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A MEETING WITH MAIMONIDES¹

By P. B. FENTON

(PLATES I-II)

The interest of medieval Jewish historians in the works rather than the lives of the great figures of history explains the relative paucity of biographical data to be found in their writings. Indeed the most factual contemporary accounts of the foremost Jewish thinker of the medieval period, Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), are to be found in Muslim historiographies,² whereas entries of comparable substance by Jewish authors are both later in date and more fictitious in nature.³ Although Maimonides's legal and philosophical writings betray at times both warmth and humanity, the autobiographical letters that have come down to us, on the other hand, portray him as an extremely occupied person, whose professional engagements left him little time for the mundane affairs of his fellow men.⁴

This view is now certainly to be qualified in the light of the present letter discovered in the Taylor-Schechter Genizah collection, which complements Professor S. D. Goitein's recent attempt to add to our picture of Maimonides's personality with the help of details culled from contemporary Genizah documents.⁵

Upon discovering the following letter, a report of a meeting with an important person, the present writer was led to surmise on the basis of certain details, that the dignitary so reverently referred to in the document, might conceivably be none other than Moses Maimonides. It was most gratifying to have this conjecture supported by Professor Goitein whose opinion was canvassed on the matter.⁶

The author of the letter was apparently commissioned to deliver a secret message to Maimonides and assumed that the latter would merely accept the note in question without condescending to receive its bearer. Indeed, his companion, al-Faḥr, did not dare to enter the great man's abode and preferred to remain at the entrance. However, the messenger was ushered in together with his young child, al-Ḡalāl.

Overwhelmed by Maimonides's affability, 'which a book would be insufficient to describe', the visitor relates with pride how his host even confided with him at length concerning the issues raised in the letter. In the meantime Abraham (1186–1237), Maimonides's son, who was also present, playfully

¹ The author wishes to thank the Syndics of the Cambridge University Library for having granted permission to publish the manuscript appearing in this article.

² The most significant of which are Ibn al-Qiftī, *Ta'arīḥ al-ḥukamā'*, ed. J. Lippert, Leipzig, 1903, 317–19 (this author was an intimate friend of Yōsef Ibn Šam'un, Maimonides's favourite disciple) and Ibn Abi Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn al-anbā'*, ed. A. Mueller, Cairo, 1882, II, 117 ff. (the author was a colleague of Maimonides's son Abraham). In volume II, 205–6, he gives an account of the Arab philosopher 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baḡdādī (ob. 1231) and the latter's impression of Maimonides whom he met while on a visit to Egypt.

³ For example, Sa'adyah Ibn Danān (ob. c. 1450), *Seder ha-dōrōt* in D. Obadyah, *Fas wē-ḥaḳamēhā*, Jerusalem, 1979, II, 19–20, and Yōsef Sambari, *Dibrēy Yōsef*, in A. Neubauer, *Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles*, Oxford, 1887, I, 117–23.

⁴ See his Epistle to Samuel Ibn Tibbon in *Iggārōt ha-Rambam*, ed. Lichtenberg, Leipzig, 1859, II, 28, and T-S Glass 16.290 published by D. Baneth, in *Studies in memory of A. Gulak and S. Klein*, Jerusalem, 1942, 50–6.

⁵ 'Moses Maimonides, man of action: a revision of the Master's biography in (the) light of the Genizah Documents', in *Hommage à Georges Vajda*, Louvain, 1980, 155–67.

⁶ I am also indebted to Professor Goitein for having kindly brought to my attention some of the letters by the same writer listed in the following note.

taught al-Ġalāl how to address the great master. Maimonides was most amused and all the warmth of his character is affectionately exhibited when he actually plays with the visitor's child.

Although the document, written in Judaeo-Arabic, is unsigned, the anonymous sender is by no means completely unknown. Indeed part of his correspondence, which has been preserved in the Genizah, contains several letters addressed to Šēlōmōh ben Yīšay.⁷ The latter, a Nāsī' from Mosul who later settled in Fuṣṭāṭ⁸ may well have dispatched the message which our writer, perhaps an agent of his, was charged to deliver personally. Furthermore, al-Ġalāl, whose name is followed by the eulogy 'may he be exalted' (*yārūm hōdō*), is mentioned in another of our writer's letters, dated 1236.⁹ It would appear that at the age perhaps of forty, his son had attained an important position in the hierarchy of the Nāsī's of Mosul. Consequently the present letter must have been written in the late 1190s when al-Ġalāl was yet a small child and Abraham Maimonides a boy of about ten years of age.

A particular feature which confirms the identification of our writer with that of Bodl. Heb.a.3.24, is his peculiar habit of dividing his letters into parts which are headed *faṣl*. Professor Goitein has suggested that this may be a Babylonian practice, in keeping with the writer's origin. The usage may, however, be comparable to our modern *post scriptum*, for in the manuscript referred to, each section is clearly an addition after the signature of a preceding section.¹⁰ Thus our note too may have been an addition, or a draft of one, which was to be attached to the end of a longer text from which it was subsequently detached. This would account for the absence of any formal address or direction. On the other hand, the hurried style, which, while imitating at times the Classical idiom, is tainted with colloquialisms and *lapsus calami*, would support the hypothesis of its having been but a draft. Both possibilities would explain how it finally came to rest in the Genizah.

In addition to the interesting linguistic features, which will be discussed below in the notes, the letter provides some illuminating details concerning both Maimonides's personality—we learn *en passant* that he was fond of lemon candy—and the layout of his residence. The entrance to the house (*dār*) gave access to a vestibule (*dihlīz*), where another door led to Maimonides's chamber.

⁷ For example, Bodl.Heb.a.3.24, which was published by S. D. Goitein in his article [in Hebrew] 'The Nesi'im of Mosul and the destruction of their houses by an earthquake', in *Y. Braslavsky Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem, 1960, 486-501. Other letters include T-S13J21.24, 20.128 and possibly also 8J24.3, a hurried note similar to our document, bearing Šēlōmōh b. Yīšay's handwriting overleaf. 18J3.8 is addressed by our author to Yaḥya (b. Samuel?) ha-Nagid and 8J10.5 is written to Ḥanan'el (b. Samuel?) the Judge. Although they are written in an Iraqi hand, I do not think as does Goitein (*ibid.*, p. 488, n. 7) that T-S 12.352, 12.413, and 12.654, whose hand is distinctly different, were also written by our author. Their scribe, who also wrote T-S 13J21.8 and 16.36, was, however, connected with Šēlōmōh b. Yīšay, to whom some of these letters are also addressed.

⁸ See J. Mann, *The Jews in Egypt*, Oxford, 1920, I, 175-6; II, 209-10, and *idem*, *Texts and studies*, Cincinnati, 1931, I, 401.

⁹ Bodl. Heb. a.3. fol. 24, line 77, published by Goitein in *Y. Braslavsky Jubilee*, 498. Al-Fahr is also mentioned again in that letter, lines 36-7. See also plate VIII at the end of that volume.

¹⁰ Goitein, *ibid.*, p. 500. His surmise is confirmed by the fact that we have so far only found this term used in this particular sense in letters written in an Iraqi hand, e.g. T-S 20.175 verso, lines 1 and 37, 13J21.8, headed *faṣl*, as well as in two documents dated, respectively, 1241 and 1242, written by Šēlōmōh b. Yīšay himself, 13J8.25 recto, line 14, and 8J6.11, heading. In a letter T-S 10J16.3, by the same writer as T-S 13J21.8 we find the following sentence (line 15): *wa-fi l-kitāb faṣl ilā maḡlisik yataḏamman aš-šawq ilayk*, 'enclosed in the letter is a note to your lordship, expressing longing for you'. In T-S 20.175, the writer introduces a new subject immediately after the heading *faṣl*, with the words: 'After having written the content of the above dispatch (*ḥidma*) . . .'. On the use of *ḥidma*, literally 'service', to designate a 'letter', see also Cambridge University Library Genizah Collection, Or.1080 J.34.

The latter was kept by an usher (*purdah-dar*),¹¹ posted in the vestibule. On this particular occasion the only person present within the reception chamber besides Maimonides, was the latter's son Abraham, who no doubt would attend such an audience as that described in our letter, in order to familiarize himself with the intricacies of communal affairs.¹² In the chamber, Maimonides and his son were both seated on an *iwān*¹³ upon which visitors would presumably not be normally allowed to sit, since our writer deemed it a great honour to be requested to do so.

For the Judaeo-Arabic text (8J14.18, 16·5 cm. × 6·5 cm.) which appears in brown ink on reddish paper,¹⁴ see Plates I–II.

Translation

Recto: [1] Al-Faḥr, may God protect him, went with us when [2] we set out for Rabbi Moses's [house] but he [preferred] for his part to remain [3] at the entrance to the house while I and al-Ġalāl proceeded to enter. [4] I kissed his noble hand [5] and he received us with a most cordial welcome [6]. He said to me 'Come and be seated young man [7]' beckoning me to sit [8] on the edge of the *iwān*, opposite where [9] he [himself] was seated [10] whilst he sat at the other end [11] of the *iwān*. So I sat down while he read the message [12] which I gave him, from beginning [13] to end. He was delighted with the presents [14] and started to play with al-Ġalāl, may God protect him. There was no one else [15] seated on the *iwān* save him, [16] Rabbi Abraham, and myself.

Verso: [1] Then there transpired that which a book [2] would prove insufficient to describe. Next, caskets were brought [3] and he began to eat lemon cakes. [4] We stayed [just] for a while but he detained me [5] in order that we confer a moment confidentially. [6] The master seemed favourably inclined. In the meantime [7] Rabbi Abraham, may God protect him, had taught al-Ġalāl [8] a term with which to address [9] Rabbi Moses. Upon his reciting it [Rabbi Moses] laughed [10] with amusement and sported with the [child]. [11] I was the first to leave [the house], [12] while al-Ġalāl remained behind talking to the usher [13] in the vestibule. Whereupon Rabbi Moses [14] enquired of Rabbi Abraham 'Where has his son gone?' [15] 'He is standing by the door', he replied. 'Go and call him', he said, while re-entering [the door], [17] whereupon he came across the [child who again] recited the form of address.

[18] Peace.

¹¹ Although this term, derived from the Persian *دَر دَار*, was characteristic of the later Mamlūk terminology (cf. al-Maqrizi (ob. 1442) in Silvestre de Sacy, *Chrétomathie arabe* (2nd edition), Paris, 1826, II, 179), Professor Goitein, however, assured me that it is to be found in a poem of Kamāl ad-Dīn Ibn an-Nābih (ob. 1222), a contemporary of Maimonides. Indeed the verse in question is to be found in his *Diwān*, ed. Beirut, 1882, 59.

¹² It was common in Genizah times for officials and religious leaders to employ their sons as assistants with a view to their eventually succeeding their fathers. Cf. S. D. Goitein, *Mediterranean society*, II, Berkeley, 1971, 90.

¹³ cf. E. W. Lane, *Lexicon*, I/1, 129: 'a slightly raised portion of the floor generally extending nearly from the door to the end, or each end, of a room.'

¹⁴ Is this the red paper so often referred to in Arabic literature? Cf. Goitein, *A Mediterranean society*, II, 1971, 573, n. 20. For other documents written on red paper see T-S 18J4.4, 24.34 and AS152.49.

verso	recto
וגרי מא לא ימכן שרחה	פצל
פי כתאב וקדם אלעלב	וכאן אלפכר ש'צ מענא למא
וצאר יאכל מן אקראץ אללימו ²²	רחנא אלי ר' משה וקעד הו ¹⁵
וקעדנא זמאן ועאד יעקני ²³	עלי באב אלדאר וגזנא אנא
5 ותחדתנא זמאן סרא פיטיב	ואלגלאל ובסתו ¹⁶ ידה אלשריפה
אלמולי קלבה ²⁴ וכאן אלגלאל	5 ולקאנא במלקא טיב גדא
קד עלמה ר' אברהם ש'צ	וקאל אטלע אגלס ר' טוק ¹⁷
כלאם יתכלמה בין ידי	ואומא אליי ¹⁸ אן אקעד עלי
ר' משה פתכלמה וצחך	טרף אלאיזאן אלדי כאן
10 ואעזבה ולאעבה	גאלסא פיה מקאבלה
וכאן גזתו ²⁵ אנא אולא ווקף ²⁶	10 פאנה כאן גאלס ¹⁹ עלי טרף
אלגלאל יחדת אלברתדאר	אלאיזאן פקעדת וקרא אלורקה
פי אלדהליו פקאל ר' משה	אלתי אעטיתה מן אולה ²⁰
לר' אברהם אין הו אבנה	אלי אכרה ופרח באלחואיג ²¹
15 פקאל עלי אלבאב פקאל	ויעב מע אלגלאל ש'צ ומא כאן
אטלבוה והו קד דכל וענד	15 פי אלאיזאן גאלסא אלא הו
אלאזנתמאע קאל אלכלאם	ור' אברהם ואנא
ושלום	

¹⁵ Note the colloquial use of the verbs *rāha* 'to go' and *qa'ada* 'to remain'.

¹⁶ In his reverence for the master, the writer endeavours to reproduce the Classical Arabic *i'rāb*, which is omitted in line 11, *q'dt*. On verso, l. 11, he attempts to do the same, although in his haste he writes *ḡrtw*, instead of *ḡztw*. It is difficult to qualify these instances as examples of hyper-correction. Indeed no example of this particular phenomenon is to be found in J. Blau's treatment of the subject in his *On pseudo-correction in some Semitic languages*, Jerusalem, 1970, 11-12, or in his earlier *Grammar of Mediaeval Judaeo-Arabic*, Jerusalem, 1961, § 56, p. 67. It can be argued that our author is simply employing *scriptio plena* in order to indicate the Classical vowel, a feature, which while mostly characteristic of late Judaeo-Arabic texts from the fourteenth century onwards, also appears sporadically in much earlier texts. Indeed, specialists have failed to point out that a great number of tenth-century (?) Judaeo-Arabic and Hebrew texts, written on vellum, invariably employ *scriptio plena*. For example, in T-S Arabic Box 45 alone, nos. 14, 19, 20, 38, 49, 56, etc., and in a similar hand in the Hebrew language, T-S C2.173. Moreover, these texts are mostly medical works and were therefore not intended for the kind of popular use associated with later texts in *scriptio plena*.

¹⁷ *ṭawq* means 'strength', especially that of a young man. *Rabbi Ṭawq* is colloquial for 'young man'. The writer stresses the master's joviality (Goitein).

¹⁸ For this orthography see J. Blau, *Grammar*, § 30b, p. 48.

¹⁹ Note the inconsistency, typical of Judaeo-Arabic, in the use of the accusative, omitted here but represented in line 9 above and line 15 below. Cf. Blau, *op. cit.*, § 218, p. 150.

²⁰ In his haste the writer has utilized the masculine instead of the feminine possessive pronoun.

²¹ *ḥawā'ij*, lit. 'objects'; spices or similar small presents (Goitein).

²² cf. Dozy, *Dict.*, II, 328. A sort of lemon pastille that was served as a dessert.

²³ Note the use in this and the preceding line, of the asyndetic imperfect, widespread in Judaeo-Arabic although not uncommon in the Classical idiom. Cf. J. Blau, *op. cit.*, § 328, p. 208. For the use of *'āda* as an auxiliary, *id.* § 295, p. 188. The spelling *yu'iqni* for *yu'iqni* seems to be a *lapsus calami* rather than a colloquialism. Note also the omission of the accusative for the adverb of time, see J. Blau, *op. cit.*, § 218, p. 150.

²⁴ The writer seems particularly proud to have been addressed confidentially; he assures his master of an affirmative response from Maimonides (Goitein).

²⁵ Note that the auxiliary has remained invariable, the person being indicated by the main verb only. On this phenomenon see J. Blau, *op. cit.*, § 287, p. 186. For the form *ḡztw*, *vide supra* note 15.

²⁶ Note again as above, n. 23, the asyndetic construction: *waqaf . . . yuhaddit*.

PLATE II

אורי נצח לה ימאכ
ט כמאב וקנס אלא
ויתד ימאכ מן אקומא
וקעדא דמאן ועמד קעני
והחידתה ודמא סמא
למול קלבה ופאס
קד שעה ז אברהם
כלום יתכלה ז יד
ז משה פבנעל ויעקב
ואברהם ואלהבה
וסמך גמא מא מולמך
ליל יחזק אברתו דר
פ אברהם פקל ז משה
לז אברהם ז אברהם
פקל ז אברהם פקל
אברהם ז אברהם פקל
אברהם ז אברהם פקל

T-S 8J14.18 verso