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8. From Bag^hdad to Cordova

(March/April 953)

Oxford, Bodl. Ms. Hebr. f. 34, Foll. 39-44a

Text in A. Cowley, JQR 18
(1906), pp. 399-403

(This letter was sent to the same recipient as No. 7, Hisdai b. Shaprūt, and approximately at the same time. Its sender was the head or vice-president of one of the two Jewish Academies of Babylonia (Iraq), which had been regarded for centuries as the highest religious authority for Jews all over the world. It is of unusual historical interest. It shows that during the heyday of Umayyad rule in Spain - the period referred to in this letter is about 800-950 - the Jews of that country regularly sent donations to the houses of learning in Iraq, despite the political antagonism between these two countries. Furthermore, the letter is illustrative of the utter decay into which Iraq had already fallen by the middle of the tenth century - a fact reflected in Arabic historical sources as well. The rich Jewish bankers, referred to in these sources, as well as ⁱⁿ this letter, were the exception rather than the rule. It was due to the impoverishment of the country that the age old rivalry between the two Academies - comparable to that of more modern seats of learning in England and America - became an ugly fight for the funds sent from abroad, a fight which sometimes also involved rival heads of the same Academy, as perhaps alluded to in this letter.

The beautifully written, but fragmentary, manuscript is a copy made at least one generation after the sending of the original. We know this

since it also contains an epistle by another head of an Academy, whose oldest dated document is from 977 (of. MT I, p. 147). The letter is written in plain, scholarly Hebrew, which only in certain passages becomes rhetorical. On the other hand, it contains many quotations, especially from post-biblical Hebrew literature, which are rendered here in an abridged form, or merely referred to in the notes.¹⁾

A. In praise of Spain

In many places, we find that the support of scholars was regarded as meritorious as the care for the Temple of God, as it is written: "Now, be strong, Zerubbabel, says the Lord; and be strong, Joshua...the High-priest; and let all the people of the land be strong, that they may do the work, for I am with you."^{a)} This verse has been interpreted by our sages in various ways, the gist of most of them being that the encouragement of the people who were building the Temple was repeated three times, in order to emphasize that the study of the Tora needed as great an effort as the erection of the Temple.

In our times, you are Zerubbabel and Joshua, and our honored brethren, who live in your country - may the Lord keep them - are to be compared with the people who were with them. You are in a position to support study, to revive our schools and to safeguard their future - may the Lord safeguard yours in happiness and protract your influential position, until the "first

government" will be re-established.^{b)} A generation led by you is not forsaken, for you know the needs of scholars and of their students, as well as the hard conditions under which they live and, realizing this, find the means of maintaining them. You are a worthy scion of the ancient pious of your country, the scholars of the West, of which it is said "God's Presence is in the West," for even in the Temple the worshippers bowed turning to the West.^{c)} Even more so: From the most ancient times on, wisdom has been found in Hispania.^{d)} This is proved by the following: when Alexander, the Macedonian, wanted to ascend to heaven, he consulted the scholars in the land of Israel, who advised him to go to Spain, for in that place were still to be found the ancient sages who had come to that country after the destruction of the First Temple.^{e)} Even the teachers of the Mishna, who had authority to establish the law,^{f)} sometimes sent questions to the sages of Hispania, who replied, and in their turn, submitted their own problems.

B. The relations between the Jews of Spain and the Academies of Babylonia (Iraq)

Later on, in the times of our lord Paltai, the head of the Academy,^{g)} the Spanish scholars asked him for a complete copy of the Talmud, with an explanation of the difficult words occurring in it^{h)} - a request to which he acceded. Following this, in the times of his son and successor, our lord Semah, my great-grandfather, they sent him writings, containing

problems which arose among them concerning the whole of the Talmud; there were so many of them that even a number of donkeys was insufficient to carry them. All these, as well as other questions sent from Spain during the time of these two heads of the Academy, are still in my possession - and they are many, for the two served as heads for about forty years. Even questions sent by your ancient scholars to their predecessors are still preserved, and likewise those addressed by your elders to my father's father, our lord Tov, the head of the Academy. In those days, they would usually apply to this Academy of Pūm,ⁱ⁾ but also to ^Szadok^k, the head of the Academy of Maḥsēya, to his son and successor Nahshon, and the latter's brother Moses, who was my mother's father, as well.^{k)} Their questions are proof of their deep understanding and vast erudition...^{l)}

C. The ruinous state of the Academy and of the country

You, the light of my eyes, and other men in your country, noted for their scholarship, have followed the example of your ancestors in supporting the Academies. Two years ago, your gift for the Academy arrived here, but I received only a fraction of it, which was saved for me by our prince Solomon, the Head of the Diaspora^{m)} - may he live forever. Likewise your gift and the funds recently raised by you arrived, having been sent through the noble elder and trustworthy merchant, Aaron, who is not equalled in piety and strictness by any one in our country, and through his honored brother, Moses, as well - may their Rock keep them and preserve their

riches, the sons of M. and R. Abraham b. Aaron of blessed memory. These funds, too, had been in danger of being swallowed up by the usurper - I indeed feel very much dejected and humiliated by this conflict within the Academy.

In addition, only a few districts have remained, from which we derive revenue. For most of them have become desolate, and while in former times prominent members of the Academy used to visit them as circuit judges, now I have to visit them in person.ⁿ⁾ In the bad years which we have experienced, all the lands possessed by us have become desolate and have been lost, and all our money and other valuables have had to be given away for merely keeping body and soul together. The only possessions remaining are the writings of my ancestors.

D. Conclusion

However, during all these calamities, God has not let our foot slip and has saved our lives. We, for our part, continue the ways of our forefathers and devote ourselves to study, despite our dire situation. To be sure, in this we were surpassed by some of the outstanding sages of the past, who excelled in scholarship, although their privations were greater than ours. Now, you, the light of my eyes, God has made you a tower of refuge for both the scholars and the great, as well as a stay and a staff and a staff for the students and the masses. Remember the covenant of friendship between my forefathers, the heads of the Academy, and your

noble ancestors, and continue to deal with me, as your forefathers did with mine, and favor me with an appropriate gift, made out in my name.^{o)} For pious people emulate the righteous behavior of their parents and teachers...^{p)} as it is written: "Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father."^{q)} Send me letters regularly with reports about your welfare, as well as your questions, whether concerned with the Bible, the Mishna or the Talmud, and I shall answer them in accordance with what God, our teacher,^{r)} has taught us, according to your wishes. Please forward your letters through the illustrious elder Aaron. May God brighten your star and give success to all your undertakings... May your welfare, scholarship, influential position, and prosperity wax eternally.

Salvation!

Nisan (1)264.

Notes

- a) Haggai 2:4. The verse refers to the proposed rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem (around 520 B.C.), after the return to Palestine of a part of the Jews, who had been exiled after the destruction of the first Temple.
- b) Namely that of the Messiah of the house of David (cf. Micah 4:6).
- c) This Talmudic saying, which had its origin in the ritual of the Temple, described above, is interpreted here as meaning that the people living in the West (i.e. Spain) excelled in piety.
- d) Here, and once in what follows, where he also speaks of ancient times, the writer does not use the later Hebrew name of Spain: Sefarad, but a Hebraized form of Latin Hispania.
- e) The writer here combines a popular legend about Alexander the Great's travel to the West with another about the very ancient origin of Spanish Jewry, in order to pay homage to the latter's fame for erudition.
- f) In Jewish and Muslim religious law, the idea prevailed that only the scholars of ancient times - such as "the teachers of the Mishna" here - had authority to establish law, while for those of later generations only its interpretation was permitted.
- g) In office 842-858 (cf. A. Marx, JQR 18 (1906), p. 770).
- h) Large sections of the Talmud are not in Hebrew, but in Aramaic, which

in the ninth century was still spoken by a part of the local population and understood by the scholars of Iraq, but not any longer in Spain. *(Jewish and Christian) there,*

- i) Abbreviated from Pūm-Badīthā.
- l) Here, the writer enumerates other heads of the Babylonian Academies, who had corresponded with Spain, but were not related to his own family.
- m) The "Exilarch" or political head of the Jewish community, who was officially recognized by the caliphs (see p.).
- n) The Jewish communities of Iraq and the adjacent countries were divided into districts, each of which was under the jurisdiction of either the Head of the Diaspora or one of the two academies. The authority appointed or confirmed the communal officers, while it received as revenue both direct contributions and fees from legal documents, such as marriage contracts or bills of divorce, as well as payments for each animal ritually slaughtered. The districts were supervised by circuit judges, of whom the Geniza has preserved some interesting details.
- o) In order to avoid the unpleasant ambiguities referred to in this letter.
- p) Ten examples from post-biblical Hebrew literature are given here.
- q) Proverbs 27:10.
- r) The text is not certain here. Although it was usual to say in such

a case: "as I (or you) shall be taught by Heaven," the phrase "the Lord, our teacher" is uncommon.

Comments

1. The text was discussed by Alexander Marx in JQR 18 (1906), pp. 768-771 and a number of scholars after him (cf. Jacob Mann, Tarbiz 5 (1934), p. 173, where reference to earlier contributions is made).