THE ARK OF GOD AT BEIT SHEMESH (1 SAM. VI) AND PERES 'UZZA (2 SAM. VI; 1 CHRON. XIII)

BY

N. H. TUR-SINAI
Jerusalem

In 1 Sam. vi we read how the Ark of God, on returning from its exile in the cities of the Philistines to the area of Israel, stopped at Beit Shemesh before it was sent on to Qiryat Ye’arim. In this story, as can easily be discerned, two different traditions are amalgamated: one, represented by the main part of the story, reports how the Ark was placed upon a new cart (v. 7), drawn by two cows, and taken to the border of Beit Shemesh, to the field of Yehoshua’ the Beitshemite, “where there was a great stone (腳板) . . . And the Levites took down the Ark of the Lord . . . and put them on the great stone (v. 15) . . .”; of the second tradition only a fragment is given, which adds the following to the account of the first:

“and [they came] unto אֲבֹל הָגהָדֹלָה, wherein they set down the Ark of the Lord—unto this day in the field of Yehoshua’ the Beitshemite. And he smote the men of Beit Shemesh, because they had looked into the Ark of the Lord, even he smote of the people fifty thousand and tree-score and ten men: and the people lamented, because the Lord had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter” (v. 18-19).

It is easy to recognise that we have to do here with a part of another tradition, parallel to the first, that at the beginning of this passage is a remnant of "and they came unto" or “and they reached” and that the extant version inappropriately puts elements of both traditions into one and the same verse: “And the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, from fenced cities unto country villages—and unto Abhel Haggedola, whereon they set down the Ark of the Lord”. There certainly was no Abhel Haggedola among “the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords”.

1) On this restoration see below.
lords”, but we are faced here with a piecing together of remnants of two different traditions.

The tradition embodied in v. 18 seqq. differs from the one given previously, *inter alia*, in that it speaks not of a stone, יַבְלָק but of Abhel, יַבְלָא. In fact, the narrative in vv. 18 and 19 is an aetiological explanation of the name of the place which existed “unto this day”, *i.e.*, until the days of the narrator. The passage says, in effect: Why is that place called יַבְלָא? Because God smote there among the people, “and the people lamented (יְתָרָבָל), because the Lord had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter”.

This reminds us of what is said of a similar place-name, Abhel Misrayim at Goren Ha-atad, which is likewise explained aetologically (Gen. 1:6-10) as “a great and very sore lamentation” and “grievous mourning (יַבְלָא)”. We shall have to refer again to the similarity of these two aetiological explanations.

It is only in this passage, and not in the main part of the story, that we find Abhel, a word which can be interpreted in the sense of יַבְלָא “mourning”. The first tradition, the one followed in the main part, speaks of יַבְלָא רֹדָלוֹת, the great stone, and a further parallel story, to be discussed later, shows that this version, too, has its support in tradition. Are we to conclude that the version in which the place is called the great stone יְתָרָבָל did not tell of God’s visitation and the lamenting which followed it? By no means. Arabic, which instead of יַבְל “to mourn, lament” has יַבּ (especially in the second form, יַבּ שְׁבָנָא ‘abbana) “to mourn, lament a dead person”), shows us that we have to do here with a mere dialectal difference in pronunciation. Some ancient Hebrew dialect evidently expressed that concept not by יַבְל but by יַבְל. The story arose, in a region where יַבְל was pronounced instead of יַבּ in the sense of “mourning”, as an aetiological legend on יַבְל רֹדָלוֹת, “the great stone”. We have thus reconstructed what must have been the original tradition. It was only later, at a place and time at which יַבּ and not יַבּ was pronounced in the sense of “mourning”, that people pronounced and wrote יַבּ רֹדָלוֹת or the like in the interpretation of the name, which formerly had יַבּ and יַבּ. There

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1) The attempts to harmonize these different traditions by reading יַבּ instead of יַבּ miss this fact.

2) The etymological connection between הֵרְבָּנָא and יַבּ was noted many years ago by Th. NöLdeke (ZDMG 40, p. 724). See also dictionaries.