A NEW SUGGESTION REGARDING 2 SAMUEL XXIII 7

“David’s last words” (2 Sam. xxiii 1-7), the poem which has occupied both ancient and modern biblical exegetes,\(^1\) concludes with two difficult verses:

\[\begin{align*}
&\text{
äbélýyá’al kéqás mûnād kullāham} \\
&\text{kít-lo’ bēyād yqqāhũ} \\
&\text{wē’iš yiggá’ bāhem yîmmâlê barzel} \\
&\text{wē’ēs ḫânît} \\
&\text{ūbá’ēs sârōp yîṣṣârēpû baśšâbet}
\end{align*}\]

I will discuss the final term: baśšâbet. The understanding of the term I wish to propose may shed light on the entire context. The term presents a number of difficulties: neither its lexical significance nor its function in the context is clear. In fact, it appears superfluous. Since the days of Wellhausen and Driver, it has commonly been regarded as a misplaced gloss originally referring to yš bšt in verse 8.\(^2\) Others have sought to resolve the problem by suggesting alternative readings.\(^3\) The ancient exegetes, however, and with them a number of the moderns, laboured to explicate the term—in its present form and context—according to one of its recognized semantic overtones. Some consider the term to be derived from $\sqrt{yš}$ and interpret accordingly: “they shall be burned in their place”;\(^4\) others derive it from $\sqrt{št}$ and interpret the verse as referring either to utter destruction\(^5\) or to cessation of activity, rest.\(^6\) These interpretations are, I believe, forced. As opposed to these attitudes, I wish to take a different path and propose a new lexical understanding of the term. This suggestion came about as a result of research concerning a certain Midrash, which I have discussed in a separate lexical investigation.\(^7\) In that Midrash as well we find the word bšt, and there too it is awkward and seems, prima facie, superfluous. I shall begin the discussion with this Midrash (Bereshit Rabba XXIX 2, on Gen. vi 8, “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord”):
R. Simon said (påtah): “Thus saith the Lord: As when tàiśō is found in the cluster (bā'ēskōl), and one saith ‘destroy it not, for a blessing is in it’” (Isa. lxv 8).

It happened that a certain Hasid went to his vineyard bōbt and saw a single grape gleaning (‘ālēlāh), and he made a blessing on it. For he said: This single gleaning merits a blessing. As it is written: “Thus saith the Lord: As, when taiśō is found in the cluster,” etc.

As is customary in a pēlīhāh, the exegete ties a remote verse (Isa. lxv 8) to the opening lines of the section being explicated. The points of contact in the case at hand are the verbs ms (find) and sḥt (destroy) which appear in both verses. In both passages a similar picture is depicted: something good is “found” and is spared destruction. The verse in Isaiah describes a scene from the vintage. A good grape (taiśō) is discovered within a blemished cluster which the vintager is about to destroy, but a companion of the vintager calls to him to spare it, for “a blessing is in it.” This is an allegorical description whose counterpart is explicitly stated immediately following: “So will I do for my servants’ sakes, that I may not destroy all”—total destruction is averted thanks to the taiśō, that is, to the righteous man. It is not surprising, then, that already in Targum Jonathan this verse was conceived of as an allusion to Noah’s salvation.

R. Simon does not content himself with the allegorical verses from Isaiah, and adds to them an illustrative tale (ma'āšēh). The story, as it stands, presents a number of difficulties: it is said of the Hasid that he “went to his vineyard bōbt,” i.e., on the Sabbath. Such an utterance seems to focus the story on a specific problem, one particularly related to the Sabbath. The stringent adherence of the Hasidim to the Sabbath laws is well known, but for our story, the fact that the event took place on the Sabbath is of no import whatsoever. The exegeses of this Midrash tried to resolve the difficulty, but with little success. As in the case of the verse in 2 Samuel, there were those who suggested that bōbt be expunged, yet this solution is untenable for the term appears (in various forms) in the majority of manuscripts including MS. Vatican Heb. 30, the principal manuscript of Bereshit Rabbah. The term is an obstacle to our understanding of the story; thus the possibility that is was interpolated by scribes is remote. On the other hand, it is difficult to find any grounds for a corrigendum which might explain the formation of this perplexing passage.

Besides this central difficulty, the story presents other problems: it is unclear why it is attributed to a Hasid, for it appears, prima facie, that