

The “*Basmala*” in Medieval Letters in Arabic Written by Jews and Christians¹

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The *basmala*, *bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi*, “in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate”, is deeply rooted in Muslim usage. It is incumbent on every Muslim to begin every act of importance with the *basmala*, and Muhammad is quoted as saying, “every important affair that one does not begin with ‘in the name of God’ is void.” Frequently the *basmala* is followed by the *taṣliyya*, the blessing for the Prophet and his family. In this way every written discourse in Arabic, including private and business letters, is introduced by the *basmala*, and at times also by the *taṣliyya*.²

It is therefore of interest to discuss its place in written discourse in Arabic among the non-Muslim subjects. When their arabization gained momentum, they took over the literary forms of the Muslim rulers, including the structure of the letter, *al-kitāb*. In the present paper, the introductory formulae in letters of Jews and Christians are discussed. The focus is on medieval autograph letters in Arabic by Jews to Jews and a small sample of medieval autograph letters in Arabic by Christians to Christians.³ The investigation is restricted to *letters*, as distinct from contracts, receipts, and other types of documents.

1. The Jewish material

The point of departure of the Jewish sample is altogether 935 autograph letters wholly in Arabic and written by Jews to Jews. For the sake of comparison, the choice has been made to exclude Jewish letters in Hebrew, including letters with proems in Hebrew. All letters come from the Cairo Genizah. 887 letters have been published by Moshe Gil and Ṣabiḥ ‘Aodeh. They are from the second half of the 9th century and from the 11th century with a few letters from the 12th and 13th centuries. Most of them are in Hebrew script, but there are a number of Arabic-script letters as well. In cases where there is any doubt that both the writer and the addressee

¹ This is a revised version of papers read at the Congress for the Society of Christian Arabic Studies in Beirut 2004 and the Nordic Symposium of Semitic Studies at Kivik 2006. For personal names of Jewish personalities the forms as used by Moshe Gil have been adopted as has his system for titles in the Jewish religious community, while the names in the Christian letters appear in the forms they have in the publications by Werner Diem.

² The *basmala*, its origin and its place are in discussed in *EI2* and *EQ* s.v. Its translation here follows the translation in *EQ*. The *taṣliyya* and its place are discussed in *EI2* s.v.

³ The term “autograph” is qualified as meaning, “autograph” of the actual writer of the letter. At times there is reason to believe that the writer and the ultimate sender of the letter may be different persons. The epistolary format of Jewish letters in Arabic from the 11th century is discussed in Almbladh, 2004.

of an Arabic-script letter are Jews, the letter has been excluded. In cases where the both editors have edited one and the same letter, this letter is quoted from the editions by Gil.⁴ To them are added 48 letters, also from the Cairo Genizah, from the circle of Judah ha-Levi in the first half of the 12th century and published by Moshe Gil and Ezra Fleischer.⁵ The writers of the letters are mostly from Egypt, Palestine, North Africa, and in a few cases al-Andalus. Only one is from Iraq. Most of the writers are merchants, just as the bulk of the letters are business letters. There are, however, a few letters written by persons holding positions in the Jewish community in Palestine and in Egypt as well as some letters from intellectual Jews in al-Andalus. The words and phrases have been rendered as they appear in the printed texts.

2. Introductory formulae in Jewish letters

2.1. *No formula*

194 letters in the sample have some kind introductory formula, be it in Arabic or Hebrew/Aramaic, i.e. about one fifth of the total number of letters. This means that the vast majority of letters lack any introductory formula. In a number of cases this lack is, without doubt, due to the present condition of the letters. Yet its absence in most of them is so conspicuous that one wonders how widespread its use was in the period. A perusal of the plates accompanying the publication of the letters from the circle of Judah ha-Levi corroborates this. Only a few letters published there are introduced by a formula, and in most cases there are no traces of one in the cases where the usual position of the formula is undamaged.

2.2. *Formulae in Hebrew or Aramaic*

2.2.1. *Bi-shmākh/bi-shmākh raḥmānā*

The formula most frequently used is *bi-shmākh raḥmānā*, “in Your name, oh Merciful”, shortened *bi-shmākh*, which is found in altogether 54 letters. One letter has *bi-shmākh raḥmānā wě-raḥūm*.⁶ The earliest occurrence is in a business letter on papyrus from the second half of the 9th century.⁷ More often than not there is a plethora of abbreviations of the formula, and this stresses its stereotypical nature. Since no less than 31 letters are either written by or addressed to a person of rank in the Jewish community (Gaon, *ḥāvēr*, i.e. a member of the religious academy in Jerusalem, and other communal notables), the rank of the writer or the addressee may be of importance.

2.2.2. *‘Al shēmākh/‘al shēmākh raḥmānā*

Altogether 50 letters are introduced by the formula *‘al shēmākh raḥmānā*, “in Your name, oh Merciful” or by its shortened form *‘al shēmākh*. The earliest extant occur-

⁴ =Gil, 1983 (= G, 1983), Gil, 1997 (= G, 1997), ‘Aodeh, 1992 (=A).

⁵ Gil & Fleischer, 2001 (= GF).

⁶ G, 1997, no. 717.

⁷ Blau, 1988, 116–117 (no. xii).

rence is in a business letter on papyrus from the second half of the 9th century.⁸ This formula is the second most frequent one. A few times it possible to note that a specific writer prefers it, as is the case with one merchant who uses it in fourteen out of his twenty-four letters.⁹ Usually, however, no such pattern can be discerned.

2.2.2.1. The origin of the formulae

The Jewish formulae most frequently used are thus ‘*al shēmākh/‘al shēmākh raḥmānā* and *bi-shmākh/bi-shmākh raḥmānā* both of which mean “in Your name, oh Merciful.” It is, of course, easy to understand them as modelled upon the *basmala*. S.D. Goitein has, however, argued that we have here an abbreviation of an ancient Aramaic *bi-shmākh raḥmānā rēḥešnā*, “in your name ‘Merciful’ is our trust” or the like, quoting a medieval letter from Yemen with this formula. He also calls attention to a study by M. A. Friedman of introductory formulae in Palestinian marriage contracts from the Cairo Genizah, viz. ‘*al shēmēh dē-varyān*, “in the name of our Creator”, with the variants ‘*al shēmākh baryān*, “in Your name, our Creator”, *bi-shmēh dē-varyān* and *bi-shmēh dē-raḥmānā*, “in the name of the Merciful.” Of these, ‘*al shēmēh dē-varyān* is a fixed formula attested in the Palestinian Talmud, where it is found in contexts expressing trust in God. This would then explain the constructions with both the preposition *bē* and ‘*al*, as the Aramaic verb *rēḥeš* is constructed with both prepositions. It is, however, worth noting that the earliest examples of ‘*al shēmākh raḥmānā* and *bi-shmākh raḥmānā* in letters antedate the examples from the marriage contracts, but this may just be accidental. A Palestinian provenance of the formulae may also be indicated by its appearance in letters written by or addressed to a person of rank in the Jewish community, including the Gaon and members of the Jewish academy in Jerusalem.¹⁰

Whatever the ultimate origin of the Aramaic formulae, there is a significant difference between them and the *basmala*, as both are invocations *to* God. In a Jewish context it may be added that *raḥmānā* is the translation of Hebrew *raḥūm*, “merciful” in the Targum, including in Ex. 34:6 with its “thirteen qualities” which have a prominent place in Jewish piety. The relative frequency of the formulae may, however, no doubt have been enhanced by the Muslim *basmala*, all the more so as it can be argued that *raḥmānā* was pronounced *raḥmānā*.¹¹

⁸ Blau, 1988, 110–111 (no. vii).

⁹ G, 1997, nos. 444, 446, 448, 451–453, 458, 460, 452 and 464–468.

¹⁰ Goitein, 1967–1988, vol. 5, 325 (with note), Friedman, 1980, 91–95 (with references). Friedman mentions a suggestion, originally made by S. Lieberman (= Lieberman, 1974), that *bi-shmēh dē-varyān* is to be understood as an invocation, “by the name of our Creator” and that it was changed into ‘*al shēmēh dē-varyān*, “in the name of the Creator (do I trust)”, but the dictionaries may be consulted for the construction of the verb *rēḥeš*.

¹¹ Nöldeke, & Schwally, 1909–1919, vol. 2, 79. See also Jahn, 1937, 159. In Goitein, 1953–1954, 48 it is suggested that the Aramaic formulae somehow were models for the formula of Quraysh. For the pronunciation, see Bar-Asher, 1992, 100, 136, where the pronunciation of the corresponding word among Algerian Jews from the 20th century is rendered *r-rāḥmana*. It is also worth observing that Goitein always renders the word *raḥmānā*. The formula is also discussed in Cohen, 2007.

2.2.3. *Bě-shem y'y/bě-shem 'ēl/bě-[shim]khā 'elōhīm*

Two letters are introduced by the formula *bě-shem y'y*, “in the name of the Lord”, and one each by *bě-shem 'ēl* “in the name of God”, and *bě-[shim]khā 'elōhīm*, “[in Your name], oh God.”¹² There is reason to believe that they are variants, and of them *bě-shem y'y* and *bě-[shim]khā 'elōhīm* are rooted in Biblical diction.

2.2.4. *Bě-shem rām wě-nissā'*

One letter is introduced by *bě-shem rām wě-nissā'*, “in the name of Him who is high and lofty”, a formula built upon Is. 47:15.¹³

2.3. *Formulae in Arabic*

A number of letters have introductory formulae in Arabic. Formulae in Arabic are only used to introduce letters in Arabic, just as formulae in Arabic never are found introducing letters with proems in Hebrew. Except where explicitly mentioned, the formulae are written in Hebrew script.

2.3.1. *Bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi*

Altogether 37 letters are introduced by this formula. The earliest extant occurrences are in three Hebrew-script papyri from the second half of the 9th century, where it is written with Hebrew characters.¹⁴ In the letters from the 11th century a curious picture emerges, as the formula is obviously to be connected with Arabic script. Arabic-script letters are thus usually introduced by the Muslim formula,¹⁵ while a few Arabic-script letters lack any formula.¹⁶ Twice it is written in Arabic script in Hebrew-script letters.¹⁷ The opposite feature, that an Arabic-script letter has a Hebrew or Aramaic formula, is not found. Three times, finally, it is written with Hebrew script in Hebrew-script letters.¹⁸ It thus appears that for a Jewish writer of the 11th century, writing an Arabic-script letter meant accepting the *basmala* when writing to another Jew, just as it was used addressing a Muslim.¹⁹

This is the place to mention an Arabic-script papyrus from the end of the 8th century which may come from a Jewish milieu. It is obviously written in Fayyum and is introduced by the *basmala*. Its addressee is a certain Abū Yazīd, and his brother-in-law Yahūdā is mentioned in the letter, but the name of the writer is no longer extant. Provided it should be ascertained that writer and addressee are Jews,

¹² G, 1983, nos. 290, 435, 436, G, 1997, no. 405.

¹³ G, 1983, no. 457.

¹⁴ Blau, 1988, 94–102 (nos. i–ii = G, 1997, nos. 103–104) and 117–120 (no. xiii = G, 1997, no. 102).

¹⁵ So in A, nos. 1, 7, 9–10, 12, 19, 21, 24–26, 29, 31, 35, 37–39, 41, 43–44, 48, 50, 52–58 and 63–64, G, 1983, no. 195, G, 1997, no. 500.

¹⁶ A, nos. 8, 12, 28, 33 and 61. Judging from the printed texts, the absence of any formulae in G, 1983, nos. 141 and 167 and in G, 1997 no. 115 may be due to the condition of the letters.

¹⁷ G, 1997, nos. 205 and 661.

¹⁸ G, 1997, nos. 111, 178, and 234.

¹⁹ This point is also made in Cohen, 2007. For letters addressing Muslims, see A, nos. 6, 15 and 46. See also drafts of a petition to the Caliph in G, 1983, nos. 196–197.

this letter would perhaps be the earliest extant specimen of a letter in Arabic written by a Jew to another Jew.²⁰

2.3.2. *Bi-smi llāhi al-‘aẓīmi*

The formula *bi-smi llāhi al-‘aẓīmi* is found in eighteen letters. Noteworthy is that one and the same writer uses it in no less than thirteen out of eighteen of his own letters and in three letters written by him on behalf of two other senders.²¹ The formula may perhaps be understood as a kind of personal motto of his. The provenance of the formula is not clear. It is a commonplace in Judaism to apostrophize God as “mighty”, and in his translation of the Psalms, Saadiah Gaon renders the Divine epithets *addīr* and *gādōl* by ‘*aẓīm*. In Islam, *al-‘aẓīm* belongs to God’s beautiful names. In one letter it is used in this way in the oath *wa-bi-llāhi al-‘aẓīm ismuhu* “by God! His name is ‘the Mighty’”.²² Thus the formula should perhaps here be translated “In the name of God, the Mighty”.

2.3.3. *Bi-smi llāhi*

Two letters are introduced by *bi-smi llāhi*, “in the name of God”.²³ Perhaps the phrase should be understood as an arabization of *bē-shem y’y*, as Saadiah Gaon renders this by *bi-smi llāhi* in cases like Ps. 118:10, 11, 12, 26, 124:8, 129:8 as well as in Is. 48:1

2.3.4. *Tawakkaltu ‘alā llāhil‘alā llāhi [waḥdahū] tawakkaltu/tawakkul bi-llāhi*

Eleven letters are introduced by *tawakkaltu ‘alā llāhi* or ‘*alā llāhi tawakkaltu*, “I trust in God”,²⁴ one by ‘*alā llāhi [waḥdahū] tawakkaltu*, “only in God do I trust”,²⁵ and one by *tawakkul bi-llāhi*, “trust in God” understood either as a noun or as an imperative.²⁶ The verbal forms of the expression are quotations of the Qur’an 11:59. It is not found in any letter of Muslim provenance, but it is used preceding the *basmala*, or after it in a number of contracts. The position of the formula in these contracts is similar to the position of the ‘*alāma*, the motto, in decrees from the caliph of the same period. This may indicate that it should be interpreted as an ‘*alāma* in these contracts as well.²⁷ As for its use by Jewish writers, it would have been possible to argue that it was a preferred choice for a few of them, were it not for the fact that even then only a few examples are found. Thus it is found in all the three letters from two brothers, as well as in the two letters from another writer.²⁸

²⁰ Jahn, 1937, no. 10. Simon Hopkins understands the letter as Jewish, see Hopkins, 1984, § 220.

²¹ G, 1997, nos. 528–529, 542–547, 549, 552–553, 555–558 and 764. Four letters are damaged, viz. nos. 550–551, 554 and 559 while one letter, no. 545, lacks any formula. Two letters are from other writers, viz. G, 1997, nos. 194 and 320.

²² G, 1997, no. 635, r. 10–11. See also Diem, 1991, 39v, 5 (with comments and references).

²³ G, 1997, nos. 209 and 604.

²⁴ G, 1983, no. 506, G, 1997, nos. 526, 663, 687, 689, 690, 693, 733, 738, 788 and 840.

²⁵ G, 1997, no. 691.

²⁶ G, 1983, no. 507.

²⁷ Rāghib, 2002, 20–23 (above the *basmala*), 85–89 (after the *basmala*), and Jahn, 1937, 161. The ‘*alāma* in the decrees is discussed in Stern, 1964, 123–165. The expression here is at times found as ‘*alāma* but obviously from a much later period.

²⁸ G, 1997, nos. 689, 690, 691 and G, 1983, nos. 506 and 507.

2.3.5. *Ḥasbī llāhu*

One writer uses *ḥasbī llāhu*, “God is sufficient for me” as a superscription.²⁹ This is a variant of the *ḥasbala* and originally a quotation from the Qur’an 3:167, *ḥasbunā llāh*, “God is sufficient for us” which al-Qalqashandī prescribed for the *conclusion* of a letter. As such it was also frequent among North African Jews of the period. In a Muslim contract from the 10th century, however, it is found preceding the *basma-la*.³⁰

2.3.5.1. Introductory formulae expressing trust in God

The use of the formulae *tawakkaltu ‘alā llāhi/‘alā llāhi [waḥdahu] tawakkaltul tawakkul bi- llāhi* and *ḥasbī allāhu* gain a new significance if the formulae *‘al shēmākh/‘al shēmākh raḥmānā* and *bi-shmākh/bi-shmākh raḥmānā* are to be understood as discussed above. The Arabic formulae are without doubt rooted in the Qur’an, just as they undoubtedly are used in similar contexts in Muslim society. Yet it is possible that they were *understood* as conveying the same meaning as the Aramaic formulae and hence were more easily accepted in a Jewish context. It is also of interest to note that in his translation of the Psalms, Saadiah Gaon renders forms of Hebrew *bāṭaḥ* with *tawakkala* as in Ps. 25:1 31:15, viz. *‘alayka tawakkaltu*. In these cases the Targum has forms of *rēḥeṣ*.³¹ This is also the place to call attention to the use of the preposition *bi* in *tawakkul bi-llāhi*. The verb *tawakkala* is constructed with *‘alā* in the sense “trust (God)” and with *bi* in the sense “pledge for somebody”. Perhaps the construction may here be due to interference from the Aramaic phrase.³² *Tawakkul* was a prime concept in Jewish piety of the period. This is mirrored, if anywhere, in Baḥya’s *Al-hidāya* where the fourth chapter is devoted to a discussion of *tawakkul*.

2.4. *An enigmatic superscription*

An enigmatic superscription is found in one letter, written in Aleppo in 1237, viz. the abbreviation *’llkm*.³³ The letter has been edited twice but none of the editors have been able to interpret the abbreviation.

2.5. *Letters introduced by quotations from scriptures*

Ten letters are introduced by a quotation from the Bible and one by a quotation from the liturgy. A natural question is what relationship there may be between the introductory quotation and the contents of these letters.

²⁹ G, 1997, no. 668.

³⁰ For the suggestion that North African Jews used the formula, see Goitein, 1973, 235, and for the views of al-Qalqashandī, 1915. The contract with the expression as its introduction is found in Rāghib, 2002, 16–17.

³¹ Saadiah Gaon, 1966, 93, 102. See also his translation of Ps 22:11.

³² For another example of the same construction, see Blau, 2006, s.v.

³³ G, 1997, no. 95.

2.5.1. “The Rock, His work is perfect!”

Mawhūb b. Aaron, the *ḥazzān*, is the writer of a draft letter from ca 1070 from Alexandria to the merchant Nehorai b. Nissim in Fustāt.³⁴ The letter was written upon the death of the wife of the addressee and is introduced by a quotation from Dt. 32:4, “The Rock, His work is perfect”, a phrase also found in the liturgy of the Jewish burial. That it was connected with death and catastrophes in the period of the letters is evident from that fact that it introduces another letter of condolences and that it is quoted in a letter describing the Almohad persecutions in the 12th century.³⁵ The entire letter is devoted to expressing condolences. The writer opens by describing the pain he experienced on hearing the news of the death of the lady, who is apostrophized as “the chaste one (*aṣ-ṣēnū‘ā*), the virtuous one (*al-kēshērā*), the pious one (*aṣ-ṣaddeqet*)”.³⁶ He prays to God that He may comfort the addressee and that all of them should be resurrected at her resurrection. Then follows additional praise of the deceased lady and her virtues, and the addressee is reminded that all of us are on our way to the same goal. The addressee is wished a good life, as is his son, and the writer confirms that all his colleagues in Alexandria are mourning the lady.

In this letter it is obvious that the secondary use of the quotation signals that the letter is a letter of condolence.

2.5.2. “Say this to him who lives: ‘Peace upon you and your house etc’. The Lord will guard you from all evil, He will guard your soul, the Lord will guard your going out and coming in, from this time and forever.”

Abū Sa‘īd b. NN in Sicily is the writer of a letter from ca 1060 to his brother Abū l-Barakāt b. Ṭāriq in Fustāt.³⁷ The letter is introduced by a quotation of 1 Sam. 25:6, “Say this to him who lives: ‘Peace upon you and your house’”, followed by Ps. 121:7–8, “The Lord will guard you from all evil, He will guard your soul, the Lord will guard your going out and coming in, from this time and forever.” After the customary introductory greetings, the writer relates how he and his family arrived in Sicily from Ifriqiyah a couple of years earlier. Their intention was to go to Egypt but as the route directly to Egypt was too dangerous they had to go via Sicily. Another obstacle was illness in his family; the youngest child of the writer even died when only one-and-a-half years old. The voyage to Sicily was evidently undertaken in a convoy of four ships, but a storm surprised the convoy and the ships had to seek refuge on a barren island without any food. In the end only one of the four ships arrived in Sicily thirty-five days after departure. At the time of the letter, the writer has been settled in Sicily for three years, as he has not dared to risk the voyage to Egypt after these horrifying experiences. He has, however, been eagerly waiting for letters from the addressee. He suggests that the addressee should settle in Sicily, as the market for different kinds of Oriental spices is prosperous there. After that follow various greetings.

³⁴ G, 1997, no. 756.

³⁵ G, 1983, no. 236 and Goitein, 1967-1988, vol. 5, 60.

³⁶ For these female virtues, see Goitein, 1967-1988, vol. 3, 166. For the forms of the Hebrew loan-words, see Almladh, 2007, 40.

³⁷ G, 1997, no. 830, Goitein, 1973, no. 74, Simonsohn, 1997, no. 138.

The first quotation is naturally understood as a greeting for the well being of the addressee. As for the quotation of Ps. 121:7–8, these verses were frequently used for anyone setting out on a journey in the period discussed here.³⁸ In this way it may be connected with the invitation to Sicily made by the writer.

2.5.3. “He will send you help from the sanctuary and strengthen you from Zion!
He will send His angel with you and make your way prosperous!”

Abraham b. Saadia in Kairouan is the writer of a letter from ca 1050 to the merchant Mūsā b. Barhūn al-Tāhīrti in Fustāṭ.³⁹ The letter begins with a quotation of Ps. 20:3, “He will send you help from the sanctuary and strengthen you from Zion”, and Gn. 24:40, “He will send His angel with you and make your way prosperous.” After that follows the customary introductory Arabic phrases interspersed with Hebrew phrases and Biblical quotations like Is. 43:2, “when you pass through the waters, I will be with you”, Ps. 91:4, “He shall cover you with His feathers, you shall be safe under His wings”, and “He shall cover them in the shade of His wings and spread over them a secure hut.” The writer then assures the addressee that he prays for the safe arrival of the addressee and his mother to Jerusalem. After that he asks the addressee to get in touch with the writer’s son-in-law in Jerusalem about some money-matter and problems with the delivery of opium. Then he asks for a speedy reply and finally tells the addressee about the harassment from the Bedouins but he closes his letter by quoting Ps. 121:8, “the Lord will guard your going out and coming in, from this time and forever.”

It is obvious that both the introductory quotations and the other Hebrew phrases are blessings and prayers for the safe journey of the addressee to Jerusalem. The introductory quotations naturally comment on the goal of the travel, Jerusalem. Normally people travelled by sea which was less risky than travelling by land. But travelling by sea was nevertheless dangerous, and this explains the quotations and phrases in the introduction as well as the final quotation. As already mentioned, it was current in the period as a blessing upon departure, and it was above all used for pilgrimages.

2.5.4. “For I hope in you, oh Lord!”

Elijah b. Aaron the *ḥāvēr* is the writer of a letter from ca 1030 to Ephraim b. She-maria, the head of the Palestinian Jews in Fustāṭ.⁴⁰ It is introduced by a quotation of Ps. 38:16, “For I hope in you, oh Lord.” After the customary introductory formulae, the letter is devoted to the arrival of a *suftāja*, a cashier’s cheque, and different problems with this. In this letter there seems to be little (if any) connection between the introductory formula and its contents.

Another letter from August 1053 written by an emissary of the Yeshiva to Joseph ha-Kohen, *Av bēt dīn* in Jerusalem, is introduced by *kī bē-y’y tōḥaltī*, “For

³⁸ It was obviously a frequent blessing for anyone setting out on a journey but especially for pilgrims, see Goitein, 1967–1988, vol. 5, 37.

³⁹ G, 1997, no. 702.

⁴⁰ G, 1983, no. 222.

my hope is in the Lord.”⁴¹ This is obviously a variant of Ps. 39:8, *kī tōḥaltī lēkhā hī*, “for my hope is in you.” After the customary introductory formulae, the writer describes his sorrow at the confusion and internal conflicts within the congregation of the Palestinian Jews in Fustāt. He describes how he has paid his respects to the leaders of the congregation and discussed the problems with them, but obviously in vain. Dejected he expresses his trust in God and hopes for himself that he will be able to celebrate the holidays in Alexandria. He also tells the addressee that the situation is no better in the congregation of the Iraqi Jews, as vacant posts have obviously not been filled there. After this follow the customary farewell-greetings. In this letter it is possible to understand the introductory formula as preparing the addressee for the rather gloomy picture of the situation in the congregation in Fustāt.

2.5.5. “You love righteousness and hate wickedness. Therefore God [has anointed you with] the oil of gladness above your fellows. You shall decree a thing and it shall be established to you [and upon your ways] a light shall shine!”

An unknown merchant from Kairouan but living in Fustāt is the writer of a short letter from ca 1050 to an unknown addressee.⁴² The letter is introduced by a quotation of Ps. 45:8, “You love righteousness and hate wickedness. Therefore God [has anointed you with] the oil of gladness above your fellows” followed by Hi. 22: 28, “You shall decree a thing and it shall be established to you [and upon your ways] a light shall shine.” After customary introductory phrases, the writer tells the addressee that he has been living in Fustāt for eight months. There he met a relative of his, Nehorai, perhaps identical with Nehorai b. Nissim. Now, however, he is in great troubles since a certain Abū Zikrī owes him money, and in his despair he asks the addressee to intervene.

Not much information is given in the letter. The quotation from Psalms was, however, used for judges whose office in this way was compared to kings, and so the addressee may be a judge. This may also be indicated by the quotation from the book of Job.⁴³ If so, the introductory quotation is a marker of the dignity of the addressee.

2.5.6. “My help comes from the Lord, who has made heaven and earth!”

Two letters from Iraq are introduced by these words. One letter from the early 11th century is written by the physician Jacob to a certain Joseph. The writer is writing from Shamṭūniyya in southern Iraq where he is on pilgrimage to the sepulchre of Ezekiel. The letter is introduced by Ps. 121:2, “My help comes from the Lord.” After the introductory blessings and small talk about some merchants the writer tells the addressee of an epidemic which befell the population of the town. He and his son were also affected by the epidemic, and he describes their agonies. He also describes the niggardliness of the inhabitants of the town, but “the Creator (He is mighty and high!) was of help in this”, and the writer and his son received the treatment they

⁴¹ G, 1983, no. 328.

⁴² G, 1997, no. 744. The words within brackets are damaged and restored from the Biblical text.

⁴³ For the purpose of the quotation from the Psalms, see Goitein, 1967-1988, vol. 5, 435 (with notes).

needed and recovered. It is likely that the Biblical phrase is a comment on this experience of the help of God in their illness.⁴⁴

The second letter is from the second half of the 11th century and written by an unknown man from Fustāt but living in Baghdad. This letter is introduced by the complete verse “My help comes from the Lord who has made heaven and earth.” After lengthy introductory blessings the main topic of the letter is to ask the addressee to be kind to a certain Solomon al-Sijilmāsā whom Fate has badly struck. The connection between the Biblical phrase and the letter is rather opaque in this letter, at least in its present condition (it is obviously not complete).⁴⁵

2.5.7. “The Lord is your keeper, the Lord is your shade on your right hand! The Lord will guard you from all evil, He will guard your soul.”

Isaac b. ‘Alī al-Majjānī, obviously from al-Mahadiyya, is the writer of a letter from 1039 to a certain Abū ’l-Faḍl, perhaps in Fustāt.⁴⁶ The letter is introduced by a quotation of Ps. 121:5, “The Lord is your keeper, the Lord is your shade on your right hand” followed by Ps. 121:7, “The Lord will guard you from all evil, He will guard your soul.” After brief introductory phrases the writer picks up the topic of the letter, viz. to remind the addressee of an undertaking on behalf of the writer which he has made. The writer thinks he has been swindled in a business transaction in al-Mahadiyya concerning 36 denars. The matter obviously has to be decided at the rabbinical court in Sicily. In the final lines the writer says that he need not insist anymore on the matter. After that he prays to God to facilitate the addressee’s handling of the matters, ensure his well-being and confirm concerning him the words “when you pass through the waters [I will be with you]” (Is. 43:3).

For a modern reader of the letter, lacking previous correspondence in the matter, the meaning of the introductory quotation is decided by the final quotation. From this quotation of Is. 43:3, it becomes evident that the writer urges the addressee to set out on a risky voyage, in this case to Sicily. As has been noted above, however, Ps. 121:7 was current as a blessing upon departure, and so it may signal to the addressee the contents of the letter.

2.5.8. “Blessed be the Lord who resurrects the dead!”

Jacob b. Salmān al-Ḥarīri in Ramla in Palestine is the writer of a letter from about 1060 to Nehorai b. Nissim.⁴⁷ The letter, which was written in the autumn, actually opens with *tawakkul bi-llāhi*, “trust in God”, after which follows a variant of a benediction from the liturgy, “Blessed be the Lord who resurrects the dead”, which is used when someone has escaped deadly danger. In the introductory greetings with the customary blessing for the addressee the writer states that he personally feels “bodily sound but upset in mind.” He relates that he had set sail to Jaffa

⁴⁴ G, 1997, no. 72. For the pilgrimage to the sepulchre of Ezekiel, see EJ2, s.v. *Ezekiel*, esp. cols. 1096-1097 and for the location of Shamṭūniyya, see Gil, 2004, 510.

⁴⁵ G, 1997, no. 88.

⁴⁶ G, 1997, no. 635, Simonsohn, 1997, no. 59.

⁴⁷ G, 1983, no. 507, Goitein, 1973, no. 5.

but a storm blew up and chased the ship to the high sea. The storm raged for four days, the boat was adrift without sails and oars, with broken rudder and mast, and everyone on board was despairing for their lives. But finally the boat reached Caesarea. There the writer took refuge in a synagogue with all his things, as he could find no other place to spread them out to dry. Having spent five days in Caesarea, he finally arrived in Ramla. The rest of the letter is wholly devoted to mercantile discussions.

In this letter there is no doubt that the quotation was chosen to signal the narration of the stormy voyage and how the writer was rescued.

3. The formulae in the Jewish letters

The most striking feature is the non-use of any introductory formula in Jewish letters in Arabic. This means that not only was the *taṣliyya* naturally excluded but also an equivalent to the *basmala*. This is all the more striking as the Jews used the same epistolary format as Muslims. Indeed, the absence of any introductory formula is the most conspicuous formal difference between letters written by Jews to Jews on the one hand and letters written by Muslims in the same period. Since there seem to be no references to the use of introductory formulae among Jews prior to the Islamic period, its non-use may be understood as an adherence to an earlier custom just as its use would be an innovation in this period. This also means that its use was optional among Jews. It is also obvious that the use of introductory formulae could later be perceived as “Islamic” in the Middle Ages. Simon b. Semaḥ Duran (Christian Spain, died 1444) thus criticizes its use in marriage contracts, maintaining that it was against the custom of the rabbis of antiquity.⁴⁸

Whatever the ultimate origin of the formulae, their use may thus quite well be due to the use of the *basmala* among Muslims. Significant is that the formulae *bi-shmākh raḥmānā/bi-shmākh/al shēmākh/al shēmākh raḥmānā* and *bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi* are already found in letters from the 9th century. The presence of the *basmala* is the least surprising feature as it was naturally adopted when the epistolary format of the period was adopted. Of greater significance is the presence of the other two formulae at this early period. It is also striking that Jews used a plethora of formulae and that most of them are invocations of God’s *name*. This is also true of the formulae in Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages of prestige among Jews and the preferred languages for these formulae.

In a few cases it is possible that the rank of the writer or the addressee has been a factor determining the choice of a certain formula just as it is possible that a certain writer uses a specific formula as a personal motto. Also peculiar is that certain formulae are directed to God, viz. *‘al shēmākh raḥmānā*, *bi-shmākh raḥmānā*, “in **Your** name, oh Merciful”, and *[bē-shim]khā elōhīm*, “[in **Your** name], oh God.” As for the *basmala*, it is obviously the choice of script which has been decisive. A peculiar feature is the use of scriptural quotations as introductory formulae, just as such a

⁴⁸ For this, Friedman, 1980, 92–93. There is no mention of such a use in Talmudic times in Krauss, 1912, 181ff. See also Cohen, 2007. There are, though, no systematic investigations of Jewish epistolary formats prior to the Islamic period.

quotation frequently signals the message of the letter. Yet the possible link between a specific formula and the contents of the letter remains to be studied.

4. Formulae in Christian letters

The earliest documents in Arabic of *Christian* provenance in Egypt are from the end of the 8th century. Such documents become more frequent in the 9th century. Some of these documents are introduced by the *basmala* with the rest in Coptic. There are also cases where the writer uses the *basmala*, adding a cross in the margin.⁴⁹ Cases are also attested where Christians have added *bi-smi l-abi wa-l-bni wa-r-rūhi l-quddūsi l-wāḥidi*, “in the name of the only Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”, or *bi-smi l-masīḥi*, “in the name of Christ”, to the *basmala*.⁵⁰

Ten autograph letters, identified as written by Christians to Christians, are studied here. All of them are from Egypt and all of them are in Arabic and written in Arabic script, although there are minor additions in Coptic in a few of them. All of them follow the Muslim format of letters in each period.

Four of the letters studied here are introduced by the *basmala*. J, a papyrus from the end of the 8th century, is a letter from Umm al-Ḥakam to Menas Pejoš. The writer asks the addressee to buy olives and onions. She also asks the addressee to send grapes and citrons and to lend her wheat and barley until the next harvest. She also tells the addressee that she is anxious to see the addressee, that her daughter’s marriage has been consummated in Fuṣṭāt, and that her sister has died. The letter is concluded by the conventional *as-salāmu ‘alayka/‘alayki*.⁵¹ D1 from the 9th century is a short note where the writer expresses his happiness that the addressee is well. The letter is wholly in Arabic except for the address which is in Coptic. It concludes with the conventional *ḥafiẓaka llāhu*, “may God preserve you.”⁵² D2, from the 9th or the 10th century, is a letter from Athanasius, son of Severus, writing to Sophia. The bulk of the letter discusses agricultural matters. The writer tells the addressee that the harvest in Dmšīw is finished but that the harvest in another place is on its way. The addressee is also informed that wild boars have destroyed part of the wheat. There is also mention of some quarrel. The writer then asks the addressee to care for a certain girl, Nike. After some final remarks concerning the state of the fields follow the final greetings after which follows a post-script.⁵³ D3, from the 10th century, is a message from a monastery.⁵⁴ The writer tells the addressee, Abū l-Yusr, that he is at the monastery for Holy Communion. He has, however, sent the surveyor to the addressee, expecting him to already have arrived in al-Lahūn. After final greetings, the letter concludes with the *ḥasbala*.

D4a and D5 are introduced by *bi-smi llāhi r-ra’ūfi r-rahīmi*, “in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” D4a, from the 13th century, is a petition written

⁴⁹ Björnesjö, 1996, 96-97.

⁵⁰ Jahn, 1937, 160.

⁵¹ Jahn, 1937, no. 12. It is understood as coming from a Christian milieu by Björnesjö (Björnesjö, 1996, 97, 104 (footnote 12)).

⁵² Diem, 1993, no. 34.

⁵³ Diem, 1993, no. 14.

⁵⁴ Diem, 1996a, no. 20.

by the novice Dāwūd to the patriarch Yūnus. He complains to the patriarch that the abbot of his monastery controls the property of the *qillāya*, “cell”, at his own discretion. Now he asks the addressee to deal with the problem according to monastic law. The petition is concluded by the doxology *as-subḥu li-llāhi dā’iman ’abadan*, “glory to God for ever and ever.”⁵⁵ D5, from the 13th century or later, is a letter from a monk to his brother. In the letter, which is modelled upon a petition, the writer asks the addressee to spend the rest of the fast, perhaps the fast before Easter, with him in the monastery. He also expresses his hopes that his mother will have another son – obviously a brother of his has just died. Finally he asks for some clothes. After final greetings to the addressee and everyone he knows comes the doxology *al-majdu li-llāhi dā’iman ’abadan*, “the praise belongs to God for ever and ever.”⁵⁶

Both D6 and D7 have one and the same introduction, *al-marjū mina llāhi raḥimatuḥu*, “what is hoped for from God is His mercy.” D6, from the 10th century or later, is a short note from Buṭrus concerning the delivery of some goods. The letter closes with the doxology *al-ḥamdu li-llāhi dā’iman ’abadan*, “thanks to God for ever and ever.” Of interest to note is that the writer has signed the letter with his name in Coptic.⁵⁷ D7, from the 13th century or later, is a letter modelled upon a petition and written by the novice Ibrahim to the monk Najīb. The writer blames the addressee for his haughty speech after leaving the monastery. He nevertheless comforts the addressee that Christ cares for anyone who cares for his brother and that Christ is the hope of every human being. After that follow final greetings, *wa-ḥasanu ḥasanu minnī*, “and all good from me.” Then follows a post-script where the addressee is asked to buy some lentils and other types of food for the monastery. After renewed exhortations to behave well comes the doxology *as-subḥu li-llāhi dā’iman*. Then follows another post-script closing with *wa-qabbala aqdāmahu*, “he [the writer] has kissed his [the addressee’s] feet.”⁵⁸

D4b is the answer from the patriarch Yūnus to the petition of the novice Dāwūd, and thus it also is from the 13th century.⁵⁹ It is introduced by *al-majdu li-llāhi dā’iman ’abadan*. The letter is obviously directed to the ἡγούμενος of the monastery of the novice. Just as the novice wanted, the patriarch orders the ἡγούμενος to follow the rules for the monasteries. The answer closes with the doxology *as-subḥu li-llāhi dā’iman ’abadan*.

D8, from the 14th century or later, is a letter from a man writing to his cousin.⁶⁰ It is introduced by *al-amalu mina llāhi subḥānahu baqā’u mawlānā wa-khulūdu sa[’ādātihi]*, “what is hoped for from God (Glory to Him!) is that our [plural of modesty] master will remain and that his happiness will continue for ever!” The writer invites him and his mother to visit him at the feast of the Cross, *aṣ-ṣalīb*. The letter obviously closes with the words *anhā l-mamlūku dhālika ba’da taqbīli ayādi mawlānā wa-yuqabbil ’ani l-mamlūki ayādi l-wālidati wa-yastawḥaṣa minhā*, “the

⁵⁵ Diem, 1991, no. 2.

⁵⁶ Diem, 1991, no. 66.

⁵⁷ Diem, 1991, no. 34.

⁵⁸ Diem, 1991, no. 67.

⁵⁹ Diem, 1991, no. 2.

⁶⁰ Diem, 1996b, no. 14.

slave [the writer] has informed you about this after kissing the hands of our master. Kiss, on behalf of the slave the hands of the mother, he is sad after her.” Then follows a post-script where he also asks the addressee for his mother to make some clothes just as he asks the addressee to let other persons make other items.

5. The formulae in the Christian letters

Ar-ra'ūfu is connected with God in the Qur'an as is *ar-rahūmu*. Of interest here is a document from the 10th century or later, introduced by *bi-smi llāhi r-ra'ūfi r-rahūmi*.⁶¹ In the absence of early Christian Bible translations of Exodus and the Psalms, it is in place to call attention to the translations of Saadia Gaon. He renders *rahūm wə-ḥannūn* in Ex. 34:6 by [*inna llāha*] *r-rahūmu r-ra'ūfu*. In Ps 111:4, however, he renders *ḥannūn wə-rahūm* by [*li'anna*] *r-ra'ūfu r-rahūmu llāha*. If this is correct, this formula is to be understood as a quotation from the Bible used as a Christian formula.⁶² It may also be relevant that the writers who use this formula are monks.

The doxologies *al-majdu li-llāhi dā'iman 'abadan* and *as-subḥu li-llāhi dā'iman 'abadan* are obviously variants. In D5 *al-majdu li-llāhi dā'iman 'abadan* appears as the concluding words, while *as-subḥu li-llāhi dā'iman ['abadan]* closes D4a and D4b and *al-ḥamdu li-llāhi dā'iman 'abadan* closes D6. Perhaps the formulae here is connected with the “Gloria Patri” of the liturgy, viz. *al-majdu li-l-abi wa-l-bni wa-r-rūḥi l-quddūsi*, “Glory to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”⁶³ The use of the doxology as the concluding formula may be compared to a petition from the 13th century from a Muslim milieu which closes with the common form of the *ḥamdala*, *al-ḥamdu li-llāhi*.⁶⁴ The use of the doxology to introduce the answer of the patriarch in D4b may in turn be compared to the use of the *ḥamdala* as an introductory formula in edicts from Mamluk Egypt, i.e. the period of this letter.⁶⁵ In this way the Christian writers use the Mamluk format of the period, only substituting the Christian formulae for the Mamluk ones. Of interest to note is, however, that the *ḥamdala* occurs after the *basmala* in (Muslim?) papyri and thus should be assigned a date no later than the 10th century.⁶⁶ The phrase *dā'iman 'abadan* may be specifically Christian. In any case Saadia Gaon renders *lə-‘ōlām wā-‘ed*, by *'abadan ilā d-dahri* (Ps. 9:6) and *'ilā d-dahri 'abadan* (Ps. 45:18, 119:44, 145:1, 2, 21). In this way *al-ḥamdu li-llāhi dā'iman 'abadan* may be understood as a Christian variant of the usual *ḥamdala*.

The origin of *al-marjū mina llāhi rahīmatuhu* is not clear. As for *al-amalu mina llāhi subḥānahu baqā'u mawlānā wa-khulūdu sa'adatīhi*, the editor quotes another example (by a Muslim writer) of the same way of introducing a letter without a *basmala*.

⁶¹ Margoliouth, & Holmyard, 1929–1931, 249 (no. 1).

⁶² Saadia Gaon, 1966, 243 and Graf, 1944, 101–102 for the Copts accepting Saadia Gaon's translation of the Pentateuch.

⁶³ For the Gloria Patri, see Graf, 1954, 104.

⁶⁴ Diem, 1996a, no. 45 (from the 13th century).

⁶⁵ Diem, 1996a, nos. 1–4.

⁶⁶ Jahn, 1937, 162.

The picture which emerges from these examples is that Christians early on accepted the Muslim formula, at times adding some other formula or another sign to mark the letter as emanating from a Christian milieu. There are, however, also examples which show that Christians quite early on introduced other formulae. Some of these formulae may be rooted in the Bible, while other may have their roots in the liturgy. It is also of interest to draw attention to a number of Coptic introductory formulae like “By/with God”, “By/with the Holy trinity”, “By/with Jesus Christ”, “[In the name of] the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit”, and “In the name of God.” In a number of cases they are obviously undated while others undoubtedly are from Late Antiquity, antedating the Islamic conquest of Egypt.⁶⁷ To what extent this means that the Muslim usage of introducing any written discourse with the *basmla* is to be connected with this Christian usage in Egypt remains to be investigated.

6. The Jewish and Christian formulae compared

Among *Jews*, the use of an introductory formula obviously was an innovation – there is no evidence that letters were introduced with any formula before the rise of Islam. Judging from the sample, its use furthermore remained optional. Among *Christians*, the evidence from Coptic letters from pre-conquest Egypt suggests the use of such a formula. Both Jews and Christians used the Muslim formula, but both groups constructed specific formulae. Likewise it is noteworthy that Christians and Jews alike refer to God’s mercy and compassion in their specific formulae, although their formulae differ. Irrespective of the origin of these formulae, they may be understood as competing with the Muslim *basmla* and as religious markers.

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