

01010 I, A, 3, 11  
Aug 1982

A7  
TS 24.72++

7. DEATH OF A BELOVED - PUNISHMENT  
FOR LEAVING JERUSALEM

Letter of a court physician of the Sultan al-Malik<sup>a</sup>  
al-'Aziz, Saladin's son and successor (ruled 1193-1198)

This letter, which was written at latest in 1198,  
is a vivid testimony to the eagerness with which Jews  
tried to settle in Jerusalem almost immediately after its  
reconquest by Saladin in 1187. But the difficulties were  
great, some were not able to carry out their intention  
to settle there and others were forced to leave after  
a short trial. Emotions ran high, as is proved by the  
letter translated below, in which an eccentric court  
physician tries to console his parents on the death of  
his younger brother.

*how utterly unconsolable he was*  
~~a son. The letter had two other purposes: by describing~~  
~~his own state of utter disconsolation~~ the writer wished  
to emphasize his ~~immense love for his deceased younger~~  
brother, and by enumerating the highest dignitaries of  
the state, including a personal envoy of the Sultan, who  
came to comfort him, he showed ~~to~~ his parents how ~~high~~ *strong*  
a position he had reached at court.

The close connection of this physician with the  
Ayyubid court is evident from a passage <sup>in</sup> ~~at~~ another letter  
of his, sent from Jerusalem: "I am passing the winter in  
Jerusalem, for I can travel only on command of al-Malik  
al-Mu'azzam and al-Malik al-'Aziz, but they are campaigning  
these days against Damascus and I cannot reach them."<sup>1</sup>

-2-

Our physician might well be identical with  
‘Aziz’ Jewish physician, oculist, and surgeon  
Abu ‘l-Barakāt ibn al-Qudāī, see M. Meyerhof in Isis,  
28 (1938), 2, p. 451 and my discussion of the sources in  
Yerushalayim, 2/5 (1955), p. 57, n. 4.

The first part of the letter, a whole sheet, is lost.  
The extant part contains one hundred lines, two completely  
filled margins, and, on the second page, the top, ~~too~~ is also  
written on. The lost part certainly consisted of the  
indispensable Hebrew introduction to a letter of consolation  
with many quotations from the Bible and other religious  
books. The fine script is of great regularity throughout  
and in amazing contrast to the extreme ~~nervosity~~ <sup>nervousness</sup> of the  
writer.

TS 24.72<sup>2</sup>

<sup>It may be assumed</sup>  
[On the last sheet the writer ~~had~~ told how he had  
met the bearer of the bad tidings <sup>in</sup> ~~on~~ the street; then he  
continues:

I threw away] all the clothing that was upon me,  
nothing remained on <sup>e</sup> ~~my~~ except the underpants and the turban,  
half of which was on my head and the other half thrown  
into the mud<sup>3</sup>. Everyone who saw me in this state ran  
after me and wanted, if he could, to talk to me. But  
I was not in the state of one who could be talked to.

-3-

Finally, I entered the house and left no oven or mobile stove without putting their ashes on my head. My senses had gone altogether.<sup>4</sup>

Then came to me the ~~head~~ physicians, Mufaddal<sup>5</sup>, and all the notables, Shams al-Din Alkin (Alcuin?<sup>6</sup>) and his two brothers with their wives. Also Fakhr al-Din Tattar<sup>7</sup> and all the entourage of al-<sup>h</sup>Aziz. Also the faqih Zayn al-Din and the <sup>h</sup>hajj (Mecca pilgrim) al-Shatir, for everyone who had seen me in that state talked about it with the result that there came to me people whom I know and others whom I do not know. But no one was able to calm me down, until <sup>a</sup>al-Aziz al-D<sup>a</sup>wla al-Azizi<sup>9</sup> together with Murshid arrived, after the faqih Zayn al-Din had left, and said: "The Sultan has sent us, for the faqih had mentioned to him what he had heard and seen, so he sent us to express to you his consolations and to tell you this: 'Accept the death of your brother as I did ~~with~~ the death of my brother al-Malik al-Amjad<sup>10</sup>. Our beloved are a treasure, which God has deposited with us and which he can take back any time. What can you do? " They did not cease to adjure me and to swear by the life of the Sultan that I must listen to them and wash the ashes from my face; otherwise, no one would come any more to greet me and they would have to report to the Sultan that I did not pay attention to his words.

I washed my face ~~even~~ before they left and remained alone in the house, stretched out on the floor until the evening. I did not see any Jew coming to <sup>express</sup> ~~express~~ his sympathy on my bereavement, to console and to comfort me. My sore eyes relapsed<sup>11</sup> and I screamed all the time because of the fire in my heart and the pain in my two eyes. I sent master<sup>12</sup> Nahum to the notables and head physicians telling them not to bring me anything worth even a penny.<sup>13</sup> They came during the night and scolded me for what I had done. I said: My brother has died and I have acted so that you should reward me for what I have done for him; whereupon they sat down and remained with me all ~~the~~ night, every one saying words of comfort and consolation in accordance with his ability.<sup>14</sup>

I fasted that day and also the next night. On the following day at noon the elder Ya<sup>q</sup>qūb Ib<sup>n</sup> Abū 'l-ʿAynay<sup>n15</sup> came when Nūr al-Dawla Al<sup>k</sup>ḥīn and Shams al-Dīn<sup>16</sup> were sitting with me. He complained about me to them, whereupon they adjured me to break my fast. I gave him a dirhem and he bought for me lemons and lettuce. He went again and brought me milk, with which I washed my eyes thoroughly.<sup>17</sup>

For four days I remained in the house and did not leave it until the faqīh Zay<sup>n</sup> al-Dīn and Murshid came, while Ibn al-Yamanī<sup>18</sup> was with me, and adjured me

-5-

that I must go out <sup>to</sup> (~~for~~ treating patients). The Sultan had sent them to me because one of the man<sup>m</sup>iluks<sup>19</sup> had sore eyes and had complained to him about me. I went with them and treated the man<sup>m</sup>iluk while the bandage was on my own eyes. I returned home and did not leave the house until after the Sabbath, after a second complaint.

And now, my lord and father - may I be your ransom - had I not received your letters containing some words of consolation and allusions to <sup>a widow</sup> death, I would not have sent you any letter, for I had entertained wishful thinking about him and vouchsafed his recovery in a letter of mine in order to calm your heart. Then there arrived your letter in which you say that you made inquiries about the deceased, for you had heard that a young eye doctor had died in Acre. Finally, when the true message came, I understood that you wished to prepare me <sup>to</sup> ~~for~~ accepting consolation, as God does. "God has given, God has taken."<sup>20</sup> May God give you, my lord, long life and accept me as a ransom for you from all evil and may he never let me see a bad day for you.

And console for me the lady, my mother, in her frustration - how much do I pity her: she has reared a child and taken pains with him, and at the end she is visited by this terrible disaster. May God, the exalted, give strength to her heart and comfort all of us and accept his death as an atonement for his sins and

-6-

the sins of his family.

You<sup>21</sup> mentioned in your letter that he was ill for three months and died on the 10th of Marcheshvan<sup>22</sup>, that his belongings were deposited with Ya'qūb, the tutor of the children of Abu 'l-Wahsh, the dyer<sup>23</sup>, and that he had willed to be buried in Haifa,<sup>24</sup> which I regret very much, but I understand that because of special circumstances they were unable to act against his will.<sup>24</sup>

Now, let us accept God's judgment against us. I say this in spite of myself, but I accept his judgment anyhow.

You have at least someone (of the family) to keep you consoled, but I, I am sorry to say, am like an orphan, while my parents are alive. God, the ex(alted), may unite us soon.

After my eyes had recovered, it happened, because of my many sins, that the tall Levi, who lived with me in the house, died and my eyes became again sore.<sup>25</sup> But while writing these lines, I am already recovering and even feel better than before - may I never miss God's benevolence.

And I say this: whoever changes his mind from his resolution to live in Jerusalem will meet no good fate.

-7-

I imagined I would remain here only a short time on command of the Sultan and then come. Now there has happened what keeps me away.

Also: anyone who leaves Jerusalem will incur disaster, either afflicting himself or his children, as is evident with us and all the calamities that have befallen us. May God turn the end to the good and unite us wherever he wills.

Now, my lord, I adjure you by what you believe, the religion of our master Moses, do not allow sorrow and grief to overcome you, and, for God's sake, do not let mother cry. My lord knows what the sa(ges), (of) b(lessed) m(emory), have said on this topic: Three days weeping, seven days dirges, thirty days no haircut; he who mourns longer than this, God forbid, will cry for someone else.<sup>26</sup>

By the truth of our religion, since I have heard those tidings I am sick in soul and body, and the ~~de~~ <sup>difficulty</sup> ~~of breathing~~<sup>27</sup> ~~of~~ which I suffer, as you know, has got worse, nor do I know what will be the end of it. Anyhow, if you mourn too much, God will only increase my pain. May God give strength to all of us, Amen.

-8-

Answer soon to comfort me. May God not put me  
to shame through you<sup>28</sup> and accept me as your ransom.

And Peace.

Written on 21 Adar I. Marginal note:

It has happened and God has done what he willed.  
By the education you have given me, had I the strength  
or anything on which I could rely, I would have let the  
physicians come every day and prescribe for me, but I  
have nothing to rely on except God, the ex(alted). If  
I let myself go, my enemies will rejoice at my failure;  
anyhow, what has befallen me is not enough for them.  
May God look upon us all with the eye of his mercy and  
grace and give strength to our hearts.

And comfort my dear sister on the death of her  
brother who loved her. And you, my lord, be not angry  
with me about what I have written.<sup>29</sup> I believe I threw  
this letter down ten times, overcome by tears.

9

NOTES

1. TS 13 J 22, f. 24, ll. 15-19. Mu'azzam was the son of 'Adil, 'Aziz' brother and successor. Damascus was taken in July 1196, Lane-Poole, History of Egypt, p. 214.

2. Ed. S.D. Goitein, Yerushalayim 2/5 (1955), p. 62-68, cf. ibid., pp. 56-59.

3. A turban consisted of many yards of a fine fabric wound around the head.

4. Throwing off one's clothing and head gear and besmearing the face with ashes or mud was not Jewish, but probably local Egyptian ritual of mourning, cf. Lane, Modern Egyptians, p. 522.

5. From the way in which most of the names are introduced it appears that the persons concerned were known to the recipient. From the letter mentioned in n. 1 it appears that the father, too, was an eye doctor.

6. French <sup>or English</sup> converts to Islam (a suggestion by D.H. Baneth), also physicians. The visit of the wives is emphasized as an indication of particular intimacy with his colleagues.

7. Fak<sup>h</sup> al-Dīn Ayāz Jahārkas, the commander of the Ṣalāhiyya regiment and Sultan 'Azīz' most prominent general. Ibn al-Athīr, Ta'rikh, 12, p. 92, l. 3, Ibn Taghribirdī, 6, p. 122, l. 5; p. 130, l. 8.

8. Muslim religious scholar, here a kind of house chaplain to the Sultan.

9. A high dignitary, who formerly had been a slave of Sultan 'Azīz.

10. No such title appears in the usual lists of Saladin's sons, but it was common in his other progeny, see E. de Zamb<sup>a</sup>ur, ...Genealogie et Chronologie...de l'Islam, Hanover, 1927, p. 100. Thus it is likely that the title was born also by one of his eighteen sons for some time.

11. Caused by excessive shedding of tears, see n. 26, below. This eye doctor complains about sore eyes also in TS 13 J 22, f. 24. He obviously all the time infected himself when treating his patients.

12. Ar. mu'allim, a young physician who had not yet received government permission to practice independently, see Med. Soc. II, ~~p.~~ 246.

13. It is Jewish and general Near Eastern custom that mourners do not eat their own food, but meals are brought to them by friends. Our writer emphasizes that he was fasting and did not eat at all.

14. By talking all night long they kept so to say the spirit of the dead brother alive.

15. Jacob, "the son of the man with two eyes", a family name found also two hundred years earlier.

16. See n. 6, above. The titles "Light of the Dynasty" and "Son of the Religion" were normally given to Muslims.

17. Ar. bnitghassal, a very colloquial form.

18. Many Jews from Yemen had come to live in Egypt and in Jerusalem in those days. Our physician was in contact with at least two of them, see S. D. Goitein, "Yemenites in Jerusalem and Egypt, etc.", Harel (Tel-Aviv, 1962), p. 137, *re edited in Goitein, The Yemenites*

19. Officers of the Sultan's bodyguard, who were legally his slaves.

12  
20. Job 1:21, but these words are in Arabic.  
The father obviously knew ~~well~~ the eccentric character  
of his son and his particular dedication to his younger  
brother, who, being an oculist like him, probably had  
studied and practiced under <sup>his brother</sup> ~~him~~ for years.

21. Whenever feasible, the father is addressed  
in the third person. For clarity's sake the second person  
is used here throughout.

22. Four months and eleven days before the  
writing of this letter.

23. The young oculist was not married and a  
friend of his, known to the writer, took care of his  
belongings. A dyer could be a well-off man, as this one  
who kept a private tutor for his children.

24. Acre <sup>kk</sup> (~~Abbo~~) had been reconquered by the  
Crusaders in 1191, that is, a few years before the writing  
of this letter. But this was not the reason why the  
young oculist did not want to be buried there, but the  
belief that the town did not really belong to the Holy Land.  
Our writer had wished ~~that~~ <sup>to be</sup> his brother ~~should have been~~  
buried in Jerusalem.

25. Because of the tears shed. Set/n. 11, above.

26. A combination of two talmudic sayings (Moed Qatan 27b) often referred to at the end of letters of consolation.

~~Literally, contraction of the soul.~~  
27. Ar. diq al-nafe, anguish, ~~More common in~~  
~~this sense: diq al-sadr, contraction of the chest.~~

28. By the father's excessive mourning.

29. May be that the father had settled in Jerusalem and then left, e.g., for Damascus.

27. Difficulty of breathing, Ar. diq  
al-nafas.