

Letter sent by Abraham Yijū to his brother Joseph From Cairo to Maz̄ara in Sicily

September 1153

University Library Cambridge T.-S. 12.337

28 x 15 cm.

Greyish paper of average thickness. The left half of the lines 11-20 is lost. Written in Abraham Yijū's beautiful hand. Clearly, this is a copy of a draft made by him, for at the bottom of the page, one line had been dropped and was filled in by him afterwards with the sharp end of the pen and in characters of a narrower type.

Although Ben Yijū had left on the right side a margin of not more than 1,5 cm, he filled it with writing, which is, as usual, the direct continuation of the recto and leads on to the backside, where, however, only one-fourth of the page is occupied by the remaining text. This indicates that the filling in of the margin with writing was a habit rather than made out of the necessity of saving space or matter of precaution.

The date of the letter can be fixed by the following considerations. In l. 22, the sender states that his little daughter had remained for three years in the house of a Yemenite notable in Aden. There he had arrived in the fall of 1149, see No. 68. In the fall of 1154, his nephew, whom he invites here to come to Cairo, already sent from his way there to his father in Maz̄ara certain goods, cf. No. 79, l. 31. In the document University Library Cambridge T.-S. 10 K 20, fr. 1, published by J. Mann, *Jews in Egypt and Palestine*, II, 291-2, Ben Yijū makes arrangements for the provision of oil for a little synagogue, certainly

headed by him, as from fall 1153, cf. the Introduction to No. 63, p. and the notes to 240(72x), l. 7 and No. 64B, l. 1. All this taken together shows that Ben Yijū must have travelled from Aden to Cairo in spring or summer 1153, while the reference to the Feast of the Cross in l. 34 indicates September as the time of the writing of our letter.

The letter is interesting for various reasons. It shows again, like No. 68, the strong family attachment of the Tunisian merchant. Although rich merchants, both in Aden and in Cairo, wanted to have his daughter for a son of theirs, he preferred to spare her for his poor, refugee relative - of course, on one condition: that the future son-in-law should be a ba<sup>c</sup> al Tōrā, a well educated young man, i.e. versed in the traditional Jewish learning, l. 12. Ben Yijū had had opportunity to inquire about the prospective bridegroom both from his brother Mevassēr, and from Sicilian merchants frequenting Aden and Cairo, see l. 26-7. Having been favorably impressed by the reports received, he invites him here to come and to take his daughter. Surūr or Perahya, B.Y.'s nephew, certainly was a learned Jew, as his letters show; however, from No. 80 we learn that he had become a religious dignitary in a provincial town of Egypt, perhaps a position not quite to the taste of an old India trader. See ~~No. 80~~ *the Introduction to Section F*, p.

A very similar case of an India merchant - who was even angry with his family - preferring to marry his daughter to a member of his own family and asking him to come out to him for the purpose, rather than "being eaten by other people," is found in No. 175.

B.Y. mentions losses "from his capital" of 1040 dīnārs and 300 mitqāls, see the commentary to margin and verso l. 11. The meaning of those lines is

obviously that expenses for charity should be covered from one's earnings, not from one's capital.

### C o n t e n t s

- A. Preamble containing a remark to the effect that their worthless brother Mevassēr had not forwarded Abraham Yijū's letters to his brother Joseph. (ll. 1-9)
- B. Abraham had arrived in Cairo, after he had lost his only son during his stay in Aden and wished now to marry his only daughter to Joseph's eldest son. (ll. 9-26)
- C. Announcement of a mixed sending of pepper and ginger as a financial help to Joseph with apologies for not having sent more. (ll. 26-35 and first word on margin)
- D. Complaint about losses incurred through their brother Mevassēr and Abraham's travel to Egypt (margin)
- E. Greetings, especially to the writer's sister and her family, condolence to an acquaintance and another apology for not having sent more. (verso, ll. 1-11)

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

- A (1) In (Your name), oh m(erciful).
- (2) This is my letter to you, my brother and lord, whom I love (.....)
- (3) may God prolong your life and preserve you and keep you. May He unite us in the near future (4) in the best of circumstances, fulfilling our happiest hopes in His grace and favor, for He (5) has the power to do everything.

What you wish to know: I had sent (6) you (pl.) a number of letters, which, however, came in to the possession of Mevassēr, who did not care (7) to forward them to you. Then, he came to Aden and I did for him (8) more than was in my

power until I found out that I had got myself into trouble. (9) However, it would take too much time to explain my experience with him.

B Now, my brother, it had pleased God to ordain my safe arrival in Cairo, (11) "Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness," and here I learned that ((you have a grown up son...)) (12) and that he is well educated, and two other sons. ((I am in the possession of x thousand and x) (13) hundred dīnārs and am well-off. ((..Out in India)) (14) two children were born to me, (pleasant) as the twigs of sweet basil (.....) (15) The first born died in Aden ((.....)) (16) I have no words to describe him ((.....)) (17) There was left me a daughter, his sister..(( She will receive)) (18) all my money. Now by God ((quickly....)) (10) send your son, the (eldest.....)) (20) so that we shall be happy with her and with him and marry ((them...While)) (21) in Aden, the Sheikh <sup>Kh</sup>Halaf b. Bundār ((had asked her)) for his son and she stayed ((during)) (22) three years in their house. However, I called the engagement off, when I heard (23) about your son Surūr, because I said to myself, my brother's son has more rights (on her) than (24) strangers. When I came<sup>e</sup> with her to Egypt, many wanted her from me. (25) I am writing you this, so that you should know - saying less about this would have been enough.

D I sent you through Sulaiman (27) b. <sup>sh</sup>Ṣitrūn a bale (ṣikāra), called surra, containing a mixture of pepper (28) and ginger, its weight being exactly one qintār and fifteen raṭl, (29) may God ordain that it comes into your hand safely. However, do not (30) deal with it as you did with the pepper, which I sent (31) you and which you lost through incompetence.

Your letters to me (32) should be sent to Cairo, if God will - let them be in the hand of your son Surūr. (33) Had not been now the time of the sailing (34) with the Ṣalibiyya winds, had I sent you more; by God, (35) do not blame me. Sulaiman and Abraham will explain to you my situation and the troubles I

Margin

have.

D As to Mevassēr, he is not a man, but lazy and of a hard heart. I paid him all he needed, although I did get into troubles (through him). By these lines, I lost one thousand and forty dīnār and suffered also losses on my way to Cairo.

Verso

E (1) Receive for your noble self the best greetings and to your three sons (2) may God preserve them, the best greetings, and she who is with you, their mother, is greeted from me (3) with the best greetings.

Together with this letter I sent a letter to my sister (4) Berāḥa, whom I love, her and her children. Please see to it that she gets the letter (5) and extend to her, in my name, the best greetings and likewise, to her husband Marwān (6) and to the children of my sister.

Should there be in your place Sheikh Barhūn b. (7) Ḥasūn b. <sup>S</sup>ʿAṭiyya, greet him and express to him my sympathy at the loss (8) of one who is dear to me.

I received this year in Aden a letter from my sister (9) Berāḥa. Likewise, greet R(abbi) Moses, the great precentor.

My dear brother, I shall not cease (10) to favor you (pl.) and to send you presents showing my affection. However, this year (11) excuse me, for I lost three hundred mitqāl from my capital.

(12) Peace to you and your sons and your house.

"Peace be to you and Peace to your house, etc."

Address (upside down as usual), right side:

(1) To the brother, the despised, who went (2) through fire and cold, but is still fresh, Joseph b. Perahya, m(ay he rest in) E(den), (3) known as Ibn (?) Surūr Ben Yijū of al-Mahdiyya, (4) living in Mazāra, m((ay God protect it)).

Middle part: This is a deposit entrusted.

Left side:

His brother, the son of his mother, (2) who longs to seeing him (3) Abraham b. Perahya, m.E. (4) Ben Yijū. (5) May Salvation be speedy.

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

8 I found out - Ar. (((wjd̄t))) wjd̄ny. Obviously, Ben Yijū intended to write: wawajadtunī.

11 The usual quotation from Psalm 107 after a safe arrival, cf. No. 68, l. 4.

11-20 The content of most of the words lost can be reconstructed and is given here in the text (in brackets, of course), as far as it appeared reasonably sure. Cf. No. 68, l. 5ff.

12 well-educated - Hebr. ba<sup>c</sup> al Tōrā, see the Introduction.

13 well off - Ar. mastūr, as in modern Egyptian speech, see S. Spiro, Ar.-Engl. Dict., 1923, p. 215b.

14 sweet basil - Ar. raihān. This pleasantly smelling plant is kept in every Yemenite house and, on certain occasions, even in synagogues.

18 by God - Ar. allah allah, which means quickly.

20 we - may be translated also: I.

21 <sup>kh</sup> Ḥalaf b. Bundār - Almost certainly a nephew of Maḍmūn, the representative of the Jewish merchants in Aden. About his father Bundār II b. Ḥasan b. Bundār I, see above No. 38, ll. 22 and 24; No. 46 (sender) and No. 227 verso, l. 15ff. The fact that while writing to his brother out in Sicily, Ben Yijū needs not to explain who that man was, indicates again how closely the trade routes between the Mediterranean and the Indian ocean connected even people who were not themselves merchants.

22 As the mother of the girl was dead - for she is never mentioned - the education of the future bride was confided to the house into which she ~~then~~ was destined to marry.

I called off - Ar. wnkt, representing <sup>th</sup> wanakatt, assimilated to wanakatt.

23 Surūr - It is remarkable that Abraham Yijū should shorten in this way the Kunya or honorific by-name of his nephew Abu Ḍl-Surūr, see No. 79, l. 14 and address. In later times, such changes were common. See, however, the address, l. 3. Concerning the prerogative of a cousin on the daughter of his paternal uncle, see No. 76 verso, l. 2ff.

25 saying less, etc. - The same phrase above No. 68, l. 28.

26-7 <sup>y</sup> Sulaiman b. Ṣiṭrūn - The same man is certainly intended below, l. 35 and in No. 74, ll. 19, 20, verso, l. 5.

27 A bale was called in the Indian ocean surra, a good Arabic word, but in the Mediterranean <sup>sh</sup> ṣikāra, possibly of foreign origin, see Dozy, Supplément I, 777b.

Obviously, the bale was sent on from Cairo as it arrived from India, without being repacked; therefore, the explanation was necessary. For the mixture of pepper and ginger in one receptacle, see above No. 65, l. 2.

28 exactly - Ar. bil-girf, as in modern speech, cf. Barthélemy, *Diet. ar.-franc.*, p. 431, majnūn girf, "a real fool," or perhaps sarf, which in class. Ar. means "exact weight or measure."

qinṭār - a hundred raṭl.

32 This shows that Abraham Ben Yijū had no intention to go further West. The Almohad menace in the far West and the Norman piracy in the middle part of the Mediterranean made a return to Tunisia unattractive.

34 Ṣalibiyya is the feast of the Cross, which is celebrated by the Copts on the 26th and 27th September, cf. E. W. Lane, *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, p. 547 (Supplement, ch. I) and Dozy, *Supplément I*, 840b-841a. As the Muslim calendar is useless for marking anything connected with the natural course of the year, Christian and Jewish feasts normally were used by Muslim populations for that purpose. Late September was the time for sailing from the shores of Egypt to the West.<sup>x</sup> [Naturally, the merchants then needed their money for purchasing merchandise to be sent with the out-going ships. Therefore, Ben Yijū excuses himself for not sending more to his refugee brother.]

35 Sulaimān - Certainly b. Ṣiṭrūn mentioned above, l. 26.

Abraham - Almost certainly identical with Abraham b. Joseph of al-Mahdiyya, No. 68 verso, l. 1; No. 77, l. 27.

<sup>x</sup> The ships were sailing so he had no time to buy anything else



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hard - Ar. qāḡī, a spelling given also in an ancient Spanish-Jewish vocabulary  
see Dozy II, 347a.

troubles - Ar. ta<sup>o</sup>b al-qalb, cf. S. Spiro, Ar.-Engl. Dict. s.v.

I did get into troubles - The same expression above l. 8, also in connection  
with the writer's unworthy brother. Here, one expects man for mā.

By these lines - The same oath above No. 68, l. 24.

The dīnārs referred to here may be Maliki d. of Aden, as the context suggests.

The sum mentioned here, 1040 d., may be identical with that of 300 mitqāl,  
given below verso, l. 11, the ratio being 1:3,46, which is almost the same as that  
(1:3,5) in No. 29, l. 35-6 and No. 30 and 61(30x), which were written in 1135 and  
1134 respectively.

losses - Ar. ḥaḡra.<sup>kh</sup> The same spelling in No. 170, l. 14.

Verso

2 she who is with you - This is one of the curious circumscriptions of the word  
"wife," which cannot be used in polite speech, as being too intimate. Cf. the  
Hebrew circumscription "house" in line 11.

9 Moses, the precentor - See No. 68, l. 32. Whether this man is identical with  
Moses, the precentor of Reggio, the town on the mainland of Italy opposite Sicily,  
with whom Anatoli b. Joseph exchanged poems, cannot be made out. For the poems,  
see S. M. Stern, "A Twelfth-century Circle of Hebrew Poets in Sicily," Journal of  
Jewish Studies 5 (London 1954), p. 75.

11 For Hebr. "house" as a polite word for "wife," see Mishna Yōmā, ch. 1, para. 1c.

In G.S. he simply says wife, but here he has returned  
to the traditional scholarly milieu

12 This is a quotation from I Samuel, ch. 25, v. 6.

Address

Curiously enough, the address is written in rhymed Hebrew prose. The words: "the despised who went through fire and cold" almost certainly refer to the fact that during the Norman conquest of Tunisia, Joseph was taken captive. The word translated here as "cold" is Hebr. paḥīm, which has many meanings; but as it appears here as opposed to "fire," it may rightly be taken as alluding to Proverbs 22, v. 5 in the sense it is taken in a saying of the Babylonian Talmud, Ketubbōt 30a: "Everything is in God's hand except colds."

3 Ibn Surūr - The reading seems to be clear. This would show that already Joseph's father was addressed Surūr instead of Abu 'l-Surūr, see above l. 23.

For the formula "This is a deposit, etc.", cf. 68, Address.

Left side

5 For the formula "May salvation be speedy," see No. 36 verso, l. 59.