

Letter by Peraḥya b. Joseph, Mazzara, Sicily to Abraham b. Elijah, al-Mahdiyya, Tunisia, inquiring about his uncle Abraham Yijū and about letter No. 68

1151/2

Bodleian Library Oxford Ms. Hebr. d. 66 (Catalogue No. 2878), fol. 139

18 x 12, 6 cm

The size of the sheet is more common in a book or a document than in a letter. The paper is dark-brown, much stained, and on the lines 17-22, very much damaged by water.

Peraḥya's handwriting, known to us also from Nos. 74, 75, and 80, is somewhat similar to that of his uncle, but more elegant and cursive. As we learn from No. 74, margin, he actually occupied himself with the copying of books. The script appearing here is indeed that used for literary texts.

The style of the letter, at least in the preamble, is unusually elaborate and involved, which is the more conspicuous, as the writer is ignorant of classical Arabic.

The year 911, referred to in line 8, abridged from 4911, is according to the era of the Creation, which was in common use in the Western Mediterranean countries. It began on 23 September 1150 and ended on 12 September 1151. Thus, at least a year, but most probably a slightly longer period, had elapsed from the date of Abraham Yijū's letter No. 68, mentioned here l. 9, and the first intimation had of it by the family of his brother Joseph in Mazzara, a town in the Western part of the island of Sicily. On the other hand, we learn that Mevassēr, Abraham's other brother, had already

joined him in Aden, after having received that letter in Messina, the well-known port on the East coast of Sicily.

The most interesting detail to be learned from this letter is the fact that the whereabouts of Abraham Yijū had remained unknown to his brothers "for ages of years," kabrat sinīn, ll. 7-8.

There exist three possibilities how this letter, which was addressed to Tunisia, finally reached the Cairo Geniza. The receiver might have forwarded the letter to Ben Yijū, cf. ll. 13-5, whose correspondence, as we witness in this volume, was to a large extent disposed of there. Or, the addressee, who had returned from the East, made another trip there, passing through Cairo. However, it is possible, also, that the letter was not sent at all, because the Yijūs in Mazzara had received a message from the two brothers out in Aden, before they had had an opportunity to dispatch this letter. Thus, it reached the Geniza with other papers emanating from the family of Joseph Yijū, Nos. 74-80.

C o n t e n t s

- A Polite preamble. (ll. 1-5)
- B Inquiry about Abraham Yijū. (ll. 5-15)
- C Greetings and polite conclusion. (ll. 15-22 and margin 1-17)

T r a n s l a t i o n o f S e c t i o n B

(5)...I have to write to my lord these two, short (6) lines, for I heard that you have arrived in your homeland. Therefore, I wished to ask

you (7) whether you know anything about my uncle, Abraham, known as Ben Yijū, for he had disappeared (8) from us for ages of years; then, last year, ^{the year} 911, we learned (9) that a letter of his had arrived in Messina, but fell into the hands of my uncle Mevassēr, who took it //(added on the margin:) and set out to meet him.// (10) We did not see the letter, nor do we know its content, but are very eager to hear (11) about him (uncle Abraham).

Therefore, I ask you, my lord, kindly to send me (12) a note, informing me whether you know anything about him or not, whether you have seen him, and in which (13) place he is found at present. If you think it possible that I should write a letter, which would be forwarded to him (14) through your endeavours and favor, please, send me a note to this effect (15) quickly - this will be a kindness on your side, which will be rewarded and thanked.

C o m m e n t a r y

2 The second lā in this line obviously is to be understood as an abbreviation of class. alā. The dot on the last word indicates that a part of the word is to be deleted. For w'ltn^om, ^{obviously} ni^oam is to be read.

3 The two strokes beneath the h indicate the Nunation, to be pronounced in or so indiscriminately for all cases, see l. 4.

5 'dtrt is perhaps not a scribal error (omission of an r), but indicates, perhaps, a dialectical form id^oart.

- 5 two - in the meaning of "a few," cf. English "a couple" and No. 121
verso, l. 13. *Same expression in the same writer's letter No. 75, r. 1.*
- 10 That Mevassār failed to transmit the urgent messages of his brother,
see No. 68, *passim*, to his relatives, is in conformity with what we learn
about him in general in No. 73.