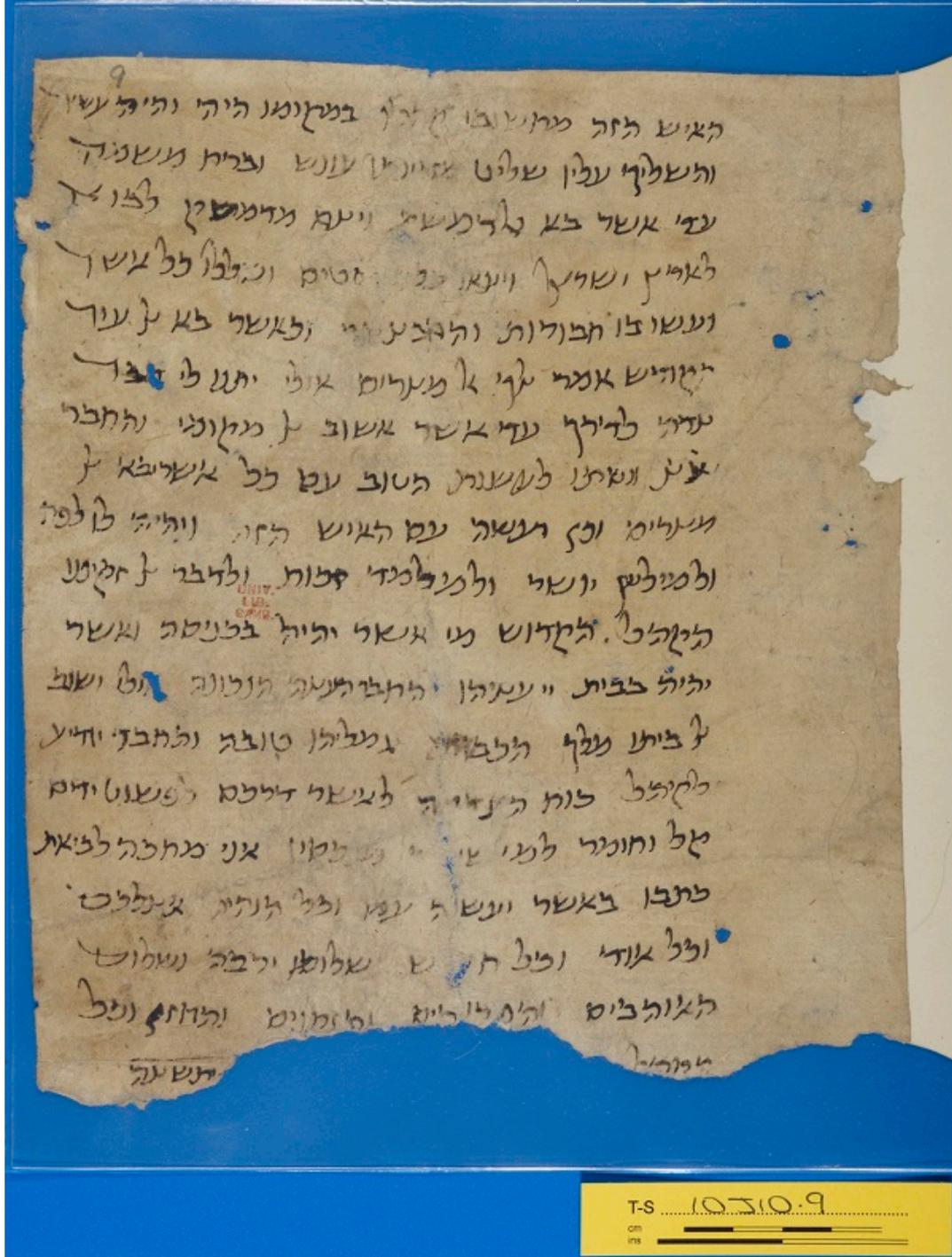


## **The letter for a man from somewhere: T-S 10J10.9**

Ben Outhwaite

T-S 10J10.9 is an incomplete letter sent from Jerusalem to Egypt on behalf of a traveller whose travels had taken a terrible turn. The letter has elicited much interest over the years, thanks to the vivid story it tells of a rich man brought low by bandits and turning up, cap in hand, in Jerusalem, but its incomplete state left many details unknown. A number of historians from Jacob Mann onwards have worked on it, and consequently opinions as to the identity of the recipient and of the unlucky traveller vary widely.



## T-S 10J10.9, recto, a letter of introduction for an unidentified man

Mann, who published the letter in full in his *The Jews in Egypt and Palestine under the Fātimid Caliphs* (1970 [1920–22]: i 103, ii 111), described it as follows: the recipient is asked to 'interest himself in the bearer of the epistle', who was a 'respected and rich inhabitant of his place'. He had been fined so heavily by his governor that he had fled, but after reaching Damascus and continuing on for Jerusalem, his luck got worse and he 'fell a victim to brigands, who despoiled him of all he possessed'. Mann stated that the letter addressed a Ḥaver, most likely Ephraim b. Šəmarya, and was sent by 'undoubtedly a

member of the school', i.e., of the Yeshiva in Jerusalem. The purpose of the letter was for the rich Egyptian community to rally round and supply funds to return the unfortunate to his homeland. S. D. Goitein, in his preface to the 1970 reprint of Mann's *Jews in Egypt*, noted that Mann had omitted the date given at the bottom of the letter, 4795 (תשצ"ה) which resolves to 1034–5 CE (Mann 1970 [1920–22]: xxxi).

Goitein later addressed the letter in his own work, volume 2 of *A Mediterranean Society* (1971: 544), and stated that 'Solomon b. Judah writes' to solicit the donations on behalf of the unlucky individual, linking the letter explicitly to the Palestinian Academy – as Mann had suspected.

From 1985 onwards, in a series of publications, in French, English and Hebrew, Norman Golb connects this letter with the story told in another document, also a letter and published by Mann, this time from the community of Arles (which is in the British Library collection, Or. 5544.1). This other letter concerns a Mar Reuben from Rouen (written RDWM) in Normandy. The most recent version of Mar Reuben's story is in Golb's study *The Jews of medieval Normandy: a social and intellectual history* (1998), and, condensed, it suggests the following about our letter here: T-S 10J10.9 was written either by the 'well known Solomon ben Judah or by his son' to a dignitary in Fuṣṭāṭ (Golb 1998: 25–28). [1] The date, the end of 1034 or the first nine months of 1035, matches not only the period of office of Solomon b. Judah well, but also that of the Arles letter. So, in his view T-S 10J10.9 fills in the later history of Mar Reuben, who was fleeing persecution in France. He evidently 'disembarked at a port on the Syrian coast, probably Beirut, and then went directly to Damascus... On his way from Damascus to Jerusalem he was attacked by highwaymen, and afterwards probably found conditions very difficult in Jerusalem. This is where the Gaon and his associates learned of his misfortunes through the letter written in Arles'. Reuben then expressed his desire to travel to Egypt in order to raise funds to return to France, wrapping up a quite miserable period of his life.

Moshe Gil examined T-S 10J10.9 in several publications, the most recent of which is the revised English-language *A History of Palestine 634–1099* (1992). He concluded that the letter had been written by Abraham, the son of the Gaon Solomon, and it was sent most likely to Alexandria, because it offers greetings to a cantor, something that is apparently not Abraham's practice when writing to Fustāṭ (Gil 1992: 526). He was uncertain as to the origin of the unfortunate traveller, who had fled because of the pressure of taxes and been left wounded and penniless by robbers, but assumed 'that someone from a distant land is being referred to, perhaps from somewhere within the Byzantine empire' (Gil 1992: 526). Gil addressed Norman Golb's theory about the letter (as given in his earlier publications, not the monograph of 1998), but considered it only an assumption and an unlikely one, given that a traveller from 'the land of the Franks' would have been described as such by the writer of the letter, as an unusual and pertinent fact. Moreover, Golb's Mar Reuben seemed to want to die in Jerusalem, whereas the bearer of T-S 10J10.9 was expressly trying to return home, עד אשר אשוב אל מקומי (Gil 1992: 549–51 n. 50).

Mark Cohen is the most recent historian to publish T-S 10J10.9 in full, in translation, in his study of poverty and charity, *The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages: an Anthology of Documents from the Cairo Geniza* (2005). There he describes the letter as recommending a 'formerly rich man who had come upon hard times' (Cohen 2005: 53–54). He identified the addressee as most likely Ephraim b. Šəmarya, the head of the Palestinian congregation in Fustāṭ in the first half of the 11th c. He notes that the bearer is attempting to return home, and adds in parentheses 'where that is, we are not told' (Cohen 2005: 53). In any case, for Cohen, the important details are those that are in the extant part of the letter itself, that an appeal was being organised in Egypt to assist a Jewish traveller from afar, speaking to the charitable impulses and organisational abilities of the medieval Jewish communities. Cohen refers to Golb's

theory that the letter concerned Reuben b. Isaac from Rouen, but points to Gil's rejection of the theory and his contention that it was 'probably from Byzantium' (Cohen 2005: 54).

Given that we have half a letter, with no signature at the end, and the portion that is missing would have contained the opening salutations naming the recipient, as well as the address on verso, it is not surprising that there is such variety in interpretation. On the whole, however, all previous scholarship agrees on the facts in the letter itself: it was written in 1034 or 1035 CE from the Academy of Jerusalem, Abraham b. Solomon Gaon's handwriting having eventually been identified. It was on behalf of a formerly wealthy man, who had been robbed on his journey from Damascus to Jerusalem. The interpretations over the years, however, cast a wider net. Was it addressed to Ephraim b. Šəmarya in Fuṣṭāṭ or someone else in Alexandria? Alexandria suggested itself perhaps because of the need for the man to take ship from there to get home. Does it concern a traveller from Byzantium (Gil), or does it continue the sad story of Reuben from Rouen (Golb)?

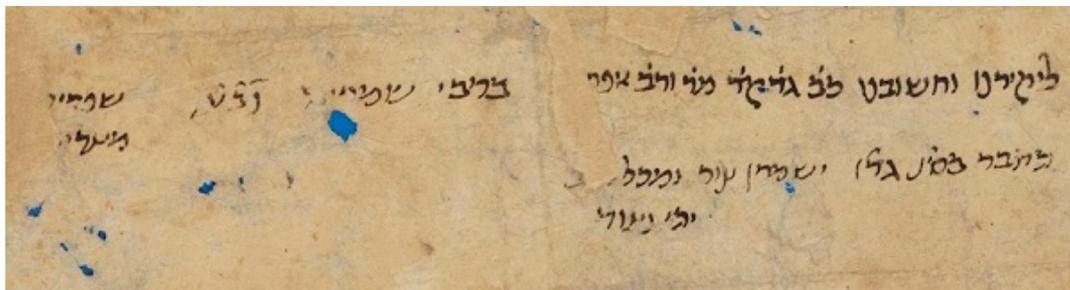
With fragments torn, scattered and lost, such situations are commonplace in Genizah research, and different scholars address the gaps in different ways – through minimalistic caution, through comparison and extrapolation, or through feats of imagination. In this case, however, we can now test the hypotheses, as I was fortunate to discover the rest of the document. How did I discover it? I was working on a different letter written in the unmistakable hand of Abraham b. ha-Gaon, and I simply searched on Cambridge Digital Library (<http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk>) for Abraham b. Solomon's letters, and looked through the resulting fragments. It took very little time to spot that T-S 10J10.9 was the bottom half of the letter I had been working on, and that the letter was neatly torn in two. [2]

T-S 10J10.9 has been published a surprising number of times, thanks to the story it tells, but its top half, T-S 13J17.4 is also well known. It is a letter of recommendation for a man from Khorāsān. It has been discussed by Mann, Ashtor, Goitein of course, and ultimately published by Gil as document number 138 in volume 2 of his *Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634–1099)* (1983). Gil describes it so (1983: ii 248–9):

אברהם בן הגאון כותב, כנראה בשם אביו, אל אפרים בן שמריה בעניין איש סביליה, אשר מכתב שלו הגיע על-ידי אדם מחִיראסאן שבא לארץ-ישראל, שמואל בן סהל.

(‘Abraham son of the Gaon writes, apparently in the name of his father, to Ephraim ben Šəmarya concerning a man of Seville, whose letter arrived in the hands of a man from Khorāsān who had come to the land of Israel, Samuel b. Sahl.’)

The address on the verso identifies the recipient:



### **T-S 13J17.4, verso, the address of the Khorāsān letter**

‘To our dear and important, honourable, great and holy, master and teacher Ephr[aim] son of the scholar Šəmarya – whose rest is in the Garden of Eden – the Haver in the Great Sanhedrin – may the Rock preserve him and from all [harm] protect him. The pavilion of Egypt.’

Šafirir Mišrayim (שפריר מצרים) is one of the Hebrew designations for Al-Fuṣṭāṭ, where Ephraim was based. Solomon b. Judah and his son Abraham, who wrote either on behalf of his father or in his own name as ‘Fourth’ of the Yeshiva, were frequent correspondents with Ephraim, the Academy’s highest representative in Egypt. As is typical of their correspondence, and of 11th-c. correspondence in general, the opening of the

letter is replete with blessings, phrased poetically. The business itself begins only in line 19, where the epistolary noun מגמה marks the transition to the matter at hand:

'And the purpose of these lines (ומגמת טורים אלה) is for the sake of their bearer, whose name is Samuel b. Sahl from the land of Khorāsān (כראסאן). With him came a letter from one of the merchants who are in Seville [by the name of] Sə'adya b. Moses, stating that...' here the letter breaks off with הודיע כי at the end of the line, which is immediately continued with האיש הזה מחשובי קהלו, 'this man is one of the notables of his community', in the first line of T-S 10J10.9. No text is lacking between the two pieces.

4

שלומות להחברות זני אשות קרובות ומגמתו והעבוד  
נששונתו וטובות והשלחות ערבות ליתרון ותוע  
ותובין וגדולות של גבי קרני מנחם ותפא אפריים  
התמיד בכוונה דין גדולה העומד בפסיעת דגולה  
והזרז בש חונן קהלה ועוזר באמת בפע המולה  
הנצח בדין מין ענה ושגמו שוכן מעלה וינערו  
מותרת וקולה ויראיתו ביאת נשוח לגלה ובין בית  
התפלה עת ובאה הממשלה בז מלכך שמדירה  
ותו בגן עץ סלה. שלום רב ופריה ענומה ויון  
טון ופודו ויקר וכל מעשיו ליוסם יהיו נא ליתרון ול  
בלוניו נחם סלה ישא החבר האדיר שלום  
רב מהל לתי ישנים ובדורות שלום ושול טובת  
כי הוא לשלום חנה ברוך הטוב ולא נפתח מקור  
כל הנחיה בין מפתחין בין מפתח אחרים המקום  
ישום אחריותה לשלום והמחיתת הרוב עוד הא  
מבין א ומגלה מדון עני ישב חותן קת  
לל מבין אשם וכבר קדמו כמעט לטע קמני קדי  
הודיעו בו כהנחיה אתה תיע מקראים והנחיה  
ומגמת טורים אלה עבדו נפסאם ושלום שמואל  
בן סהל מאמן פלאיזאם בא עמו פתח מן היתנים  
אשר בטובותיהם מעדיה בין משה הודיע כי  
האיש הזה מתעבדו לך במתקנתו היה ותיב עשו

והשלחך ענין שליטת אחריו ענין  
עני אשר בא להגישת יעקב מדינת לבנון  
לארץ ישראל ויעקב נבחר והוא כלל אשר  
ועשו בו חבורות והוצעו ופאשר בא תעור  
היהיש אמה תן אמתיות אולי יתעב צד  
עדי לדרך עני אשר אשוב ת מקומו והחכה  
צד ואתו לעשות הטוב עם כל אשר בא ת  
מקומו וכך תראה עם האיש הזה ויהיה כלפי  
ולמלך יושא ולמלכדי קבור ולדבר ת מקומו  
המלך. הקדוש מן אשה יהיה בפיסת אשה  
יהיה בבית יעקב החברתית הכולה וכל ושוב  
ת ביתו ענין הלבנות גמילות טובה והחבד יודיע  
למלך כוח הנשיה לעשה דמכס ופשוט יודיע  
כל וחומר למי ענין ענין אני מחכה לציאת  
כתבו באשר יעשה ענין וכל הנחה גמילות  
וכל אודי וכל חן שאלוה ירבה ועמוד  
האורבים וכל ליהודים והחיים ועל

**Reconstruction of complete letter, T-S 10J10.9 + T-S 13J17.4, recto**

With the letter now complete, we can describe it so, based purely on the facts preserved in it: a letter in the handwriting of Abraham b. Solomon Gaon, to introduce its bearer, Samuel b. Sahl of Khorāsān, to Ephraim b. Šemarya in Fustāṭ. Samuel had left distant Khorāsān, because of a punishing fine placed upon him by a local ruler, and travelled through Damascus to eventually arrive in Jerusalem with an introduction from a merchant, Sə'adya b. Moses. This spoke of his position in society and his former wealth. Unfortunately, in travelling from Damascus to the Holy Land, he was attacked and robbed by bandits, who left him injured. He now wishes to go down to Egypt and obtain help from there to allow him to return home. Ephraim is asked to organise this assistance from within the Egyptian community.

Clearly, the complete letter shows that some of the former assumptions about the background of T-S 10J10.9 were not accurate. Gil suggested on insubstantial grounds that it was sent to Alexandria – the address now says Fustāṭ – and thought that the traveller was from Byzantium – a reasonable assumption given the traveller’s arrival from the northern route, but proved wrong: he was a more exotic traveller from Khorāsān. Golb’s far-reaching theory, connecting it with his reconstructed story of Reuben b. Isaac of Rouen, has to be disregarded: already credibly disputed by Gil, it is unquestionably now contradicted by the facts.

At the risk of falling into the same trap, however, I would suggest that one aspect of the complete letter, preserved in the top half and stated as fact by Gil, is not correct: ‘having brought with him a letter from Saadia b. Moses, of Seville, whom he evidently met somewhere *en route*’ (Gil 1992: 623), reading בשביליה in his edition (Gil 1983: ii 247). If Samuel travelled west from Khorāsān, through Damascus and down to the Holy Land, where would he have met a merchant from Seville? Merchants and ships from Seville are mentioned in Genizah documents (Constable 1994: 21), and the metropolis of Damascus might have provided the opportunity. However, I think that Abraham b. Solomon’s handwriting has misled Gil here: the first *yod* is just his usual serif on the preceding *bet*, and I prefer to read טו (compare טורים two lines above) to ש. I think therefore that we should read this as בטיבריה, written plene (unusual, but not unknown: compare בטיבריא in a ketubba, Bodl. MS. Heb. c13.13).<sup>[3]</sup> I believe this fits the known facts of the story better: a stopover in Tiberias, after leaving Damascus and en route for Jerusalem, makes sense. Samuel was probably waylaid after leaving Damascus, and robbed of everything – including any letters he carried – before reaching the Holy Land at Tiberias. In that bustling town he received a new letter of introduction from a merchant based there, and it is this that he shows in

Jerusalem where, robbed of his goods and ambition, the man from Khorāsān decides to make the difficult journey home, with the help of the reliably charitable Jewish community of Egypt.

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## **Footnotes**

[1 ] In a footnote (26 n. 56) Golb states that 'the handwriting of Solomon and that of his son are among the most recognisable in Genizah documents' – this is very true. 'It is, however, extremely difficult to distinguish between Solomon's hand and his son's' – this is not true: the two hands are like the product of two different generations, so conservative and serified is Solomon's and so 'modern' and streamlined is his son's.

[2 ] I subsequently checked on the Genizah image portal (<https://fjms.genizah.org>) to see if the image matching engine would have found T-S 10J10.9 as a match for T-S 13J17.4, and it did, returning the correct match within the first line of results. So there were multiple ways to find this match. Having completed this Fragment of the Month, I asked Dr Amir Ashur to look at it. He told me that Dr Oded Zinger – himself a prolific 'joiner' of fragments – had also independently spotted that these two fragments join, with the help of the image matching engine. Gil, who published both documents in full within a few pages of each other in volume 2 (as documents number 123 and 138) of his *Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634–1099)* did not spot this, but then, given how many documents he addressed in that work, perhaps it is not that surprising.

[3 ] Further evidence is that the phrase אשר בשביליה does not fit the context. 'Who are in Seville' implies that the merchant is actually in Seville. We would prefer 'of Seville' or 'from Seville', מן שביליה. 'Who are in Tiberias', better fits the fact that Samuel probably travelled through Tiberias.

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