

Letter by Samuel b. Joseph Yijū to his two elder brothers

From Mazara, Sicily, "to Alexandria or Cairo"

Late fall 1156

Bodleian Library Oxford Ms. Hebr. b. 11 (Catalogue No. 2874), fol. 15

Height 37.5 cm. Breadth at top 13 cm, at bottom 12 cm. Greyish-brown paper, much affected by dark stains. Boyish, insecure, oblong letters, about 4 mm high.

Like his father - see No. 76 - Samuel puts in many w's and y's to express short u's and i's, e.g. tdkwr for tadkur, l. 7, or cylm for cilm, l. 16, of course, without consistency, compare kwtbkm in l. 6 with ktbkm, l. 22, and ktb, l. 24, and sometimes he would skip over the letter obligatory for indicating a long vowel, hl for h'l, l. 10.

As some other Magribī writers, Samuel puts a horizontal stroke over g to indicate that it should be pronounced j, ll. 26 and 39, and a dot into a final k to indicate that it should be read k and not q, ll. 12-3, 30, 45 and - most significantly - once, verso margin in katira a dot into a r, cf. S. D. Goitein, "Autographs of Yehuda Hallevis," *Tarbiz* 25 (Jerusalem 1956), p. 398, note 19, and below No. 117, l. 6. The name of the coin rubā<sup>c</sup>i is mostly abbreviated in such a way that only rb' is written, with the concluding Ālef shortened into one-half of its regular form.

As to the date of the letter, Samuel mentions letters of his brothers, which had arrived in the first decade of the month of Tammūz of (4)916 (of the era of the Creation), which corresponds exactly to the last decade of June 1156. This reference clearly indicates that the letter was written after the beginning of

another calendar year; on the other hand, the contents of No. 79 show that it is an answer to those letters, i.e. it was written in the same sun year, in time to be sent with the ships going out to the African coast. The year of the Creation (4)917 began on 17 September 1156. Thus, our letter must have been written at the end of September or beginning of October of that year.

No. 79 contains a number of points of general interest, see the Introductions to Chapter III, Section F and to No. 76, and the Commentary below.

### C o n t e n t s

- A. Preamble (ll. 1-5)
- B. Request to clarify the allusions concerning Moses' capture by pirates and other matters referred to in Peraḥya's letters. (ll. 5-25)
- C. Warning not to travel that year, owing to the threat of war (ll. 25-30)
- D. Report about the ~~sendings~~ <sup>shipments entrusted</sup> ~~confided~~ to one Ḥajjāj (ll. 31-45)
- E. The despair of the parents (l. 45-verso, l. 4)
- F. Request to ask the Head of the Jewish community in Egypt to act on behalf of the passage of the Yijū family from Sicily to Egypt. (V., ll. 5-20)
- G. Greetings, etc. and local news (V., ll. 20-36 margin and 37)

Detailed address.

### Translation of Sections B - D (ll. 5-45)

B (5) Your letters (6) arrived in Tammūz of the year 916, (7) where you mention that Moses was captured. In the moment, we read (8) the (i.e. your) letter, we grieved and wept (9) very much. Father and mother could not speak (10) for sorrow about my brother Moses and about you. However, when we saw (11) the letter of Moses, my brother and head, which contained Bible verses indicating that (12)

he was released, we became consoled.

He did not explain how everything (13) occurred, neither how he was captured, nor how he was released, nor did (14) my brother Abu 'l-Ṣurūr explain what (15) he was doing and what caused him not to make mentioning of his cousin (i.e. bride), (16) nor how much was lost.

We, too, had no knowledge that (17) my brother Moses was captured. Only people reported that (18) Jews were captured and that those in the galleys had taken the Jews (19) and the light baggage of the Jews, while the heavy cargo remained in the ship. (20) When the ship arrived in Messina, part of the cargo was seized by the (21) commander Mubaṣṣir. However, we had no details about Moses, until (22) your letters came. Concerning the seizure of the cargo, (23) there is also no exact information of eye witnesses. (24) We had sent a number of letters to Messina with the request to answer us, but we have got no answer.

C We sent you in (26) a Genoese (?) ship two letters and another letter to Tripoli (27) in this year, for we had heard that forty galleys (28) of the enemy had arrived at Bijāya (Bougie), and others (29) to places, from which might be danger. Therefore, brother, (30) none of you should travel, the Lord shall preserve your coming out and your coming in.

D (31) In Marḥeswān<sup>V</sup> 915 (9 October to 7 November 1154), we got a slip (32) of paper //from Ḥajjāj, ...(((.....))// ..... saying: your sons have sent you (34) something with me; as soon as I shall have unbaled my goods, I shall send it to you. He sent one hundred ruba. (24) less eleven ruba. We ate them up in that year, for there was (35) great dearth (lit. hunger), one mudd of wheat costing eight ruba. (36) and finally ten ruba. When the year was over, there did not

remain of that sum (37) the slightest rest. In order to secure our livelihood, we sent (38) him a number of letters. After we implored for help Sheikh Abu (39) 'l-Faraj, who did not disappoint us - please send him a letter (40) of thanks - he (Ḥajjāj) sent us another one hundred ruba. less ten ruba., (41) however, he did not forward us (your) letters, nor did he send us anything, (42) although we implored him to do so, so that we do not know (43) the quantity. Please inform us how much did you send (44) with Ḥajjāj and what was lost, how many bales, //what sign was on them, how did they look, and whether your name was written on them.// May be, God will see to it that some of them will be saved.

#### C o m m e n t a r y

B As in spring 1156, the two brothers had sent letters to their parents separately, they certainly did not stay together. Moses most probably was still in Tyre or another place on the Syrian or Palestinian coast, as in No. 77, while Perahya abu 'l-Surūr was in Cairo.

The events after No. 74 can be reconstructed as follows: The two brothers did not move immediately to Egypt, as Moses had been discouraged to do so, No. 74, l. 21-2; on the other hand, he refused to come home with empty hands, see ib. Thus, the brothers did business, perhaps in Greece, which then contained many flourishing Jewish communities, but perhaps also in Egypt, and sent home in fall 1154 a considerable consignment, which, as we see here, Section 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 No. 75. A second consignment was carried home to Sicily by Moses himself. The ship in which he travelled was,

however, attacked by pirates, described here as "those in the galleys," l. 18, and Moses, together with other Jews, was captured (for the sake of securing ransom - one hundred dīnārs for three persons captured, see No. 117). Why Jews only? May be that the pirates were of the same nationality as the ship captured, but more probably our writer mentions only Jews because this was a proof that his brother was among the captured. Thus, when the Normans took Corinth in Greece in 1147/8, they captured the Jews and the wellbeing, M. Amari-Nallino, Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia III, 441, because it was wellknown that even poor Jews would be ransomed by their coreligionists.

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

As no mentioning is made of Moses' being ransomed with money (the sum would have been 133 Sicilian rubā<sup>o</sup>Is), the pirates must have been attacked, most probably by Norman ships on their way to Tyre, and their captives were freed. Thus, we find Moses in that town, where he arrived half dead, see No. 77, ll. 30-1.

6 916 - 6 is written before 10, because in Arabic and Hebrew - as in English - it precedes it in speech as well. The same in the numbers (not dates) in No. 54, l. 24 and No. 55, l. 15.

9-12 Strong feelings are expressed in Hebrew, see the Introduction to No. 76.

11 my brother and head - This strange expression, which is found also in No. 76,

verso l. 29, has its origin in Genesis, ch. 46, v. 21, where these words design names, explained, in the sense translated here, in Bereschit Rabba, ed. Theodor-Albeck, Berlin 1927, p. 1179.

Bible verses - This seems to be a more adequate translation of Hebr. fīsuqīm than "sentences" in general. Instead of giving facts, Moses had expressed his gratitude to God for his rescue in many quotations from the Bible.

15 See the Introduction to Ch. III, Section F.

20 was seized - Ar. uqila, an expression very frequent in papers from the Mediterranean, referring to seizure by a ruler or his representative.

26 Genoese - Ar. markab jnwwyn. The second word could design also an Italian name of a man.

Tripoli was at that time in Norman hands, as most of Eastern Tunisia, and Porahya certainly had expressed in a previous letter his intention to travel there. Nor is it difficult to imagine why he did so. His uncle and prospective father-in-law, Abraham 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.

28 the enemy - Obviously, the Almohads, see the Introduction to ch. III, section F.

31 The slip of paper referred here is our No. 78.

32 The letters after the name Ḥajjāj seem to be yzl, the abbreviation of the Hebr. formula: ma(y he be remembered) w(ith blessings), which is a little strange, as the writer has not to say much praise about the man.

34 It is not clear why P. writes here and in l. 40 - one hundred less eleven or

ten respectively, while his father, referring to their sendings, speak<sup>s</sup> of 90, No. 76, l. 42. The ten or eleven rubā<sup>o</sup>īs cannot mean expenses for transport or agio, as this would be far too excessive. *B. + would include that which is lost for himself*

35 The same statement above No. 76, l. 6. The mudd had many different values, see W. Hinz, Islam. Masse und Gewichte, Leiden 1955, 45-7. In the Magrib, it corresponded in the late Middle Ages to 4,32 litres.

36 and finally - Ar. yaqūm bi. The translation is not certain.

38 Abu 'l-Faraj - Ibn Masnūt, see verso, l. 16 and No. 76, l. 26 between the lines.

44 and what was lost - When Moses was taken off the ship in which he carried the bales referred to.

F See above No. 76, Section I.

Margin

One point in the local news is of particular interest. Samuel reports that the daughter of the Scribe had married, after the death of her father and mother, Mu<sup>c</sup>allim (i.e. rabbi) Jacob, the brother of the local rabbi, "and she prays for you very much, God give you grace and honor." While such remarks with regard to old women are common, I do not remember to have read it with reference to a newly wed girl, who, in addition, obviously was not a relative. However, as all these people presumably were refugees from North Africa, their family-like attachment to each other possibly is understandable. Or were the prayers of the scribe's daughter a mediaeval form of a romance - terminated when P. set out to marry the daughter of the India merchant?

Here 79x = 264 (ENA 4020 fr. 1)  
is to be inserted 31.12.1958