

25. From Toulouse, France, to Cordova, Spain

T.-S. Loan 46

Text in MT I, pp. 27-30

(This letter was destined for Hisdai b. Shaprut, a Jewish diplomat, who was versed in Arabic, Latin, and Hebrew, and held an important position at the court of the caliph Abd al-Rahman III of Cordova (912-61). He used his influence and, in particular, his role as intermediary between the caliph and the emissaries of foreign rulers to improve the position of his coreligionists, whenever an opportunity arose. For this same purpose, he sent agents to various countries who kept him informed of the situation of the Jews and of wrongs which should be redressed. The Hebrew letters, dispatched and received by him on these and other matters, were written in an elaborate and artistic style, comparable to that used in the Arabic correspondence of the caliph's chancellery. For this reason, these letters were used as models of Hebrew epistolography, which explains how some of them survived, both in literary sources and in the Geniza. The most famous example is Hisdai's correspondence with Joseph, the king of the Khazars. Jacob Mann has identified and published a number of others, two addressed to the Empress Helena and her learned royal husband, Constantine Porphyrogenetos (912-959) of Byzantium; two sent to him from Byzantine Southern Italy; and one, partly translated here, issued in the name of "the congregations of France," (cf. MT I, pp. 3-30). The senders of that epistle apologize for not being able to compete with their Spanish colleagues; however, although there is a marked

difference between the relative simplicity of their style and that of Hisdai's secretaries, who were also masters of metrical versification, for our taste, of course, their style is elaborate enough. Here, only the lines referring to the purpose for which the letter was sent are translated.)

...We, the congregations of France, your servants, the dust of your feet, ...pray to our Creator for the well-being of your mortal frame... and the increase of your glory and the ascent of your exalted position. We are well and happy...because of the good tidings which we heard about you from our notables, M. Saul, R. Joseph, and M. Judah,^{a)} who have come back from your abode, after having become enriched through contact with you... Likewise, we were much pleased to learn from your trusted convey, M. Samuel,^{b)} that you enquired whether you could do anything for us, by which you, the chosen of God, would be able to accomplish a praiseworthy deed.

Yes, we have found such an opportunity for you, our lord. Every year, in the city of Toulouse, the Jews have to supply 30 pounds of wax to the Church at their season of light,^{c)} and when the wax is delivered, the man who brings it receives a blow on the neck.^{d)} When your agent, M. Samuel, heard this, he said that it would be an easy matter for you, our lord, to bring about the abolition of this practice. Therefore, we

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thought perhaps our lord will be able to remove this abomination through his diplomatic skill... (thirteen lines of praise).

Please do not disdain the writing of your servants. We know that we are not worthy to address you, and we do so only because we love you, our lord, and trust in your great modesty and sincere piety. Therefore, we have described with utmost succinctness some of your ways, you, our Master and Teacher, the prince of Israel. It is as if one presented a king, possessing a million hundredweights of gold with two hundredweights of silver. Therefore, we refrain from making many words... May the greatness and glory of our beloved increase and wax...in eternity.

Notes

- a) The first two are most probably identical with Saul and Joseph, who accompanied the embassy of the king of Slavonia to the court of Cordova in 952/3 and, on their way back, volunteered to forward Hisdai's letter to the king of the Khazars^S (see MT I, p. 17).
- b) The same agent is referred to in the letters to Hisdai from Southern Italy (see above). MT, I, p. 19.
- c) Easter time.
- d) A symbolic revenge for Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and for Jesus' maltreatment (cf. MT, quoted in Note a).