

Husband and Wife

A Letter of a Young Scribe to His Wife, Sent to Old Cairo from

Sammanūd, a Little Town in the Nile Delta

(In Hebrew)

L-S. 13 J 20, f. 9

Text in MJ II, pp. 307-8

(The young scribe most likely was the son-in-law, and perhaps also successor designate, of the cantor Abu 'l-Bayān, to whom the letter is addressed (see p.). Instead of Arabic, the normal medium of correspondence between husband and wife at that time, the writer uses Hebrew, perhaps because his provenance was from a Christian country and, therefore, he was not very fluent in the written use of Arabic, or, more likely, because the daughter of the cantor was a learned woman and it was a point of honor for her to be addressed in Hebrew, the literary language of her community.)

Abundant greetings and wishes for speedy salvation to my pure and chaste wife. It is only now that I appreciate your good deeds, but I have no words to express what I feel. I hope you are happy, but I feel great bitterness,^{a)} owing to my separation from you and from the eyes^{b)} of the boy, my dear, beloved, and most cherished son. I weep and groan and cry, day and night, and lift my eyes unto the four quarters of the world, but there is no one who has mercy upon me, except the Holy one - Blessed be He. Although you need no admonition from me, please act for the sake of your soul¹

and take utmost care of our cherished and dear boy, and do not neglect him. This will be the best proof of your love.

Please, do not think badly of me (that I have gone away). For, if I could, I would ride upon a swift cloud and come.³⁾ But if the Lord ordains it, I shall complete my work soon and come back quickly, with Heaven's aid, without a full purse, but in high spirits.⁴⁾ I trust on Him that said: "Let there be the world, and there was the world, and when all gates are closed, the gates of tears are never shut."⁵⁾

Please talk amicably to Mrs. Umm ^{Thana} ^{f)} and advise her that as soon as I shall return, I shall finish (copying) her Pentateuch.⁶⁾

Greet everyone who inquires about me, in particular my lord, the ^{ad} h(onor), f(reatness and) h(oliness-of) our Master and Teacher Abu 'l-Bayān, the easter, the wise and prudent - m(ay his Rock) p(reserve him). And upon you let there be the lot of the righteous, and peace.

Written in Sammanā on the New Moon day of Kislev (November-December), may it be a good sign for us and for all our people.^{h)}

I passed Saturday in Benhā.ⁱ⁾ No food entered my mouth from the time of my departure on Thursday until the Sabbath night (i.e. Friday evening).

^{ver 10}
(The address on the backside repeats the polite phrases referring

to the addressee contained in the letter above, with the additional epithet "Ethan the Ezrahite" (one of the musicians in the Temple of Jerusalem, see Psalm 89:1), which is very appropriate for a cantor.)

Notes

- a) A play of words on Isaiah 38:17.
- b) The phrase has its origin in the custom that one kissed a child on his eyes (see p.).
- c) Like the Lord in Isaiah 19:1. There is a slight touch of humor in the phrasing of the letter.
- d) A humorous reference to the usual wish for a traveller on business to come back with a full purse (see p.).
- e) A wellknown phrase, meaning that the prayers of one in great distress are sure of finding their way to God's ear.
- f) The
- g) The lady might have ordered the Pentateuch for donating it to a synagogue (see p.); ~~however, as she was in such a hurry, perhaps she wanted it for her own use.~~
- h) When mentioning a month or a holiday, Muslims and Jews often add that they should be a blessing for the addressee and his people (see p.).
- i) Benhā is a town in the Nile delta about thirty miles north of Cairo. The writer does not state from where he had journeyed to Benhā, as this probably was known to the addressee. Perhaps he had come there directly from Fustat.

f) In a document dated 1181 we read indeed that this lady donated a Pentateuch to the Syn. of the Bab. in Old Cairo. \$567.50 vnc. (D. B. 17) - Gottlieb 106) p. 19

Comments

1. Text: loma'an yigrōthayikh. The meaning is doubtful.