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# MAINTAINING FRIENDSHIP AND COMMERCIAL RELATIONS IN EIGHTH-CENTURY EGYPT

## THREE LETTERS FROM ABŪ YŪSUF TO ABŪ YAZĪD

PETRA M. SIJPESTEIJN

THE AUSTRIAN NATIONAL Library Papyrus Collection houses three Arabic letters sent by one Jewish merchant to another in Egypt, in the eighth century CE. Although the individuals and events appearing in the letters cannot be identified or precisely located in time and place, palaeographical similarities among them, as well as their near-consecutive inventory numbers (suggesting that the three documents were found together) strongly point to their being part of a connected series. More letters in the series may yet emerge, but even with just three, exciting opportunities suddenly emerge: we have the opportunity to compare them and to identify differences that might otherwise be explained by style, personal idiosyncrasy, or regional variation. We can see rhetorical strategies at work and distinguish them more certainly from the merely formulaic and reflexively conventional. We now have some context.

These letters chart the interactions of three protagonists: Abū Yūsuf, the writer of all three letters; Abū Yazīd, the recipient mentioned in the three letters; and Abū Yazīd's son-in-law Yahūdā: all residing somewhere in the Fayyūm oasis. Three additional actors, Abū Ishāq, Abū al-Ḥārith, and Abū Yaḥyā, have walk-on parts. Abū Ishāq was a distant business partner of the protagonists, most probably fulfilling the function of capital investor. He is mentioned as the recipient together with Abū Yazīd of one of the three letters. Abū Yaḥyā and Abū al-Ḥārith were also commercial associates, but their positions are harder to identify, as will be discussed below. There were presumably return letters to which Abū Yūsuf was reacting, but these have not survived. The time lapsed between the letters are all unknown.

The context depends on understanding the letters as a sequence, an exchange that tells a story as it unfolds. Although that sequence cannot be known with absolute certainty, I propose to read the letters as they appear in my Appendix, which is also the numbering I use throughout this article.<sup>1</sup> Letters 1 and 3 have already received a good

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I Joseph von Karabacek, Karl Jahn, and Werner Diem each followed the order of the inventory numbers in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in their separate discussions of two letters—the Letters 3 and 1 analyzed here—while apparently unconvinced of any potential sequencing based on their contents. See Diem, *Vier Studien*, 2; Jahn, “Vom frühislamischen Briefwesen,” nos. 9–10; Karabacek, in Karabacek, Krall, and Wessely, *Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer*, 170–71, nos. 650 and 651.

deal of scholarly attention, including two editions with translations, to be discussed in detail below. I recently discovered Letter 2, and identified it as belonging to the same sequence. A translation is provided here for the first time.<sup>2</sup> Letter 2 supports some of the observations made by previous scholars on the basis of Letters 1 and 3, especially concerning the Jewish background of the correspondents. It also adds information about the shared peculiar linguistic characteristics of these letters. Based on my reconstruction of the events that form the background of the three letters, I have attempted to provide new readings and translations. The main contribution of this article, however, is the analysis of Abū Yūsuf's use of rhetorical devices that distinguish the visual appearance, language, and contents of the letters.

## Background

These three papyrus letters were found in the garbage heaps of Kiman Faris, the area north of Madīnat al-Fayyūm, where the deserted ruins of the earlier oasis's capital (known by its Greek name, Arsinoe) had served as an ancient repository for centuries. At the instigation of Josef von Karabacek (1845–1918), Professor of Oriental History at the University of Vienna, funds were secured from Archduke Rainer Joseph of Austria (1827–1913) for the Austrian antiquities dealer Theodor Graf (1840–1903) to purchase them for Archduke Rainer's collection, along with some ten thousand other papyri from the Fayyūm, at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This so-called "first Fayyūm find" formed the starting point of the papyrus collection now kept at the Austrian National Library.<sup>4</sup>

Similarities in handwriting, layout, and language strongly suggest the same person wrote all three letters. All three letters display similar, distinctive letter shapes: a similarity first observed by Karabacek's analysis of the only two letters known at the time. All three also display an unusual density of diacritical dots, as well as a horizontal lengthening of letters (*mashq*). Giorgio Levi Della Vida later suggested, based on the striking palaeography of the published Letters 1 and 3, that they must both have been written by the same person, presumably the sender whose name appears on letter 3: Abū Yūsuf.<sup>5</sup> Letter 2 also carries an address with Abū Yūsuf as the sender. Interestingly, Letters 2 and 3 exhibit the same graphical feature on the verso: a drawing in lieu of the seal that would have closed the string with which papyrus letters were usually tied (Figure 3.1).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> An edition of the Arabic text with a translation and commentary will also appear in Sijpesteijn, *Care for the Poor*.

<sup>3</sup> Only Letter 1 is said explicitly to have been part of the "first Fayyūm find," according to Jahn, "Vom frühislamischen Briefwesen," 186; but we can extend this provenance to Letters 2 and 3, as well.

<sup>4</sup> For the history of the collection, see <https://www.onb.ac.at/bibliothek/sammlungen/papyri/die-papyrussammlung>.

<sup>5</sup> Levi Della Vida, "Remarks," 131–33.

<sup>6</sup> Diem (unlike Jahn) includes a description of the drawing on the verso of Letter 3—but without, it seems, being aware of its function: *Vier Studien*, 6. For this practice of drawing lines across the

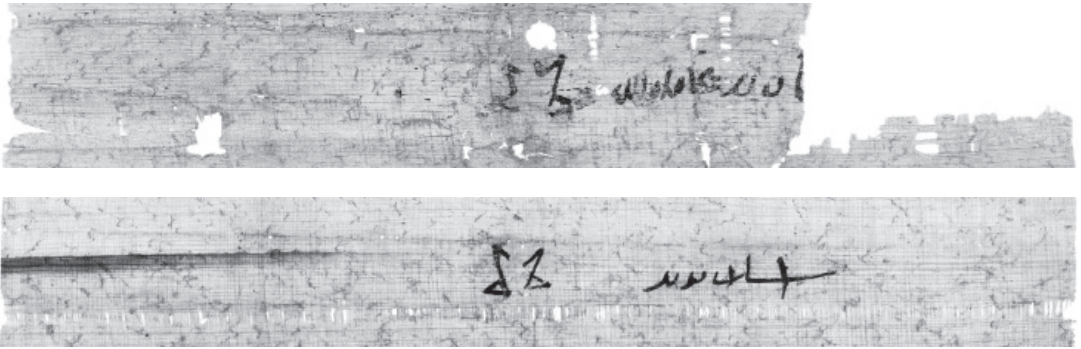


Figure 3.1. Verso details of papyrus Letters 2 (P.Vindob. Inv. AP 849) and 3 (P.Vindob. Inv. AP 287) showing drawing of seals. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Papyrussammlung. Reproduced by permission.

The letters additionally reveal comparable orthographic features which, although somewhat common to all papyrus letters, are repeated so frequently in these letters as to suggest the same hand at work in all three. Finally, linguistic choices also point to a single scribe, such as the blessing “may God protect you” (*amta’a allāh bika*) which, as Werner Diem pointed out in his analysis of Letters 1 and 3, is unusual and a sign that the two letters were written by the same person.<sup>7</sup> This same blessing occurs in Letter 2.

The unity of the subject matter across the letters reinforces the hypothesis that they were sent by a single individual. Whether Abū Yūsuf penned the letters himself or delegated this to an (unnamed) scribe cannot be determined with certainty. My own view is that the degree to which the palaeography and layout are marshalled to serve the rhetorical aims of the letters suggests that Abū Yūsuf probably wrote them himself, especially given his personal investment in the apparently deteriorating financial situation which the letters document. All three letters were sent to Abū Yazīd, who is addressed directly in the body of the letters. In Letter 1, Abū Yūsuf aims to reconcile Abū Yazīd with the latter’s son-in-law, Yahūdā, who had turned to Abū Yūsuf for help. Yahūdā most likely delivered this letter to Abū Yazīd himself, which would explain the absence of an external address on the verso. Letters 2 and 3 have a partial external address on the verso, noting only the addressee’s name (Abū Yazīd). On the recto of Letters 2 and 3, an internal address attests to the sender, Abū Yūsuf, and to the addressee(s), Abū Yazīd (and Abū Ishāq), as part of the prescript.<sup>8</sup> Only Letter 2 was jointly addressed to Abū Yazīd and Abū Ishāq, who otherwise does not feature in the correspondence. Especially in the second half of this letter, Abū Yūsuf directs his words to his more familiar correspondent, Abū Yazīd, to whom the letter was delivered.

papyrus string closing the letter that functioned as seals, see Grob, *Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters*, 182.

<sup>7</sup> Diem, *Vier Studien*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Grob, *Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters*, 39–42.

Karabacek dated the letters to the ninth CE or third AH century. He did not make an edition, but gave a summary of the contents.<sup>9</sup> The letters were subsequently edited and translated by Karl Jahn, who pushed the dating back to the end of the second/eighth century and reported that Letter 2 had been part of the “first Fayyūm find.”<sup>10</sup> Levi Della Vida made some suggestions for alternative readings and interpretations in his review of Jahn’s edition and, based on the appearance of the name Yahūdā in letter 1, suggested that the correspondents were Egyptian Jews.<sup>11</sup> Simon Hopkins also provided some textual corrections in his study on the language of the Arabic papyri,<sup>12</sup> and Werner Diem re-published the two letters in a study dedicated to them, providing crucial corrections to the reading and interpretation of the letters, corroborating the assumptions of earlier scholars concerning the Jewish identity of the interlocutors, and presenting a detailed linguistic study of the letters’ Jewish Arabic phonetic spelling.<sup>13</sup> Diem dated the letters firmly to the second/eighth century on palaeographical and linguistic grounds.<sup>14</sup> Some unusual expressions attested in both letters were adduced by him to support the connection between the letters, already suggested by Levi Della Vida, and he corrected the understanding of Yahūdā’s relationship to Abū Yazīd: not his brother-in-law but his son-in-law. Letter 2 (P.Vindob. Inv. AP 849), which I have now identified as belonging to this group of letters, is here used to support the conclusions made by earlier scholars and to analyze Abū Yūsuf’s epistolary strategies.

All of the men mentioned in the letters seem to have been involved in trading and moneylending. Abū Yūsuf and Abū Yazīd may even have been related, judging from the degree of intimacy that Abū Yūsuf shows in his greetings to Abū Yazīd.<sup>15</sup> The demands he feels comfortable making of him, and the solicitude he shows for his well-being (especially in Letter 3, urging him not to brave the inclement weather) also suggests a fairly high level of familiarity and regard. That Yahūdā, Abū Yazīd’s son-in-law, turns to Abū Yūsuf to intercede on his behalf with Abū Yazīd, further confirms Abū Yūsuf’s closeness to the family—close enough to involve himself in their internal ructions. Abū Yūsuf and Abū Yazīd also live near enough to each other that Abū Yazīd can look after Abū Yūsuf’s family in his absence. We do not know where this is, but it was presumably somewhere

<sup>9</sup> In Karabacek, Krall, and Wessely, *Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer*, 170–71, nos. 650 and 651.

<sup>10</sup> Jahn, “Vom frühislamischen Briefwesen,” nos. 9–10.

<sup>11</sup> Levi Della Vida, “Remarks,” 131–33 and n21.

<sup>12</sup> Hopkins, *Studies*.

<sup>13</sup> Diem, *Vier Studien*, nos. 1–2. These are texts written in Arabic using Arabic script (as opposed to Judaeo-Arabic: Arabic written in Hebrew characters). The extent to which Arabic texts composed by and for Christians, Jews, and Muslims constitute different linguistic registers remains a point of discussion: see, for example, Blau “Are ‘Judaeo-Arabic’ and ‘Christian Arabic’ Misnomers Indeed?”). For the letters’ Jewish Arabic linguistic elements, see note 38 below.

<sup>14</sup> Diem, *Vier Studien*, 3, 11. For a more detailed description of the features of letter-forms in papyrus letters of the seventh to eighth centuries CE (first to second centuries AH), see Khan, *Selected Arabic Papyri*. The use of an internal address could be used to support an eighth-century date: see Grob, *Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters*, 39–42.

<sup>15</sup> Grob, *Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters*, 68; Diem, *Vier Studien*, 10–11.

in the Fayyūm oasis, where the letters were found. The three men clearly moved between each other's places of residence and trading centres, although the distances they travelled do not seem to have been very great, considering that Yahūdā could shuttle back and forth between Abū Yūsuf and Abū Yazīd (as reported in Letter 2) and Abū Yazīd could consider coming to see Abū Yūsuf in his "hiding place" (Letter 3).

The commercial context is clear from the letters' references to the business transactions that form the core of Letters 2 and 3. This is confirmed by Abū Yūsuf calling Abū Yazīd the only "brother whose dedication I can trust (*akh athīqu bi-naḥiyatihi*)" in Letter 3. "Brother" is commonly used in Arabic to mean a "business associate" of equal social status.<sup>16</sup> The greetings conveyed to "all our associates" (l.13: *wa-jamīʿ aṣḥābinā al-salām*) at the end of Letter 2 similarly point to a commercial relationship.<sup>17</sup> There exists, however, a division of tasks among the three men. Abū Yūsuf seems to have operated as the commercial agent for Abū Yazīd and Abū Ishāq, travelling and conducting business (not always successfully, it transpires) on their behalf. Although Abū Yūsuf strikes a formal tone when delivering unwelcome news, the nature of his greetings, the way he mixes business and family matters, and what he feels free to ask of Abū Yazīd suggest a relationship of some intimacy between the two men. Abū Ishāq, however, seems to stand at slightly greater distance. His inclusion amongst the addressees in Letter 2 summons a more formal tone from Abū Yūsuf. Abū Ishāq, indeed, seems to have been the main investor in their enterprise, with Abū Yūsuf the man in the field and Abū Yazīd some kind of middleman or facilitator.

The crux of the exchange is some kind of business reversal, the precise nature of which we never learn, although the ramifications for Abū Yūsuf are clear. This soured the business transaction in which Abū Yazīd and Abū Ishāq have a stake (Letter 2), eventually leaving Abū Yūsuf in debt to undefined "people" [*al-nās* in Letter 3, l. 5]. The ensuing sense of shame (Letter 2), his need to pay off his debtors, and his insistence on making good the loss prevent him from returning home (Letter 3). While writing Letters 2 and 3, he is away from his family, who are located wherever it is that Abū Yazīd lives. Not having planned for such a long absence, he is increasingly worried about his family.

## Letter 1

Letter 1 does not have an internal or external address, but Abū Yazīd is addressed by name in the body of the letter and is surely the recipient. The language and script, as discussed above, support its attribution to the same person who authored Letters 2 and 3, as already suggested by Levi Della Vida and confirmed by Diem. This letter should be interpreted as an intercession letter.<sup>18</sup> Abū Yūsuf writes to his associate Abū Yazīd on

<sup>16</sup> Cecilia Palombo and myself are preparing a publication on the use of kinship terms in Arabic papyri.

<sup>17</sup> For the use of *ṣāḥib* to refer to commercial partners, see Goitein, "Formal Friendship."

<sup>18</sup> Diem considered this letter to be a certificate of good conduct confirming to Abū Yazīd that Yahūdā had behaved well while accompanying Abū Yūsuf, and asking Abū Yazīd to treat Yahūdā as well as he deserves on the basis of his piety: *Vier Studien*, 6. In my interpretation, Abū Yūsuf is

behalf of Abū Yazīd's son-in-law Yahūdā, who has committed some kind of unspecified blunder and is with Abū Yūsuf to escape his father-in-law's anger. In dealing with Abū Yazīd, Abū Yūsuf self-assuredly assumes a relationship of parity. The letter opens rather abruptly (unlike Letters 2 and 3), without the internal address as part of the prescript, as was common at this time. The disappearance of the internal address and greeting common in the first two centuries of the Hijra has been linked to a changed conception of the function of letters in the Abbasid era, to be replaced by blessings on the addressee reflective of Abbasid court ceremony. Here, by contrast, their absence seems more to do with Abū Yūsuf's sense of himself and the requirements of the exchange. Hence, too, the language of religious invocation, blessing, and eulogy is quickly dispensed with and the weight of the appeal to Abū Yūsuf is vested instead in the expectation that his entreaty will be heard by Abū Yazīd and duly acted upon—because it is Abū Yūsuf who is asking. His intercession on Yahūdā's behalf depends, therefore, on his standing with Abū Yazīd and the mutuality of their interests: the reason why Yahūdā has sought his intercession in the first place (ll. 2–3: “he acknowledged the good relationship that exists between you and me”; *wajada ḥusn mā baynī wa-baynaka*).

To emphasize the letter's intercessory function, Yahūdā is dispatched to hand-deliver it and to collect and pay for a dirham's worth of rosewater that Abū Yūsuf asks Abū Yazīd to buy for him. To formulate this request, he uses an imperative with a slide-in blessing which follows a common format for requests in letters in l. 7: “See to it, may God grant you joy, that if there happens to be rosewater, you buy us a dirham worth of it and take the dirham from Yahūdā” (*wa-unzur amta'a allāh bika in kāna waqa'a ward fa-bta' la-nā minhu bi-dirham wāḥid wa-khudh al-dirham min yahūdā*).<sup>19</sup> Strikingly, none of the imperatives in the request are softened by accompanying blessings or a conditional such as *in shā'a allāh* “if God wills,” which is the usual technique for heightening the level of politeness and deference in requests. That Yahūdā delivered the letter to Abū Yazīd personally is clear from its having no external address to serve the deliverer.<sup>20</sup>

A final note asks Abū Yazīd to convey to another associate of theirs, one Abū Yaḥyā, a request to send a certain servant to him. The request to Abū Yaḥyā is couched in terms of a favour, but Abū Yūsuf's use of direct speech, which Abū Yazīd should pass on to Abū Yaḥyā, is also blunt and peremptory. This tone, as well as the explanation “for I need him” (the servant, *fa-innī ilayhi muḥtāj*), supports the interpretation of this letter as matter-of-fact and business-like, suggesting a frank and easy relationship without the need for undue politesse. Abū Yūsuf's closing, without a greeting for Abū Yazīd, is of a piece with this overall tone.

Yahūdā's problems are not explicitly discussed by Abū Yūsuf in the letter, but we can tentatively reconstruct what happened. Yahūdā seems to have had business dealings with some unreliable partners, leading to some kind of commercial misadventure,

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arguing for Yahūdā's good behaviour in response to Abū Yazīd's (anticipated) anger with him; he is interceding for Yahūdā, rather than recommending him.

19 For slide-in blessings, see Grob, *Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters*, 33–39.

20 Already remarked by Diem in *Vier Studien*, 6.



probably also affecting funds or merchandise belonging to his father-in-law Abū Yazīd. It is Abū Yazīd's expected disapproval of Yahūdā that Abū Yūsuf is seeking to counter. He spends by far the largest part of the letter arguing for Yahūdā's good character and reputation, encouraging Abū Yazīd to "take care of him and treat him well, for he deserves all the goodness he can get" (ll. 6–7: *fa-istawṣi bihi khayran wa-aw'idhu min nafsika khayran fa-innahu ahl kull mā ṣuni'a ilayhi min khayr*). Further evidence of Yahūdā's impeccable character is offered in the reference to his avid praying and fasting, a sign not just of his general piety but of his fitting sense of contrition and remorse. Invoking a standard feature of petitions and request letters,<sup>21</sup> Abū Yūsuf emphasises that Yahūdā has run afoul of forces beyond his control, as the victim of "evil people" (l. 4: "while evil and bad people hated him," *bāghidan ilayhi al-sharr wa-ahl al-sharr*). Abū Yūsuf professes himself hardly able to believe that "something like this would happen to him (i.e., Yahūdā)" (ll. 4–5: *mā kuntu aḥsabuhu 'alā dhālika wa-lā bi-dhālika*).

The real force of his argument, though, is the relationship of trust he shares with Abū Yazīd. When he tells Abū Yazīd that he would never have thought this could happen to Yahūdā, his own integrity and judgement are being called upon. To disagree would be to challenge Abū Yūsuf's credibility, personally. Abū Yūsuf's request that Yahūdā be treated well by his father-in-law makes a similar claim. Finally, a deft invocation of God preemptively forecloses Abū Yazīd's options for turning against his son-in-law: "Thank God Who made you stick to your opinion (of him)" (l. 5: *fa-l-ḥamd li-llāh alladhī lam yukhlif ḡannaka*), even though it is exactly Abū Yazīd's change of mind that has necessitated Abū Yūsuf's intercession.

In sum, although Abū Yūsuf is not above having to deploy arguments and persuasion, his demeanour and his confidence that his intercession will be successful speak to an atmosphere of equality and familiarity.

## Letter 2

In Letter 2, this atmosphere changes markedly. Abū Yūsuf has run into some setbacks of his own, and there is explaining to be done. The balance between him and Abū Yazīd tilts against him, and his tone shifts accordingly. Beside Abū Yazīd, the internal address of the letter also mentions Abū Ishāq: a more distant business acquaintance, similarly requiring an adjustment in the language. Whereas in Letter 1 Abū Yūsuf starts and ends without greetings or benedictions, in Letter 2 he opens with a flourish of blessings and invocations. The relative economy of Letter 1 is partially explained by its having been hand-delivered by Yahūdā, who presumably imparted the appropriate blessings verbally. Nevertheless, the escalation of emollient in Letter 2 is striking, especially when taken together with the letter's contents. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Abū Yūsuf feels that recourse to more elaborate epistolary formulations are going to be strategically necessary.

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21 Sijpesteijn, *Righting Wrongs*, Chapter 3.



Business has gone badly. His joint venture with Abū Yazīd and Abū Ishāq for which he was responsible, has failed. He pleads for understanding—and more time. In the interim, while he makes the loss good, he asks Abū Yazīd to look after his family. The letter appears to be a reply to an informative, perhaps even irritated, enquiry by the two addressees about the progress of their joint venture. This is also the longest letter, executed with the most care and effort. The stakes have obviously been raised: Abū Yūsuf needs to restore the trust—financial and personal—between himself and Abū Yazīd and Abū Ishāq, both because of the losses he has incurred and (possibly) his delay in informing them of his failure. Abū Yūsuf's formulation, "know that what prevented me from returning was nothing more than shame" (ll. 6–7: *ukhbirukum raḥimakum allāh annahu lam yamna'nī min al-dukhūl illā ḥayā*) suggests a reply to a specific enquiry or accusation. He sets out to make amends, and also to ensure that his family does not suffer from the fallout. In doing so, his rhetorical strategy operates on two levels: script and language.

The writing and language of this letter seem to have been the object of particular care, with meticulously executed script and formulations, though this special attention is not maintained consistently throughout the letter, either in the palaeography or the language. There are several instances of the lengthening of letters (*mashq*) (e.g. l. 2: *ishāq*; l. 4 *ḥafīzakumā*; l. 5: *bi-ḥāl*; l. 6: *nī'matihi* and *'alaynā*). Some letters are, moreover, especially carefully written, almost in a calligraphic style (e.g. the *zā'* in l. 4's *ḥafīzakumā* and the *lām* in l. 2's *illā*, l. 4's *al-ḥisāb* and l. 7's *lam*). Several lines, especially ll. 6–10, display an unusually large number of diacritical dots. These features are all clearly applied as aesthetic devices to increase the appeal and effectiveness of the letter. Although all of these characteristics also appear to a certain degree in the first and the third letters, they seem to be deployed with particular fastidiousness here. Abū Yūsuf's language serves a similar function, affirming his commitment to the relationship and emphasising their common identity. He makes an effort to employ careful and precise language, applying dual personal pronouns and verbs, though he reverts to the second-person singular or plural in other places (examples of the dual are l. 2: *'āfāhumā allāh* and *ḥafīzakumā allāh* and in l. 9: *u'dhurānī*; examples of the second-person plural are l. 5: *ilaykum* and in l. 6: *'alaykum* and *raḥimakum allāh*; examples of the second-person singular are l. 3: *ilayka* and l. 12: *iqra' nafsaka*). In the latter part of the letter, the second-person singular seems to have been used intentionally, however, to address Abū Yazīd alone. Other linguistic features are the extensive and uncommon blessings with which the letter starts (l. 4), as well as the unusual addition of a slide-in-blessing after the names of the addressees in the internal address (l. 2).<sup>22</sup>

Abū Yūsuf's arguments and explanations are also chosen to reinforce his message of remorse and piety, and blamelessness. He was prevented from returning home by "shame" due to the "disaster" he suffered and the "bad market" he encountered (ll. 7–8: *lam yamna'nī min al-dukhūl illā ḥayā* [...]) *li-annā wāfaqnā bawāran wa-lam nuwāfiq*

<sup>22</sup> For the unusual feature of slide-in blessings in an internal address, see Grob, *Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters*, 39n40.

*sūqan*). His explanation contains two crucial elements intended to evoke Abū Yazīd and Abū Ishāq's sympathy: innocence and shame. Abū Yūsuf was not at fault, nor did he cause the problems he is now forced to deal with. Moreover, he is acutely aware of having fallen short and painfully embarrassed about it. He explicitly asks the addressee(s) to forgive him (l. 9: *fa-u'dhurānī*) and asserts his sincerity by calling upon God (l. 7: "God knows this," *allāh ya'lamu dhālika*) and Yahūdā—here called "my master" (*rabbī*) but referring to the same Yahūdā attested in Letter 1, Abū Yazīd's son-in-law<sup>23</sup>—as his witnesses (l. 8: "my master Yahūdā knows about this," *qad 'alima dhālika rabbī yahūdā*). He then promises to return soon with "something that will please you" (ll. 9–10: *wa-anā in shā'a allāh dākhil ilā ra's al-hilāl bi-llādhī yasurrukum*), implying a resolution that will more than compensate for the loss. This will, moreover, be realized before the next full moon, so at most a month hence. Finally, he draws upon the shared bonds between himself and Abū Yazīd. He sends greetings to their large number of mutual friends and commercial partners, emphasising their community of interest, and backs this up with an emotional appeal to "look after my family and do your very best!" while he is away (ll. 10–11: *unzur yā abā yazīd istawṣi bi-ahlinā khayran wa-kūn 'inda aḥsan*), drawing attention again to the complexity of links between them as well as invoking the pathos of his own predicament.

There are interesting parallels between Abū Yūsuf's justification for his behaviour in this letter and his description of Yahūdā's actions in Letter 1. In both cases, far from being culpable, both men are merely the unlucky victims of circumstances beyond their control, in Yahūdā's case unscrupulous traders, in Abū Yūsuf's the vagaries of market fluctuations. Shame plays, moreover, an important role in both accounts, with Yahūdā's incessant fasting and praying, and Abū Yūsuf shamefaced reluctance to return home.

### Letter 3

In the shorter, franker, but also more desperate Letter 3, addressed to Abū Yazīd alone, Abū Yūsuf explains how serious his situation has become. This letter repeats some of the events mentioned in Letter 2 but uses more emotional language. Besides the failed business transaction, Abū Yūsuf now confesses to owing other people money, debts that have to be repaid before he can return home. He asks Abū Yazīd, as his only remaining "brother," to look after his family until that time, with an additional request to retrieve some money for him. He advises Abū Yazīd against coming to see him, presumably in reaction to a letter from Abū Yazīd offering to come and help.

In keeping with his even further reduced circumstances, Abū Yūsuf's posture becomes more plaintive and deferential, even submissive. Even if the language is partially instrumental, to enlist Abū Yazīd's sympathy and support, the difference in tone and form is striking. Abū Yūsuf now rather desperately calls Abū Yazīd the only business relation he can turn to. He relates the debts he has accumulated and how they are pre-

<sup>23</sup> Although a common Jewish name that occurs regularly in the collection of the Cairo Geniza, Yahūdā is only attested twice in the Arabic papyrological record, in these two letters.

venting him from leaving. He tries to secure the wellbeing of his family, highlighting not only the precariousness of his situation but also theirs.

Some of this more urgent and despairing tone is accounted for by the letter having been addressed to Abū Yazīd alone, which allows Abū Yūsuf an additional level of unvarnished candour. Of the three letters, this is the shortest and smallest in text and size. The writing is cramped and the penmanship slapdash, as if the note was written in haste. Some of the letters nevertheless display the calligraphic extensions that are characteristic of Abū Yūsuf's other writings, but their careless execution undermines their rhetorical force. The usual internal address and opening greetings are included, as was common. On the verso, the name of the addressee, Abū Yazīd, is added followed by the same drawn symbol of the seal that also appears on the back of Letter 2. The presence of the (partial) external address indicates that this letter, like Letter 2, was also delivered by a messenger.

This letter supports what Abū Yūsuf had written in Letter 2, retailing some of the same travails but to greater dramatic effect, achieved through the emotive use of language and expressions of solidarity. His primary goal is to convince Abū Yazīd of his good intentions in order to preserve their close working and personal relationships and, one assumes, to ensure Abū Yazīd's good offices in relation to Abū Ishāq. He sets the tone by starting with the dramatic statement that Abū Yazīd is the "only reliable brother" he has left (ll. 3–4: *annahu laysa lī al-yawm akh athīqu bi-nāḥiyatihi ghayraka*). The sense of being alone is confirmed by his assertion that he "cannot return until God prepares for me what I owe people" (l. 4: *annī laysa nadkhūlu ḥattā yuhayyi'a allāh lī mā 'alayya li-l-nās*). The claim of not having anyone but the addressee is a familiar feature of request letters and petitions.<sup>24</sup> In fact, it seems that Abū Yūsuf is expecting Abū Yazīd to be so affected by his letter that he will immediately want to come and help him. So Abū Yūsuf strongly advises against this, citing the unfavourable weather (ll. 6–7). As I just noted this may be a response to an offer of Abū Yazīd's, expressed in a letter not available to us, but it may also be another application of the rhetorical tactic we saw in Letter 1: floating a course of action which is then dismissed, flattering Abū Yazīd by imputing to him motives of commendable generosity but conveniently obviating the need for him to act upon them.

Here, the general request in Letter 2, to look after his family, is phrased more urgently. Abū Yūsuf asks Abū Yazīd "to make sure my family does not suffer from need," which is supported with a double oath (l. 4: *fa-llāh allāh fī ahli an lā yaḍīqū*) since—to underscore his own distance—Abū Yazīd is on the spot (l. 3: *wa-anta ḥāḍir*). These repeated appeals are striking because it was considered a duty of business associates to take care of their partners' families during their absences. In fact, it seems that these urgent requests function here as a confirmation or reminder of the interdependencies and mutual responsibilities of care and support between the two men.

The letter also introduces some hope for Abū Yūsuf's redemption, with Abū Yūsuf's plea that Abū Yazīd wait until *he* comes to see *him*, and not the other way around, suggesting that, at some point, Abū Yūsuf's problems will be resolved and he will return.

<sup>24</sup> Sijpesteijn, "Connecting via Loneliness."

Moreover, Abū Yūsuf mentions that he has managed to secure a loan of three dirhams from a certain Abū al-Hārith, presumably another business associate known also to Abū Yazīd, and asks Abū Yazīd to collect the money for him. It might be the beginning of Abū Yūsuf's financial recovery and road back home, but it could also be the start of a downward spiral of loans, debt, and bankruptcy.<sup>25</sup>

### The Jewish Milieu and Arabicization

Papyrus, made from strips of the reed that is native to North African marshes, was the main writing material in the ancient world from its invention in pharaonic Egypt, during the third millennium BCE, until it was replaced by paper in the tenth century CE. Egypt was not just a major centre of papyrus production, but the preservative properties of its desert climate have ensured that tens of thousands of papyrus documents, of every conceivable sort, have survived. In this sense, the material history of the three letters is entirely typical.<sup>26</sup> Although the clandestine and haphazard nature of much papyrus excavation has left many papyri without a secure provenance, the scale of their survival nevertheless provides very significant opportunities for reconstructing patterns of social organisation and politico-cultural change. One very important pattern revealed in these letters is the process of Arabicisation.

Egypt had been incorporated into the early Islamic Empire in 642 CE. At the time when the three letters were written, it was governed as a province of the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258 CE) in Baghdad. Jews and Christians populated Egypt before the Arabs arrived, and the languages that were in use were Greek and Coptic (a form of ancient Egyptian).<sup>27</sup> Arabic was introduced immediately following the conquest, but it started to make headway for daily written communication amongst the wider population only in the ninth century. Although the prestige of Arabic gave it an obvious momentum, the process of Arabicisation was not a linear one, nor did it take place simultaneously throughout the province.<sup>28</sup> It depended rather on the distribution of local centres of government, as well as patterns of migration: of Arabic-speakers into the countryside and of Egyptians into the Arab cities, especially the garrisons in Fuṣṭāṭ. Commercial interaction provided another stimulus to linguistic exchange. The Fayyūm, where the three letters were found, is some eighty kilometres south of Fuṣṭāṭ. Although not as closely integrated as the Delta, the oasis was linguistically under the greater influence of the political-administrative capital than areas further south.<sup>29</sup> It is to be expected that Arabic took hold here earlier than in areas further to the south in Egypt.

<sup>25</sup> Papaconstantinou, "Women in Need."

<sup>26</sup> For some basic information about the study of papyri, including for the Islamic period, see Bagnall, ed., *Oxford Handbook*; Bagnall, *Reading Papyri*; Khoury, "Papyrus"; Sundelin, "Introduction."

<sup>27</sup> For the presence of Jews in early Islamic Egypt, see Sijpesteijn, "Visible Identities." The position of Egyptian Christians under early Islamic rule is better studied: see, for example, Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic*.

<sup>28</sup> Papaconstantinou, "Arabic"; Papaconstantinou, ed., *The Multilingual Experience*.

<sup>29</sup> The same was true for the Greek language under Ptolemaic and Roman rule.

The individuals mentioned in these letters are not otherwise known, but several elements point to their Jewish background. As mentioned above, Levi Della Vida already identified the correspondents as Jews based on the name Yahūdā in Letter 1.<sup>30</sup> Diem analysed some linguistic features in Letters 1 and 3 as elements of Jewish Arabic.<sup>31</sup> Letter 2, which I have now added to this dossier, offers further support for the identification of a Jewish milieu through onomastics and linguistics: the reference to “Rabbī Yahūdā, may God increase the likes of him in Israel” (l. 8). Although Yahūdā is depicted as a very pious person in Letter 1, there is no definite indication of his Jewish background,<sup>32</sup> and Abū Yūsuf also does not use the honorific *rabbī* in Letter 1. A secondary indication are the personal names of those to whom greetings are conveyed at the end of Letter 2, which contain a large number of Biblical resonances. While these names—Ishāq, Yūsuf, Isma‘īl, Hārūn, Ḥanān, that is to say Isaac, Joseph, Ishmael, Aaron, and Hanan—are all also commonly used by Muslim and, to a lesser extent, Christian Egyptians, their high concentration in this letter, especially combined with patronymics such as Yūsuf son of Ishāq, Hārūn son of Ishāq, Ḥanān son of Isma‘īl, further supports their identification as Jews.<sup>33</sup> *Kunyās*, or by-names in the form of “father of,” are used to identify the addressees and sender, as well as other individuals mentioned in the body of the letter (including someone to whom greetings are conveyed in Letter 1), and these were generally considered to show respect and honour to the addressee, while simultaneously displaying a form of familiarity.<sup>34</sup> Some of these *kunyās* are religiously neutral, as they are based on Arabic words—i.e. Abū Yazīd, Abū al-Ḥārith—while others have a Biblical association, such as Abū Yūsuf, Abū Ishāq, Abū Yahyā.<sup>35</sup>

Egyptian Jews switched to using the Arabic language for spoken and written communication, along with the rest of the province’s population, in the centuries following the Arab conquest. Nevertheless, their written Arabic can sometimes be distinguished from that of other Arabic-speaking Egyptians. Graphically, Arabic-speaking Egyptian Jews used both the Arabic and Hebrew script to write Arabic. The use of the Hebrew script for private documents in Egypt was, however, only introduced in the ninth century, well after our papyrus letters were written.<sup>36</sup> But Egyptian Jews used Judaeo-Ara-

30 See above, note 11.

31 See below, note 38.

32 Diem discusses the “undisputed” Jewish background of this name and the necessity that this individual’s family members must also be Jewish: *Vier Studien*, 2.

33 Ḥanān is a common male name in biblical and Jewish-Arabic contexts. It appears as an adjective for the prophet Yahyā in the Qur’an (19:12–13).

34 Wensinck, “Kunyā,” Ackerman-Lieberman, “Names and Naming Practices.”

35 Diem points to the fact that the names Abū Yūsuf, Abū Yazīd and Abū Yahyā do not indicate the same religious connection as Yahūdā, but neither do they exclude a potential Jewish identification: *Vier Studien*, 3. Importantly, there are two different Arabic versions of the name of the biblical prophet Johanan/Johannes attested in papyri from Egypt: يوحنا is used by Christian Egyptians, while يحيى is the common Islamic and Jewish form.

36 In these letters we would thus *not* expect Hebrew characters to be used, contrary to Diem’s opinion in *Vier Studien*, 15.

bic, Arabic written in Hebrew characters, alongside Arabic written in Arabic script, first on papyrus, and later on paper.<sup>37</sup> The written Arabic of these letters can also be distinguished through some shared linguistic features. Joshua Blau and Simon Hopkins have identified linguistic features of a “Jewish Arabic phonetic spelling” using the corpus of Judaeo-Arabic papyrus letters. These identifiers, for example the assimilation of the *lām* of the definite article to the initial “sun-letters” of the following nouns, were connected to and expanded for Jewish Arabic by Diem using Letters 1 and 3. These features are also attested in Letter 2.<sup>38</sup>

However, although textual references and linguistic usage place the letters’ production in a Jewish environment, the epistolary formulae, the expressions of reverence and goodwill, and the language of entreaty closely conform to those used in letters composed by other Arabic-writing Egyptians,<sup>39</sup> and most of the linguistic elements and rhetorical tactics that Abū Yūsuf applies are shared with similar request letters on papyrus in Arabic and other languages. The techniques of persuasion that Abū Yūsuf applies in his letters also do not differ from those deployed by his Muslim or Christian contemporaries, with religious-moral invocations and emotional appeals grounded in shared notions of shame, community, and family loyalty. What we see, therefore, is a community of Jewish traders conscious of its own identity but actively engaging in the wider Egyptian context and integrated into prevailing Arab customs and values and the *koinē* of Arabic language usage. Thus, their communal identity overlaps with that of Egyptian traders and others of other different religious backgrounds with whom they share common expectations about help offered and requested for oneself and one’s family. Simultaneously, the letters’ language use and writing style draws a smaller communal circle within which mutual support was to be expected and a certain response could be demanded. Abū Yūsuf appealed to these concentric circles of solidarity in his letters to Abū Yazīd.

## Conclusion

The largely casual nature of papyrus disposal in antiquity, with documents typically discarded as rubbish once their immediate purposes had been fulfilled, and the only slightly less chaotic nature of papyrus discovery in modern times, has meant that most papyri exist in isolation, the people in them invariably unknown and the events they record unable to be corroborated by either other papyri or alternative written sources.<sup>40</sup> Even groups of papyri found together, such as those of the “first Fayyūm find,” of

**37** Blau and Hopkins, “Judaeo-Arabic Papyri.” This is also attested by the commentator Sa’dya Gaon (d. 942), who was the first Egyptian to produce substantial texts in Judaeo-Arabic: see Sijpesteijn, “Visible Identities.”

**38** The assimilation of the *lām* of the definite article to the initial “sun-letters” of the following nouns is discussed as a feature of Jewish Arabic phonetic spelling in Blau and Hopkins, “Judaeo-Arabic Papyri,” 148 and Diem, *Vier Studien*, 12–13. It occurs in Letter 1 at l. 4: *ash-sharr* [...] *at-tuqā’* and l. 8: *ad-dirham*; in Letter 3 at l. 5: *li-n-nās* and l. 7 *ash-shitā*; and in Letter 2 at l. 7: *ad-dukhūl*.

**39** For examples, see the commentary to the edition of this text in Sijpesteijn, *Care of the Poor*.

**40** For the potential difficulties of using papyri, see the sources mentioned above in note 26.



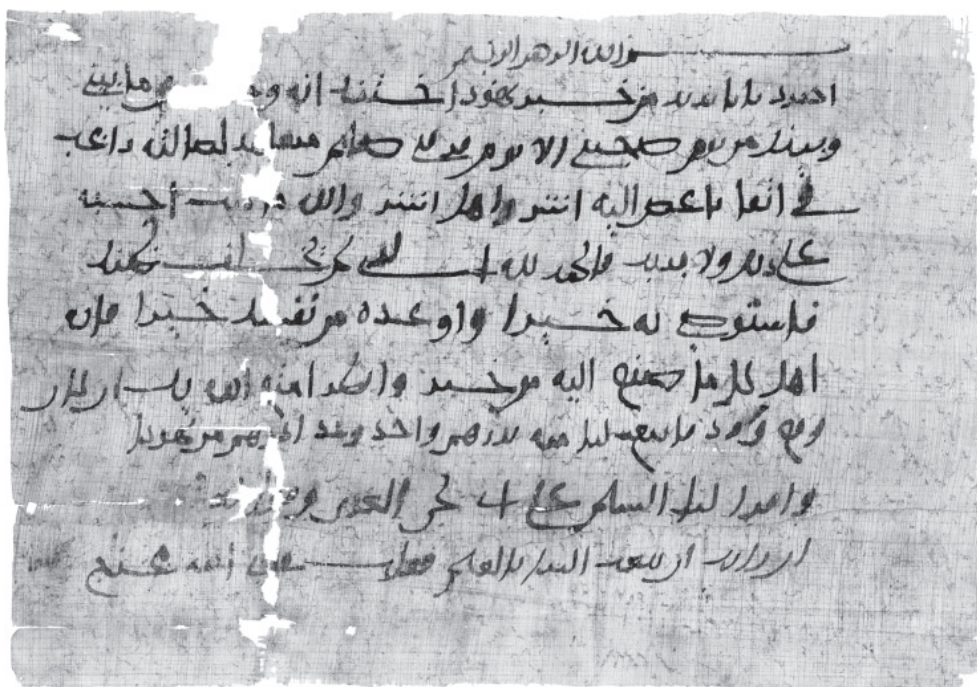


Figure 3.2. Papyrus Letter 1 (P.Vindob. Inv. AP 287). Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Papyrussammlung. Reproduced by permission.

which our three papyri formed a part, contain mostly unrelated pieces.<sup>41</sup> When papyri can be connected through the people, places, or events recounted in them, or because they form an interrelated dossier, the possibilities for linguistic and historical research immediately increase. These three letters are a case in point. Kept by the recipient in his purpose-made archive or as part of less deliberately organised private possessions for as long as he needed them, they were eventually dumped on the waste heaps of Arsinoe.<sup>42</sup> Because the letters can now be placed in a sequence that relates the escalating difficulties of their sender, it is possible to examine how their writing was adjusted to serve his purposes, and how language reflected and supported social relationships. In this case, the letters tell a story, and we can connect their author's methods to the exigencies of his situation and reconstruct his rhetorical strategy. Over the course of the letters, moreover, it is possible to see how his reversal of circumstances changes his epistolary persona.

<sup>41</sup> Even documents that were collected as a group in antiquity might be dispersed again as they moved to different modern collections. See, for example, the papyrus that seem to have belonged to the papers of 'Abd Allāh b. As'ad, an administrator in the middle of the eighth CE or second AH century in the southern Fayyūm, which can now be found in the collections of the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, as well as in the papyrus collections of the Universities of Michigan and Cambridge, Princeton University, and the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek: Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, 6–10.

<sup>42</sup> I use the term in the sense that papyrologists ascribe to it: a group of texts related to a particular person, family, or topic, assembled by modern scholars; as opposed to an archive of private or public records purposely collected in antiquity: see Vandorpe, "Archives and Dossiers," 218.



## APPENDIX

Letter 1. *Interceding for Yahūdā: Abū Yūsuf Appeals Abū Yazīd*<sup>43</sup>

[1] In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. [2] I inform you, O Abū Yazīd, about Yahūdā, your son-in-law, namely that he ackn[owledged the good] relationship<sup>44</sup> that exists between me [3] and you.<sup>45</sup> From the day he came to me until the day he left, he spent fasting, dedicated to his prayer, craving [4] devoutness, as evil and bad people treated him hatefully.<sup>46</sup> By God, I never thought [5] that this would happen to him ever.<sup>47</sup> Thank God Who made you stick to your opinion (of him).<sup>48</sup> [6] So take good care of him and be kind to him! For he [7] deserves all the goodness that he can get. And make sure, may God preserve you, if there [8] happens to be rosewater available, buy<sup>49</sup> a dirham worth for us,<sup>50</sup> and take the dirham from Yahūdā. [9] And convey greetings to Abū Yahyā from Aden from us, and tell him:<sup>51</sup> [10] “Could you please<sup>52</sup> send us the servant because I need him?”

**43** My deviations from Diem’s edition and translation (*Vier Studien*, no. 2) are indicated in the notes below. Diem incorporated and corrected Jahn’s *editio princeps* (“*Vom frühislamischen Briefwesen*,” no. 10) and also emendations suggested by Hopkins (*Studies*) and Levi della Vida (“Remarks”). For an Arabic edition of the papyrus, see the Arabic Papyrology Database, [www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/apd/show2.jsp?papname=Jahn\\_JBW\\_10&line=1](http://www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/apd/show2.jsp?papname=Jahn_JBW_10&line=1).

**44** Diem’s من [ . . . د ] وج can be restored as [د حسـ] ن.

**45** Diem translates as “that he [has pro]ven [himself] [fitting?] the (good) relationship that exists between you and me” (“daß er <sich als> dem zwischen mir und Dir bestehenden [guten] Verhältnis <entsprechend (?)> erwie<sen hat>”).

**46** Diem translates as “whereby he persevered in fasting, devoted himself diligently to prayer, strove for pious behaviour, and evil and evil people him hated” (“wobei er in Fasten verharrete, sich eifrig seinem Gebet widmete, nach gottesfürchtigem Wandel strebte und ihm Schlechtes und schlechte Menschen verhaßt waren”).

**47** Diem translates as “By God, I had not (before) considered him so (pious) and also not so (highly)” (“Bei Gott, ich hatte ihn [vorher] gar nicht so [fromm] und auch nicht so [hoch] eingeschätzt”). The emphasis in my translation is based on the repetition in the Arabic ll.5–6: *mā kuntu aḥsibuhu ‘alā dhālika wa-lā bi-dhālika*.

**48** Diem translates as “So praise be to God, Who has not disappointed your (good) opinion (of him)!” (“So sei den Gott gelobt, der Deine [gute] Meinung [über ihn] nicht enttäuscht hat!”). I have reverted to Hopkins’ translation (*Studies*, 238): “thank God that He did not change your mind,” which is close to Jahn’s “Gott, sei Lob, der Deine Meinung nicht ändern möge” (*Vier Studien*, 9), which Diem had rejected.

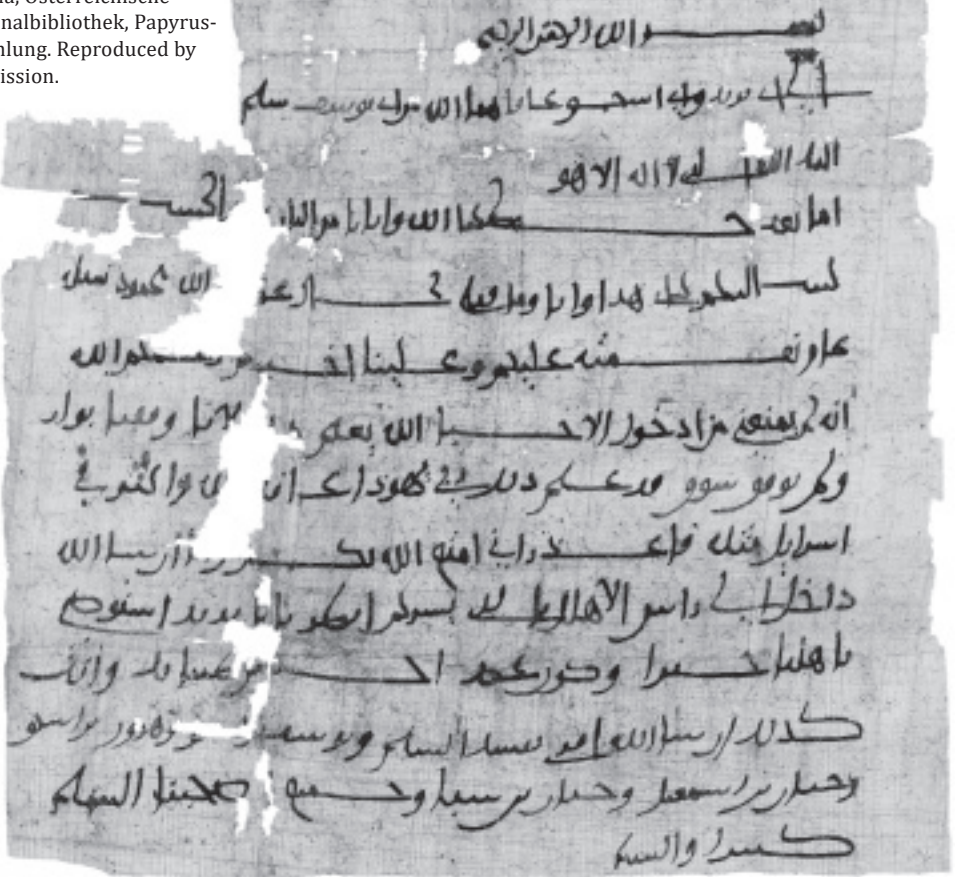
**49** Diem’s فابيع can better be read فابيع.

**50** Diem translates as “then sell us some for one dirham” (“dann verkaufe uns welches für einen Dirham”).

**51** Diem added: [يابا يحيى] [O Abū Yahyā!].

**52** Diem translates as “if this is your opinion” (“Wenn Du der Meinung bist”).

Figure 3.3. Papyrus Letter 2  
(P.Vindob. Inv. AP 849).  
Vienna, Österreichische  
Nationalbibliothek, Papyrus-  
sammlung. Reproduced by  
permission.



**Letter 2. Restoring a Business Relationship**<sup>53</sup>

[1] In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. [2] To Abū Yazīd and Abū Ishāq, may God protect both of them, from Abū Yūsuf. Peace [be upon you and I thank] [3] for your sake God, besides Whom there is no god but He. (vac.) [4] Further, may God guard both of you and us from hell [and the day of] the final accounting. [5] I am writing you this letter of mine while I and those with me are in a heal[thy state.] God be praised. We ask Him [6] to complete His blessing on you and on us. I inform you, may God have mercy on you, [7] that nothing prevented me from coming (to you) except embarrassment, God knows this, because we ran into disaster [8] and we did not encounter business.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Edition, translation, and commentary will appear in Sijpesteijn, *Care for the Poor*.

<sup>54</sup> *wafaqnā bawār(an) wa-lam nuwāfiq sūq(an)*.

My master Yahudā, may God protect him, knows this, may (God) increase [9] the likes of him in Israel. So may both of you forgive me, may God allow me to enjoy you. And [I], God willing, [10] will arrive at the full moon with something that pleases you. Make sure, o Abū Yazīd, to look after [11] my family and do your very best! Also, [12] convey to yourself many greetings, and to Yūsuf son of Ishāq, Harūn son of Ishāq, [13] Ḥanān son of Ismaʿīl, Ḥanān son of Sabʿ and all our companions many greetings [14] and peace.

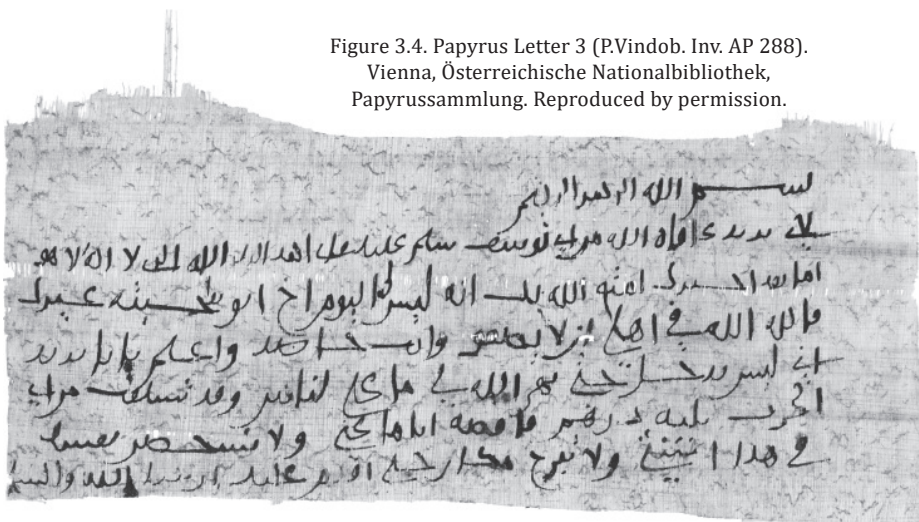
Verso: To] A[bū] Yazīd may God protect him.

### Letter 3. The Situation Deteriorates<sup>55</sup>

[1] In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful [2] To Abū Yazīd, may God protect him, from Abū Yūsuf. Peace be upon you and I thank for your sake God, besides Whom there is no god but He. [3] Further, I inform you, may God protect you, that I have at the moment no brother on whom I can trust besides you. [4] And by God, by God,<sup>56</sup> make sure that my family is not in need, for you are present. And know, O Abū Yazīd, [5] that I will not return until God presents me with what I owe the people (*mā ʿalayya li-l-nās*). I have borrowed from Abū [6] al-Ḥārith three dirhams, so settle it with him on my behalf (*iqḍihi iyyāhā ʿannī*). Do not come here [7]. in this bad weather/season and do not move from your place until I come to you, God willing. Greetings.

Verso: To Abū Yazīd

Figure 3.4. Papyrus Letter 3 (P.Vindob. Inv. AP 288).  
Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek,  
Papyrussammlung. Reproduced by permission.



<sup>55</sup> Diem's edition (*Vier Studien*, no. 1) incorporated and corrected Jahn's *editio princeps* ("Vom frühislamischen Briefwesen," no. 9) and also made emendations suggested by Hopkins (*Studies*) and Levi Della Vida ("Remarks"). For an Arabic edition of the papyrus, see the Arabic Papyrology Database: [www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/apd/show2.jsp?papname=Jahn\\_JBW\\_9&line=1](http://www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/apd/show2.jsp?papname=Jahn_JBW_9&line=1).

<sup>56</sup> The oaths are represented in Diem's translation by "certainly" ("unbedingt").

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**Abstract** Three Arabic papyrus letters written by the same individual in the eighth or second AH century Fayyum oasis in Egypt now kept in the Austrian National Library describe the activities of a group of closely related Jewish merchants. The author of all three letters applies linguistic and calligraphic epistolary rhetoric to support his letters' messages as his financial and personal circumstances deteriorate. He makes use thereby of the expectations to offer help and sympathy that follow from interpersonal social interactions and relationships.

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**Keywords** medieval Islamic Egypt, papyri, petition letters, Jews, Fayyum, epistolary rhetoric