rabbi Baruch b. Isaac of  
Aleppo (lived around 1060-1125) on a responsum published by S. Asaf in *Tarbiz*  
19 (Jerusalem 1948), p. 107. L. Zunz, *Zur Geschichte und Literatur*, pp.  
341-8, seems not to have noted this expression. It has its origin in the  
ancient conception that Eden was different from, and higher than, Paradise,  
see the Talmudic sources quoted by Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*,  
vol. 5, p. 30, note 84.

Left side:

3 For the eulogy, see No. 54, Address.