



Document of the Month 12/25: A Judeo-Persian Letter from Bamiyan

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“The Pain of Separation from the Lord”: A Personal Letter to the Son of a Jewish Magnate in Bamiyan

by Ruben S. Nikoghosyan

This month’s document, [NLI Ms.Heb.8333.207=4](#), is a personal letter in Early Judeo-Persian, currently kept in the National Library of Israel (Figure 1). It is one of the documents that have emerged from Afghanistan in the past few decades, belonging to the cache known as the “Bamiyan Papers”¹ or the “Afghan Geniza”. It has been digitized and made available to the public in the framework of the “Ktiv” project,² and is part of the Invisible East corpus.

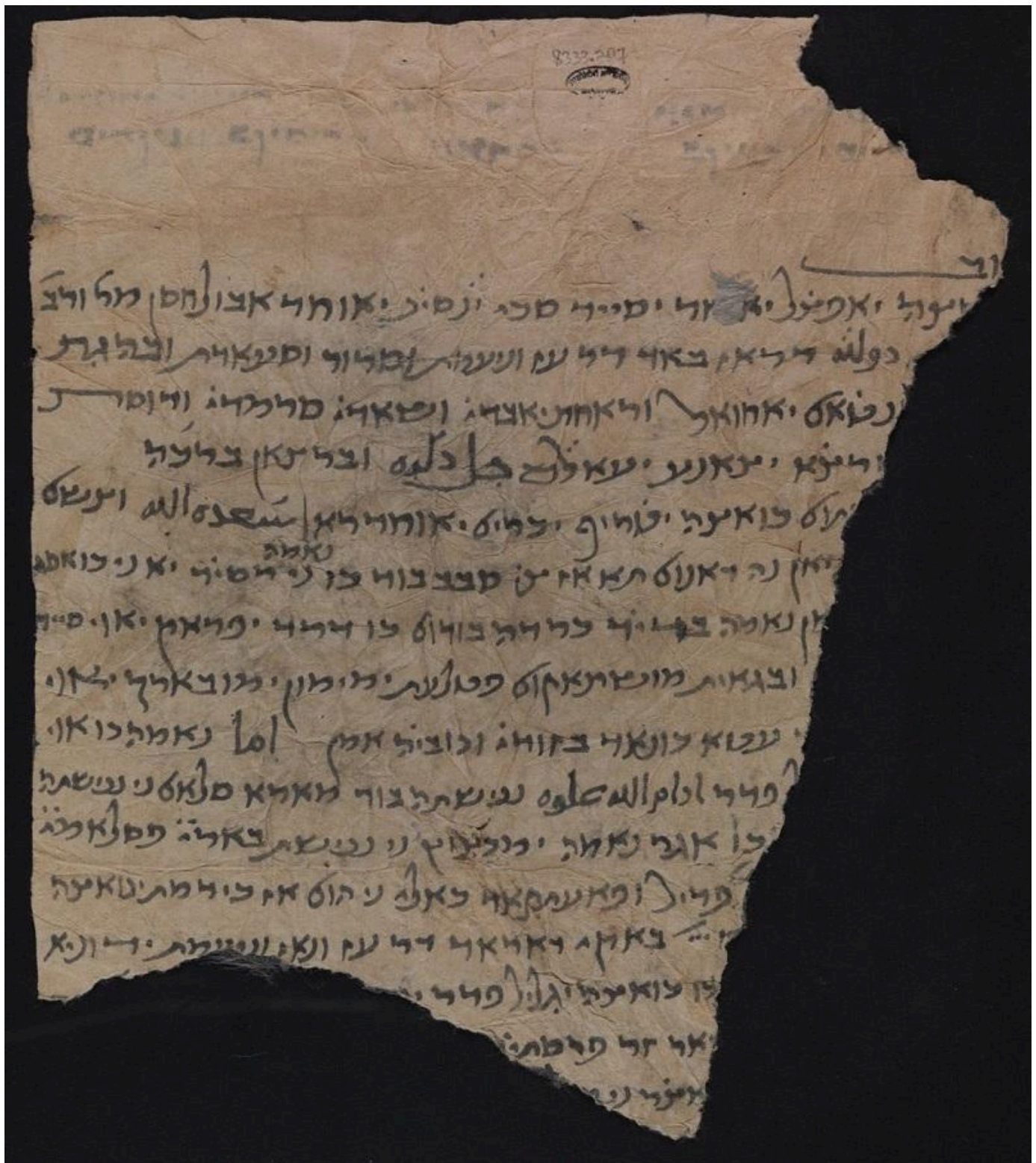


Fig. 1: NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.207=4 recto. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project.

Jewish letters from Cairo to Khotan

Since the discovery of the Cairo Geniza in the 1890s and of the earliest known Judeo-Persian letters in Dandan Uiliq (near Khotan, Xinjiang, in modern-day China) in 1901, thousands of Jewish letters have come to light that illuminate the socio-economic life of medieval Jewish communities in the Eastern Mediterranean, Iran, India, and beyond. In the past few decades, a group of documents known as the Bamiyan Papers or the Afghan Geniza, has further extended this geographical range to include modern-day Afghanistan. Although nowhere near as large as the Cairo Geniza, this sizeable cache is extremely important for understanding the history of the Jewish community in what is now Afghanistan, as well as the broader life of the region in the pre-Mongol period.

What is Judeo-Persian?

Judeo-Persian is an umbrella term for all varieties of Persian texts written in the Hebrew script. Surviving texts in Judeo-Persian are divided between pre- and post-Mongol periods. Pre-Mongol (Early) Judeo-Persian documents present us with a variety of Persian that is not internally uniform and is significantly different from Classical Persian.³ They contain precious information on the development of Early New Persian in Iran and Afghanistan, and contribute significantly to our understanding of the daily and cultural life of the Jewish communities there. In contrast to Late Judeo-Persian, one needs to have close familiarity with the history of the Persian language to be able to fully understand Early Judeo-Persian, as it has many archaic linguistic features that sometimes bring it closer to Middle Persian.

Post-Mongol (Late) Judeo-Persian is very similar to standard Classical Persian, except being written in Hebrew script. There are many valuable literary texts in Late Judeo-Persian, including those composed by the two most famous Iranian Jewish poets Shāhīn-i Shīrāzī (14th century) and 'Imrānī (15th century).⁴

Judeo-Persian letters from Bamiyan

The Bamiyan Papers are a collection of unprovenanced documents from Ghaznavid- and Ghurid-era Bamiyan (early 11th to early 13th centuries). They were brought out of Afghanistan under unknown circumstances, and some were later acquired by the NLI in two batches, in 2013 and 2016. This collection contains legal documents, letters and literary texts in Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew, as well as in Persian in Perso-Arabic script. Particularly noteworthy among them are fragments written in Early Judeo-Persian - very varied in their contents. Among them one can find literary, medical, and theological texts, as well as business and private letters. These letters belonged to the family and circle of Yehuda b. Daniel, an influential Jewish magnate who lived in Bamiyan in the first half of the 11th century (i.e. in the early Ghaznavid period). They attest to his family's business and personal connections, and their close study will yield important results not only for research on the Persian language of the period but also for the understanding of the social and private life in the region in the early 11th century. The longest letter in the set has been published by Ofir Haim in 2012, but the rest are as yet unpublished (I am editing and preparing for publication the remaining letters, which will hopefully come out next year - R.N.). One of these letters is the subject of this *Document of the Month*.

The manuscript

NLI Ms.Heb.8333.207=4 measures 28.3 × 24.7 cm. It is inscribed on both sides: the recto contains the main text of the letter (Figure 1), and the verso contains the ending of the letter, in a fragmentary condition, and an address, written upside down in relation to the main text (Figure 2). The right side of the recto is torn, with the damage increasing towards the bottom. Similarly, the bottom part of the letter is missing, rendering the letter incomplete. Unfortunately, no line survives intact. At the top, two or three words are missing from each line, with the number increasing to four or five words in the lower half of the letter. The last three surviving lines on recto are fragmented, with tears on both the left and right, further diminishing their legibility.

It was customary to vertically flip the paper after one has finished writing on the recto side, and to continue the letter on the reverse, writing from the opposite direction. Thus, what had been the bottom of the recto, would become the top of the verso. Unfortunately, because of this, the ending of the letter is also in a very fragmentary state and not much can be made out of it.

Upside down on the verso side, we have the names of the sender (left column) and the recipient (right column), written parallel to each other. As the left edge of the verso is missing, the name of the sender is preserved only partially. Luckily, we can read the initial letter of his name as well as his patronymic, S... b. Ya'qūb-i Sīman. Given that it was not uncommon to name a child after their grandfather, the name may be tentatively reconstructed as S[īman] b. Ya'qūb-i Sīman.⁵

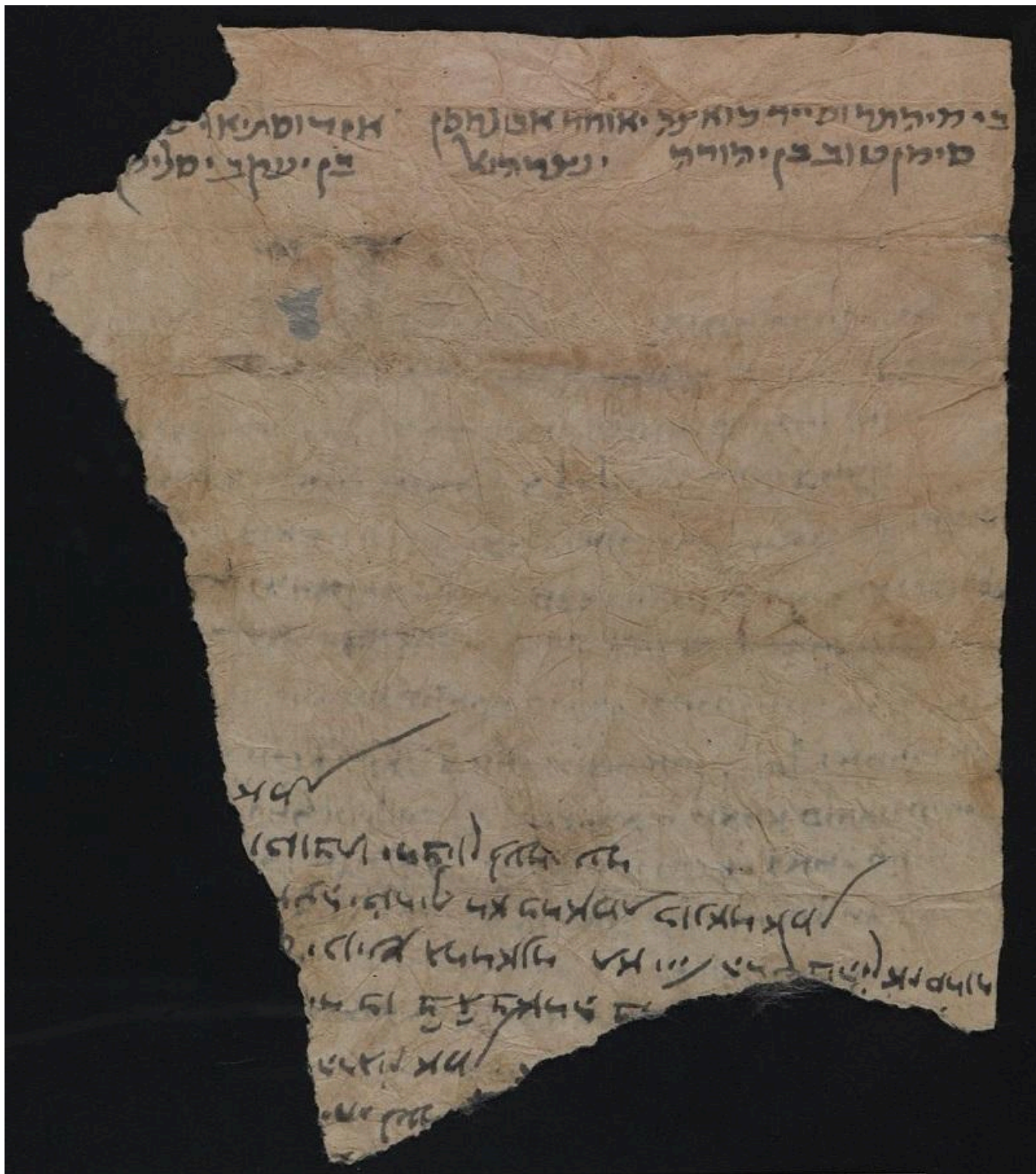


Fig. 2: NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.207=4 verso. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project.

The letter and its contents

The letter was sent by S[īman] b. Ya'qūb-i Sīman to Abū-l-Ḥasan Siman Tov b. Yehuda, to whom and whose father Yehuda b. Daniel the majority of surviving Judeo-Persian documents in the Bamiyan Papers seem to have belonged. The sender identifies himself as a friend of Abū-l-Ḥasan, but the generally servile tone of the letter pushes us to assume that there was a status gap between them. This comes as no surprise, given that Siman Tov was the son of one of the most (if not the most) influential regional magnates in early 11th-century Bamiyan, as we learn from other surviving documents penned by Yehuda b. Daniel and the circle of his relatives and agents.⁶

The surviving text of the letter can be divided into six parts:

Recto:

Lines 1-5. Greetings and praise of the recipient, who is called “master and teacher”.

Lines 6-10. The sender enquires about a letter he previously sent to the recipient and to which he did not get a response.

Lines 11-15. The sender enquires about an epistolary issue pertaining to a letter he received from someone’s father, in which the customary greetings had been omitted.

Lines 16-17. The beginning of another discussion concerning some financial issues. Since it is in the lower part of the letter, only a few words are preserved.

Verso:

Lines 1-8. The ending of the letter, which survives very partially because the upper part of the verso is torn.

Upside down. Lines 1-2. The names of the recipient (right column) and the sender (left column).

In the best-preserved part of the letter (recto, lines 6-15) there seems to be a discussion of two issues. Firstly, the sender appears to have sent an earlier letter and, having not received an answer, wonders whether the letter has not reached Siman Tov – who is called *khwāja* “master” throughout the letter – or if Siman Tov has intentionally left it unanswered. He asks: “I do not know for what reason it was: did the letter not arrive, or did he⁷ not want to (write a response)?” Having reassured Siman Tov of his sincere devotion, the author then turns to discussing an issue related to someone’s father. This is in all likelihood the father of Abū-l-Ḥasan Siman Tov himself, i.e. Yehuda b. Daniel, as he is mentioned in a very respectful manner (line 11: “may God perpetuate his dignity”) and without being directly named. This more or less direct inquiry about another member of the family may imply that the sender stood in close connection to the family and was one of the agents working for Siman Tov and his father. This time the author is concerned that “the letter that ... the (most virtuous) father, may God perpetuate his dignity, had written to me, he had not written the greetings...”. This issue is not as trivial as it might appear, as this small gesture could have signaled that the author had fallen out of favor.

Despite all this, the main purpose of writing this letter seems to have been financial, as is suggested by lines 16-17. Unfortunately, being in the lower, lost part of the letter this section has not survived well. One gets a sense of its original contents only from the phrase “you send gold” on line 16. Perhaps the talk is about some investment suggested by the sender; alternatively, he may have been asking for financial support.

Some interesting features of the letter

The language of the letter is very similar to standard Classical Persian (with the exception of the conjunction *kū* ‘that’), and it is written in a very neat handwriting. Throughout the text a number of Arabic religious benedictions stand out that are written in Arabic script, e.g., “may God make him happy” (recto, line 6), “may God perpetuate his dignity” (recto, line 11), etc. (Figure 3). I have marked them with bold characters in the edition, to distinguish them from the Hebrew-script text.⁸

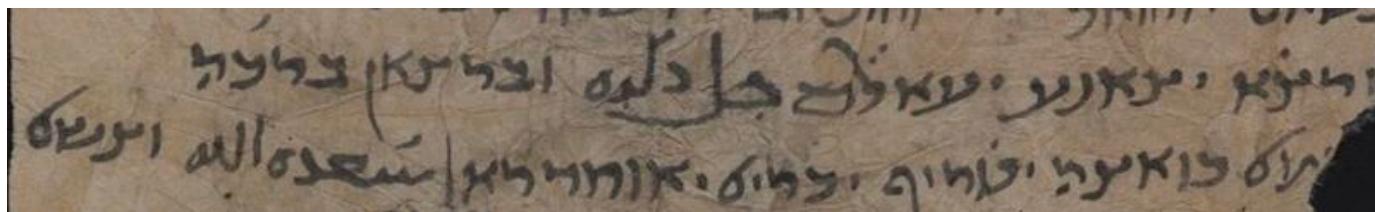


Fig. 3: Detail of NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.207=4 recto, showing Arabic religious formulae written in Arabic script. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Israel. “Ktiv” Project.

While it is not uncommon to see words in Arabic script inserted here and there in Judeo-Persian texts both from the Cairo Geniza and the Bamiyan Papers, it is interesting that the writer of our letter adhered to the rule of writing the benedictions almost exclusively in the original Arabic script. This aligns well with a similar phenomenon described by Shaul Shaked,

who considered it to be a characteristic feature of the Khuzestani variety of Early Judeo-Persian.⁹ Shaked, who at the time of writing the article in 2011 did not have access to the Bamiyan material, explained it as a peculiarity that could only have existed in a majority Arabic-speaking environment, i.e. Egypt, where members of the Iranian-Jewish community “treated Judaeo-Persian as a Jewish language, to be written in Hebrew characters, while the phrases in Arabic script were considered to be quotations from the predominant non-Jewish language, namely Arabic.” However, our letter testifies that writing Arabic formulae in Arabic script was also practiced in Jewish circles in the Eastern Iranian lands. At the current stage of research, this custom appears to reflect a certain biliteracy among Iranian Jews (to the best of my knowledge this phenomenon was less prevalent among Judeo-Arabic-speaking communities). This is further supported by the practice of writing seemingly random words in the Perso-Arabic script, of which the present letter has only one example (𐤀𐤌) on recto, line 10). This demonstrates that the convention of writing Persian in Hebrew characters in non-religious contexts was a conscious choice, which did not stem from a lack of mastery of the Arabic script.

Another interesting feature of the letter is the use of the phrase *mr w rb* (recto, line 2), an abbreviation of the Aramaic expression *marana ve-rabbana*, “our master and teacher”.¹⁰ This abbreviation (sometimes in the form *mr w r*) is frequently used in Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew letters in the Cairo Geniza when addressing eminent members of society, such as scholars or rabbis. Some examples can be found in Bodl. MS heb. b 11/22 (ca. 1145–48, Judeo-Arabic, verso, address, line 2); T-S 13J26.3 (ca. 1050, Hebrew, verso, address in Judeo-Arabic, line 1); Moss. IV,10 (ca. 1035, Hebrew, verso, address, line 2). Its usage in our letter might imply that the addressee was also viewed in that way.

Final remarks

Even a brief comparison between Jewish documents in the Bamiyan Papers and in the Cairo Geniza shows that the Jewish community of Afghanistan formed – whether directly, or as is more likely through the mediation of the Jewish community of southern Iran – part of the wider Jewish business, scholarly and letter-writing culture that extended westward to the Mediterranean. I have little doubt that a deeper examination of this question will allow this connection to be demonstrated more decisively and thoroughly.

Notes

1 This term was coined by the Invisible East project, see Haim 2023:201.

2 [https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH990039250420205171/NLI#\\$FL45509256](https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH990039250420205171/NLI#$FL45509256)

3 For a description of its grammar, see Paul 2013; on the varieties of Early Judeo-Persian, see Shaked 2009. Shaked’s classification of the available Early Judeo-Persian material into five groupings needs to be updated in light of the new material from Bamiyan.

4 The first scholar to study these poets was Wilhelm Bacher (Bacher 1907–1908); for partial translations see Moreen 2013.

5 Goitein 1973:66.

6 See Haim 2012; Haim 2023. For an example of a letter written by Yehuda b. Daniel see [NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.35=4](#).

7 In Early Judeo-Persian letters, it was a common way of courtesy to address a person by using the 3rd person instead of 2nd person.

8 This follows the practice of Shaked 2011 and Haim 2012.

9 According to Shaked’s categorization, there are five discernable varieties of Early Judeo-Persian typical of the following areas: a. Khuzestan, b. Central Fars, c. Bukhara region, d. Chinese Turkestan, e. Afghanistan (Shaked 2009:450-451). In the variety of Khuzestan, it was common to write the formulaic Arabic phrases in Arabic script (Shaked 2011:322).

10 I thank Nadia Vidro (Invisible East) for her comments on the Aramaic and Hebrew expressions in the letter.

+ Expand All

Transliteration

National Library of Israel, Ms.Heb.8333.207=4. Transliteration by Ruben S. Nikoghosyan. Words in Hebrew, Aramaic or Arabic are italicised. Words in Arabic script are also bolded.

Recto

1. ____*[t]*wb
2. _____(')šh y 'pzi y '[wḥ]d y syyd sky y nsyb y 'wḥd 'bwlḥsn *mr w rb*
3. _____***dwlth*** dr'z b'd dr 'z w ny'mt w srwr w s'dt w bhḡt
4. _____nž'm y 'ḥw'l w r'ḥt y 'bdy w š'dy srmdy w dwst
5. _____w rz' y š'n' y "l' ***jl ḏkrh*** w br š'n *brkh*
6. _____twm kw'šh y žryp y krym y 'whd r' ***s'dh'llh*** w ššm
7. _____y'n nh d'nwm t' 'z šy sbb bwd kw n'mh ny rsyd y' ny kw'st
8. _____(')n n'mh bryd krdh bwdwm kw drd y pr'q y 'wy syyd
9. _____w bg'yt mwš't'qwm pḥ't y mymwn y mwb'rk y 'wy
10. _____(r) 't' kwn'd bzdwy¹¹ w xwbyh¹² *'mn*. ***'m'*** n'mh kw 'wy
11. _____(l) pdr ***'d'm'llh 'lwh*** nbyšth bwd m'r' sl'm ny nbyšth
12. _____kw 'gr n'mh y mkšwš ny nbyš't b'ry psl'my
13. _____pdy l w p'tq'd x'ly ny hwm 'z kydmt y kw'šh
14. _____(w) yyy b'qy d'r'd dr 'z w n'z w ny'mt y dwny'
15. _____kw kw'šh y ḡlyl pdr y _____
16. _____'r zr prsty_____
17. _____(m)zr ny (b)_____

Verso

1. _____[...]¹³_____
2. _____yhy l'd_____
3. _____hrgyz *'mn'*_____
4. _____yd kw 2 3 b'rh b_____
5. _____[?] y kwyš grd'nd t' yyy hrš byhyn 'z srwr
6. _____(')šh y žryp r' kr'mt kw'nd *'mn*
7. _____w *ḥwbtw yrbywn l'd 'd*
8. _____*'mn*

Upside Down

1. by myhtr w syyd kw'šh y 'whd 'bwlḥsn¹⁴

2. symn ḥwb bn yhw dh y *nšrha*¹⁵
'z dwsty 'wy s[lymn?]

bn y'qb y slymn_____

Notes

11 It is interesting that *ba* and *pa* here (and in other similar documents) are used interchangeably.

12 The final *h* is archaic, cf. Middle Persian *nēkih*. It is well attested in other Early Judeo-Persian texts. The parallel usage of *zūdī* and *xōbīh* is interesting.

13 Only the bottom of one letter is visible, the rest is missing.

14 The receiver and the sender are mentioned here in two parallel columns.

15 This word seems to convey the Arabic phrase *naṣarahu-allāh* (“May God help him” or “May God grant him victory”); the last word is written as a ligature that combines *aleph* and *lamed*.

Transcription

National Library of Israel, Ms.Heb.8333.207=4. Transcription by Ruben S. Nikoghosyan. Words in Hebrew, Aramaic or Arabic are italicised. Words in Arabic script are also bolded.

Recto

1. *[ʔ]ov*
2. [zindagānī-i xwā]ja-yi afzal-i a[wh]ad-y sayyid(-i) saxī-i nasīb-i awḥad Abu-l-Ḥasan *marana ve-rabbana*
3. **[adām-allāh] dawlatuhu** dirāz bād dar ‘izz u nī‘mat u surūr u sa‘ādat u biḥjat
4. _____ niẓām-i aḥwāl u rāḥat-i abadī u šādī-i sarmadī wa dōst
5. _____u riẓā y ṣānī‘-i ‘ālam **jalla-ḏikruhu** wa bar jān *barakahu*¹⁶
6. ___[nāma firis]tom xwā]ja-yi ẓarīf-i karīm-i awḥad rā **sa‘dahu-llāh**, wa čašm(-i)
7. [juwāb dārom, u] in na dānom tā az čī sabab būd kū nāma nē rasīd yā nē xwāst
8. [juwāb nibištān. wa] ān nāma barīd karda būdom kū dard-i firāq-i ōy sayyid
9. _____wa bi-ḡāyat muštāqom pa-tal‘at-i maymūn-i mubārak-i ōy
10. _____[dīdā]r ‘atā kunād bi-zūdī u xōbīh, *amin. ammā* nāma kū ōy
11. [sayid-i afza]l pidar **adām-allāh ‘uluwwuhu** nibištā būd mārā, salām nē nibištā
- 12 [būd]_____ kū agar nāma-yi maxṣūṣ nē nibišt bārī pa-salāmī
13. _____pa dil wa pa ‘ittiḡād xālī nē hom az xidmat i xwā]ja
14. _____xudāy¹⁷ bāqī dārād dar ‘izz u nī‘mat-i dunyā
15. _____kū xwā]ja-i ḡalīl pidar-i_____
16. _____ar zar firistī_____
17. _____(m)uẓīrr nē b[ūdī]_____

Verso

1. _____[...]
2. _____īhī l‘ad_____
3. _____hargiz *amin*. a_____
4. _____yad kū 2-3 bāra b_____
5. _____-i xwēš gardānad tā xudāy har-čī behīn az sarwar
6. _____[xwā]ja-i ẓarīf rā kirāmat kunād, *amin*.
7. _____*ve-ḡovotav yirbeyun*¹⁸ *la-‘ad ‘ad*
8. _____*amin*

Upside Down

1. bē mihtar u sayyid xwā]ja-yi awḥad Abū-l-Ḥasan,

2. Sīman Ṭōv bin Yahūda-i *naṣarahu-llāhu*
az dust-i ōy S[īman]

bin Ya‘qūb-i Slīman____

Notes

16 This benediction is in Hebrew characters.

17 Written here and on verso as yyy, as is common in Jewish documents (Early Judeo-Persian and Judeo-Arabic).

18 For this form, see Deuteronomy 8:13.

Translation

National Library of Israel, Ms.Heb.8333.207=4. Translation by Ruben S. Nikoghosyan. Words in Hebrew, Aramaic or Arabic are italicised. Words in Arabic script are also bolded.

Recto

1. *[Beneficie]*nt

2. [May the life of] the most virtuous, unique, master, the generous lord, noble and unique Abū-I-Ḥasan, *our master and teacher*,¹⁹

3. ***[may God prolong] his fortune***, be perpetuated in respect and wealth, happiness, bliss and joy,

4. ----- orderliness of his affairs, eternal peace, and perpetual happiness, and [his] friend

5. ----- and the satisfaction of the creator of this world, ***may his mention be elevated***, and upon the soul [may His] *blessing* be.

6. ___ [I sent a letter] to the beautiful, generous and unique master, ***may God make him happy***, and my eye

7. [is waiting for his response], as I do not know for what reason it was that the letter did not arrive, or he did not want to

8. [write a response] ___ I had sent the letter by the hand of a messenger, as the pain of separation from the lord

9. ----- and I am extremely eager, under his beneficent and blessed auspices

10. ----- [may God] gift it (to him) very soon and with benevolence, *amen*. ***However***, the letter that he

11. ----- the (most virtuous) father, ***may God perpetuate his dignity***, had written to me, he had not written the greetings

12. ----- that if he did not write a special letter, overall, with (...) ²⁰ greetings

13. ----- by heart and by conviction, I am not absent from the service of the master

14. ----- may God keep him in respect and worldly wealth,

15. ----- the exalted master, the father -----

16. ----- you send gold -----

17. ----- would not be harmful -----

Verso

1. ----- [...] -----

2. ----- ? for eternity -----

3. ----- never, *amen* -----

4. ----- (come) as 2-3 times -----

5. ----- will make his own, so that God whatever is the best, from the lord

6. ----- will treat the beautiful (mas)ter with generosity, *amen*.

7. ----- ***may his welfare multiply forever and ever***.²¹

8. ----- *amen*.

Upside Down

1. to the noble and lordly, unique master, Abū-I-Ḥasan,

2. Siman Tov bin Yehuda, ***may God help him***,²²
from his friend S(līman)

bin Ya'qūb-i S(līman)---

Notes

19 In Aramaic.

20 There is an *idāfa* after the word “greetings”, probably for an adjective, but because the beginning of the following line is missing, we do not know exactly what the author wants to say.

21 In Hebrew.

22 This Arabic expression is written in Hebrew characters.

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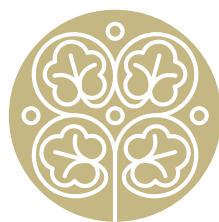
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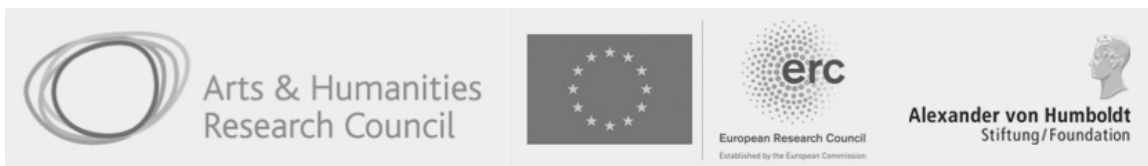
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