

II, 40 *Three Poems Written by Ben Yijū in Honor of Maḍmūn*

{Apparently Aden, ca. 1140}

SPIOS D 55.10

{These three poems are written on the verso of a copy of the deed of manumission for Ben Yijū's slave girl in India in 1132, which is III, 17. All three have the acrostic ABRHM (Abraham). He labels them: poems nos. 2–4 in praise of Maḍmūn. No. II, 40 may have been intended to follow II, 38–39 or some other encomium to Maḍmūn, which has not been identified. The first and second of these poems ('nos. 2–3') speak of Maḍmūn's two sons, Ḥalfon and Bundār, and the first mentions specifically that Maḍmūn was anticipating the birth of a third 'son.' (Vs. 18–19: 'Keep alive the two children for their father/Ḥalfon and Bundār; and the third, their brother/will quickly and speedily join them.') Ben Yijū speaks of Maḍmūn as his protector, and in all likelihood he composed these poems when in Yemen.

The first poem emphasizes Maḍmūn's position as Nagid, both in the refrain ("My lord Maḍmūn, Nagid of the Lord of Hosts' people") and in the body of the poem. Vs. 3 reads "brothers renew the kingship." I assume that this refers to the time when Maḍmūn was first awarded the title Nagid. Unfortunately, we do not know when this event—met by some opposition (see II, 38–39 and II, 41)—took place. In II, 35 and II, 36 (ca. 1135), he was spoken of most deferentially but not (yet) called Nagid. No. II, 37 addresses Maḍmūn as Nagid and names his third son, Japheth; presumably it postdates II, 40. As we have seen, Goitein's assumption that II, 37 was written before 1141 cannot be firmly established.

But that year approximately corresponds to other information concerning both Ben Yijū and Maḍmūn. There is evidence for Ben Yijū being in India between 1132–39 and 1145–49, and he probably visited Yemen for an extended visit that began ca. 1140 (see page 648). Maḍmūn's sons Ḥalfon and Bundār—seemingly described in both II, 37 and II, 40 as youths—were respected merchants by ca. 1150 and Ḥalfon was appointed Nagid after his father's death in 1151 (see II, 61 and II, 71). Ben Yijū's arrival in Yemen presumable coincided with Maḍmūn's appointment as Nagid. A confusing factor, however, is introduced by II, 70, written in all likelihood in 1146. There the rabbinical court of Fustat writes Maḍmūn—again in most deferential terms—but does not address him as Nagid. See the discussion there (pages 525–26).

With poetic license, Ben Yijū calls Maḍmūn: Naṭronai b. R. Yose ha-Gelilī. (Maḍmūn is Arabic for Protected by God, in Hebrew Shemaryā;

the Aramaic Naṭronai means the same. Yose stands for the biblical Joseph, who was handsome [Gen. 39:6], since Ḥasan, Maḍmūn's father's name, also means handsome, and its Hebrew equivalent Japheth (Yefet) was interpreted to mean the same [Hebrew *yāfe*].)

In the refrain of the second poem Ben Yijū likens Maḍmūn's sons to myrtle branches. In III, 41, line 14, Ben Yijū compares his own sons to twigs of an aromatic tree, a commodity frequently exported from India. A slightly different version of the last two stanzas of this poem is preserved in another manuscript, TS G 2, f. 59v (added as III, 29a). In both versions Ben Yijū compares Maḍmūn to the famous R. Nissīm [b. Jacob] of Qayrawān (d. 1062), in the one for the heavenly reward he deserves and in the other for his piety (but not for his scholarship, of course). R. Nissīm was much revered by Maghrebi Jewry, including Ben Yijū.

As Ben Yijū notes in the caption above the third poem, he attempted to fashion it after a poem by the poet laureate Solomon Ibn Gabirol. But he was rather inept at this. Besides the words 'Nagid of my people,' which appears in both, Ben Yijū's poem bears little similarity to Ibn Gabirol's.<sup>1</sup> In the continuation of the manuscript and on the blank spaces on recto Ben Yijū wrote two liturgical poems (*ṣ'liḥōt*).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> {As Prof. Ezra Fleischer called to my attention, Ben Yijū made some attempt to copy the meter of Ibn Gabirol's poem and probably intended that it be sung with the same tune.

<sup>2</sup> Goitein prepared only a most brief description of II, 40.}