

Chapter III Section F

Letters concerning the travel to and settlement in Egypt of the family of Joseph Yijū and the proposed marriage of his son Perahya to the daughter of Abraham Yijū, the India Merchant

Nos. 74 - 80

In No. 74, Perahya, accompanied by his brother Moses, writes to his parents from Messina, from where he intended to embark to the East. In No. 75, Moses is sent back to Mazara via Palermo, in order to get from his father a power of attorney for the claim of certain debts. No. 76, written about two years later, is a diffuse letter of about a hundred lines, in which Joseph urges his two sons, whom he believes to have arrived in Egypt, to arrange for the transfer of the rest of the family to that country. No. 77 is a letter by Moses, who had been captured by pirates and subsequently released, from Tyre or another town in Syria or Palestine to Perahya in Egypt, expressing the hope to take part in his forthcoming wedding (dated 14 April 1155). No. 78 is a short note by one Hajjāj notifying Joseph of a consignment sent to him by his sons. No. 79, diffuse and in the same vein as No. 76, written by Samuel, Joseph's third son, warns his brothers, whose exact whereabouts still were not known to the family in Sicily, not to travel owing to the danger of war in the Mediterranean (fall 1156). Finally, No. 80 proves that the Yijūs actually had succeeded in getting to Egypt. For here Perahya writes to his brother Samuel, who obviously occupied an important position at the rabbinical court of Cairo, greeting his mother, who lived with the latter, and sending regards from his own wife and two children, the elder bearing the name Joseph after his meanwhile defunct father.

As at least one member of the family had settled in Cairo and was connected with the rabbinical court there, it is not astonishing that all these letters had found their way into the Geniza. Still, it is significant that even letters of such transitory importance as No. 75 were not only preserved for such a long time, but also carried overseas on the journey from Sicily to Egypt.

In the addresses of Nos. 69, 74, 75, 77, 79, Joseph Yijū is called Melammed, schoolmaster, and in Hajjāj's letter, No. 75, Hazzān, precentor, and appears as a poor man without regular income. However, from a letter addressed to him, ms. University Library Cambridge 13 J 6, fol. 15a, it is evident that before the disaster, which befell his hometown al-Mahdiyya through the sack by the Normans in 1148, he was a respectable merchant who did overseas business and was approached by another merchant in dire with the expressions of utmost reverence. No. 75 shows that even in 1154 there were still debts due to him, presumably from the time when he still was engaged in business.

The troubles of the Yijū family on their way to Egypt are to be explained against the background of the insecurity prevailing in the Mediterranean in the fifties of the twelfth century. In addition to the always precarious situation on the coast of Tunisia and Tripolitania, there were raids of the Norman fleet on the coastal towns of Egypt, one on Tinnis in 1153/4 and one on Damiette, Tinnis, Rosette, and Alexandria in August 1155, see Michele Amari-Nallino, *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia*, Catania 1938, III, p. 433 and 477 (Amari suggests that the first raid was perhaps directed against Tanas on the Algerian coast). In addition, piracy was strife, see Nos. 77 and 79. Finally, there loomed the danger of a total war

on side of the Almohads. The conquest of Tunisia and Tripolitania by these fanatic sectarians was accomplished only in 1159/60. However, Ibn Athir, History, ed. Thornberg XI, 159, reports that for their drive to the East, the Almohads stored up the crops of three years. Our No. 79, ll. 27-9, contains the interesting fact, obviously not yet noted in literary sources, that the Almohad fleet, too, was preparing that great onslaught three years ahead.

Naturally, the financing of such a travel from Sicily to Egypt also presented a problem, as we see from various passages, e.g. No. 74, ll. 19-20; No. 76, v., ll. 17-20; No. 79, v., ll. 14-18, especially the two latter, in which the help of the Head of the Jewish community in Egypt is solicited. One wonders that Abraham Yijū did not take care of this, after he had invited his brother in such glowing terms. The puzzle becomes even stranger by the fact that in all these letters, greetings are never extended to him, while his daughter, Sitt al-dār, the bride, is greeted most affectionately, see No. 76 v., l. 30. On the other hand, when mentioned, as ib., l. 29, no eulogy over the dead ^sis attached, which would certainly not have lacked in these letters of utmost family attachment, had he died recently.

Thus, it seems almost sure that the old India trader, although having made provision for his little synagogue in Cairo for the years 1153-6, see the Introduction to No. 73, left again for the East, perhaps in spring 1156. For in letters received in Sicily in June of that year from Perahya in Egypt, no mentioning was made of his bride--to the great astonishment of his family, see No. 79, l. 6 and 15. This is strange, indeed, as his brother had hoped, in April 1155, to be present at his forthcoming wedding. Obviously, the old trader, when meeting his

nephew, found that he had not the qualities which made a good merchant and safeguarded the future of his only daughter and his riches, earned during his long stay in India. Perahya's little aptitude for business can be seen from passages such as No. 76, ll. 37-45, and No. 79, l. 16. He was a scribe and schoolteacher, No. 74, margin. It may also be that the bride herself, Sitt al-dār ("The Queen of the house" - to be sure, a common name at that time) had a say in this matter. Most probably, Abraham Yijū went back to Aden and married there his daughter to the son of Halaf b. Bundār, see No. 73, l. 21 and No. 68, l. 18. We may assume that in the letters sent by Perahya in spring 1156, he had reported about the departure of his uncle - that is why no greetings are extended to him in the letters of Joseph's family, No. 76 and 79 - while, and this is only human, he did not mention his failure to gain the favor of Sitt al-dār's father...or of herself.

Our interpretation of the testimony of the documents discussed is borne out by No. 80, where we find Perahya as a religious dignitary in a provincial town. Had he married the daughter of his uncle and taken over his business, he would hardly have chosen that way of life. Naturally, all that has been said is only an attempt to give a plausible explanation of the content of these letters.

Letter of Perahya b. Joseph Yijū, writing from Messina to his father in Mazara,

Sicily

1154

Transl. Levens