A YEMENITE POET ON EGYPT OF THE XVITH CENTURY

BY

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Recent research has shown that the relations between the Jewish communities of Egypt and the Yemen in the Islamic period were considerably closer and more continuous than has been assumed hitherto. Previously, the darkness which hung over the history of the Jews of the Yemen in the Middle Ages was relieved only by Maimonides' famous letter on the false Messiah who appeared in the Yemen at his time[1], and the various references in Maimonides' other writings as well as in the traditions of the Yemenites[2] about their acceptance of Maimonides' authority. Now it appears that at the time when the fatimid rulers of Egypt (969-1171) gained sovereignty over the Yemen and in the period following, the spiritual leadership of the Egyptian Jewish community was freely acknowledged by its Yemenite brethren even *before* the times of Maimonides. Egypt at that time was the cultural centre of the whole Islamic world, and there it was that Jewish scholars from Spain, North Africa, Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Persia freely met. No wonder that the Jews of the Yemen turned to this centre of learning and enlightenment whenever they had

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[1] The letter is addressed to one Ya'aqov b. Nethan'el b. el-*Fayyumi*, which means, of course, a man of Egyptian descent living in the Yemen.

[2] Cf. especially Ya'aqov Saphir's 'Iben Safir', Lyck 1866, p. 53 *a* (new edition of the section on the Yemen by A. Ya'ari, Jerusalem 1945, p. 65, where further references). The fanciful report on the Yemen by Binyamin of Tudela, the famous traveller, cannot be regarded as an historical source.