

Letter by Joseph Kōhēn b. Mešullām, Aden to Ben Yijū, staying in the

inland of Yemen^e

1150/1

Bodleian Library Oxford, Ms. Hebr. d66 (Catalogue No. 2878), fol. 61

24 x 10 cm

Thin, smooth, light-brown paper. A Yemenite hand, similar in character to No. 62 recto. Some letters, in particular b, d, h, k, r, s, have crownlets (called "tāg" in Hebr.) on their left upper end, cf. above No. 51 and Nos. 23-30, 32-34, all Yemenite hands. These crownlets are sometimes detached and may then wrongly be taken for a y. This writer quite exceptionally sometimes puts a diacritical dot on the letters tht, ll. 15 and 23; ^{dh}d, ll. 19 and 21; and even ^{kh}h, l. 19 and margin, l. 2.

The letter was written in Aden, as the details about the arrival of the ships and the activities of Maqmūn, the representative of the merchants in that city, prove, cf. ll. 18-22. It is addressed to inner Yemen, for the writer speaks about B.Y.'s "coming down" to Aden or to another town on the coast. Likewise, No. 72 was sent to B.Y. while he sojourned in the inland of Yemen. From No. 240 (72x-a), we learn that B.Y., while staying in Aden - or having returned to it, considered to leave that town for the Highland of Yemen. As in No. 72, l. 7, B.Y. is styled "Head of the Congregation," it is highly probable that a small group of Tunisian merchants, seeing that owing to the Norman occupation, their return to their homeland was jeop-

ardized, tried to settle in South Arabia and formed a small congregation, of which B.Y. was the head, cf. the Introduction to Nos. 71-72x-a. Our letter, however, presupposes that B.Y. intended to return from the High Yemen as soon as circumstances permitted.

This letter was written in 1150 or 1151, for B.Y. was still in Aden in September 1149, see No. 68, while Maḡmūn died late in 1151 or early 1152, see No. 47.

The Dā^cī, or "Missionary," the official title given by the Fatimid caliphs of Egypt to the ruler of Yemen, recognized by them, certainly designs here Muhammad b. Saba (ruled 1139-53 or 55), the most successful Sultan of the Zuraⁱ_{id} dynasty. About him, see Encyclopedia of Islam, s.v. (banu 'l-) Karam, vol. II, 795-6 and O. Loefgren, Aden im Mittelalter II, 217. In 1150, he killed his last major rival, ^{Gh}Alī b. Abi 'l-~~ḡ~~arāt (cf. No. 235 (91x), 1. 13), and in the same year (see Loefgren ib.), he acquired by purchase twenty-eight castles and towns, including Dū Jibla, then the capital of Yemen. Clearly, our letter refers to these events which contributed to the pacification of the country.

The letter is interesting because of the reference to the high-handed ways of Maḡmūn, the representative of the merchants, and other details.

C o n t e n t s

- A. Preamble, including two Bible verses opening the letter (ll. 1-10)
- B. Report about the pacification of the country by the Dā^cī (ll. 10-18)
- C. Details about happenings in Aden (ll. 18-20)

D. Advice to the addressee about his journey from the High Yemen to the Coast. (margin)

T r a n s l a t i o n o f B-D

B (10-11) Your servant noticed your inquiry, my lord, (12) about the safety of the roads and the peace made between the Dā^cī (13) and his adversaries. I am able to inform you, (14) my lord, that even one or two persons (15) may travel on any road and that the whole country (16) is at peace. Likewise, the Dā^cī has made peace (17) with all his enemies and has received from them (18) hostages.

C All the ships have safely (19) arrived. Sheikh Maḍmūn, m(ay he be remembered with) b(lessings), has taken away (20) completely the (two shops), and there has not remained in the possession of Abrah(am?) (21) anything except the doorway and the room for the manufacture of wine. This was done, of course, out of mercy (22) on his side for the people.

Now I pray to God to protect you (23) from all misfortunes and unpleasant experiences.

Please (14) do not ask me, my lord, what I experienced from Mūsā b. (25) Mevōrā^{kh} and his joy over the loss (26) of my shop. Yes, my shop was taken away from me by force.

Margin

(1) Receive for your honored self the best (2) greetings, and to not defer your travel ^{coming} (lit. down) to (3) or to our place. And

please, do not travel (4) except in the company of people on whom you can rely. (5) And Peace to you and full sal(vation). (6) This note was written in a hurry.

C o m m e n t a r y

1 Micah, ch. 5, verse 8. Used also by Maḍmūn in No. 23, l. 1 and by another writer, possibly from Alexandria, No. 217, l. 36.

2 Job, ch. 22, v. 25. Used also by another writer from Aden, see above No. 208 (60x), l. 3.

18-9 This remark about the safe arrival of "all the ships" seems to indicate that traffic on the Indian ocean must have been rather regular, i.e. that it was known in Aden, and even in the inland of Yemen, which ships were expected to arrive each year.

19 The eulogy over Maḍmūn - cf. No. 23, l. 2 and No. 36, l. 53 - is either a matter of routine or meant sarcastically.

20 - The word is destroyed partly by emendation and partly by water damage. It seems that the writer wanted finally to put in here the word al-saqīfatain, "the two shops," obviously referring to that of the man mentioned in the same line and to his own, cf. l. 26. For saqīfa, cf. Dozy, Supplément I, 663a "portique, galerie couverte." The translation here by "shop" is self evident. On both sides of the entrance door to a Yemenite house, there may be shops. Under circumstances not specified, but obviously known to the receiver, the two merchants were "robbed" - l. 26 - of these places, while one

of them retained the entrance to the house and the room for the preparation of wine. Such a room (mostly for the preparation of brandy) is found in every better Jewish house in Yemen at the back of the entrance hall, see Carl Rathjens, *Jewish Domestic Architecture in San'a, Yemen*, Jerusalem 1957, p. 24. The partition even of one floor between different proprietors was common in Yemen, see the documents published by S. D. Goitein in the book just mentioned, pp. 71-4.

22 Here, the writer intended to conclude his letter with good wishes for a safe journey, but added an afterthought concerning his own shop.

Margin 4 on whom you can rely - Ar. tkn, from wkn. In the High Yemen, the relevant form would be pronounced tūkan or tkan, cf. S. D. Goitein, *Jemenica*, Leipzig 1934, p. XXI, § 17a.