

12. A Family and Business Letter from Tunisia

T.-S. 16.179

(For reasons explained on p. , Tunisia is represented in the Geniza more than any other Mediterranean country, except Palestine and Egypt. The following letter, send^t by a member of a very prominent family to his younger brother in Old Cairo, is a typical example.

The sack of al-Qairawān, the main city of Tunisia, by the Bedouin hords of the Hilāl and Sulaim in 1057 is referred to in this letter in various places. But some years must have passed since that event. For the writer mentions that he had been in Egypt ^{subsequently} ~~after that time~~, while his journey to that country must have been made at least a year before the writing of this letter, as he states that he did not know his brother's wife.)

A. Preamble and Congratulations.

In Your Name!

I am writing - may God prolong the life of my brother in flesh and spirit, the beloved of my soul, and preserve him always in safety and prosperity and keep him happy to the end - from al-Mahdiyya, on the 12 of Shevāṭ^{a)} - may God let you partake of its^{b)} blessing. I am safe and well, Thanks God.

Your letter, containing the great news and joyful tidings about the blessed, blissful, and auspicious new-born, has arrived and there was much joy, feasting^l and congratulations here because of it. But I wept very much during all this, since God has separated us for lifetime and has not

16

privileged me to see your wife^{o)} and child. However, perhaps God will grant me that I should be able to say: "I had not expected to see your face; and, lo, God has shown me also your children."^{d)}

Yes, my brother, you are to be congratulated, and very much so; may God bestow on me that both you and he will live and may He make him a brother "of seven and even eight."^{e)} May He strengthen your arm through him and establish by him your honored position and fulfil in your case: "Instead of your fathers there shall be your sons, whom you may make princes all over the earth."^{f)} May God avert from you and from him the effect of the evil eye and may He never let me hear anything undesirable about the two of you all your life.

I have previously sent you a letter with the courier and hope that this letter will also reach him at Sfax in time.^{g)} In that letter I informed you of the arrival of a letter of Şemah's with the good tidings of the blessed new-born, which, however, I distrusted, for Zakkai, when he arrived, told me it was a girl. My mind became composed only with the arrival of your letter. Indeed, that blessed and blissful sheet² has not left my hands for many days. Every hour I took it out from my sleeve^{h)} and kissed it and put it on my eyes. This week, I sent it to our sister, but swore herⁱ⁾ to return the letter to me. I wrote also to the whole family and announced "that unto us a child was born; unto us a son was given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, etc."^{k)}

B. Fatherly lessons, how to behave as a considerate business friend and not to worry about expenses.

You wrote, dear brother, that you were much distressed by my words of reproach. But, we only criticize the ones we love, and if not you, whom is there that I should criticize? Have I not sworn to you time and again that you are not only my brother, but both my younger brother and my eldest son? When will this little boy, whom I made soil his feet¹⁾ and whom I punished for his misdeeds, be grown up?³ Was it in your power to save that ship? God forbid that I reproach you for a misfortune which God has decreed! The purport of my reproach was this: Had this merchandise belonged to someone else who owed you something and suffered such enormous damage, it would have been considerate of you to write to him as follows: "In view of the losses incurred by you with regard to the merchandise sent by me I am granting you a delay of payment until some other time." I grieved about this and wrote to you what I felt, when your letter arrived and I got a little upset. That's all. For all the world I would not have misunderstandings^{m)} between me and you, how much less for 20 dinars. How could I worry, after what I have lost in al-Qairawān! Here they say in the way of a proverb: If all that's left of your food is a crumb, throw it into the sea. You are dearer to me than the world and all that is in it.

You complained about the expenditure incurred by you.ⁿ⁾ "Expenses

are on God's account." Thanks God that it turned out well. I ask Him to preserve what He gave to you.

C. Advice, how to act with regard to money, collected by the addressee for the Nagid^o) and lost on sea.

You mentioned how upset you were over the fate of what you sent to the Nagid - may God make his honor permanent! This is no concern of yours; these are the affairs of the Creator, and who may say unto Him, what have You done?^{p)} You wrote that you had urged the travellers to inform our Master (Rabbēnū) Nissīm^q) - m(ay he live) f(or ever)⁴ - about your actions, but only Abū Hārūn arrived and he does not know anything about the matter.⁵ You had better arrange for a document signed by our friends who were present when you gave to Surūr what you had collected for the Nagid. This should be made out in three copies in both Old Cairo and Alexandria, of which you should keep one and send two to me; I shall have them confirmed here before our Master and he will give the details to the Nagid in a letter, for he promised him to write to him this year. I, for my part, shall attach one copy of your statement to my letter to him and keep one with me. Do not be remiss in this matter.

You mentioned that you had told him^{r)} not to travel in that ship and that he acted against your advice; this is not your responsibility; the man's stubbornness brought this about. He arrived in Tripoli and I wrote him a letter, but so far no answer has arrived from him.

D. Details about a large shipment of lao (obviously arrived in Sfax).

This is to inform you that I received a letter from Ḥayyīm b. °Ammār announcing that "the young man"^s) Ḥasūn has taken delivery of six loads of lao, while one, which is divided,^t) was in the ware house. Ben Mūsā stirred up trouble over it⁶ - he did not know whether it was Ḥāsūn^u) b. Mūsā or Judah b. Mūsā - with the result that it was sequestered. He, namely my lord Sheikh Abū °Abdallah,^v) sequestered the loads representing your share, until I would send the acquittances, and urged me to write him two copies of acquittances and a guarantee stating that I was unconditionally responsible for you. I went immediately to an excellent notary⁷ and he wrote me a document in triplicate combining thanks and praise for my lord, the sheikh, with the acquittance and the guarantee. I discussed this with the prominent notables of al-Qairawān^w) and al-Mahdiyya and sent a copy to Ishaq b... to Sfax and two copies...

E. News from Sicily.

(Much of the five lines of this section is effaced. The town Māzar, the port in South-West Sicily, from which one used to embark to Tunisia, and "The City," which is Palermo, are mentioned.)

F. Expression of utmost satisfaction with the addressee's progress in *study*
and the revival of learning in Egypt owing to the settling there of a

Tunisian scholar, styled "the Master" (al-Rav)

You wrote that you had gone over the Bible a second time and that you

knew it⁸ and, furthermore, that you studied with my lord, the Master - may God make his honor permanent - Mishna and Talmud.^{x)} You have made me extremely happy with this. It really is the crowning of your success and happiness. I felt indeed, and have told this also to our friends here that the presence of my lord, the Master, in Egypt^{y)} has brought about a revival of learning there. All our friends praise him⁹ (in particular....) for teaching all of you according to the method of our Master.^{z)} The latter was much pleased with this and praised him..., as he understood that he helped all of you in your study and made easy everything difficult - may God let you attain all noble aims. He was also pleased to learn what you have done for his nephew; he is very grateful to you for this and prays for you two - I ask God to receive his prayers for you and your child.

However, the study of Arabic script should not be neglected.^{aa)}

G. Sundry, short business notes.

(The beginning of these was written on the top of the page and ^{is} partly *lost*, *on the reverse side* ~~cut away~~. The continuation-overleaf-is largely effaced. The sender of the letter inquires about the price of litharge, see p. , in Egypt, as he intends to send some there.)

H. Greetings

Best greetings to you, my son and master, as well as to the little one, the joy of my eyes, Abī 'l-Barakāt - may God bless and preserve him

for me and for you. Kindly convey my greetings to my lord, the most illustrious elder, your father-in-law, congratulate him for me on the blessed new-born - may God let him witness the weddings¹⁰ of his boys - likewise to my masters, your brothers-in-law.

The brother of my mother sends you his regards and congratulates you on the blessed new-born - may he live. He is in Sūsa^{bb)} and asks you to cash for him those dinars from Mevassēr and to send them to him. Your "young man"¹¹ Abī °Imrān kisses the ground before you and conveys to his master and mistress his greetings and likewise to his cousin. The maid conveys greetings to you and to her mistress and congratulates the two of you... (three lines mostly effaced).

Postscripta. I. A redeemed Bible codex as a present for the new-born.

(Much of this section - twelve lines - is effaced, but its purport is clear. A Bible codex, the common property of the writer and the addressee, which had been lent to their uncle, had been carried off, no doubt, during the pillage of al-Qairawān in 1057 or 1060, but was redeemed by a relative. The Hagiographs, the third section of the Bible, and some quires of the second section, the Prophets, had been lost. The writer now suggests that if his brother agreed, he would compensate the relative who redeemed the codex, replace the missing quires and send the codex to the new-born as a present, as it was not needed for study in al-Mahdiyya. This section concludes with the wish to be reunited with the recipient in the choice

place, i.e. Jerusalem. From the middle of this section, and indeed from the middle of a sentence, on line 22 of page 2, the letter is continued in a different handwriting, which is far more calligraphic and clearer. Perhaps, being exhausted by such a long letter, Labrāṭ completed it by dictation to a scribe.)

II. About a lawsuit.

The Kōhēn, Master Abī Ya^cqūb Yūsuf b. ^cAlī, greets you and says to you: "I should like to know for what have I deserved to have your friend appoint a proxy to sue me here. I am on my way back to Egypt to sue him there."^{cc})

III. Greetings to persons in Old Cairo.

(In addition to the scholar, characterized as "the Master," and mentioned above, three prominent merchants are greeted: Nahrai b. Nissīm, see p. ; "the physician," who no doubt is identical with Moses, "the physician," the representative of the merchants, referred to here in the last postscript, whose son Jekuthiel looms so large in the Geniza papers about the Indian trade; finally, one Abraham (b. Peraḥ), who is greeted together with his son Abī Surūr, as first, most probably because he was a relative.

IV. Report about the situation in Tunisia, Sicily and Sepin.

My cousin and his sons are well and in Sūsa,^{dd}) but my cousin Joseph has given up the idea to move to al-Mahdiyya. Our town dwells secure as never before. The prices here: wheat - one qafiz^{ee}) for two and a half

Labrāt -First-born T.-S. 16.179

dinars cash; oil = 12 (qaffiz) for one dinar cash. I am astonished at this fall in prices: two dinars^{ff)} for a qaffiz! During the last eight years we have never had such a low price as now, two and a half dinars. During my absence,^{gg)} I had to pay 10 dinars cash for 10 thumn's^{hh)} wheat and 5 dinars cash for 4 qaffiz oil for maintenance every month, with other words something above 30 dinars for one qaffiz. With such misfortune I should really cry.

May God never let you hear what we hear about the state of ^{the} communi-
ties.ⁱⁱ⁾

Last summer, wheat cost six dinars per qaffiz.

Al-Qairawān is deserted and ruined. Only the poorest sort of the people of the land have remained there.

The Arabs are in great consternation and the population in general is afraid this year of...^{kk)} an attack, for they have made great preparations - may God turn things to the good.

The Christians^{ll)} were victorious this year in the Andalusian peninsula and have ruined many of its villages..., and all the countries pay to them tribute. May God look upon us and upon the whole of Israel.

V. A last postscript.

Dear brother and master, Abī Zakariyya b. Qayyōmā conveys to you greetings and asks you to inform my lord "the physician" that the power-of-attorney, which he confided to him...

Labrāt -First-born T.-S. 16.179

-10-

Address, written upside down, as usual. Right side:

To my brother, master and arsenal¹² Abī Zakariyya Judah b. Moses - m(ay
he rest in) E(den) - b. Sigmār, may God prolong his life and make com-
 plete his wellbeing.

Left side:

His brother, who is longing for him, Labrāt b. Moses. To his dwelling
 place - Fuṣṭāt if God will...

Please, master Abī Ya^cqūb, kindly give this to the courier going east.^{mm)}

(The right side of the address is repeated in Arabic letters.)

Notes

- a) Approximately January.
- b) The blessings of the month, a common place formula, see p.
- c) Literally: "your house," baitak, which form of speech is used in both Arabic and Hebrew.
- d) As Jacob said to Joseph, when the latter showed him his children, Genesis 48:11.
- e) A word-play on Ecclesiastes 11:2. To have seven boys was the pride of a woman in Biblical times, cf. I Samuel 2:5.
- f) This formula is used, while addressing a person whose father had occupied a public office or who did so himself. The father of the two brothers had been Dayyān or judge in al-Mahdiyya, see p. . The words are taken from Psalm 45:17 and occur frequently, especially in letters containing an appeal.
- g) Sfax is situated on the east coast of Tunisia, south of al-Mahdiyya. The courier going from al-Mahdiyya to Cairo had, of course, to pass through this town. From here we learn that he would remain in that town for quite a while, at least long enough to enable a person in al-Mahdiyya to write another letter, after having received his mail from Egypt, and send it to Sfax to be carried on to the East.
- h) The wide sleeves worn in those days served as receptacles in the place of pockets.

- i) The text has "them," the sister's family being intended.
- k) Isaiah 9:6. This verse was certainly written on the top of the letters referred to.
- l) I.e., whom I sent on errands.
- m) Literally, "words."
- n) Perhaps connected with the boy's birth.
- o) Certainly the Nagid, or head of the Tunisian Jews, who had his residence in al-Qairawān, and who, after the sack of the city in 1057, had left the country for a place more to the West, most probably after having lost most of his property. Normally, a Nagid was the richest or at least most influential person in the community. That a collection had to be made for him now among the Tunisian merchants in Egypt is a telling illustration of the disaster wrought in Tunisia by the Bedouin hordes.
- p) Ecclesiastes 8:4 - a hackneyed phrase.
- q) This is the most famous Jewish scholar produced by Tunisia. The Arabic original of one of his many books, The Book of Comfort...of R. Nissim b. Ya'aqobh Ibn Shāhīn..., was published by the Yale University Press in 1933. All dates about him, known until 1954, are collected in a new Hebrew translation of that book by H. Z. Hirschberg, which appeared in Jerusalem in that year. From our letter, we learn that after the sack of al-Qairawān, where he was Chief Rabbi and head of a college, he had moved to al-Mahdiyya.

- r) I.e. Surūr, the carrier of the money collected for the Nagid by the addressee. Obviously, the ship foundered, but the man was saved, see below.
- s) A factotum working for a business firm. Ar. sabī.
- t) The six loads were on common account of the writer and the recipient; the one in the warehouse was divided into shares earmarked for each of them. For lac, see p.
- u) This man is, of course, not identical with his namesake previously mentioned. The name Ḥasūn was as common in the Muslim West as Ḥasan was in the East.
- v) A Muslim ship's owner, frequently mentioned in the Geniza papers of that time, see p. . While taking the consignment on board, he had no doubt signed a receipt. Learning that there were claims against the sender, which meant that the lac could be sequestered by court order, he wanted to make sure that he would not be held responsible for such an occurrence.
- w) They had moved to the writer's place, al-Mahdiyya, see above note q) and below Postscript IV.
- x) The main repositories of Jewish religious knowledge after the Bible.
- y) In Arabic, Miṣr, which designated also (Old) Cairo.
- z) The above mentioned Niṣṣīm, who was indeed renowned for his special methods.

- aa) The addressee obviously had remarked that owing to preoccupation with Hebrew studies, he, or the nephew of R. Nissim just mentioned, had to neglect the study of Arabic script, which also included the art of writing letters.
- bb) A town on the east coast of Tunisia, north of al-Mahdiyya. That uncle most probably had lived before in al-Qairawān, wherefore his nephew reports here, where he settled after the sack of the town. Later on, he is referred to as the keeper of the Bible codex taken away during that pillage.
- cc) Merchants were highly insulted when a power-of-attorney was given to sue them in another country, because such an action demonstrated publicly that their opponents had no faith in their honesty.
- dd) Another report about movements of relatives who had lost their homes in al-Qairawān, see Note bb).
- ee) A measure comprising, according to W. Hinz, Islamische Masse und Gewichte, (Leiden) (1955), p. 50, 201,877 litres or about 44 gallons.
- ff) It seems that the writer here omitted the word "and a half" (in Arabic one word).
- gg) In postscript I, the writer had mentioned that he had been in Egypt after the sack of al-Qairawān. Obviously, this voyage is referred to here.
- hh) A thumn, literally an eighth, was 1/32 of a qaffiz. About these

- tremendous fluctuations of the prices of grain and oil, see p.
- ii) The Jewish communities in other towns of Tunisia, which were sacked by the Bedouins.
- kk) About three words are effaced here, the first of which, however, may be read as Sicily.
- ll) Only traces of this word are visible, which I take for Edom, a general designation for Christians. It is interesting to read here that in the early sixties of the eleventh century, a wholesale Christian attack on North Africa was a possibility seriously reckoned with. In 1087, al-Mahdiyya, the Tunisian town, in which our letter was written, was indeed taken by the Normans and their Italian allies.
- mm) A note to a friend in Sfax, see Note g).

Comments

1. "Feasting" - Text: wa-li^oab, if my reading is correct.
2. "Sheet" - Text: kaff. Dozy, Supplément II, p. 475, has "main de papier" and this only from modern dictionaries.
3. Text: an yantahī hādha 'l-ṭifl...wa'an lak min al-maqdara an tukhalliḡ...
I take the two an as an abbreviation form of aina, as is common, e.g., in Yemenite Arabic. Similarly, the writer has ash for aish, "what."
4. Text: yl, which is an abbreviation of yihyē lā^oad (Hebrew).
5. Literally: "He does not know what is the beginning of this matter nor

its end."

6. The reading of this word is not clear, but there is no doubt about the general meaning of this sentence.
7. "Notary" - Text: faqīh
8. Text: wa'amahā ḥaṣalat laka, if my reading is correct.
9. Text: dā^oī(yīn) - spelled with two y, literally: "Pray for him," a phrase usually rendered by "wishing him the best." In many cases, the translation "praise him" seems to be more adequate.
10. Literally: "The joys," afrāḥ.
11. The reading is doubtful (wgybk for waṣabīyuka; mistakes like this are extremely rare).

This writer seems to use Abī in all cases.

12. Text: wa^ouddatī. This epithet, which I have never read before, seems to indicate that the addressee was of great help to the writer in his business affairs.