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Goitein's alleged simplistic linguistic analysis of T-S 13J24.22

by [M. A. Friedman](#)

Scholarship by definition precludes unquestioning acceptance of the findings of eminent predecessors. This rule by necessity applies to Genizah research, and even the scholarship of such towering figures as S. D. Goitein beckons for critical reassessment, a point well-taken by Esther-Miriam Wagner in her recent [FOTM](#) piece. Unless such seemingly daunting challenges are confronted, scholarship is liable to stagnate. In the attempt to demonstrate the superiority of a new analysis the burden of proof rests heavily on the challenger, and this rule too must be self-evident.

Wagner demonstrates the first principle with her criticism of Goitein's posthumously published discussion (5:222, 569n17) of T-S 13J24.22. This is a late, 16th (?) -century Judaeo-Arabic letter, in which Najmiya, whose family emigrated from Spain to (Old) Cairo, writes her father, and reports that her mother said that he should come home quickly, since she had entered her last month of pregnancy.[1] Goitein commented that 'the specifically Semitic sounds of Arabic were impossible for the Spanish girl to pronounce, wherefore she mercilessly mixed up *k* and *q*, *t* and *ṭ*, 'alif and 'ayin, and was unable to discern between short and long vowels, so absolutely vital in Arabic.'

Specific examples of this 'merciless mix' were not cited by Goitein in his book. This notwithstanding, in Wagner's opinion 'from a linguist's point of view' his analysis was 'simplistic' and reflected the prejudices of his time. Since this letter is part of the India Book collection (VI, 54) on which I have been working, I have Goitein's rough-draft transcription at my disposal. Nevertheless, I enter into the discussion with trepidation, as I have not studied such late Judaeo-Arabic materials and am hardly a linguist.

Najmiya—Wagner speculates that a male relative might have written the letter for her—clearly writes *q* instead of final *k*, especially for the singular pronominal suffix. But since the writer spells the plural pronominal suffix *-kum* with *k*, Wagner deduces that she 'knew perfectly well how to write the suffixes' and concludes that 'this feature can in fact only be interpreted as a misreading of the final *k*.'

While final *ך* and *ק* are in fact often indistinguishable, Goitein's supposed misreading is fantastic here. Unless the situation is different in the period concerned, to the best of my knowledge those two letters may be identical in form—if and when *ק* is drawn with one stroke. But in this document, which is written in a rather handsome hand, all the examples of *ק* are clearly penned with two, disconnected strokes. This appears to preclude a misreading. Is it not possible that the writer distinguished between the pronunciation of final *k* (without following vowel) and medial *k*, and that the former was realized like *q*? Furthermore, in lines 18–19 Goitein read: ואסתעל פי אלמי כאד מא תכדר 'come as quickly as you can,' with *tkdr* = *tqdr* ('you can'). Besides this expression being more idiomatic in my opinion, from the shape of the letters alone I consider this reading preferable to תכדר ('hurry'), even though there is only a slight difference between ב and כ.

Wagner notes that 'the spelling of *ṭ* for *t*, the so-called *taḥīm*, occurs commonly from the 15th century onwards.' I suggest that the opposite spelling *t* for *ṭ* occurs in the clause ואלעפיא ושלום בי אלכיר ואלעפיא ושלום in lines 19–20, which I understand to mean 'I shall not burden you with more prolixity, except (to wish you) well-being, health and peace,' with *nutawwal*<*nufawwil*. I am not familiar with such a spelling (a loose *tarqīq*?) from the classical period of Judaeo-Arabic and do not know how common it was from the 15th century onwards.

As to the interchange of 'alif and 'ayin, Wagner correctly assumed that Goitein may have interpreted אדמנא in line 6 as עדמנא ('we missed'). In his draft copy the equivalence is marked with a question mark. This reading was undoubtedly intended in his *A Mediterranean Society* where אדמנא נמ עפיתכם וסמענא אג הונק ציעף כיתיר in lines 6–7 was paraphrased: 'he forgot to say in his letter, "I am well," as usual, and the climate of Mocha, where he stayed was not salubrious'. Wagner prefers identifying אדמנא as a derivative of *adāma* 'to make long lasting,' but neither 'we made long lasting' nor 'it made (for?) us long lasting' fits the context.

My own preference is to translate the clause: 'From it (reading your letter) we felt relief because of your health, since we had heard that there was much sickness there.' Relief afforded by the good news of a letter and by word of a loved one's good health is a common theme in Genizah letters. (For ציעף, 'illness,' see Dozy, II, p. 9; Hava, p. 418. Cf., e.g., ENA 4020.1, lines 3–4: וטאן קד בלגא אן כאן תם ציעף 'He [= I] heard there had been sickness there [= in your home]': India Book III, p. 381; India Traders, p. 776.) If so, אדמנא is a phonetic spelling of אטמנא, also known from Spanish Arabic (Corriente, p. 334: *mud/tmán*).

In line 20 עתית could be understood 'I gave,' either as an equivalent of עטית (as noted by Goitein) or אתית (from IV אתי) (see, e.g., Wehr, p. 3; Hava, p. 3; there is also evidence for this in Judaeo-Arabic texts from the classical period). Accordingly, the phrase ואוסלתני אלהי בנדיקא should be translated 'I received the 5 *bndyks* and gave 3 to Rahma,' and it was so understood by Kraemer (p. 249). (*Bndyk* might be a garment or piece of cloth, so *bndqy* Piamenta, p. 41).

I think that Wagner's questioning Goitein's reading Mocha (the Yemenite port city) is well taken (his copy indicates some uncertainty on the decipherment). But her conclusions that Goitein's linguistic analysis was simplistic, reflected the prejudices of his time, and that the writer was a native Arabic speaker have not been adequately demonstrated in my opinion and require further consideration.

The letter itself is fascinating both because of its contents and language. It merits a detailed analysis and full edition, and I hope that these will be engendered by the discussion initiated by Wagner.

*I would like to thank Dr. Wagner for having shared with me observations on her reading of the text.

Notes

[1] I assume that is what 'entered her month' means, but Goitein remarks that the writer forgot to mention which month it was.

[2] Najmiya's concern for her father's health resurfaces later in the letter, in an apparently disconnected fashion (in line 11 ועפיתכם באס 'and your health is poor').

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