

Letter by Abraham Yijū to his brothers after his safe arrival fromIndia in Aden

7 Tisrī 1461 Era of Documents = 11 September 1149

University Library Cambridge 10 J 10 fol. 15

Breadth 17, 5 cm. The top of the document was detached, but obviously only little has been lost, for the address on the verso is preserved completely; as addresses normally were written near the upper edge of the page, only a few cms can be lacking. Of the length, 20, 5cm have been preserved. The right margin is damaged, but the words written on it can be restored almost completely.

The paper is of the same dark-brown variety used in Yemen as in Nos. 71 and 72. The script shows the scribe Ben Yijū *cf. the Introduction to No. 63, p. 1* almost at his best.

This letter was published first by J. Braslawsky in the Hebrew Quarterly Zion (Jerusalem 1941/2), pp. 135-9. As he had at his disposal only one document referring to Ben Yijū, while in this book over fifty pieces connected with him are contained, it is natural that, in a number of instances, corrections and additions will be necessary. These are mostly self-evident and are mentioned only when requiring explanations.

As to Mr. B.'s historical introduction to his edition, it should be remarked that our letter does not contain references to merchants from Jerba (the relevant word is to be read gurabā, "strangers," see l. 16). Nor does ms. British Museum Or. 5542, fol. 20 (bearing now the number 17,

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published here as No. 135) refer to trade with Persia (the word referred to is Kārim, not Fārs).

The address of our letter contains the names of both Joseph and Mevassēr, Abraham Yijū's brothers. However, in the text, he addresses himself solely to the latter, certainly because he had been in contact with him since 1147, see the notes to No. 52, l. 16.

As we learn from Nos. 69 and 74ff., Joseph and his three sons had found a temporary refuge in Sicily. However, our letter was addressed to "al-Mahdiyya in Tunisia or anywhere in Ifrīqiya" (corresponding approximately to Tunisia and Western Libya), where his brothers might have been found. From No. 69, ~~it clearly appears~~ ^{we learn} that the letter actually reached ^{Messina in Sicily, where it fell into the hands of Mevassēr} ~~al-Mahdiyya or some other place in Ifrīqiya~~. As ~~both~~ Mevassēr, the receiver of the letter, ~~and afterwards Joseph's sons~~ moved to Egypt, it is easy to understand how this letter finally found its way into the Cairo Geniza.

The letter is marked by the strong attachment of the writer to his brother ^s and sister and their families. On the other hand, while out in India during at least eighteen years, he had not kept up regular correspondence with them. Otherwise, he would have been better informed about their children than he proves to be here and would not have needed to give them the details about his own children mentioned in our letter, see l. 18 and No. 73, ll. 20-25; cf. also No. 69, l. 7, where his nephew expressly states that the family had been out of touch with him for many years.

The particular upsurge of family feeling after so many years of estrangement may partly be explained by the disaster which had befallen his relatives, when the Normans of Sicily, under King Roger II, ravaged and occupied the towns of Western Libya and Tunisia. Tripoli[§] fell into their hands in 1146, al-Mahdiyya and Sfax in 1148, cf. G. Marcais, *Les Arabes en Berberic*, p. and *Enc. of Islam* under the names of the towns mentioned.* It may well be that B.Y.'s brother, Joseph, and his sons came to Sicily as prisoners of war and in complete destitution, see No. 74.

The writer of our letter appears here as a tired man, who wishes to transfer a part or the whole of his business - together with the care for his children - to his brother (ll. 15-6), an attempt which caused him bitter disappointment, see No. 73.

It is interesting to observe that, after so many years out in the East, Ben Yijū relapses here in various places into his Magribi dialect, while addressing his brother, whereas in India (No. 133), he wrote the standard Arabic of his time (to be sure, No. 133 is a letter dictated to him).

*Mr. Braslawsky sees in our letter an echo of the Almohad persecutions (about the cause and nature of the forceful conversion of Christians and Jews by the Almohads, see now S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, III (New York 1957), pp. 290-2). However, the towns concerned were taken by ^cAbd al-Mu'min, the Almohad Caliph, only in 1159/60, ten years after the writing of this letter. It should be noted also that Abraham Yijū reckons with the possibility of settling again in al-Mahdiyya or Ifrīqiya, l. 20. To a land, where a Jew could not profess his faith, Yijū certainly would not have considered to return.

C o n t e n t s

- A. The writer has safely arrived with his children in Aden from India and has money enough to keep the whole Yijū family (which had become refugees). (ll. 1-6)
- B. He had sent to Cairo forty dīnārs worth oivet perfume for Nevassēr, but the latter was reported to have returned to Sicily. (ll. 7-11)
- C. Invitation to his brother to come and live with him (ll. 11-16)
- D. He wants to marry his daughter to a son of his brother Joseph or his sister Berāha and live together with his family. (ll. 17-20)
- E. Greetings, expressions of condolence, etc. (ll. 20-26)
- F. Further admonition to his brother to come and to take over his business. (ll. 27-31)
- G-1 *Postscripta.*
G. ~~Postscripta~~ greetings. (margin)
- H. Details about the forwarding of letters, repetition of the urge to come, and regards to friends (verso, ll. 1-4)
- I. Inquiry about the disaster which befell the Tunisian communities (verso, ll. 5-7)

T r a n s l a t i o n

A (1) As to what ((I have to announce to you,)) my brother - I do not know what to write (to you)); (2) so strong is my longing and so ardent my yearning. I ask God to unite us all presently in the best of circumstances.

(3) This is to announce you, my brother, that I have set out from

India and arrived in Aden - may God protect it - (4) with my money, life, and children well preserved. May God be thanked for this, "Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness and for his wonderful works (5) to the children of men."

Now I wish to let you know that I have enough to live on for all of us. God, the exalted, may let this money be a living for me and my children and be sufficient for you as ((well)),

B (7) I have to reproach you, my brother, that you got as far as Egypt and did not come to Aden. I sent (8) you to Egypt //with a consignment of my master Sheikh Maḡmūn// for forty dīnār civet perfume, about fifty ounces weight, through Sheikh Abū Naḡr (9) b. Elisha - may he be remembered with blessings. Afterwards, I learned from Sheikh Abū Zikrī, the Kōhēn //Sijilmāsī//, the brother-in-law of my master Sheikh Maḡmūn (10) that the civet arrived duly in Cairo; however, as they did not find you there, my brother, they forwarded it to you (11) to Sicily with a trustworthy Jew called Samuel, himself a Sicilian. //I hope it has reached you//.

C I also met (12) Sheikh Sulaiman Ibn Gabbay //Fāsī// and he told me that you were very hard up; therefore, I ask you, (13) my brother, come to me under all circumstances and without delay, "come down to me, do not tarry" (14) "and I will sustain you there." I have a son and a daughter, take them and take with them (15) all the money and riches - may God fulfill my wishes and yours to the good. (16) Come quickly and

take possession of this money; this is better than strangers taking it.

D (17) Also, find out who is the best of the sons of my brother Joseph or the sons of your sister Berāḥa, so that I marry him to my daughter.

(18) After your coming here, we shall live in Aden or Cairo or Alexandria, if it will (19) not be possible for us to go to al-Mahdiyya or to Ifrīqiya, or perhaps to Tunis or Qairuwan. (20) Everything, of course, is in God's hand.

E Please convey in my name the best greetings to your brother Joseph and to his children, and say to (21) him: "Your brother Abraham says to you: By God, I shall not grudge you a thing; this money, which I have here, (22) is at your disposal." Likewise, greet my sister Berāḥa and her children and tell her (23) the same.

I heard that Yumn Ma^omar's husband died, but was not sure about it. If it is (24) true, may God comfort you; ^{all} however, by these lines, it is hard for me to comfort on his death (25) anybody.

Convey in my name to my brother-in-law Marwān b. Zikrī, m(ay he rest in) E(den), b. Bihār the best greetings, God (26) keep him alive and preserve him for you, and likewise to Abu 'l-Barakāt b. Qayyōmā the best greetings.

F (27) By God, and again by God, do not delay your coming here, take this dirham, (28) which I have earned, and buy and sell with it, if God will - saying less about this would have been enough. (29) When you will come, I shall write (?) all that is in my heart, which no letter can hold

and no epistle can comprise.

(30) Written in the month of Tishrī, after seven nights have passed of it - may God let you taste its blessings - of the year (31) 1461 of the Documents.

G Convey from me to the precentor Moses, son of the precentor Abraham,

m.e.

Margin

* The best greetings. /And Peace./ And to my brother, /his children/ and his wife special greetings. /Likewise, to my sister, /her husband/ Marwān /her sons/ and her daughter, /special/ greetings. /And to the daughters (?) of /my paternal uncle/ (((their sons))) /their sons and their daughters/ greetings. /To my maternal aunt/ and her children /greetings./ To you /Peace/ and to your house /Peace.

Verse

H (1) I gave instructions that my letters to you should be in the hands of Sheikh Abraham b. Joseph, m.e., Ben al-Baqqāl, (2) may God ordain his safe arrival. And, by God, come as quickly as possible to Aden.

(3) And kiss the soil before my master //our teacher// Labraṭ, the Dayyān (Judge), son of his honor, our master and teacher Moses, (4) 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 (5) I heard what happened to the coastland of Ifriqiya, Tripolis, Jerba, Qarqana (6) Sfax, al-Mahdiyya, and Sūsa. However, no letter arrived, from which I could learn, who died and who remained alive. (7) By God, write exact details and send your letters with reliable people to soothe my mind.

And Peace.

Address, right side:

(1) This letter shall reach my dear brothers - may God prolong ((their lives)) - (2) Joseph and Nevassēr, the sons of Perahya, m.E., Ben Yijū. God may recompense him that will be concerned (3) to make efforts to transmit it into their hands, and from the Lord he will receive good good reward. (4) "Convey and get remuneration." "This is a deposit entrusted."

Left side:

(1) Their brother, who is longing for them (2) may God unite him with them, (3) Abraham, son of Perahya, m.E., Ben Yijū. (4) To al-Mahdiyya, if ~~((God))~~ will or anywhere (5) in Ifriqiya.

C o m m e n t a r y

4 The writer mentions his belongings first, perhaps, because the aim of the letter was to invite his refugee brothers to share them with him. 4-5 Psalm 107, verses 8, 15, etc. It is strange that Ben Yijū writes the first word both here and in No. 73, l. 11, defective (ydw), while

in the accepted Bible text, it is always plene (ywdw).

7 I have to ^{re}approach you - Ar. atban, cf. e.g. S. Spiro, Ar.-Engl. Dict....Egypt, p. 288a. Braslawsky's reading gadbān is impossible, as the Hebr. letter ayin is never used in these documents to express g.

8 civet perfume - Ar. zbd', to be read zabadah, as B.Y. often writes Aleph for Ar. Hā', e.g. l. 12 tyq'-tiqah, or verso, l. 6 mhd'y'-Mahdiyyah. For the form of the word, see Dozy, Supplement, I, 578b. In l. 10, the usual form zabād is used.

Here, certainly, Egyptian dīnārs and ounces are intended. In 1133, ten ounces civet perfume cost, in Cairo, seven dīnār, see No. 85, l. 18.

Abu Naṣr b. Elisha - about this important Alexandrian business man, see above No. 208 (60x), l. 32. Abu Naṣr carried a consignment for Maḍmūn and consented to take along in it also B.Y.'s sending. Forty dīnārs were sufficient for one year of modest living, see Vol. I, ch. Prices.

9 blessings - Hebr. beṭōvā. The usual form is beṭōv, see No. 31, l. 30; ib. margin, l. 21; No. 82, l. 3, etc. The Ar. equivalent in No. 83, l. 19.

//Sijilmāsī// B.H. wrote Silijmāsī. As the name Abū Zikrī was common, this additional name was added between the lines. Abū Zikrī's wife was the sister of the Adenese merchant Maḥrūz, see No. 34D, l. 7; from here we learn that this representative of the Cairine merchants was also brother-in-law of Maḍmūn, the representative of the Aden merchants, which can only mean that his sister was married to Maḍmūn. This is a striking

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example showing us how the Indian trade was fortified by family ties.

K/ Abū Zikrī's family came to Cairo from Sijilmāsa in Morocco, see No. 49 address, and the Introduction to No. 131.

11 Samuel - The Sicilian perhaps bore a Romanesque name, not familiar to B.Y.

12 ~~Fāsi~~ - Of Fez; the reading is uncertain.

you were very hard up - Ar. annak kunt intahaw^c alā ḥubz in wāhid, thus approximately the original may be rendered; it means: you have arrived at one single loaf of bread. The form intahaw ('nthw) is particularly noteworthy.

13-14 The quotations are from Genesis, ch. 45, verses 9 and 10, where they are, however, separated by other words. For a similar case, see above No. 60, l. 9.

17 m y brother, y o u r sister - below, ll. 20-2, B.Y. says: y o u r brother, m y sister.

19 One sees that B.Y. would prefer to live for the rest of his life in his native Tunisia, if this was possible, despite of the Norman occupation.

24 Yumn Ma^c mar - Yumn, "Happiness, Luck," corresponding to Hebr. Mazzāl, certainly was a close relative, for in No. 80 top, l. 12, the daughter of Yijū's nephew, Peraḥya, is called by the same name. Ma^c mar was perhaps the father of that woman. The name is rare and the absence of the word

"daughter" unusual.

24 by these lines - An oath, meaning: just as the letter, which the receiver holds in his hands, is something real, thus the assertion is true.

The following phrase seems to mean that the defunct was such a dear person that the writer was unable to comfort on his loss.

25 brother-in-law - Cf. margin. Biḥār, literally "the seas," i.e. "an ocean of bounty" cf. the rather common North African Jewish name Behar, M. Eisenbeth, Les Juifs de l'Afrique du Nord, Alger 1936, pp. 92-3. Hardly Baḥḥār, "sailor" is intended, although Jewish mariners are sometimes mentioned in Geniza papers referring to the Mediterranean.

29 I shall write (?) - One expects: I shall tell you. However, the ~~letters are unambiguous, while the reading naktabb makes no sense.~~

30 seven nights - As, according to both Muslim and Jewish reckoning, the night precedes the day, the seventh of the month is intended. The eulogy after the name of a month is added not only after the holy month of Tišrī, but after others as well.

31 Up to the present day, in Jewish North Africa, the public offices are rigorously hereditary, see André Chouraqui, La condition juridique de l'Israélite marocain, Paris 1950, p. 123.

Margin - The repeating of greetings was common and is understandable especially at such an extraordinary occasion as "coming home" from India

to Aden.

The quotation is from I Samuel, ch. 25, v. 6.

Verso 1 - B.Y. informs his family that his letters would be forwarded to them through the merchant named. In practice, this means that they would have to inquire with him from time to time whether any mail from B.Y. had arrived for them. About this merchant, see above No. 35, l. 20. He was

a native of al-Mahdiyya, like the Yijūs, and actually contacted
 Abraham's the nephews, see No. 77²⁷⁻⁸ where we find him travelling from Tyre to
 2 ordain his safe arrival - Ar. salāmatahu; Braslawsky read salāmakum, Sicily.

which shows that even a beautiful Magribi had has its intricacies.

3 Kiss the soil - This is the formula with which a judge, whether Muslim or Jewish, is addressed. The Chiefrabbi of Tunisia bore the title Dayyān, judge, see vol. I, s.v. This Labraṭ was the son and successor of Moses b. Labraṭ, who was Dayyān of al-Mahdiyya in 1097-8, see above No. 16, l. 12.

5 Ben Yijū had heard about the Norman devastation and occupation of the Tunisian coastland, but knew no details as to how his friends and acquaintances were affected by these events. The towns mentioned are wellknown, with the exception of Qarqana, an island ten miles off the coast of Sfax. See Yaqūt, Geogr. Dict. ^{IV, 66-7} who says that the scholars spelled the name Qarqanna, while the people of the place pronounced it with one n.

7 write exact details - Ar. taktubū watu'akkidū, cf. Dozy, Supplément

II, 836b. Braslawsky reads ta'pudū, which, however, does not make sense.

Address 4 "Convey and get remuneration" - Ar. ballig tūjar (or tūjar).

The same formula, in Arabic letters, in No. 80, a letter from Abraham Yijū's nephew, written many years later. The meaning of the formula is evident: the bearer of the letter will receive a reward on delivery. It is found also in a letter, quoted by I. Goldziher, *Formules dans les lettres de "Gheniza," Revue des Etudes Juives* 55 (Paris 1908), p. 54⁵. Goldziher read בלגת ויד, however, from a photograph of the document referred to, David Kaufmann Collection, Hungarian Academy of Science, No. XVII, it appears that there, too, ballig tūjar is to be read. The comparatively rare occurrence of the formula in our documents is to be explained by the fact that, on the Indian route, letters were normally carried by business friends, while on the Southern shore of the Mediterranean, mail was sent with paid messengers, faij, cf. No. 120, l. 3.

This is a deposit entrusted - About this Hebrew formula, see above No. 19 verso, l. 4. In No. 80, address, too, it is found together with the Ar. formula just discussed.

from Gold