An Eleventh-Century Letter from Tyre in
The John Rylands Library

By S. D. Goitein, Ph.D.

Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton; Formerly Professor of
Arabic in the University of Pennsylvania

Tyre was once a great fortress and the largest port on the
Lebanese coast, comparable to Beirut today. Its conquest
by the Crusaders in A.D. 1124 constituted the zenith of their
success; its fall in 1291 marked the end of their exploits. The
letter dealt with here was written from Tyre by a son to his
father in Fustat, Egypt, on 28th October 1090. Its writer served
as a communal official, that is, as cantor, who led the congregation
in prayer, and notary and perhaps also as schoolteacher in the
small Jewish community of Jubayl, a small town north of Beirut,
the ancient Byblos. He sojourned in Tyre and was on his way to
Acre (today Akko, in Israel), at that time also an important city,
where he intended to make some money, probably by singing at a
wedding or in a synagogue. Like opera singers nowadays,
cantors in medieval times were great travellers and, for the same
reason, a new audience meant additional income. At a time
when our writer's father was already dead we read in a letter from
Ascalon on the south-Palestinian coast: "Sedaqa the cantor, son
of Solomon, may he rest in Eden, has not arrived. People say
he is in Tyre." Thus, this was at least his second journey to the
Lebanese coast.

As often in personal letters, the writer does not call himself by
name. Since he writes in Arabic, he calls his father by his
Arabic name, Salama b. Sa'id, known as Ibn Nufay'. The
Hebrew equivalent of this name was Solomon b. Sa'adya, a man
who is known to us from a manuscript in the University Library
at Cambridge. This consists of a reading sheet for a child,

1 British Museum, Or. MS. 5544, fol. 3, lines 9-10. The letter is addressed to
Eli b. Hayyim ha-Kohen, a parnas, or communal officer, in Fustat, the ancient
capital of Islamic Egypt (dated documents referring to him date from 1057 to 1098,
but he might, of course, have lived longer).

2 TS. (i.e. Taylor-Schechter Collection, in the University Library, Cambridge,
Glasses), 16.378.
AN ELEVENTH-CENTURY LETTER FROM TYRE 95

containing the biblical verses Proverbs i. 8 and xxiii. 24 in large, monumental characters filled in with colours and concluding with Joshua i. 8, written in a cursive script, not much different from that used in the letter we are considering here. It may well be that our writer, while a small boy, filled in the hollow letters with colours, thus making his first acquaintance with the art of the scribe.

The Ibn Nufay‘ family can be traced in Geniza documents through two centuries. They were Levites, but while it was absolutely de rigeur to address a Kohen, or alleged descendant of Aaron, the Highpriest, by this title, the Levites, whose rank was much inferior, were less fastidious. Only in signatures to documents would the title ha-Levi be regularly added.

Our writer, who was called Şedaqa (“ Alms ”, namely given to the mother by God) ha-Levi b. Solomon, wrote and signed, together with twenty-five other persons, a petition concerning communal strife in a small locality, which could have been Jubayl, although I am inclined to believe that it was rather a small town in Lower Egypt. In the spring of 1100 he signed a document in Fustat and in January 1105 in its sister city of Cairo. By the spring of 1132, that is forty-two years after the writing of our letter, he was the chief cantor and court clerk in Alexandria, issuing there a bill of repudiation, and as such he is addressed in the draft of a letter of condolence jotted down on the back of a long petition addressed to the Nagid, or head of the Egyptian Jews, Mevorâkh (d. March 1112).

From what has been just said, it is evident that Şedaqa wrote


2 See above. It was taken by the Crusaders in 1103. Thus, if written there, TS. 16.186 must have preceded that date.

3 Bodleian MS. Heb. d 61 (Catalogue of Hebrew Manuscripts, II. 2859, no. 3, fol. 9a (1100) ; TS. 16.188 (1105).

4 TS. 8 J 5, fol. 2a-c, line 2. The issuing of a bill of repudiation was a responsible affair with which only the chief notary of a local community was entrusted.

5 TS. 16.253v (the title is hazzân mumhe, see Goitein, op. cit. II, chap. vi, sec. 10, n. 22).
our letter when he was still a very young man, probably in his early twenties. He refers indeed to his youth himself. The main purpose of his writing was to ask his father's indulgence for accepting a post so far away from him, for a son should be with his father and serve him (Malachi iii. 17). It was not his fault, but dire necessity (or God, as he says) which forced him to be away and he would return as soon as possible. Even more, he had married an orphan girl without a penny, with the sole intention that no other family ties should keep him away from his filial duties towards his father. Modern man, whose social notions are so different, is inclined to see in such words merely polite phrases. The present writer, who has had the opportunity to observe closely Middle Eastern people while studying the Jews of Yemen, is convinced that these utterances expressed the writer's innermost feelings. It is, of course, possible that the orphan girl concerned had other traits that may have made her attractive to the young cantor.

An account of the documents follows:

RYLANDS GASTER MSS., GENIZA FRAGMENT L213.¹

Paper, 19.5 × 11 cm., much damaged by holes and stains. The ends of most lines are lost, but can be safely completed, with the exception of one in which a personal name is mentioned. In Hebrew script, exhibiting the hand of a trained scribe. The language is Arabic throughout.

¹ For the origin and nature of the Cairo Geniza documents and the libraries where they are preserved today see Goitein, op. cit. I. 1-28.
VERSO

contre (`

للأؤدب والأؤدب

للأؤدب والأؤدب

بعل فدره

بعل فدره

أمأء الله بكحذ [أذاءة عذة

RECIO

عمرذ أ`

لاصبي يأ أؤد لأؤد لأؤد بكحذ [أذاءة عذة

أمعذ أمن أور وأوراكم ستطلق ستاطفه وأوراده

لأؤد لأؤد لأؤد لأؤد [واعرفه

أمن شوك أؤد شويى يروع أؤد بكحذ برحيمه

أمن أؤد لأؤد أفلم [أذاءة عذة

أومأ أعلمك به أنني يرمى بحذة هذه [أذاءة عذة

معرول علء

7
לוספר אלפי עכו אשתל מדונה שי וארוד אק שא
אלולדה אלפי זור
ארבל פימה עלי אלדלי אםלאכת עלילה(?) ואנוק
ב המ אראו רקד
ך גוח החבית החבה וולד אלישר זאב נזר
ויה
אלדמשי אפרסק פייה מי קד אמתך לי פסי
גבלי
אננה אובר[
לי מ♪ קומר בוי רוביתיה יבגמשי
מ אתחוליד
יירש עליי [א] כותבכ בלא אק ליימ בד לי פסי
אך אגתמאשה
יאן אשלע רגובמע פלא התדעבי מך אלדעש
א לאיצלאה
ואليل[ה] א לכלאם אא אשתהיה אלפקן אללוה
ביכן אנה וה
אלדיר קסע רצק רופרקב יבגנה רמא תסי ענדעי
לישת
אלצבבי במלא בלא מערישה בלא אגוס קד אנוסני
da [ט[לפ[ה
אלסליוע אלירכמウォם אימבנה אליך דולד לילאה
ישבל עלבכמ
רומא אסsdaleת אלו אליותמה מא לא להה לאבל
אנה לא בטין
מעיג אליע מזר פסאלתך באלולא לא חפסני מך
אלד[ע] לאבטין
אבקש רכוב בחר פט בך רכד ולא חפסני
מך [ֶתֶבֶךן]
פִי בך רכד אליע בור אליע הזרת המלך אלריך
פִאָנה יֶצבָנִי אליע [ז]
כַּצָּחַך באתם שלסלך רוזלדחי שלסלאם מוראָליך
אַלָשִכִך
אַבְּרִי עֶמֶן תַחְםַת רַעְאוֹת הָלָסָלָם רַעְםַאָן
יִכְּבָﬠך
בָּלָסָלך וַחֲכֵכּ לְיַלְשִכּ אַבְּ(QL רַעְקֵר בָּלָסָלך
[Deletes]
אלַטְמָתָה בֵּן שַבֵּנִי רַוְלָדָה אַלָסָלך רַוְלָאִי
[Deletes]
רַוְלָדָה אַלָסָלך רוֹמֵיָּא אַצְדַקְאָה אַלָסָלך [רוֹלָא
tחפסני
מך בַתָאָבך [רַאלָסָלך
רַכְבּ אַלָיָּה יָדְך מִשְרָר רַמְאָאָך תַּבְנָא
[Deletes]
Address (on right):

To my father, whom I love, my lord, the elder Abū [Nas]r1 Salāma b. Sa‘īd, known as Ibn Nufay‘. [May God prolong his life] and make his honoured position permanent.

On left:

His son—may he be made his ransom.2

Recto

I am writing to you, my father—may God prolong your life and make permanent your honoured position and his help to you, and humiliate your enemies—from Tyre. I am well and healthy, thank God, the Lord of the [worlds]. I strongly yearn after you, may God unite us in his mercy, if [He wills].3

This is to inform you that on the day I am writing these [lines, I intend to] depart for Acre, to earn there something and to return, if God [wills, to Tyre], where I intend to marry the one whom I have betrothed4 and to stay h[ere a few days]. I have sent you a letter with the son of the elder Abū Naṣr Jū[dah] of Damas-

1 The remains of an r are visible. The honorific by-name Abū Naṣr used to be connected with Salāma, e.g. in the name of the prominent banker and accountant Salāma b. Sa‘īd Ibn Ṣaghīr (who occurs in dated documents between 1021 and 1057) and also with its Hebrew equivalent Solomon (see Westminster College, Cambridge, Fragmenta Cairensia 18, combined with Westminster Glasses 22, which form one document, dated 1047). Yet I put a question mark, or, rather, the customary dot, beneath the r, because the by-name Abū Bishr is also connected with the name Solomon, although it has not so far been found with Salāma.

2 That is, may all misfortunes destined for the father be diverted from him to the son. A common phrase. 3 All these are phrases frequently used.

4 The Arabic expression corresponds to Hebrew ‘ērūsin, a betrothal; that is, legally a marriage lacking only consummation. Nowadays Jews combine this “betrothal” with the wedding.

Tyre was in those days the seat of the Yeshiva, or Jewish High Council, which had moved there after Jerusalem had been captured by the Seljuks in 1071. Our scholarly young man, who was on good terms with the head of the Yeshiva (see below) wished to have his wedding in Tyre so that the President (the famous Evyatar ha-Kohen b. Elijah) could officiate on that occasion. About his fiancée he had written in an earlier letter.
cus in which I informed you what was agreed upon in Jubayl, [namely,] that they have fixed emoluments for me which are sufficient for me and my house¹ and all that I need.

I regret very much that we are separated. I must work for our reunion. I must go up² and be [together with you]. And, please, never cease praying for me [or the good].³ God knows that it was not I who desired the separation. God is witness between us; it was He who withheld from me sustenance and separated us. I do not cherish the life of a young man who is idle without proper earnings and friends. I tried to go up to you, but it was impossible lest you might worry [because travel was unsafe]. And I have joined myself to an orphan girl who does not possess a penny, only with the intention that she should [come] with me to Miṣr [i.e. Fustat].

I entreat you also never to cease p[raying for me, for] all the time I experience the dangers of sea voyages.⁴ And always send your letters to me to Tyre to his excellency, my lord, the President [of the Yeshiva], for he will forward them to me to Jubayl.⁵

I extend my most dedicated greetings to you and to my mother. Also to my lord, the elder Abū ‘Alī,⁶ and all those attached to him. ‘Imrān greets you. Extend also my greetings to the elder Abū

¹ That is, wife.
² One went "up" to Cairo or Fustat when coming from the north, because one travelled by boat upstream.
³ The Arabic word for "prayer" can mean also "curse"; therefore, a defining adjective is often added.
⁴ Today one would travel by land between places such as Tyre and Jubayl. In those days the dangers of the sea were preferable to the vagaries of constant warfare and attacks by bandits. Belief in the protective power of prayer is expressed in many Geniza letters.
⁵ All religious and legal problems of the smaller communities were referred to the President of the Yeshiva. Together with his official mail, he would forward to the cantor of Jubayl letters arriving for him in Tyre.
⁶ Every person called Hasan in Arabic and Japheth in Hebrew could bear the honorific by-name Abū ‘Ali. But the time of the letter, the place to which it was sent, and the sequence of the persons to whom greetings are extended, leave no doubt that here Abū ‘Ali Japheth b. Abraham b. Azhar (in Heb. Ya‘ārî), "the Pride of the Community", overseer of the Caliphal mint (who occurs in documents dated between 1076 and 1103) is intended. See Goitein, op. cit. vol. II, Appendix C, sect. 16, and Index.
Ya'qūb\(^1\) and to the expert [cantor] Ibn Shekhanya\(^2\) and his son. Also to my lord \[. . ? . .\] and his son, as well as to all our friends. [And never cease] writing me. And Peace!

Written today, the first of the month of Ramadān, 483.\(^3\)

\(^1\) Again, Abū Ya’qūb is most common. But here, no doubt, the representative of the merchants, Abū Ya’qūb Jekuthiel b. Moses al-Ḥakīm ("the Doctor", so called after his father, who was a physician), is intended. Both Japheth b. Abraham and Jekuthiel were most active in communal affairs, which explains why our young cantor was well known to them.

\(^2\) A cantor in the fifth generation. The title is the same as that noted in p. 95, n. 5 above.

\(^3\) Normally Jews did not date according to Muslim months. But Ramadān, the Muslim month of fasting, was such a disruption of the economic and social life of the community that it is often referred to in Geniza letters. The first of Ramadān 483 A.H. coincides with 28 October 1090.

It was not customary to date letters according to years. But those were very insecure times. Tyre itself had been retaken by the Fatimids only the year before. Then, both the caliph al-Mustansir and his mighty viceroy Badr al-Jamālī had died and the succession was uncertain. Moreover, it was late in the year, and storms might close the sea at any time. Under such circumstances one dated a letter by year in case it was delayed by nature or men.