# 4 Aloneness as Connector in Arabic Papyrus Letters of Request

PETRA M. SIJPESTEIJN

Amongst the thousands of papyrus documents from medieval Egypt written in Greek, Coptic and Arabic, a large number consist of letters of request and petition. Addressed to patrons in the administration and those holding positions of social, legal or economic power, the letters were configured and formulated according to certain linguistic and rhetorical patterns. Successful letters tied the person asking for help to the recipient of the letter in a relationship of social dependency, encouraging or even obliging the petitioned to offer her or his help to the supplicant. This paper examines one way in which this was done, namely by presenting the supplicant as defenceless and alone, and the petitioned, consequently, as the only person available to offer help. Focusing on three ways in which 'aloneness' was expressed – abandonment, being friendless and alone, and having no one (but the addressee) to appeal to – I will examine how a (self-)description in terms of helplessness invoked social expectations by emphasising the exclusive dependency between the supplicant and petitioned, resulting in an obligation on the side of the petitioned to help. The paper is based on published and unpublished Arabic letters on papyrus from Egypt dating from the eighth to the tenth century CE, while contemporary papyri in other languages are used as comparisons.[1]

This work was supported by the European Research Council under Grant number 683194. In preparing this publication I have benefited especially from conversations with Karen Bauer, Alon Dar, Edmund Hayes, Reza Huseini, Cecilia Palombo, Eline Scheerlinck and Oded Zinger. Any remaining mistakes are, of course, my own. Papyrus editions are abbreviated according to the Checklist of Arabic Documents (www.naher-osten.lmu.de/isapchecklist) and the Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets (https://papyri.info/docs/checklist).

[1] This work is part of a larger study into Arabic letters of request, together with Coptic, Greek and Pahlavi documents and historical sources, and what value system of social justice they represent (Petra M. Sijpesteijn, *Righting Wrongs. Justice and Redress in the Early Islamic Empire*, forthcoming).

## Petition Letters

Everyday life in medieval Egypt was full of challenges: a failed Nile flood or one that was too abundant might destroy the harvest, animal plagues caused damage to crops and fields, illness and death struck suddenly. Then there were man-made setbacks: slow markets causing disappointing commercial returns, arbitrary confiscations of property or theft of possessions, imprisonment or kidnapping and physical abuse at the hands of the authorities, landowners or criminals. Problems between friends, business partners and family members formed another challenge: disagreements over inheritances, where to spend holidays, how to run a business or 'simply' how to behave could turn into disruptive feuds, even resulting in the permanent break-up of relationships through divorce, wrecked friendships or the dissolution of commercial partnerships. In the meantime, taxes continued to have to be paid and families had to be fed, clothed and married off. A failure to pay the tax-collector or anyone else who felt entitled to goods, money or services could lead to imprisonment until the debt was discharged, but until that time no money could be raised to support dependents.

So what to do when faced with such misfortune, especially when it became clear that the problem in question could not be solved easily? The answer was to turn to a third party for help. The number and variety of petition letters are great, in terms of the cases in which help is sought, who is asking for help, and from whom assistance is expected to come.[2]

[2] For similar letters from pre-Islamic Egypt, see e.g. Arietta Papaconstantinou, 'Women in Need: Debt-Related Requests from Early Medieval Egypt', in *Living the End of Antiquity: Individual Histories from Byzantine to Islamic Egypt* (*Millennium Studies* 84), edited by Sabine R. Huebner *et al.* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 195–206; Eleanor Dickey, 'Emotional Language and Formulae of Persuasion in Greek Papyrus Letters', in *Emotion and Persuasion in Classical Antiquity*, edited by Ed Sanders and Matthew Johncock (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016), 237–62; Roger S. Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC–AD 800* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Chrysi Kotsifou, 'A Glimpse into the World of Petition: Aurelia Artemisia and her Orphaned Children', in *Unveiling Emotions. Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions in the Greek World,* edited by Angelos Chaniotis (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012), 317–27; Jean Gascou, 'Les pétitions privées', in *La pétition à Byzance*, edited by Denis Feissel and Jean Gascou (Paris: Association des amis du centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2004), 93–103. For petitions sent to government officials, see, for Byzantine Egypt, Denis Feissel and Jean Gascou (eds.), *La pétition à Byzance* (Paris: Association des amis du centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2004); Bernhard Palme, 'Emotional Strategies in Petitions of Dioskoros of Aphrodito', in *Unveiling Emotions III. Arousal, Display, and Performance of Emotions in the Greek World,* edited by Angelos Chaniotis (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2021), 321–44; and, for Islamic Egypt, Marina Rustow, *The Lost Archive. Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); and 'The Fatimid Petition', *Jewish History* 32 (2019): 351–72.

A petition letter's effectiveness depended on three things: first, the case in which help was sought had to be worthy or presented as such; second, the letter had to reach the right person; and, last, the letter had to be formulated appropriately. Although the focus of this paper is on the latter aspect, it is worth spending a bit of time on the first two, because the way the letter was formulated was clearly influenced by the issue at stake and who the addressee was who had to be convinced. This does not mean that it is always possible to provide a good explanation for the presence of a given rhetorical element, and a certain degree of what Oded Zinger calls in this volume 'spinning threads in various directions in the hope that one or more will stick and bind the target' is going on as well.

The cases that the letters deal with vary greatly, paralleling the great diversity of man-made and natural disasters listed at the beginning of this section. Most requests would have been made in person, orally and without leaving a written trace. However, many requests, it seems, involved written documentation, mostly in the form of letters but sometimes including other documents, even if these were elaborated upon orally. In some letters a reference to an oral explanation by the petitioner, who also delivered the letter to the petitioned, was made.[3] Others contain such a full account of the problem that oral reiteration seems superfluous.[4]

Some petitioners addressed their request directly to the person whom they expected could solve their problem. In other cases, the sender wrote on behalf of someone else, asking the addressee to help that third person who had approached the sender to act as an intermediary. Still other letters show the sender asking the addressee to act as an intermediary and to approach

[3] An oral component is clearest when the letter is delivered by the person seeking help. In an eighth-century letter the sender writes that the 'weak workman' whom he wants the addressee to help is the one delivering his letter 'so that you can question him about his case' (*P.Heid.Arab.* II 42, provenance unknown). See also the many cases in which the request is phrased very enigmatically as 'look into my/his/her case' (*fa-unẓur fī amrī/amrihi/amrihā*) without further explanation, suggesting that the exact problem was explained orally by the petitioner themself. Such phrases are commonly found in petition letters (see Sijpesteijn, *Righting Wrongs*, chapter 1). See also how the frequent reference to the petitioner (or the object of a letter of recommendation) is through the expression 'the carrier of my letter' (*ṣāḥib kitābī* and variants thereof). Cf. Sijpesteijn, *Righting Wrongs*, chapter 2 and Federico Morelli, '*Grammatêphoroi* e vie della giustizia nell'Egitto tardo antico', in *Symposion 2005*, edited by Eva Cantarella (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 351–72. Jean Gascou lists the delivery by the petitioner as a characteristic of the petition that distinguishes it from other letters. See Jean Gascou, 'Les privilèges du clergé d'après la Lettre 104 de S. Basile', *Revue des sciences religieuses* 2 (1997), 193.

[4] An early ninth-century letter contains an exhaustive account of all the information necessary to solve the problem of the person delivering the letter (*P.Hamb.Arab.* II 38, dating to 801–30, provenance Idfū).

a third person on behalf of the sender.[5] Such requests for intercession could in fact extend across multiple contacts with intercessors approaching the sender on someone else's behalf and other letters asking the addressee to ask someone else to approach yet another person. In such cases explanations were provided by third parties to the sender orally or in writing, especially when the sender was writing on someone else's behalf. Similarly, some requests assume that the recipient will produce a petition letter on his or her own or will consult someone orally or in writing in relation to the solving of the case.[6] This mobilising of intertwined patronage networks could lead to complicated arrangements involving multiple individuals, documentation and reports which are schematically represented in Figure 4.1.

The corpus of request letters and petitions in which petitioners use a claim of 'aloneness' to support their appeal for help contains examples of all such trajectories. Some are written directly by the petitioner to the petitioned, while others make use of an intercessor. Of the four Arabic letters that use the claim of aloneness and that are written on behalf of a petitioner, three are written for a woman. The fourth is written at the behest of

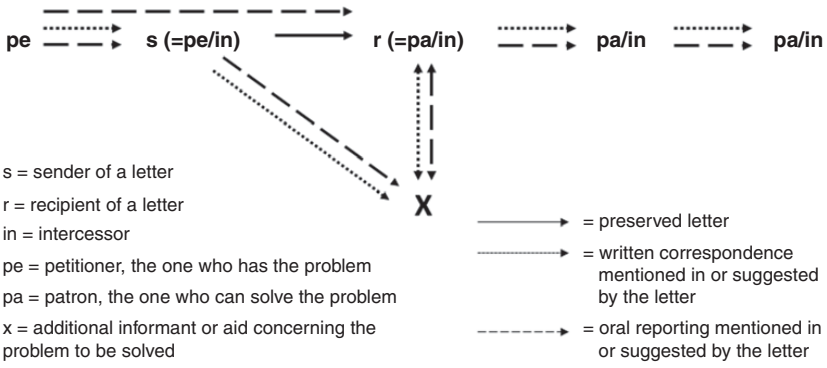


**Figure 4.1** A representation of the different actors and documentation that can be involved in writing a petition letter.

[5] See e.g. the early ninth-century letter in which a certain ʿAlī writes to someone called Abū al-Ḥasan Rizq Allāh b. Muḥammad to help the person delivering the letter, Abū Jaʿfar Aḥmad b. Qāsim, to retrieve his donkey from yet another person called Yuḥannis from Idfū (*P.Hamb. Arab.* II 38, dating to 801–30, provenance Idfū).

[6] Another example is the letter dating to between 870 and 900 in which the sender asks the addressee, Abū al-Ḥasan, that the deliverer of the letter, Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān from Armant, be allowed a deferment on his taxes (*kharāj*) due and that Abū al-Ḥasan orders that he be treated kindly and patiently. The sender also informs Abū al-Ḥasan that he has written to someone called Abū Jaʿfar asking him the same thing, suggesting that Abūal-Ḥasan communicates with him about the case (*P.Hamb.Arab.* II 17).

a man in prison. Of the other twenty-two Arabic papyrus letters that use the argument of being 'alone in the world', five more are written by women, and of these two are directed at other women. That means that the argument of being alone is used in our corpus much more often by and for men than for women. This obviously reflects the fact that the surviving papyrological record overall contains more letters from men than women, but it is clear that the argument is not limited to or preferably used by female petitioners. The kinds of cases in which women use the argument of being alone, moreover, overlap those of male petitioners. It is thus difficult to distinguish a gendered discourse in these letters. There is, however, a small number of letters in which women are depicted using familiar typologies of weakness and helplessness applied to women specifically, as will be discussed below.

## Abandonment

Several letter-writers link an act of abandonment by the addressee or another party to their supplication. Sometimes the desertion is unrelated to the problem at hand but makes an emotional appeal to the addressee's responsibility to deal with the sender's request. 'I never thought you would leave me alone at this feast (*qad ẓanantu … annaka lā taqṭāʿu bī fī hādha al-ʿīd*)', al-Haytham son of Khālid writes to Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥusayn son of ʿAbd al-Salām and Abū Yaʿqūb as he asks him to forward as soon as possible the textiles that he and his partner Yūsuf son of Yazīd desperately need.[7] Another powerful example is the letter of Ruqayya daughter of Yaḥyā son of Zakariyya to her aunt Umm al-Qāsim daughter of Zakariyya. Rukayya writes: 'I am healthy, thank God, despite the death of my lord and son that suddenly afflicted and befell me (*ʿalā mā dahānī wa-afjaʿnī min wafā sayyidī wa-waladī*)'. Not surprisingly, her son's death has left Rukayya 'perplexed, alone, weak and poor (*fa-qad baqītu ḥayran waḥīda ḍaʿīfa faqīra*)'. On top of this, Rukayya's own brother has not written to console her, adding to her feeling of desertion. Her urgent request that her aunt does not 'stop writing her' is directly related to her current, sad and lonely situation.[8]

[7] *P.Marchands* V/1 8, ninth century, provenance Fayyūm.

[8] *P.JoySorrow* 18. The request not to stop the correspondence (literally 'do not cut me off from your letters') occurs often, including in letters in which no request or claim to powerlessness is conveyed. Cf. *P.Cair.Arab.* 339, provenance Idfū, ninth century; *CPR* XXXII 7, provenance unknown; 9, provenance Fusṭāṭ, both tenth century; *P.Hamb.Arab.* II 31, dating between 901 and 950; *P.Berl.Arab.* II 81, tenth–eleventh century, provenance of both is unknown.

Fear of being abandoned is an important theme in a group of begging letters sent by a brother and sister to their brother asking him to intercede with their father, Jaʿfar son of Aḥmad son of ʿAbd al-Muʾmin of a family of textile traders based in the Fayyūm oasis.[9] 'Do not abandon us' (*lā tadaʿnā yā-akhī; allāh allāh lā tussalimnā*), the siblings exhort their brother repeatedly in their letters. Their fear is grounded in their father having already turned away from them (*aslamanā*), persisting in his harshness (*ghilzuhu*) towards them as they write. Were the brother to abandon them too, they would lose access to their only means of softening their father's stance towards them and convincing him to provide them with material help. Hunger, thirst and a lack of clothes are other arguments brought forward by the brother and sister in their attempt to make their case, as is their claim to be 'weak and poor' (*ḍuʿafāʾ masākīn*).[10] But being left on their own without the brother's concern and help is at least as important an argument in their correspondence. The brother and sister's appeal to kinship solidarity to solve economic problems links to Reza Huseini's study in this volume of the strong economic ties that bound households in early Islamic Bactria.

In other letters an act of active abandonment is the direct cause of the problem. 'You left us behind like pitiful people at *fiṭr* (the feast marking the end of Ramaḍān) (*taraktanā fī al-fiṭr mithla al-masākīn*) and now you intend to leave us like pitiful ones also at the sacrificial feast (at the culmination of the ḥajj) (*turīdu tatrukunā ayḍan fī al-adḥāʾ mithla al-masākīn*)?' Sayyida exclaims desperately in an attempt to convince her husband to honour his promise to celebrate only *ʿīd al-fiṭr* with his other wife.[11] In another Arabic ninth-century papyrus letter, a husband whose wife left him, while she apparently also took some of his belongings, is described as 'weak' (*ḍaʿīf*).[12] The poor husband surely aimed to retrieve his expropriated possessions and have his wife return to his house, but his description as being deserted and (therefore?) weak in the recommendation letter he delivered himself also served to convince his potential patron. In another case, a man whose uncle, he claims, has been responsible for expelling him from his house is left 'hungry, dying from hunger (*wa-anā jāʾiʿ mayyit*

[9] *P.Marchands* II 16–23, ninth century, provenance Fayyūm.

[10] Mark Cohen worked extensively on how the argument of poverty is used in petitions from the Geniza. Cf. Mark R. Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[11] *P.Marchands* II 2, ninth century, provenance Fayyūm.

[12] I am in the process of publishing this unpublished papyrus from the Austrian National Library (Inv. AP 1497).

*bi-l-jūʿ*)', fearing 'the cold because of being naked (*akhāfu bard al-ʿurī*)'.[13] He accuses the addressee of 'leaving him dependent on alms (*taraktanī aḥtāju ilā al-ṣadaqa*)'. All of this will be solved if the addressee, whom he addresses as 'my brother', talks to his sister to appeal to his uncle to give him some wheat. The sender of the letter, by the way, thus finds himself three steps removed from the person who can offer the relief he is hoping for, his uncle. He is involving the addressee, 'his brother', to persuade the latter's sister to request that the sender's uncle allow him to obtain some wheat. We might think that this complicated chain of people is the only way for the sender to gain access to his uncle. Conversely, the entanglement of all these individuals gave the sender a chance to recruit and mobilise social capital: if more people knew about his need and his uncle's 'scandalous' behaviour, they could offer material help or get involved on the sender's behalf to put pressure on the uncle.[14] Their mere awareness of the affair would indeed already provide pressure on the uncle to do something about his 'poor' family member. Interestingly, while the threat of being expelled from one's house is a recurring topos in the petitions, in this case the petitioner seems really to have been ousted from his house and is now roaming the streets begging for alms.[15]

The people who wrote these letters are not literally alone as a result of having been deserted. Nor do they lack resources to appeal to the people who deserted them. The whole point of their petition letters is that they have means and ways to appeal to others. Rukayya, the mother who suddenly lost her son, writes that she hopes most of all that God should prolong the life of Abū ʿAbd Allāh her husband, who 'looked after him (the deceased son) and me through all of this so well (*fa-law raʾat ʿaynuki qiyāmahu bihi wa-binā … la-sarraki*)'. The brother and sister so desperately trying to get through to their father via their brother have each other as well as the numerous people they mention who frequent their house. The man whose uncle cheated him out of his property like 'a hair pulled out of the dough (*mithla mā akhraja al-shaʿra min al-ʿajīn*)' asks that the sender send his letter via the vizir so that he can add his own letter. Sayyida, who has been abandoned by her husband on the most important Muslim feast days, conveys her cry of injustice via the letter of one of her husband's business associates. In fact, being alone is not the main concern of these petitioners.

[13] *P.Ryl.Arab.* I VI 8, ninth–tenth century, provenance unknown.

[14] I would like to thank Oded Zinger for pointing this out to me.

[15] For the threat of being expelled in Arabic and Coptic petitions, see e.g. *O.Frange* 32, provenance Thebes; David-Weill, 'Louvre', no. 23, provenance unknown, both eighth century; *P.Hamb.Arab.* II 7, ninth century, provenance Armant.

Rather, it is the act of having been cast aside – and therefore deprived of the backing that they expected on the basis of their relationship with the addressee or someone else – that forms their most important argument in their search for help. In other words, the severance of the connection that they relied upon for support is their main justification for being entitled to assistance.

## Alone

Being alone (*waḥīd/waḥīda*), however, does occur as an argument in the letters of request. 'Aloneness', though, does not mean that there are no people around, but rather that the appropriate aid or support is lacking.[16] This can have broad applications. Because Umm Abū al-Qāsim could not find any messengers, she sent her servant girl to Umm Abū Bakr to deliver her letter. The servant girl was excited about this adventurous assignment, but her mistress warns Umm Abū Bakr: 'Swear to me that you will not keep her, because I am alone and she needs to complete a task for me (*wa-biḥaqqī ʿalayka an ḥabastihā fa-innī waḥīda wa-arādat taqḍī lī ḥāja*)'.[17] We have already met Rukayya, whose son's death and the lack of her brother's communication on the topic have left her 'alone'. Similarly, a man whose father, mother, brother and sister have all died is left 'alone' (*fa-lammā tuwuffiya al-wālid wa-l-wālida wa-l-ukht wa-l-akh raḥamahum allāh baqītu waḥīd*). This is a situation he is 'not used to (*lā salafa ʿalā dhālika*)' and he aims to get married so that he can enjoy some female company.[18] In a tenth-century letter from Ashmūnayn, in which a son writes to his father concerning all sorts of work-related matters, one of their associates who lacks suitable workmen is described as 'being without anyone (*huwa bi-lā aḥad*)'.[19]

Recently, Oded Zinger has shown that women in Geniza letters asking for help often use gendered arguments referring to their being 'alone' and 'cut off' from male protectors or aids. In a world where success and well-being depended greatly on one's participation in social networks, it is the being cut off from such networks that affected women – whose access to

[16] Oded Zinger found this same claim in somewhat later women's letters in Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic. See Oded Zinger, 'The Use of Social Isolation (*inqitāʿ*) by Jewish Women in Medieval Egypt', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 63 (2020): 820–52, 832.

[17] *P.Vind.Arab.* II 17, ninth–tenth century, provenance unknown.

[18] *P.Khalili* I 18, dating between 878 and 938, provenance unknown.

[19] *P.Giss.Arab.* 16.

them was generally only possible via a male connection – especially hard.[20] Similar linguistic expressions seem to be lacking in the Arabic papyri and paper letters from this period.[21] However, one third/ninth-century letter presents a similar concern that a woman without male kin should receive help. Although the woman in question used to have a father and grandfather (*kāna lahā ab wa-jadd*), she is now left 'poor, alone and by herself (*waḥīda faqīra*)'.[22] The woman seems to have a problem with some property, probably the agricultural land which is mentioned in the letter. The sender urges the addressee 'to look after this woman so that she receives her property through justice (*taʿnā bi-hādhihi al-marʾa ḥattā taḥūzu mālahā bi-inṣāf*)'.[23] The woman's claim to help on the basis of her lacking any male relative seems to have mostly a practical function: it is suggested that her access to the judicial process and legal representation necessary to secure her property is at stake, which could be interpreted as especially relevant for women. It is, however, of a different order than the cultural claim of lacking social belonging that the women make in the Geniza letters studied by Oded Zinger.

As emphasised above, the claim of being alone does not mean that these solicitors for help had no physical person around. The woman whose proprietary rights have been compromised, who figured in the letter just discussed, has a network (of powerful men) enabling her to mobilise support. Interestingly, the sender of the letter has some kind of obligation to look after the woman's interests, and it is as much his relationship with the woman as her condition that is used in the letter to convince the addressee to take care of her problems (*kitābī ilayka fī marʾa yalzamunī ḥaqquhā*). In other words, the woman in this letter, although presented as alone and without male kin, obviously still has useful male connections to help her handle her affairs. The sender intercedes for her in writing, asking his contact to help her, using the woman's protectorless state, as well as his own relationship to her and to the addressee, to support his request to the addressee.

[20] Oded Zinger, 'The Use of Social Isolation'.

[21] Zinger ('The Use of Social Isolation', 827 n. 29) cites only one eleventh-century letter (*P.Vind.Arab.* III 41, provenance al-Gharbiyya) in which a man claims 'to have been left cut-off, without anyone to take care of me (*wa-qad baqītu munqaṭiʿ bī wa-laysa maʿī man yakhdumunī*)'. This difference might be explained by the chronological gap between the two corpora, explaining the use of the expression in a paper letter close to the Geniza material in time, albeit by a man rather than a woman. It might reflect a different position of women in public life, which is perhaps reflected in the reluctance to mention wives by name in the Geniza letters, an unwillingness not matched by the papyrological material.

[22] *P.Marchands* II 39, ninth century, provenance Fayyūm.

[23] And later in the letter: 'it is up to you to take care of her' (*wa-laka fī al-ʿināya*).

The qualification of being alone is used in the letters of request to describe situations in which the petitioner is lacking some specific specialised presence, but also in more general terms to emphasise helplessness in support of a claim for help.

## Only You

The claim of being alone has a more common variant which makes a direct claim on an exclusive relationship between the claimant and the petitioned and thereby on the latter's help: the petitioners' assertion that they have no recourse except (via) the addressee. The expressions fall into two categories. First, there are those that make a point of presenting the petitioner as a pious person who does not forget that God never forsakes him or her. This finds expression in phrases such as, 'I have no one except God and you (*mā lī aḥad illā allāh wa-anta*)',[24] 'I rely on God and on you (*anā bi-llāh thumma bika*)',[25] 'I trust in God and you (Copt. tipistewe *epnoute nemētn*)',[26] 'seeking help from God and you (*mustaghaytha bi-llāh wa-bika*)';[27] or, more extensively, 'we rely on God and the amīr's justice (*naḥnu bi-llāh wa-bi-ʿadl al-amīr*)',[28] 'because I trust in God and in Your Benevolence' (Copt. eithareï *gar epnoute mntekagapē*);[29] and the elaborate 'because I have no one who will look into my case except you and I confide (literally: am strong) in God and you (Copt. *če mntairōme efnašine hm pahōf sarōtn awō eitačrēw ehrai ečm pnoute nēmētn*)'.[30]

The rather dramatic 'I have no living creature besides God and you' (*laysa lī khalq illā allāh wa-anta*)'[31] that appears in an eighth-century letter might have been informed by the nature of the problem. The letter-writer

[24] Adolf Grohmann, *From the World of Arabic Papyri* (Cairo: al-Maaref Press, 1952), 186, dating to 169–171/786–787, provenance unknown.

[25] *P.Marchands* II 17; 20, both from the same dossier, ninth century, provenance Fayyūm; *P.Hamb.Arab.* II 7, ninth century, provenance Armant; Karl Jahn, 'Vom frühislamischen Briefwesen: Studien zur islamischen Epistolographie der ersten drei Jahrhunderte der Hiǧra auf Grund der arabischen Papyri', *Archiv Orientální* 9 (1937): 153–200, no. 7, eighth century, provenance unknown.

[26] From a representative of the village to a member of the monastery: *P.Mon.Apollo* 55, eighth century, provenance Bawīṭ.

[27] *P.Ryl.Arab.* I XV 1, ninth century, provenance unknown.

[28] Naïm Vanthieghem, 'Violences et extorsions contre des moines dans la région d'Assiout: Réédition de P.Ryl.Arab. II 11', *Journal of Coptic Studies 18* (2016): 185–96, ninth century, provenance Asyūṭ.

[29] From Tsia to Apa Frange: *O.Frange* 320, eighth century, provenance Thebes.

[30] From John to Apa Daniel: *P.Ryl.Copt.* 316, seventh–eighth century, provenance unknown.

[31] *P.Khalili* I 24, eighth century, provenance unknown.

states: 'a male relative of the wife of Abū al-Khayr has fallen out with me/spoken ill of me in the village' (*rajul min qarāba mara* [sic] *abū* [sic] *al-khayr waqaʿa bī fī al-qarya*), an apparently rather urgent concern, possibly because of Abū Khayr's status. Ill-speaking, gossiping or false accusations, and the consequent negative effect on one's reputation with the resulting social disadvantages, were a cause for serious concern, which might be another reason for the use of the more elaborate expression, adding an urgency to the request. This is confirmed by an eighth-century Coptic letter where the more high-flown formulation 'we trust in God and in Your Benevolence' (eithareï *gar epnoute mntekagapē*) is used in an emotional letter asking for help after a (presumably false) allegation of theft had been made against the petitioner.[32] Tsia writes to Apa Frange, 'Mesiane, the wife of David son of Lazarus, has brought a complaint against me. She has said: "You have robbed me."' She emphasises how serious the situation is in which this accusation has placed her: 'God knows, if you do not have the good heart to help me and send something in my favour, by God, I will throw myself in the river or a well to die'.[33]

In two Arabic papyri the expression calling upon the petitioned as the only recourse is used by a woman whose situation is caused by her regular male support and means of sustenance having fallen away. The first case concerns a wife whose husband has been taken to prison, leaving her and her children to fend for themselves. The abandoned wife is at her wits' end: 'I do not know whether he is alive or dead (*lā adrī a ḥayy huwa aw mayyit*)'.[34] She ends her sad report to the addressee by plaintively stating 'we rely on God and on you'. Although the actual request is lost, it is probable the woman asked for some material support for herself and her children. In the second letter a 'poor widow (*armala miskīna*)', who 'lives through God and her son (*laysa lahā aḥad illā* [*allāh wa*?] *waladuhā taʿayshu bi-llāh wa-bihi*)', recounts how the *amīr*'s men have taken her son to prison. Again, the actual request is lost, but it is most likely that the petitioner asks the *amīr* in her letter for something that will compensate for her loss of income now that her only source of maintenance has been imprisoned.[35]

[32] *O.Frange* 320, eighth century, provenance Thebes.

[33] *P.Ryl.Copt.* 316, seventh–eighth century, provenance unknown, might also be triggered by false allegations. See the fragmentary and enigmatic references in the letter to community gossip: 'I beg my lord father that he bring to nought all the thoughts of those who talk to him, while he enquires into my affair'.

[34] P. Vindob. A. P. 798, ninth century, provenance unknown. I am preparing a publication of this letter fragment.

[35] P. Vindob. A. P. 669, ninth century, provenance unknown. I am preparing a publication of this letter fragment.

The petitioner's pious attitude is in some of these letters strengthened by additional displays of a humble and suppliant disposition before God. In an Arabic papyrus letter, a 'poor orphan (*yatīm miskīn*)' without any parent at all (*lā abā lā wālid lī*) turns to the governor (*amīr*) Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Sulaymān (in office 169–171/786–787), asking for help to retrieve the part of his father's inheritance that was unlawfully withheld from him.[36] When his father died, the petitioner claims, a certain Ilyās owed the deceased four dinars. Ilyās, however, refused to pay the rightful heir and current petitioner 'even a fils' of these four dinars. Besides stating that 'I have no one but God and you', a statement of forlorn pathos reinforced with the modifiers 'poor'[37] and 'without parents', the petitioner exclaims, 'I am humble before God and you (*fa-danattu ilā allāh wa-ilayka*)' and later on in the letter cites the Muslim profession of faith (*wa-uslimu an lā ilāh illā allāh*). Despite the displays of humble piety and claims of powerlessness, the petitioner exhibits a vigorous sense of righteousness, making two very suggestive claims on the governor's justice working to his advantage. The first appears in the encomia that open the letter. After asking God to keep the *amīr* healthy, the petitioner beseeches God to let him benefit from the *amīr* and to help the *amīr* respecting the affairs over which He appointed him in His world and His world to come (*ʿāfāhu allāh wa-amtaʿa bihi wa-aʿānahu ʿalā mā wallāhu min umūr dunyāhu wa-ākhiratihi*). The second instance in which the petitioner points indirectly to the *amīr*'s divinely ordained position and the responsibilities that come with it comes after the petitioner's profession of faith in the letter: 'And you are the one who orders this (*wa-anta ʿāmirun bihi yā-sayyidī*)'. That the petitioner is certain of his case also comes out in his 'request', which is phrased as a straightforward order: 'send to that man who has taken the four dinars from him (i.e. the petitioner), questioning him until you (i.e. the *amīr*) know the truth (*wa-arsil ilā dhāka al-rajul alladhī akhadha minhu al-arbaʿa danānīr isʾalhu ḥattā taʿrifa al-ḥaqq min dhālika*)', which is only slightly softened by the following benediction: 'I will ask God for a good life for you (*asʾalu allāh laka ḥayāt ṭayyiba*)'. The petitioner uses the language of being alone, helpless, without the sought-after aid, while at the same time laying claim to the *amīr*'s support by invoking the *amīr*'s God-given position and his responsibility towards people

[36] Grohmann, *World*, p. 186, dating to 169–71/786–87, provenance unknown.

[37] *Miskīn* has the meaning of being pitiful and of having no money. In this letter both meanings are invoked. The orphan is obviously pitiful as he is fatherless (parentless). The orphan is, however, also in need of money. His father had intended the four dinars for his maintenance which are now lost because the money is unlawfully withheld from him (*wa-bihā sabab lī fa-dhahaba sababī*).

like himself, robbed of what is rightfully theirs, poor, powerless and pious. In other words, the petitioner creates a direct link between himself and the petitioned, obliging the latter to come to his aid by invoking mutually understood, cultural categories of power and patronage.

The same strategy can be observed in other letters of request. Tsia, the lady who threatened to kill herself if Apa Frange did not come to her aid against her neighbour's false accusation of theft, uses similar techniques in her petition. She starts by calling herself a sinner (Copt. *teïrefnobe*) and uses pious formulae, including oaths, throughout her letter. Oaths are as much expressions of piety as a powerful tool to tie the person swearing the oath to the one for whom the oath is issued as an assurance.[38]

Another category of letters leaves God out, turning instead directly to the petitioned as the only source of help for the petitioner, in some cases mirroring the conditions of the letters mentioned above, in which the same expressions are applied to God. The following two letters were written for and about the person in trouble, about whom it is said that he, and much less likely she, had no recourse. The fact that it is not the petitioner talking in these letters may explain why the variant of the expression is used that states that the petitioner has no one but does not mention God or the addressee. Possibly, it was considered to be inappropriate to discuss someone else's relationship with God except in terms of prayers (may God increase your life and the like). The sender of a ninth-century letter asks the addressee to look up an imprisoned man, who, he writes, is 'poor and has no one (*huwa miskīn laysa lahu aḥad*)'.[39] Another petitioner intercedes on behalf of an 'orphaned girl who has no one' (*kānat yatīma lā aḥad lahā*)'.[40] In other cases, however, it is the sender who uses the phrase. 'There is no one but you (*laysa aḥad illā antum*)', a brother and sister write to their brother, asking for help in reaching their father.[41] 'We have no one, that is to say besides you' (*laysa lanā aḥad yaʿnā ghayraka*)',[42] the senders of a ninth-century papyrus letter write.

Two further letters, moreover, specify, in the framework of commercial relations, that the addressee is the sender's only available or suitable

[38] Roy Parviz Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

[39] P. Vindob. A. P. 1510, ninth century, provenance unknown. I am preparing a publication of this letter fragment.

[40] P. Vindob. A. P. 374r, ninth century, provenance unknown. I am preparing a publication of this letter fragment.

[41] *P.Marchands* II 19, ninth century, provenance Fayyūm.

[42] P. Vindob. A. P. 1739, ninth century, provenance unknown. I am preparing a publication of this letter fragment.

'brother (*akh*)', presumably referring to a business partner rather than a family relation.[43] At the end of the eighth century Abū Yazīd starts his letter to Abū Yūsuf: 'I have these days no brother in whose affection I can trust except you' (*annahu laysa lī al-yawm akh athiqu bi-maḥabbatihi ghayraka*).[44] It becomes clear what Abū Yazīd is expecting from his only brother: 'God, God, what a terrible family I have who will not pay my debts, fortunately you are present' (*fa-allāh allāh fī ahlī in lā yaḍaʿū wa-anta ḥāḍir*). Abū Yazīd's creditors have been increasing their pressure on him to pay up the money he owes and he now asks Abū Yūsuf to help him by providing some cash. Another letter written by an anonymous sender to Abu Jaʿfar in the ninth century exclaims: 'I have no brother besides you in the world (*laysa lī akh ghayraka fī al-dunyā*)', as he tries to organise for a way to meet Abū Jaʿfar to avoid missing his delivery of expenditure (*nafaqa*) and other goods.[45]

Other letters do not mention the addressee specifically in the phrases expressing the sender's aloneness, but it is clearly implied that the addressee should feel himself obliged to come to the petitioner's rescue. 'As the General (*qāʾid*) knows, I am a stranger in the city and I know (literally: have) no one here' is the beginning of an intriguing appeal for help written on a ninth–tenth-century papyrus which is unfortunately otherwise lost.[46] In the seventh or eighth century a certain Salmān son of Mughīth informs ʿUbayd son of Yasār about a host of ill relatives and acquaintances in the capital Fusṭāṭ. Salmān himself is also in need of help, for, as he writes: 'I have no one here in Fusṭāṭ who is concerned about me' (*fa-innahu laysa lī fī al-Fusṭāṭ aḥadan huwa ashfaqa ʿalayya*).[47] The expression of helplessness supports Salmān's request to ʿUbayd to convey some goods, including 'a piece of papyrus so that I can write you something'.

Without explicitly stating that the petitioned is the only person the petitioner can turn to, the sender can use other expressions to the same effect. Abū Hurayra, belonging to the ninth-century Fayyūmic family of

[43] For this use of 'brother' to refer to close relations, see Jessica L. Goldberg, 'Friendship and and Hierarchy: Rhetorical Stances in Geniza Mercantile Letters', in *Jews, Christians and Muslims in Medieval and Early Modern Times. A Festschrift in Honor of Mark R. Cohen*, edited by Arnold E. Franklin *et al.* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 279–80; Roxani E. Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade. 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 2012), 157–58.

[44] Jahn, 'Briefwesen', no. 9, dating to between 771 and 800, provenance Madīnat al-Fayyūm.

[45] Jean David-Weill, 'Papyrus arabes du Louvre I', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 8 (1965): 277–311, nr. 3a, ninth century, provenance unknown.

[46] *P.Ryl.Arab.* I 2, ninth–tenth century, provenance unknown.

[47] *P.JoySorrow* 16, seventh–eighth century, provenance Fusṭāṭ.

textile merchants we have already encountered, writes to Abū ʿAbd Allāh a letter extensively rehearsing their friendship ties. 'My love for you is as constant as you deserve because of what I know of your love for me and your frequent enquiries after me (*al-maḥabba laka minnī qāʾima ʿalā mā tastaḥiqquhu wa-li-maʿrifatī bi-maḥabbatika wa-kathra masalika ʿannī*)'.[48] Abū Hurayra wants something, however, but he asks for it very politely and elegantly, though nevertheless forcefully, insisting on Abū ʿAbd Allāh's duty to help those less fortunate than himself: 'so make sure to do good deeds out of thankfulness towards God and to be nice to those over whom God has preferred you (*fa-ightanim … al-taʿaṭṭuf ʿalā man faḍḍalaka allāh ʿalayhi bi-faḍlika alladhī faḍḍalaka allāh bihi*)'. The link between Abū Hurayra and Abū ʿAbd Allāh is based on their special friendship and Abū ʿAbd Allāh's responsibility to do good deeds for his fellow man, who has fallen on hard times. Abū Hurayra makes, however, also a specific claim on Abū ʿAbd Allāh's good offices by singling him out as his only appropriate means of help: 'you are not like the others, not like the others! (*fa-anta laysa ka-ghayraka ka-ghayraka*)'. Abū Hurayra asks Abū ʿAbd Allāh to answer a third person who remains unnamed, probably in response to a petition or request. 'People approach you in all sorts of ways of which you prefer the truthful', Abū Hurayra writes to Abū ʿAbd Allāh, confirming that he is being sought out as a patron.

This letter incidentally points to another interesting feature of the procedure in which request letters were made to have an effect. An intercessor could deliver one's letter but he could also be used to support a petition by putting pressure on the petitioned in writing, as in this case, or in person. The unnamed petitioner had apparently made a request to Abū ʿAbd Allāh, but the latter was not inclined to answer the petitioner positively. Abū Hurayra in his letter to Abū ʿAbd Allāh uses his own relationship with Abū ʿAbd Allāh and some moral pressure to ask him to answer the unnamed petitioner after all.

As suggested above, in some letters the sender's claim that the addressee is the only one available to help him/her might be related to the problem at hand, but in most cases the remark 'I can only rely on you' and its variants are used in combination with other claims of helplessness as a kind of variable shorthand for being wretched, miserable and in need of help. The most common combination is with 'poor' (*miskīn*), which has both the sense of having no money and being pitiful. Weak (*ḍaʿīf*) is also common, often

[48] *P.Marchands* II 33.

together with 'poor'.[49] Then there are more specific qualifications such as 'foreign' (*gharīb*) and 'orphan' (*yatīm*), which occur much less frequently.[50] Repetition, word by word or by listing similar qualifications, is a common element in petitions.[51] Two things, however, are striking about this group of petitions that use multiple descriptions of helplessness and weakness. First, most of the letters that use multiple expressions in combination are directed at government officials, such as a general (*qāʾid*), governor (*amīr*) or tax-collector.[52] Indeed *all* letters directed to an official attest multiple adjectives to describe the helplessness of the petitioner. Second, the majority include amongst their descriptions a variant of the expression 'I have no one but God and you'.[53] It seems therefore that letters directed at a government official in office – and, thus, presumably participating in an official problem or complaint-solving procedure in general – use more qualifications in combination than those written to non-officials (or individuals not in office). In addition, the senders of these letters to officials emphasise their piety by reassuring the recipient that they have sought help from God before turning to the petitioned. The variations between the letters are, however, too great to interpret this as a prescribed model or even a fixed element of administrative petitions.

[49] Grohmann, *World*, p. 186, dating to 169–71/786–87, provenance unknown: 'poor, orphan, no parents, no one but God and you'; *P.Marchands* II 20, ninth century, provenance Fayyūm: 'poor, weak, no one but God and you'; Jahn, 'Briefwesen', no. 7, eighth century: 'poor, no one but God and you'; *P.Ryl.Arab.* I XV 1, ninth century, provenance unknown: 'poor, weak, seeking help from God and you'; Vanthieghem, 'Violences', ninth century, provenance Asyūṭ: 'poor, weak, no one but the amīr's justice'; P. Vindob. A. P. 669, ninth century, provenance unknown: 'poor, lives through God and son'; *P.Ryl.Arab.* I I 2, ninth–tenth century, provenance unknown: 'stranger, no one'; P. Vindob. A. P. 374r, ninth century, provenance unknown: 'orphan, no one'; P. Vindob. A. P. 1510, ninth century, provenance unknown: 'imprisoned, poor, no one'.

[50] Stranger (*gharīb*): *P.Ryl.Arab.* I I 2, ninth–tenth century; and in an eleventh-century 'recommendation' letter *P.Heid.Arab.* II 48; orphan (*yatīm/a*): P. Vindob. A. P. 374r, ninth century, provenance unknown; Grohmann, *World*, 186, dating to 169–71/786–87, provenance unknown.

[51] Irene Salvo, 'Sweet Revenge: Emotional Factors in "Prayers for Justice"' in *Unveiling Emotions. Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions in the Greek World*, edited by Angelos Chaniotis (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012), 235–66, therein 235.

[52] General (*qāʾid*): *P.Ryl.Arab.* I I 2, ninth–tenth century; governor (*amīr*): Grohmann, *World*, 186, dating to 169–71/786–87, provenance unknown; Vanthieghem, 'Violences', ninth century, provenance Asyūṭ; P. Vindob. A. P. 669, ninth century; tax-collector: Jahn, 'Briefwesen', no. 7, eighth century.

[53] 'I have no one but God and you': Grohmann, *World*, 186, dating to 169–71/786–87, provenance unknown; *P.Marchands* II 20, ninth century, provenance Fayyūm; Jahn, 'Briefwesen', no. 7, eighth–ninth century; *P.Ryl.Arab.* I XV 1, ninth century; Vanthieghem, 'Violences', ninth century, provenance Asyūṭ: 'I have no one (but you)': P. Vindob. A. P. 669, ninth century; *P.Ryl.Arab.* I I 2, ninth century; P. Vindob. A. P. 374r; P. Vindob. A. P. 1510.

## Connecting through aloneness to elicit help

The senders of the petitions and letters of request discussed in this paper aimed to establish through their letters a privileged connection with the addressee. The petitioned is by definition the more powerful and the better resourced party in this relationship, because he/she has something that the petitioner needs. The petitioners emphasise their dependency using descriptors that highlight their powerlessness and the lack of alternative sources of succour available to them, besides the petitioned. At the same time most of the petitioners are *not* entirely helpless and at the mercy of the petitioned. Rather, the special tie between the petitioner and petitioned imposes certain expectations and responsibilities on the addressee, almost compelling the petitioned to heed the request being made. Behind the (self-)descriptions of 'aloneness' by the petitioners is a sense of entitlement to aid based on the problem they are wrestling with, the special category of neediness they invoke, but especially because of the nature of the social dependency between themselves and the petitioned, and the patronage that follows from it. It is important to emphasise that there are two ways in which these letters of petition exploit the relationship between the petitioned and petitioner to persuade the former to help. In some letters the sender refers to an existing relationship from which certain obligations follow vis-à-vis the petitioner. Other letters, however, forge such a relationship by the (self-)presentation of the petitioner.

This does not mean that the petitioned had no choice in how they responded to the request posed to them or that every letter of request received a positive reaction. A letter already cited above made it clear that a petition is no guaranteed road to a successful solution of one's problem. When Abū Hurayra was asked to support a petition apparently ignored by the petitioned, he wrote a passionate epistle aiming to convince the addressee to respond (favourably) to the petition after all.[54] In another papyrus letter a man complains not only that the addressee's sister did not achieve anything concrete for him, despite her oath to the contrary (*ʿalā mā fāraqatnī wa-ḥalafat ʿalayhi*), but also that the addressee did not approach his sister to address this deplorable situation as the sender had apparently repeatedly asked him to do.[55]

This paper has examined how the argument of being alone is used to support a request by establishing or describing a special relationship of social

[54] *P.Marchands* II 33, ninth century, provenance Fayyūm.

[55] *P.Ryl.Arab.* I VI 14, dated between 642 and 950, provenance unknown.

dependency between sender/petitioner and addressee/petitioned. The first way in which this is done is by appealing to shared values of social justice. Being alone is in the context of petitions associated with vulnerability and helplessness, misery and neglect. The claim of aloneness is directly related to the request for help from the addressee and can thus be framed either as a self-description (I am alone; I have no one) or in the form of an appeal to the addressee's position as only proper caretaker (I have only you to turn to).

Being alone becomes a more powerful claim when it can be connected to a (sudden) loss of protection.[56] In some letters the petitioner specifies that he/she has been abandoned by the petitioned or another person as an argument for support or as the cause of their problem.[57] This applies most obviously to orphans and widows or otherwise abandoned wives/women. They have lost their primary provider: their parents or father in the case of orphans, their husband in the case of discarded wives, or supportive children in the case of abandoned widows. Similarly, strangers lacking their local support network are eligible for help. Prisoners too seem to fall into a category of people whose lack of a support network entitles them to especially helpful treatment. The idea that orphans, widows, prisoners and strangers are particularly vulnerable and weak and therefore entitled to special care from the more powerful in society is obviously not unique to medieval Islamic Egypt but can be found across ancient Near Eastern cultures.[58] It is also conspicuous in the Qurʾan, for example, and in Islamic wisdom literature.[59] Someone who by definition lacks support (orphans, widows and otherwise abandoned women, strangers, prisoners) is thus effectively linked to the addressee as the care-provider par excellence. In other words, there is a social expectation that the strong help the weak,

[56] See also the discussion of conjunctural poverty by Mark Cohen in *Poverty and Charity*, 33–71.

[57] See the section 'Abandoned' above.

[58] For two examples from Egypt extending from the Ptolemaic to the Byzantine period, see Bagnall and Cribiore, *Women's Letters*, 103, dating to 256 BCE, provenance Fayyūm; Joëlle Beaucamp, 'La référence au veuvage dans les papyrus byzantins', *Pallas* 32 (1985): 149–57.

[59] Avner Giladi, 'Orphans', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan,* edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Johanna Pink *et al.* (Leiden: Brill), http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQSIM_00311, consulted 02/03/21; Eric Chaumont, 'Yatīm. In the Ḳurʾān and Classical Islamic Law', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition*, edited by Peri Bearman, Thierry Bianquis, Clifford E. Bosworth, Emeri van Donzel and Wolfhart P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill), http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1362; Mona Siddiqui, 'Widow', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Johanna Pink *et al.* (Leiden: Brill), http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQSIM_00459, consulted 02/03/21.

which directly impacts the dealings between individuals (the petitioner and petitioned).

While making use of the argument of 'being alone', being an orphan, widow, prisoner or stranger as a specific category carrying expectations of protection and help, in most cases there is a catalyst that spurs men and women to turn to a petitioner. In other words, only seldomly is the etiquette of social category used in itself to request help, although it is obviously sometimes added to support a more extensive retelling of a problem.[60] One petitioner classifying himself as a stranger asks for help in the specific case of arriving in a new city where he does not know anyone.[61] The widow asking an *amīr* for alms writes when her son, who is her source of income, is imprisoned.[62] Interestingly, in another letter, an imprisoned man also presents the fact that he is his family's provider as the main reason for the addressee to help him (*fa-inna ʿalayya ʿiyāl wa-ṣabyān wa-muʾna wa-innamā aʿmulu yawm bi-yawm wa-aʿwaluhum*).[63] This man, however, does not claim that he has no one but the addressee to help him, although he does add that he and his family members are poor (*wa-naḥnu wa-llāh masākīn*). In other words, women whose male support (husband, son, parents) has fallen away make an appeal to the petitioner on this basis, as do men who find themselves in such a situation. One orphaned girl and an orphaned boy write their petitions in support of a pursuit to regain access to their property using the argument of 'being alone' or 'not having anyone'.[64]

As the expected backing has fallen away, the petitioner suggests, the petitioned now has to step in as provider and protector. The absence of one relationship requires the coming into existence of an alternative one. In this way the claim to 'aloneness' functions both as a powerful assertion of entitlement to help and a strong connector to the addressee. This connection to the addressee is more directly claimed by the common expression in the

[60] See e.g. 'I am a poor, weak woman seeking help from God and you' (*P.Ryl.Arab.* I XV 1).

[61] *P.Ryl.Arab.* I I 2, ninth–tenth century, provenance unknown.

[62] P. Vindob. A. P. 669, ninth century, provenance unknown. See also from a much earlier period the mother Haynchis who asks Zenon to help her get back her daughter. Without her daughter's help in her beer shop, Haynchis writes, her income has dropped dramatically. Haynchis thus asks Zenon to help her 'because of my old age' (Bagnall and Cribiore, *Women's Letters*, 102, dating to 253 BCE, provenance Fayyūm).

[63] P. Vindob. A. P. 3002, ninth century, provenance unknown. I am preparing a publication of this unpublished papyrus.

[64] Orphaned boy: Grohmann, *World*, 186, dating to 169–71/786–87, provenance unknown. Orphaned girl: *P.Marchands* II 39, ninth century, provenance Fayyūm. In one other unpublished papyrus that I am preparing for publication, an orphaned girl is mentioned, but too much is lost to understand the context (P. Vindob. A. P. 374r, ninth century, provenance unknown).

petitions that the petitioner has no one but the addressee to turn to. The claim of being alone does not necessarily mean, as Oded Zinger has already stated, that one has no other people around. The point is to emphasise that the right person is not available, thereby making the help of the petitioned necessary. In the papyrus letters, contrasting the Geniza letters discussed by Zinger, the person lacking this needed presence or support is not necessarily (or mainly) a woman, nor is the 'right' person always a man. It is a special relationship with the petitioned that the petitioner is looking for, providing him with protection and care.

The expression is also, however, purposely manipulative and belongs to a set of linguistic strategies employed in the petitions. As a regular feature of petitions, repetition and the use of multiple attributes emphasising the petitioner's needy position, sometimes in a list, sometimes spread throughout the letter, are referred to above.[65] Another way to underline the petitioner's need to be helped is by accentuating the contrast in power and hierarchy between the petitioner and petitioned. Calling the addressee 'lord' (*yā sayyidī*)[66] or mentioning a title positions the petitioned as powerful and mighty while confirming the petitioner's fragility and inferiority.[67] On other occasions the opposite strategy is used, applying kinship terms and other descriptions that connotate dependency and an existing relationship between the asker and giver.[68] Finally, plain exaggeration is an obvious element in these letters. While the claim 'to have no one' or 'to be alone' has to be explained – as discussed above – as having no appropriate support, the statement is aimed to invoke pity with the petitioned. Similarly, petitioners asking for help in retrieving material possessions often claim they have 'nothing'. The orphaned boy whose four dinars from his father's inheritance were kept by Iliyas claims 'my means of sustenance has disappeared (*fa-dhahaba sababī*)'.[69] 'By the Almighty God, at this moment I have nothing big or small (*laysa maʿī fī hādha al-waqt khafīf wa-lā-thaqīl*)', a man writes passionately to his business associate with the request to recover the *dīnār* that 'my lord, my brother, Abū Bakr Najm' owes him.[70] The claims to 'be dying from hunger or thirst' or 'to go naked' are also aimed to make

[65] Salvo mentions this feature of supplications to the gods (Salvo, 'Sweet revenge', 246).

[66] Grohmann, *World*, 186, dating to 169–71/786–7, provenance unknown.

[67] Similarly, Greek inscriptions asking God's help contrast an almighty God with an inferior and fragile supplicant who is in need of help (Salvo, 'Sweet Revenge', 242).

[68] Anneliese Parkin,'"You Do Him No Service": An Exploration of Pagan Almsgiving', in *Poverty in the Roman World,* eds. Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 60–82, 72.

[69] Grohmann, *World*, 186.

[70] *P.Vind.Arab*. I 32, tenth century.

an emotional appeal. 'None of us have any trousers to put on', a man writes in support of a request to send a load of promised textiles.[71] As referred to above, the threat of expulsion is often used in petitions with the same aim.

What is striking is the sense of entitlement to help that many of the petition letters display. The petitioners appeal to social expectations that the weak and needy are deserving of help from the more powerful and well-to-do in society.[72] Such help requires a relationship in which the stronger party takes care of the weaker side. In these letters the petitioners refer to the existence of such a relationship or aim to establish one with the petitioned. To do so they make use of different strategies: appealing to the social category of 'being alone' as a marker of weakness and using emotionally manipulative language that emphasises their status as wretched and helpless. The aim is to establish a firm connection between the petitioner and petitioned in a relation of social dependency with concrete and clear expectations of (material) care and protection. In addition, by claiming aloneness, the petitioners appealed to a claim of social justice by placing themselves in a category of the vulnerable and pitiful. Protecting their interests was a matter of general societal concern but was especially felt to be the duty of the rich and powerful. The petitioned in their relationship vis-à-vis the petitioner would surely be considered as such. The petitioner thus invoked a general claim of social justice and a direct appeal to the petitioned by forging a one-on-one relationship. The effect of these letters cannot be measured at the individual level since the response in most cases is unknown, but only as a corpus in which general trends can be discerned. Still, through this multidirectional approach, the letters invoking loneliness seem to make it very difficult if not impossible for the petitioned not to reply positively to the petitioner's request.

## Bibliography

Bagnall, Roger S. and Raffaella Cribiore. *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC–AD 800*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006.

Beaucamp, Joëlle. 'La référence au veuvage dans les papyrus byzantins'. *Pallas* 32 (1985): 149–57.

[71] *P.Marchands* II.

[72] See the similar rhetorical effect of using 'dicastic pity' in Athenian law-courts as described by Lene Rubinstein, 'Evoking Anger through Pity: Portraits of the Vulnerable and Defenceless in Attic Oratory', in *Unveiled Emotions II: Emotions in Greece and Rome: Texts, Images, Material Culture*, eds. Angelos Chaniotis and Pierre Ducrey (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014), 140 ff.

Chaumont, Eric. 'Yatīm. In the Ḳurʾān and Classical Islamic Law', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition*, edited by Peri Bearman, Thierry Bianquis, Clifford E. Bosworth, Emeri van Donzel and Wolfhart P. Heinrichs. Leiden: Brill. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1362. Consulted on 02/03/21.

Cohen, Mark R. *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

David-Weill, Jean. 'Papyrus arabes du Louvre I'. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 8 (1965): 277–311.

Dickey, Eleanor. 'Emotional Language and Formulae of Persuasion in Greek Papyrus Letters', in *Emotion and Persuasion in Classical Antiquity,* edited by Ed Sanders and Matthew Johncock, 237–62. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016.

Diem, Werner. 'Philologisches zu den arabischen Papyri der Hamburger Staats- und Universitäts-Bibliothek'. *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 45 (2006): 7–54.

Feissel, Denis and Jean Gascou (eds.). *La pétition à Byzance*. Paris: Association des amis du centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2004.

Gascou, Jean, 'Les pétitions privées', in *La pétition à Byzance*, edited by Denis Feissel and Jean Gascou, 93–103. Paris: Association des amis du centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2004.

Gascou, Jean. 'Les privilèges du clergé d'après la Lettre 104 de S. Basile'. *Revue des sciences religieuses* 2 (1997): 189–204.

Giladi, Avner, 'Orphans', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan,* edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Johanna Pink *et al.* Leiden: Brill. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQSIM_00311. Consulted on 02/03/21.

Goldberg, Jessica L. 'Friendship and Hierarchy: Rhetorical Stances in Geniza Mercantile Letters', in *Jews, Christians and Muslims in Medieval and Early Modern Times. A Festschrift in Honor of Mark R. Cohen*, edited by Arnold E. Franklin *et al.,* 271–86. Leiden: Brill, 2014.

Grohmann, Adolf. *From the World of Arabic Papyri.* Cairo: al-Maaref Press, 1952.

Jahn, Karl. 'Vom frühislamischen Briefwesen: Studien zur islamischen Epistolographie der ersten drei Jahrhunderte der Hiǧra auf Grund der arabischen Papyri'. *Archiv Orientální* 9 (1937): 153–200.

Kotsifou, Chrysi. 'A Glimpse into the World of Petition: Aurelia Artemisia and Her Orphaned Children', in *Unveiling Emotions. Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions in the Greek World,* edited by Angelos Chaniotis, 317–27. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012.

Margariti, Roxani E. *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade. 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port.* Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 2012.

Morelli, Federico. 'Grammatêphoroi e vie della giustizia nell'Egitto tardo antico', in *Symposion 2005*, edited by Eva Cantarella, 351–72. Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007.

Palme, Bernhard. 'Emotional Strategies in Petitions of Dioskoros of Aphrodito', in *Unveiling Emotions III. Arousal, Display, and Performance of Emotions in the Greek World,* edited by Angelos Chaniotis, 321–42. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2021.

Papaconstantinou, Arietta. 'Women in Need: Debt-Related Requests from Early Medieval Egypt', in *Living the End of Antiquity: Individual Histories from Byzantine to Islamic Egypt* (*Millennium Studies* 84), edited by Sabine R. Huebner *et al.*, 195–207. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020.

Parkin, Anneliese. '"You Do Him No Service": An Exploration of Pagan Almsgiving', in *Poverty in the Roman World*, edited by Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne, 60–82. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Rubinstein, Lene. 'Evoking Anger through Pity: Portraits of the Vulnerable and Defenceless in Attic Oratory', in *Unveiling Emotions II: Emotions in Greece and Rome: Texts, Images, Material Culture*, edited by Angelos Chaniotis and Pierre Ducrey, 135–66. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014.

Rustow, Marina. *The Lost Archive. Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.

Rustow, Marina. 'The Fatimid Petition'. *Jewish History* 32 (2019): 351–72.

Salvo, Irene. 'Sweet Revenge; Emotional Factors in "Prayers for Justice," in *Unveiling Emotions. Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions in the Greek World,* edited by Angelos Chaniotis, 235–66. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012.

Scott Meisami, Julie. *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Siddiqui, Mona. 'Widow', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Johanna Pink *et al.* Leiden: Brill. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQSIM_00459. Consulted on 02/03/21.

Sijpesteijn, Petra M. *Righting Wrongs. Justice and Redress in the Early Islamic Empire*, forthcoming.

Sijpesteijn, Petra M. 'Taking Care of the Weak. An Arabic Papyrus from the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam', in *Inediti offerti a Rosario Pintaudi per il 65° compleanno (P.Pintaudi)*, edited by Diletta Minutoli, 289–94. Florence: Edizioni Gonnelli, 2012.

Sijpesteijn, Petra M. 'Army Economics: An Early Papyrus Letter Related to ʿAṭāʾ Payments', in *Histories of the Middle East Studies in Middle Eastern Society, Economy and Law in Honor of A. L. Udovitch*, edited by Roxani Margariti, Adam Sabra and Petra M. Sijpesteijn, 245–68. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

Vanthieghem, Naïm. 'Violences et extorsions contre des moines dans la région d'Assiout: Réédition de P.Ryl.Arab. II 11'. *Journal of Coptic Studies 18* (2016): 185–96.

Zinger, Oded. 'The Use of Social Isolation (*inqitāʿ*) by Jewish Women in Medieval Egypt'. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 63 (2020): 820–52.