

BAB NAHARA

BY

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The Talmud is replete with material that can cast light on Sassanid Persia. But the average Talmudist, not being a trained Iranologist, is usually incapable of appreciating the significance of such passages. Conversely, the Iranologist on his own may not be competent to analyse Talmudic texts in a sufficiently critical manner. It is at this point that cooperation must be sought. In the following brief note I wish to present just such a text which I myself am not qualified to analyse to the full, in the hope that some Iranologist may pick up at the point where I leave off, to the mutual benefit of both Talmudists and Iranologists.

In B. Sukka 18a we read the following: **כי הא דאמר אביי הא צחנתא דבב נהרא מאי טעמא, אילימא משום דרדיפי מיא והאי דג טמא כיון דלית ליה חוט השדרה לא מצי קאים, והא קחזינן דקאי, אלא משום דמליכי מיא והאי דג טמא כיון דלית ליה קילפי לא מצי קאי, והא קחזינן דקאי, אלא משום דלא מרבה טינייהו דג טמא. אמר רבינא והאידינא דשפכי נהר איתן ונהר גמדה להתם אסירא.**

As Abbaye said: “The *tzahḥneta*¹⁾ of Bab Nahara is permitted (to Jews to be eaten, i.e. is made from kosher fish)”. Why? [Is it because] the waters [of Bab Nahara] run swiftly, and the non-kosher [type of] fish, as it has no spine, cannot survive [in such swiftly rushing waters]? [This cannot be. For] surely we see that they (i.e. non-kosher types of fish)

¹⁾ See *Nöldeke Festschrift*, ed. Carl Bezold (Giessen 1906), vol. I, p. 561, Immanuel Löw's article “Aramäische Fischnamen” § 52, s.v. **צחנא**, which he translates “Haché aus kleinen fischen”. He identifies it with the Syriac **ܥܚܢܐ** (Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 3394; Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*², p. 626a, s.v. = Arabic **الصحناء**). As a “haché” the fish in it could not be individually identified, and hence one could not tell whether they were kosher or not. Abbaye states that if it comes from this particular place it is kosher, presumably because there are only kosher fish to be found there. Cf. also B. Sanhedrin 49a, and *Otzar ha-Geonim*, ed. Taubes (Jerusalem 1966), p. 368 § 838-9.

do survive [in swiftly rushing waters]. But [you may suggest the reason is] because the waters [of Bab Nahara] are salty, and the non-kosher [type of] fish, since it has no scales, cannot survive [in such salty waters]? Surely we see that they do survive [in salty waters]. But rather [the reason is] because the muddy soil of the river suffers no non-kosher fish to live in it ¹⁾. Said Rabina: "And now that the river Aitan and the river Gamda pour into there (i.e. into Bab Nahara) it (the tzaḥneta) is forbidden".

The same text is found in B. Avoda Zara 39a, except that there we read of the river גוזא instead of the river Aitan. Among the different variants to the Sukka text we find a reading of נהר נתן instead of איתן ²⁾. And in both recensions there are variants recorded which read רבא (Rava) in place of רבינא (Rabina). However, it appears that Rabina is the more correct version ³⁾.

Now Adolphe Neubauer in his *La Géographie du Talmud* (Paris 1868) p. 338 writes: "Nous ne trouvons aucun fleuve de nom de Bab. S'il était permis de corriger בב en כבר, ce serait le *Khabour* (Chaboras de Ptolémée); Gamda pourrait représenter le Mygdonia, et Goza, le gozan, qui se jettent dans le Chaboras" ⁴⁾.

However attractive this explanation may be, it cannot be accepted. For both recensions of our text, though differing in the matter of the Aitan-Goza river, read בב-Bab. Moreover, the Munich Ms. to Sukka ibid. reads דבב נהרא ⁵⁾, which is clearly a corruption of דבב נהרא, but which could hardly have evolved out of דכבר נהרא. Furthermore, the river כבר was well-known (from Ezekiel I.I., if nowhere else),

1) This is Jastrow's translation in his *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli* etc., p. 532 s.v. טין, (reading מרבי and not מרבה).

2) See R. Rabbinovitz, *Variae Lectiones in Mischnam et in Talmud Babilonicum* (= *Diqduq Soferim*) to Sukka, p. 51 note 40.

3) Ibid. See also *Tractate Avodah Zarah* etc., according to the Ms. of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (= JTS), ed. and annotated by Shraga Abramson, (New York 1957), fol. 34v, line 16. There we also read of נהר גוזן and נהר גומקא, while a marginal gloss states ס"א גומדא.

4) Basing himself on Mannert, *Geographie der Griechen und Roemer*, vol. V part 2, p. 197.

5) Rabbinovitz, *Variae Lectiones* etc. ibid. note 30.

so that the principle of *lectio difficilior* should dissuade us from emending **בב** to **כבר**. Finally, if **בב** is really the name of a river, one would rather have expected **נהר בב**, than **בב נהרא** ¹⁾.

Alexander Kohut, in his *Aruch Completum* (vol. I, p. 334ab, s.v. **איתן**) also tackled the problem of identifying these rivers. He suggests that **איתן** = Δούρος, referring to Sozimus 3.25. He further states that in Ammianus 23.6 this river is called the Diabas, which he suggests = **דבב**. Into this river, he continues, flows the river ὁ Γούτης (= **גמרא**) of Herodotus I. 889, 5.52 ²⁾. The river **גוזא** (or **גיזא** as he reads) = **גוזן** (as in Ms. JTS, see above note 4) of I Chron. 5.26, which is still called the Osen ³⁾.

A. Berliner, in his *Beiträge zur Geographie und Ethnographie im Talmud und Midrasch* (Berlin 1884) p. 25 note I, refutes Kohut's happy combination of similar-sounding name-identifications. For it is quite clear that the "daleth" of **דבב** is a genitive (*of* Bab) and not part of the name **דבב**. According to Kohut the text should have read **דדבב**, but no such reading is recorded in any source ⁴⁾. Again, one would expect **נהר דבב**. Berliner suggests (*ibid.* pp. 24-5) that **בב** here = **ביב** (a canal etc.) ⁵⁾, translating **בב נהרא** "des Kanalstromes".

Jastrow in his *Dictionary* (somewhat cautiously) translates (p. 316a, s.v. **בב**): "name of a tributary or canal of the Euphrates". ⁶⁾

Now strangely enough what seems completely to have escaped the notice of all these scholars is the information which the Talmud itself gives concerning these rivers. Firstly **בב נהרא**, whatever and wherever it be, has *salty* and swift-moving waters. Does this not suggest that **בב** may not be a name, but a noun meaning "gate" (**בבא**), i.e. river

1) One would certainly expect **נהר כבר** sooner than **בב נהרא**.

2) Mannert *ibid.* p. 315 et seq.

3) Ritter *Syrien*, part VIII, 590, 615. Cf. Kohut *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 4a s.v. **דבב**, and vol. 8, p. 14a s.v. **צחן** 2.

4) Berliner's refutation is accepted by S. Krauss, in *Additamenta ad Aruch Completum*, p. 135b s.v. **דבב**.

5) See Jastrow, *Dictionary* etc. p. 159a, s.v.

6) Cf. Jastrow *ibid.* p. 252a s.v. **גמרא**. See also Jacob Obermayer, *Die Landschaft Babylonien* etc., (Frankfurt am Main, 1929) p. 228.

estuary or mouth, (like פּוֹם נהרא, cf. Berliner *ibid.*)¹). Secondly, and this is surely more significant, in the time of Abbaye the Aitan or Goza and Gamda did *not* run into the “Bab Nahara”. Only in the time of (Rava or) Rabina did these rivers flow into “Bab Nahara”, bringing into it fish that may be non-kosher. Abbaye died 338/9, (Rava 352) and Rabina [I] c. 420²). Thus, either the rivers changed their courses between c. 340 and (c. 350 or) c. 400, or—and this seems the more plausible suggestion—they were linked together by some new canal or canal-system³). Whichever the case may be, it must have taken place (either between c. 340 and 350, or) during the second half of the fourth century. It is at this point that I hand the problem over to the Iranologists, looking to them for further enlightenment.

1) On פּוֹם נהרא see Neubauer, *La Géographie etc.* p. 336; Hirschensohn, *Sheva Chochmoth* (London 1912), p. L94, etc.

2) There was another Rabina [b. R. Huna] who died on the 13th Kislev 501, according to *Iggeret R. Scherira Gaon*, ed. B. M. Lewin (Haifa 1921), p. 95 line II, a date accepted in M. Margalio's *Encyclopedia of Talmudic and Geonic Literature*⁴ 788, s.v. רבִּינָא 2 (Hebrew). However, Isaac Halevy in his *Dorot Harishbonim* emends this date to 476. (See Lewin's note 5 in his edition of *Iggeret* *ibid.*) In our own case I think it is the great Rabina I who makes the statement.

3) On new canal systems built during the Sassanian period (before c. 330) see B. Berachot 59b; Neubauer, *La Géographie etc.* p. 336-7; Hirschensohn, *Sheva Chochmoth* pp. 32-3; Kohut, *Aruch Completum*, vol. I, pp. 66b-67a, s.v. אִיְהִי דְקִירָא; *Addimenta ad Librum Aruch Completum*, ed. S. Krauss, p. 19b s.v., etc. Ihi Dakira seems to be the Greek Dikhori; see inter alia M. Sprengling in *Third Century Iran Sapor and Kartir* (Chicago 1953) p. 5. See also Obermayer, *Die Landschaft etc.*, index s.v. Hit. See also, Hermann Pick, *Assyrisches und talmudisches. Kulturgeschichtliche und lexikalische Notizen* (Berlin 1903) p. 12.