

## JEWISH TRAVELLERS

the place or go to sea without taking a pilot with him from Parenzo. At his orders the ship and vessel must go. He stands at the head in the place of the captain. We also took a pilot and journeyed that night and came at 7 o'clock within eight miles of Venice. The pilot became drunk and the wind prevailed against us before we struck anchor, so that the vessel of Monsieur Piero Lando, who was in his cabin, was nearly wrecked. It was a close thing and we had nearly been in very great danger. On the same day we arrived in Venice, that is, to-day, the 19th October, 1481, well and hearty, thanks be to God. From Parenzo to Venice is one hundred miles.

From this it follows that from Naples to Jerusalem the holy city is two thousand eight hundred and seventy three miles, from Jerusalem to Damascus two hundred and eight miles, and from Damascus to Venice five thousand seven hundred and three miles. The total of the journey which R. Meshullam, the son of R. Menahem of Volterra, made when he went to Jerusalem, the holy city, that is, from Naples to Venice is eight thousand seven hundred and eighty-four miles. May the Lord send us the righteous Redeemer to deliver us and bring us to Jerusalem speedily with all Israel our friends, and let us say Amen!

From Jewish Travellers in the  
Middle Ages

ed. Eliezer Nathan Adler

## THE LETTERS OF OBADIAH JARÉ DA BERTINORO (1487-90)

Obadiah Jaré of Bertinoro in Italy was one of the most distinguished Italian Rabbis of his time. His Commentary on the Mishna known as "The Bertinoro" remains a standard work. As will be seen from the three letters, of which translations follow, he migrated to Palestine in 1487. The first two of these letters are found in manuscripts in the Gunzburg Library bought for Jerusalem but still impounded by the Soviet Government. The last is from a copy of the British Museum contemporary MS. This copy was formerly in the E. N. Adler collection and now belongs to the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. The first two were published with a German translation by Dr. Neubauer and with an English translation, here reproduced, in *Miscellany of Hebrew Literature*, London, 1872.

The Hebrew text of the last was edited by Professor Alexander Marx, of New York, in the *Palestine New Year Book*, 2 and 3, at Tel-Aviv, in 1926 and again by Eisenstein.

Obadiah appears to have resided in Jerusalem until his death, about 1500, and a subsequent traveller says that he was the leading Jew of Palestine in his time.

### I

My departure has caused you sorrow and trouble, and I am inconsolable because I have left you at a time when your strength is failing; when I remember, dear father, that I have forsaken your grey hairs I cannot refrain from tears. But since I am denied the happiness of being able to serve you as I ought, for God has decreed our separation, I will at least give you an account of my journey from beginning

## JEWISH TRAVELLERS

to end in the way in which you desired me to do in your letters, which I received in Naples about this time last year, by describing the manners and customs of the Jews in all the places I have visited and the nature of their intercourse with the other inhabitants of these cities.

On the first day of the ninth month (Kislev, 1486), after having arranged all matters in my place of residence, Citta di Castello, I repaired to Rome, and thence to Naples, where I arrived on the 12th of that month and where I tarried for a long time, not finding any vessel such as I wished. I went to Salerno, where I gave gratuitous instruction for at least four months and then returned to Naples.

In the fourth month, on the fast day (the 17th of Tammuz), 1487, I set out from Naples, in the large and swift ship of *Mossen* <sup>1</sup> *Blanchi*, together with nine other Jews ; it was five days, however, before we reached Palermo, owing to a calm.

Palermo is the chief town of Sicily, and contains about 850 Jewish families, all living in one street, which is situated in the best part of the town. They are artisans, such as copper-smiths and iron-smiths, porters and peasants, and are despised by the Christians because they wear tattered garments. As a mark of distinction they are obliged to wear a piece of red cloth, about the size of a gold coin, fastened on the breast. The royal tax falls heavily on them, for they are obliged to work for the king at any employment that is given them ; they have to draw ships to the shore, to construct dykes, and so on. They are also employed in administering corporal punishment and in carrying out the sentence of death.

The Synagogue at Palermo has not its equal in the whole world ; the stone pillars in the outer courtyard are encircled by vines such as I have never before seen. I measured one of them and it was of the

## OBADIAH DA BERTINORO

thickness of five spans. From this court you descend by stone steps into another which belongs to the vestibule of the Synagogue. This vestibule has three sides and a porch in which there are large chairs for any who may not wish to enter the Synagogue, and a splendid fountain. The entrance is placed at the fourth side of the Synagogue which is built in the form of a square, 40 cubits long and 40 cubits wide. On the eastern side there is a stone building, shaped like a dome, the Ark. It contains the rolls of the law which are ornamented with crowns and pomegranates of silver and precious stones to the value of 4,000 gold pieces (according to the statement of the Jews who live there) and are laid on a wooden shelf, and not put into a chest as with us. The Ark has two doors, one towards the south, and one towards the north, and the office of opening and shutting the doors is entrusted to two of the congregation. In the centre of the Synagogue is a wooden platform, the *Theba*, where the Readers recite their prayers. There are at present five Readers in the community ; and on the Sabbath and on Festivals they chant the prayers more sweetly than I have ever heard it done in any other congregation. On week-days the number of visitors to the Synagogue is very small, so that a little child might count them.

The Synagogue is surrounded by numerous buildings, such as the hospital, where beds are provided for sick people, and for strangers who come there and do not know where to pass the night ; and again a large and magnificent mansion, where those who are elected sit in judgment and regulate the affairs of the community. There are twelve of these, and they are chosen every year ; they are empowered by the king to fix the taxes, to levy fines, and to punish with imprisonment. There is nothing to be said in favour of this arrangement, for men of no name and of bad character frequently prevail

## JEWISH TRAVELLERS

has many vineyards and olive-trees, and contains at the present time twenty families, all Rabbantes, half of whom are descendants of the forced Apostates who have recently returned to their faith.

On Tuesday morning, the 13th of Nisan, we left Hebron, which is a day's journey distant from Jerusalem, and came on as far as Rachel's tomb, where there is a round, vaulted building in the open road. We got down from our asses and prayed at the grave, each one according to his ability. On the right hand of the traveller to Jerusalem lies the hill on which Bethlehem stands ; this is a small village, about half a mile from Rachel's grave, and the Catholic priests have a church there.

From Bethlehem to Jerusalem is a journey of about three miles. The whole way is full of vineyards and orchards. The vineyards are like those in Romagna, the vines being low, but thick. About three-quarters of a mile from Jerusalem, at a place where the mountain is ascended by steps, we beheld the famous city of our delight, and here we rent our garments, as was our duty. A little farther on, the sanctuary, the desolate house of our splendour, became visible, and at the sight of it we again made rents in our garments. We came as far as the gates of Jerusalem, and on the 13th of Nisan, 5248, at noon, our feet stood within the gates of the city. Here we were met by an Ashkenazi who had been educated in Italy, Rabbi Jacob Calmann ; he took me into his house, and I remained his guest during the whole time of the Passover. Jerusalem is for the most part desolate and in ruins. I need not repeat that it is not surrounded by walls. Its inhabitants, I am told, number about 4,000 families. As for Jews, about seventy families of the poorest class have remained ; there is scarcely a family that is not in want of the commonest necessaries ; one who has bread for a year is called rich. Among the

## OBADIAH DA BERTINORO

Jewish population there are many aged, forsaken widows from Germany, Spain, Portugal and other countries, so that there are seven women to one man. The land is now quieter and happier than before ; for the Elders have repented of the evil they had done, when they saw that only the poorer portion of the inhabitants remained ; they are therefore very friendly to every newcomer. They excuse themselves for what has happened, and assert that they never injured anyone who did not try to obtain the mastery over them. As for me, so far I have no complaint to make against them ; on the contrary, they have shown me great kindness and have dealt honourably with me, for which I daily give thanks to God.

The Jews are not persecuted by the Arabs in these parts. I have travelled through the country in its length and breadth, and none of them has put an obstacle in my way. They are very kind to strangers, particularly to anyone who does not know the language ; and if they see many Jews together they are not annoyed by it. In my opinion, an intelligent man versed in political science might easily raise himself to be chief of the Jews as well as of the Arabs ; for among all the inhabitants there is not a wise and sensible man who knows how to deal affably with his fellow men, all are ignorant misanthropes intent only on gain. . . . .

The Synagogue here is built on columns ; it is long, narrow, and dark, the light entering only by the door. There is a fountain in the middle of it. In the court of the Synagogue, quite close to it, stands a mosque. The court of the Synagogue is very large, and contains many houses, all of them buildings devoted by the Ashkenazim to charitable purposes, and inhabited by Ashkenazi widows. There were formerly many courts in the Jewish streets belonging to these buildings, but the Elders sold them, so that

## JEWISH TRAVELLERS

not a single one remained. They could not, however, sell the buildings of the Ashkenazim, because they were exclusively for Ashkenazim, and no other poor had a right to them. The Jews' street and the houses are very large; some of them dwell also on Zion. At one time they had more houses, but these are now heaps of rubbish and cannot be rebuilt, for the law of the land is that a Jew may not rebuild his ruined house without permission, and the permission often costs more than the whole house is worth. The houses in Jerusalem are of stone, none of wood or plaster.

There are some excellent regulations here. I have nowhere seen the daily service conducted in a better manner. The Jews rise an hour or two before day-break, even on the Sabbath, and recite psalms and other songs of praise till the day dawns. Then they repeat the *Kaddish*; after which two of the Readers appointed for the purpose chant the Blessing of the Law, the Chapter on Sacrifices, and all the songs of praise which follow with a suitable melody, the "Hear, O Israel" being read on the appearance of the sun's first rays. The Cohanim repeat the priestly benediction daily, on weekdays as well as on the Sabbaths; in every service this Blessing occurs. At the morning and afternoon service supplications are said with great devotion, together with the Thirteen Attributes of God; and there is no difference between Mondays and Thursdays, and the other days of the week except that the Law is read on the two former.

Jerusalem, notwithstanding its destruction, still contains four very beautiful, long bazaars, such as I have never before seen, at the foot of Zion. They have all dome-shaped roofs, and contain wares of every kind. They are divided into different departments, the merchant bazaar, the spice bazaar, the

## OBADIAH DA BERTINORO

vegetable market, and one in which cooked food and bread are sold. When I came to Jerusalem there was a dreadful famine in the land. A man of moderate means could have eaten bread the weight of a drachma at every meal, which in our money makes a bolognino of old silver, and he would not have been satisfied. I was told that the famine was less severe than it was at the beginning of the year. Many Jews died of hunger, they had been seen a day or two before asking for bread, which nobody could give them, and the next day they were found dead in their houses. Many lived on grass, going out like stags to look for pasture. At present there is only one German Rabbi here who was educated in Jerusalem. I have never seen his equal for humility and the fear of God; he weaves night and day when he is not occupied with his studies, and for six months he tasted no bread between Sabbath and Sabbath, his food consisting of raw turnips and the remains of the St. John's bread, which is very plentiful here, after the sugar has been taken out of it. According to the account of a trustworthy man, Jericho, the "city of palms", is only half a day's journey from Jerusalem, and there are at the present day scarcely three palm-trees in the town.

Now, the wheat harvest being over, the famine is at an end, and there is once more plenty, praise be to God. Here, in Jerusalem, I have seen several kinds of fruits which are not to be found in our country. There is one tree with long leaves, which grows higher than a man's stature and bears fruit only once; it then withers, and from its roots there rises another similar one, which again bears fruit the next year; and the same thing is continually repeated. The grapes are larger than in our country, but neither cherries, hazel-nuts, nor chestnuts are to be found. All the necessaries of life, such as meat, wine, olives,

## JEWISH TRAVELLERS

and sesame-oil can be had very cheap. The soil is excellent, but it is not possible to gain a living by any branch of industry, unless it be that of a shoemaker, weaver, or goldsmith; even such artisans as these gain their livelihood with great difficulty. Persons of various nationalities are always to be found in Jerusalem from Christian countries, and from Babylonia and Abyssinia. The Arabs come frequently to offer up prayers at the temple, for they hold it in great veneration.

I made enquiries concerning the Sambation, and I hear from one who has been informed, that a man has come from the kingdom of Prefer John and has related that there are high mountains and valleys there which can be traversed in a ten days' journey, and which are certainly inhabited by descendants of Israel. They have five princes or kings, and have carried on great wars against the Johannites (Abyssinians) for more than a century, but, unfortunately, the Johannites prevailed and Ephraim was beaten. The Johannites penetrated into their country and laid it waste, and the remembrance of Israel had almost died away in those places, for an edict was issued against those who remained prohibiting the exercise of their religious duties as severe as that which Antiochus issued in the time of the Hasmonians. But God had mercy. Other kings succeeded in India who were not so cruel as their predecessors; and it is said that the former glory of the Jews is now in a measure restored; they have again become numerous, and though they still pay tribute to the Johannites they are not entirely subject to them. Four years ago, it is said, they again made war with their neighbours, when they plundered their enemies and made many prisoners. The enemy, on the other hand, took some of them prisoners, and sold them as slaves; a few of these

## OBADIAH DA BERTINORO

were brought to Cairo and redeemed by the Jews there. I saw two of them in Cairo; they were black (Falashas?) but not so black as the negroes. It was impossible to learn from them whether they belonged to the Karaites or the Rabbaites. In some respects they seem to hold the doctrine of the Karaites, for they say that there is no fire in their houses on the Sabbath; in other respects they seem to observe Rabbanism. It is said that the pepper and other spices which the negroes sell come principally from their country.

It is universally known here that the Arabs who make pilgrimages from Egypt to Mecca journey through a large and fearful desert, forming caravans of at least 10,000 camels. Sometimes they are overtaken in the wilderness by a people of gigantic stature, one of whom can chase a thousand Arabs. They call this people El-Arabes, that is, children of the Almighty, because in their battles they always invoke the name of Almighty God. The Arabs assert that one of these people is able to bear the burden of a camel in one hand, while in the other he holds the sword with which he fights; it is known that they observe the Jewish religious customs, and it is affirmed they are the descendants of Rechab.

No Jew may enter the enclosure of the temple. Although sometimes the Arabs are anxious to admit carpenters and goldsmiths to perform work there, nobody will go in, for we have all been defiled (by touching bodies of the dead). I do not know whether the Arabs enter the Holy of Holies or not. I also made enquiries relative to the *Eben Sathiah* where the Ark of the Covenant was placed, and am told that it is under a high and beautiful dome built by the Arabs in the court of the Temple. It is enclosed in this building, and no one may enter. There is great wealth in the enclosure of the temple. We hear

structure  
dome  
temple  
W.M.

## JEWISH TRAVELLERS

that the monarchs build chambers there inlaid with gold, and the king now reigning is said to have erected a building, more splendid than any ever before built, adorned with gold and precious stones.

The temple enclosure has still twelve gates. Those which are called the gates of mercy are of iron, and are two in number; they look towards the east of the temple and are always closed. They only reach half-way above the ground, the other half is sunk in the earth. It is said that the Arabs often tried to raise them up but were not able to do so.

The western wall, part of which is still standing, is composed of large, thick stones, such as I have never before seen in an old building, either in Rome or in any other country. At the north-east corner is a tower of very large stones. I entered it and found a vast edifice supported by massive and lofty pillars; there are so many pillars that it wearied me to go to the end of the building. Everything is filled with earth which has been thrown there from the ruins of the temple. The temple-building stands on these columns, and in each of them is a hole through which a cord may be drawn. It is said that the bulls and rams for sacrifice were bound here. Throughout the whole region of Jerusalem, in fields as well as vineyards, there are large caves connected with one another.

On the Mount of Olives are the graves of the Prophet Haggai and Huldah the Prophetess and more than ten caves, one leading out of the other. The sepulchre of the seventy Elders, which lies about 2,000 cubits from Jerusalem, is splendid, especially that of Simon the Just. Everywhere, outside and inside, both in fields and houses, the caves are innumerable.

The waters of Siloam flow underground in the valley of Jehoshaphat. Siloam is not exactly a stream, but rather a spring which rises up every morning

## OBADIAH DA BERTINORO

till about noon, then falls and flows under the mountain to a place near which there is now a large ruin. It is said that this building was built by Solomon as a mint; now it is used for a tanyard. The vale of Jehoshaphat is small. It runs along between the temple mount and Mount Olivet. At the foot of the slope of the temple mountain are Jewish graves; the new ones are at the foot of the Mount of Olives, and the valley runs between the grave-yards. Not far from here are the monuments of Absalom and of the Prophet Zachariah; at the latter place, prayers are offered up on fast days; and on the 9th of Ab lamentations are repeated.

The Mount of Olives is lofty and barren; scarcely an olive-tree is to be found on it. From the top, Sodom and Gomorrah may be seen in the distance; they now form a salt sea. I heard from people who were there that the ground was everywhere covered with salt. Of Lot's wife nobody could tell me anything; for pillars of salt are innumerable, so that it is impossible to distinguish which is Lot's wife.

Mount Abarim, where Moses is buried, is visible from Jerusalem. The district beyond the Jordan, including the lands of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, and of the sons of Ammon, the Mountain of Moab, and Mount Seir, are now waste places. Not an inhabited city is to be found there; for the Bedouins destroy everything. They come even up to the gates of Jerusalem, steal and plunder in the open roads, and no one can interfere with them, they are so numerous. For this reason the district is all waste, without inhabitants; and there is neither ploughing nor sowing. Jericho is a small village, consisting of about twenty to thirty houses. Bethar, formerly a large city, is now a place for cattle, and contains about twenty houses; it is half a day's journey from Jerusalem. Nearly all the houses that were formerly great are now waste places.

## JEWISH TRAVELLERS

They continue to bear the same names, but are uninhabited.

In all these districts, in the valleys and mountains, there are toll-collectors, who represent themselves as overseers for the security of the way, and are called Naphar <sup>is in Arabic.</sup> These men take as many taxes as they like from the Jews with perfect impunity. From Cairo there are twenty toll bars; and I for my part paid them altogether about a ducat. The Jews who come from Cairo to Jerusalem have only to pay ten silver denarii at the city gate, while, on the other hand, those who come by way of Jaffa have to pay a ducat. The Jews in Jerusalem have to pay down every year thirty-two silver pieces per head. The poor man, as well as the rich, has to pay this tribute as soon as he comes to the age of manhood.

Everyone is obliged to pay fifty ducats annually to the Niepo,<sup>is</sup> i.e. the Governor of Jerusalem, for permission to make wine, a beverage which is an abomination to the Arabs. This is the whole amount of annual taxation to which the Jews are liable. But the Elders go so far in their iniquity that, in consequence of alleged deficits, they every week impose new taxes, making each one pay what they like; and whoever refuses is beaten by order of a non-Jewish tribunal until he submits.

As for me, so far God has helped me; they have demanded nothing from me as yet, how it may fare with me in the future I cannot tell.

The Christians in Jerusalem are divided into five sects—Catholics, Greeks, Jacobites, Armenians, and Johannites (Abyssinians); each one declares the faith of the others to be false, just as the Samaritans and Karaites do with respect to the Rabbanites. Each sect has a separate division in the Church of the Sepulchre, which is very large and has a tower surmounted by a cupola, but without a bell. In this

## OBADIAH DA BERTINORO

Church there are always two persons of each sect who are not allowed to leave it.

On Mount Zion, near the Sepulchre of the Kings, the Franciscans have a large Church. The Sepulchre of the Kings also belonged to them a long time ago, but a rich Ashkenazi, who came to Jerusalem, wished to purchase the graves from the King, and so involved himself in strife with the ecclesiastics, and the Arabs then took the graves away from them and have ever since retained them in their own keeping. When it became known in Venice that the graves had been taken from the Catholics through Jews who had come from Christian lands, an edict was published that no Jew might travel to Jerusalem through Venice; but this edict is now repealed, and every year Jews come in the Venetian galleys and even in the pilgrim ships, for there is really no safer and shorter way than by these ships. I wish I had known all this while I was still in those parts, I would not then have remained so long on the journey. The galleys perform the voyage from Venice here in forty days at the most.

I have taken a house here close to the Synagogue. The upper chamber of my dwelling is even in the wall of the Synagogue. In the court where my house is there are five inhabitants, all of them women. There is only one blind man living here, and his wife attends on me. I must thank God, who has hitherto vouchsafed me His blessing, that I have not been sick, like others who came at the same time with me. Most of those who come to Jerusalem from foreign countries fall ill, owing to climatic changes and the sudden variations of the wind, now cold, now warm. All possible winds blow in Jerusalem. It is said that every wind before going where it listeth comes to Jerusalem to prostrate itself before the Lord. Blessed be He that knoweth the truth.

## JEWISH TRAVELLERS

I earnestly entreat that you will not despond nor suffer anxiety on account of my having travelled so far away, and that you will not shed tears for my sake. For God in His mercy has brought me to his holy dwelling, which rejoices my heart and should also delight you. God is my witness that I have forgotten all my former distresses, and all remembrance of my native country has passed away from me. All the memories which I still retain of it centre in your image, revered father, which is constantly before my eyes. Mine eyes are dimmed when I remember that I have left you in your old age, and I fear lest your tears will recall the sins of my youth.

Now, I beseech you, bestow your blessing upon your servant. Let this letter atone for my absence, for it will show you the disposition of your son and you will no longer be displeased with him. If God will preserve me, I shall send you a letter every year with the galley, which will comfort you. Banish all sorrow from your heart. Rejoice with your dear children and grand-children who sit around your table. They will nourish and sustain your old age. I have prayed for their welfare and continue to do so in the sacred places of Jerusalem, the restoration of which, by means of the Messiah, God grant us to witness, so that you may come joyfully to Zion. Amen.

Finished in haste in Jerusalem, the Holy City.  
May it soon be rebuilt in our days.

From your Son,

OBADIAH JARE.

*On the 8th Ellul, 5248 (1488).*

## II

How precious are your words to me, my brother. They are sweeter than sweet spices. Your three letters came to me on the 15th Ellul, through the master of the pilgrim ship, together with the long

244

## OBADIAH DA BERTINORO

letter from the worthy Signor Emanuel Chai of Camerino. I shall answer them generally, and in a few points more explicitly.

First of all I praise the Almighty and thank you for the good news that our aged father, whom I never cease to love tenderly, still lives. May God continue His mercy and preserve him to us in strength and health for a long time to come. But my joy was very much saddened by the death of your eldest daughter and of your son who was born to you after I had left you. What God determines is ever for the best, however, and there is nothing left for us to do but to pray for those who still remain to us, that God would grant them His blessing and preserve them.

You ask me about the miracles which are said to take place at the temple-mountain and graves of the pious. What can I tell you, my brother, about them? I have not seen them. As for the lights on the site of the temple, of which you have heard that they always cease to burn on the 9th of Ab, I have been told that this is the case, but I cannot speak with certainty respecting it; I need not say that the story about the Sephardi is all deception and falsehood; but intelligent men like you, my brother, must inquire into such stories and not trust to false reports.

I have not yet had time to go anywhere since I came here, therefore I can only tell you by hearsay of the environs of the Holy City and the other adjoining districts. It is said that the Jews live quietly and peaceably with the Arabs in Safed, in the village of Cana, and in all Galilee, yet most of them are poor and maintain themselves by peddling, and many go about the villages seeking scanty means of subsistence. In Damascus, on the other hand, I hear the Jews are rich merchants and in every respect there is no place so blessed as Damascus. It has beautiful houses and magnificent gardens, such as are scarcely to be

245



## JEWISH TRAVELLERS

seen elsewhere. The air, however, is not very pure, and strangers going there become sick. People come hither from Egypt, Damascus, Aleppo, and other places to prostrate themselves before the Lord.

Jews have come here from Aden. Aden is said to be the site of the garden of Eden : it lies S.E. of Ethiopia, but the Red Sea separates them. These Jews say that in their country there are many large Jewish communities. The king is an Arab and is very kindly disposed to the Jews, and that the country is very large and beautiful, bearing many splendid fruits, of kinds which are not to be found among us. Where Paradise was actually situated they do not know ; they sow in the month of Adar (March) and reap in Kislev (December). The rain season there is from Passover to the month of Ab (August). It is in consequence of the great quantity of rain that falls there that the Nile rises in the month of Ab. Its inhabitants are somewhat black. The Jews do not possess the books of the Talmud ; all that they have are the works of R. Isaac Alfasi, together with commentaries on them, and the works of Maimonides. They are all, from great to small, well versed in the works of Maimonides, for they occupy themselves principally with studying them. The Jews told us also that it is now well-known through Arabian merchants that the river Sambation is fifty days' journey from them in the wilderness, and like a thread, surrounds the whole land where the descendants of Israel dwell. This river throws up stones and sand and rests only on the Sabbath, therefore no Jew, who is traveling in that country, is likely to violate the Sabbath. It is traditional among them, that the descendants of Jacob dwell there. This river throws up stones and sand and rests only on the Sabbath, therefore no Jew can cross over it, for otherwise he would violate the Sabbath. It is

## OBADIAH DA BERTINORO

traditional among them that they are all descendants of Moses, all pure and innocent as angels, and no evil-doer in their midst. On the other side of the Sambation the children of Israel are as numerous as the sand of the sea, and there are many kings and princes among them, but they are not so pure and holy as those who are surrounded by the stream. The Jews of Aden relate all this with a certain confidence, as if it were well-known, and no one ever doubted the truth of their assertions.

And old Ashkenazi Rabbi, who was born and educated here (Jerusalem), tells me that he remembers how even in his youth Jews came from Aden, and narrated everything literally as these do. The Jews of Aden also say that the Israelites dwelling on the borders of their territory, of whom I wrote in my first letter, are now at war with the people of Prefter John (the Abyssinian), and that some of them have been taken prisoners and brought to Cairo. I have seen some of these with my own eyes ; these Jews are a month's journey in the wilderness from the others who live on the Sambation. The Christians who come from the territory of the Johannites relate that the Jews there, who are at war with the people of Prefter John, have suffered great defeats, and we are very anxious to know if these accounts are really true, which God forbend. May the Lord always protect his people and his servants !

I live here in Jerusalem in the house of the Nagid, who has appointed me ruler of his household, and twice a month I hold discourses in the Synagogue in the Hebrew tongue, which most of the people here understand. My sermons sound in their ears like a lovely song, they praise them and like to listen to them, but they do not act in accordance with them. Yet I cannot say that anybody has done me an injury : even the Elders have done me no wrong ; they have

## JEWISH TRAVELLERS

not yet burdened me with any tax, as is generally done here every week. They even would not have me pay the poll-tax the first year, from which no one is exempt. So I remain here as by a miracle. God knows how it will go with me in the future!

The honoured Emanuel Chai of Camerino sent me one hundred Venetian ducats at my request, the profits on the capital I left with him, and he has promised to do so every year. I give ten per cent. to the master of the ship, who brings me the money. The worthy Emanuel also added twenty-five ducats, partly for oil for the synagogue lamps and partly to give to the poor. As for me I live contentedly in Jerusalem wanting nothing from anyone. Every morning and evening we meet together to study Halacha (law). Two Sephardic pupils take uninterrupted part in my instruction and we have now also two Ashkenazic Rabbis here. And perchance the Promised Land may now be rebuilt and inhabited, for the king has issued a decree of lasting validity, that the Jews in Jerusalem shall pay only the poll-tax imposed on them. Formerly the Jewish inhabitants had to pay four hundred ducats annually, without reference to their number, and thus all suffered. Now each one pays his own poll-tax, and has nothing to pay for the others. This is a decree such as has not been made in Jerusalem for fifty years. Hence many who left Jerusalem are returning. May it please God that the city and the temple be rebuilt, and that the scattered of Judah and Ephraim may come together here and prostrate themselves before God at the holy mountain. I must now conclude for the present, for I am much occupied.

Sent in haste from Jerusalem, Ellul the 27th, 5249 (1489).

From your Brother,

OBADIAH JARÉ.

248

## OBADIAH DA BERTINORO

### III

Honoured Sir,<sup>14</sup>

May the Almighty give you mercy and length of days, and may you acquire the merit to see the Sanctuary and Temple. Amen.

When the Florentine Ambassador came here with my Lord's pleasant letters, I was not in Jerusalem, the Holy City, for I had gone to Hebron and dwelt there many days. My stay there seemed somewhat dearer to me than at Jerusalem, for the Jews there are few and good and not bad like the men of Jerusalem. There are about twenty householders living in a closed courtyard, and no Ishmaelite or unclean man comes among them, and it is a tradition in all the country that it is better to be buried in Hebron than Jerusalem.

Here in Hebron, on the tomb of the Patriarchs, is a very old building of almost incredibly great stones, and on the old building is a new building of the Ishmaelites, and the place where the angels revealed themselves to Abraham is still called Mamre and there is a small cave there and a stone upon which it is said that Abraham was circumcised, and a distance away from the City is a large well which the Ishmaelites call Bir Ibrahim and a little further on is another well, Bir Ishaq, and a bow-shot or more away is the brook of Eshcol, still so called, and the grapes near the brook are to this very day larger than all the grapes of the country around, and there are still many villages around Hebron called by their names, as mentioned in the Books of the Prophets. And now as to the great city of Damascus, about which my Lord asks whether it is in the Holy Land. It is well-known from the words of all the wise men, and particularly of those of Maimonides in Hilchot Terumot (81-9), that it is reckoned as of Syria, and to this day all the inhabitants of Galilee agree as to this, but they say

249