

SAUL AND THE ḤABIRŪ

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The character and mode of life of the Ḥabirū have been well summed up by J. Bright, as follows: 'They might, in disturbed times, hire themselves (so in the Amarna letters) as irregular troops for whatever advantage they could gain. Or they might, when driven by need, dispose of themselves as clients to men of station, or even sell themselves as slaves (so at Nuzi).'¹ Since bands of these rootless Ḥabirū were always likely to join as mercenaries in any war in the Fertile Crescent, we should have expected them to make their appearance once again in Canaan, when the decisive struggle for the mastery of the country was about to be waged between the Israelites and the Philistines. It would have been in keeping with their character to attach themselves, as hired troops, to either of these opposing armies. In this paper we shall try to demonstrate that this is precisely what happened after Saul's election as the first king of the federated tribes of Israel. The restoration of this historical episode is made possible by adopting or extending the application of a very simple device already known to biblical scholars. Julius Lewy, in an article entitled 'Origin and signification of the biblical term "Hebrew" '², demonstrated most convincingly that the term 'ibrim is to be taken as signifying the Ḥabirū. We shall apply this principle to I Samuel and render the word 'ibrim as Ḥabirū wherever we quote it in this book. It should be stated, by way of anticipation, that there are, indeed, passages in I Samuel where the term 'ibrim must necessarily refer to the Israelites, but it will be noted that it is never used by the Israelites to designate themselves. The Philistines are represented as calling the Israelites 'ibrim, that is, Ḥabirū, probably in derogatory fashion. We confine our examination to the use of the term 'ibrim by the narrator and, where the Masoretic text which we shall cite is clearly faulty, reference to the LXX version will help in the attempt to restore the correct Hebrew reading and thus bring about a sensible sequence of the recorded events.

Our first reference is I Samuel xiii:7, where we read ועברו את הירדן ארץ גד וגלעד. The RSV, representing a consensus of scholarly opinion, renders this line as 'or crossed the fords of the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead' (italics mine). This rendering is of an amended text, on the assumption that the Masoretic text is faulty and that the line ועברו את הירדן should be read as ועברו את מעברות הירדן. The LXX, however, testifies to the consonantal correctness of the Masoretic text by pointing ועברו as וְעָבְרוּ: — καὶ οἱ διαβαίνοντες. In both cases of modern textual emendation, as in the LXX, however, the assumption is that the movement across the Jordan refers to the Israelites and that verse 7 is a continuation of verse 6. In this latter verse the narrator states that the Israelites were so terrified by the advancing Philistine forces that they hid themselves in caves, holes and rocks. Verse 7, then, is taken to mean that some of them even fled the country to the eastern side of the Jordan.⁴

However, if one equates the narrator's 'ibrim with the Ḥabirū, then our text, as we have it, is perfectly correct and its meaning is, simply, that 'the Ḥabirū crossed the Jordan at (or, by way of) the territory of Gad and Gilead', that is, they crossed into Canaan. Here, then, we have the first historical mention of a third military force which had now entered the country and with which both sides would have to reckon. The Ḥabirū were, in fact, moving westwards in the direction of what was to become the battleground between the Israelites and the Philistines. The LXX version here reminds us that, at the time of that translation, all knowledge of the Ḥabirū had long been lost. The LXX rendering εἰς τὴν γῆν Γαδ — 'to the land of Gad', implying that verse 7 refers to the Israelites, follows the Rabbinic interpretation, as evidenced by the Targum,⁵ Rashi⁶ and Kimhi⁷ and this is accepted by recent commentators. This faulty interpretation is due solely to the failure to recognize that the 'ibrim of our text are the Ḥabirū.

1. JOHN BRIGHT, *A History of Israel* (SCM Press, London, 1960), p. 85.
2. *HUCA* 28 (1957), p. 1ff.,
3. H. W. HERZBERG, *I and II Samuel, a commentary* (translated by J. S. Bowden), (SCM Press, London, 1964), p. 101, renders this verse as 'and great crowds crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead'. In a footnote he says: read

'am rāb (רַב וְעַם): in stead of the surprising 'and Hebrews' which is not confirmed by the LXX.

4. HERZBERG, op. cit., says that 'there was a mass flight of the Israelite population'.
5. ויהודאי עברו ית ירדנא לארע גד וגלעד
6. לברוח מפני פלשתים
7. מקצתם התחבאו ומקצתם עברו את הירדן וברחו שם

If the interpretation we have offered is correct and we can thus establish the historical fact of the entry of the Ḥabirū upon the military scene, we must pose the question: 'Which side did they join as mercenaries?' The textual evidence which we shall produce shows that they first gave their allegiance to the Philistines, but they later defected and went over to the Israelite side. It would seem that, because the Philistines were better equipped and more highly trained for warfare than the Israelites, they offered mercenaries the prospect of being on the winning side. What induced the Ḥabirū to go over to the Israelites cannot be ascertained. However, it must have been clear to all concerned that the balance of power between the Israelites and the Philistines could be tipped either way by the added weight of the Ḥabirū irregular army. It was vital therefore, for Saul somehow to win them over to his side.

Our textual evidence for this reconstruction lies in I Samuel xiii:3 and xiv:21. In order to achieve a smooth sequence of events in chapter XIII, it is necessary to place verse 3 after verse 7, that is to say, following the information that the Ḥabirū had arrived. This measure will not be regarded as arbitrary by Old Testament scholars, for the restoration of a misplaced line in a passage is far from being an unusual procedure. Verse 3 informs us that ושאול תקע בשופר בכל הארץ לאמר ישמעו העברים which the *RSV* renders: 'And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying: "Let the Hebrews hear"'. The Rabbinic interpretation of this line, based on their equating 'ibrīm with the Israelites, is that Saul warned the Israelites of the possible consequences for them, following upon the defeat of the Philistine garrison (or prefect? — נציב (הפלשתים) at Geba by Jonathan, mentioned in the first half of this verse.⁸ Contemporary scholarly reaction to this line is summed up by L. H. Brockington in his despairing observation that 'this is a surprisingly empty message'.⁹ This kind of criticism of the Masoretic text again flows from the faulty identification of the 'ibrīm with the Israelites.

The *LXX* rendering of these enigmatic words is, however, Ἡθητακαγιν οι δουλοι — 'the slaves have revolted' — in Hebrew, פשעו העברים. This *LXX* reading has led scholars to accept the emendation of

פשעו for ישמעו but, because of their continually equating 'ibrīm with the Israelites, they are compelled to place these two words פשעו העברים at the end of the verse. They thus reshape this first half verse to say that, following upon the defeat of the Philistine garrison (or prefect?) by Jonathan, the Philistines heard that the 'ibrīm, that is, the Israelites, had revolted.¹⁰

While the proposed emendation פשעו העברים may be accepted, reasonable sense can be made of it only by taking 'ibrīm to refer to the Ḥabirū and keeping this phrase where it is in the Masoretic text. The meaning is, simply, 'the Ḥabirū have defected'. The proclamation which Saul had broadcast throughout the land was to the effect that the Ḥabirū, who had joined the Philistines and thereby created panic among the Israelites, had now defected and had in fact come over to the Israelite side. This was by no means 'an empty message'. On the contrary, it was the rallying call which lifted the Israelites out of their state of despondency and boosted their morale. The text, as restored, is perfectly plain and there is no justification for moving these two words, for they speak of the Ḥabirū and not of the Israelites.

That the defection of the Ḥabirū from the Philistines was followed by their going over to the Israelite side is borne out by a statement in I Sam. xiv:21. With a very slight adjustment in the wrong division of letters in the middle of this verse, we read: והעברים היו לפלשתים כאתמול שלשום אשר עלו עמם במחנה סבבו גם המה (סביב וגם המה MT) להיות עם ישראל אשר עם שאול יהונתן.

The *RSV* translates: 'Now the Hebrews who had been with the Philistines before that time and who had gone up with them into the camp, even they also turned to be with the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan.' Modern commentators, still adhering to the notion that the 'ibrīm were the Israelites, follow the Rabbinic pattern that the reference is to those Israelites who had been forced into military service by the Philistines or who had been caught up in the military advance.¹¹ According to this view, the verse speaks of those unhappy Israelites who had become detached from the main body, but who were now emboldened to link up with the Israelite army.¹² It

8. שמרדנו בפלשתים וישמרו מהם (RASHI).

כדי שישמעו וישמרו מפלשתים (KIMHI).

9. L. H. BROCKINGTON, *I and II Samuel*, Peake's Commentary on the Bible, ed. M. Black and H. H. Rowley (Thos. Nelson & Co., Edinburgh, 1962), p. 323.

10. HERZBERG, *op. cit.*, p. 101 takes verses 3 and 4 together and translates, 'Jonathan defeated the prefect of the Philistines . . . and the Philistines heard of it and proclaimed: "The Hebrews have risen". And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land and all Israel heard it and said: "Saul

has defeated the prefect of the Philistines." ' In a footnote he says, 'According to *MT*, Saul would have spread the message around "Let the Hebrews hear" (or "let them rise") but this is not feasible because of the word "Hebrews". Saul would have had to say "Israel" '.

11. So RASHI and KIMHI *in loco*.

12. Cf. BROCKINGTON, *op. cit.*, p. 324 says, 'The Hebrews who were among the Philistines were either there as mercenaries, probably coerced, or as refugees. . . or they may have been simply caught up in the Philistine advance'.

would surely be strange that the narrator should refer to these Israelites as *'ibrīm*, and to the rest as *ישאריל*. Clearly, there is a distinction between the terms *'ibrīm* and *yisrā'el*. When we realize that the *'ibrīm* are the Ḥabirū, the sense of this verse is straightforward and is, simply, that the Ḥabirū, who had hitherto been attached to the Philistine camp, had now 'turned about', that is, changed their allegiance, and had gone over to the Israelites who were under the command of Saul and Jonathan.

Bearing in mind that the added weight of the Ḥabirū forces could have a decisive effect upon the outcome of the war, it would not be surprising to find that the Philistines made some overtures to the Ḥabirū to win them back. The possibility of such an attempt is suggested by a strange statement attributed to Goliath, when he issued his challenge. The Masoretic text gives the impression that Goliath suggested that the outcome of the vital struggle about to be waged between the two poised rival forces should be determined by a single combat between two champions. Examples of such a procedure are indeed known;¹³ the defeat of the one champion by the other would result in the routing of the forces of the defeated champion by those of the victor, because the rank and file would become demoralized. Yet, from the *LXX* text of I Samuel xvii:8, it would seem that the challenge was directed, not to the Israelites, but to the Ḥabirū, who had joined them. Goliath is represented by the Masoretic text as saying *הלווא אנכי הפלשתי ואתם עבדים לשאול* 'Am I not a Philistine and you are servants of Saul?' If he had addressed the Israelites, we would surely have expected him to say 'I am a Philistine and you are Israelites'. The *LXX* reading of the second half of this statement is, however, *ὁμοις ἐβραίοις εἰς Σαουλ*, i.e., reading *עבדים* for the Masoretic *עבדים*. It might be argued that, even though we take *'ibrīm* to mean Ḥabirū, it could still refer to the Israelites, as a term of contempt used by a Philistine. Yet, the fact that the writer should have added *לשאול* suggests that Goliath was addressing himself to the 'Ḥabirū who were attached to Saul'. It looks as if the *LXX* has preserved the original reading and that this represents an attempt by the Philistines to win the Ḥabirū back. It is true, of course, that the rest of Goliath's challenge as represented by the *MT* does not accord with this hypothesis, but it is noteworthy that the hero who, according to the account in this chapter, met this challenge with such brilliant success should himself have been the leader of a band

of outlaws, that is to say, he could be described as a Ḥabirū. The possibility presents itself that David rose from the ranks of an Israelite Ḥabirū group, of which he became leader, as opposed to the traditional account of his assuming this role due to his persecution by Saul. Students of I Samuel are aware that there are two traditions of David's origin and life in this book. The one tradition gives an idyllic account of David's youth and his rise to power, while the other portrays him as the daring, brilliant and ambitious soldier, the leader of a band of outlaws — the kind of man produced by destiny to establish and consolidate a firm and stable monarchy. The portrait of the gentle, music-loving shepherd may be regarded as folklore, while the figure of the vigorous, calculating soldier, working his way to kingship, looks more like the historical David. It is pertinent to note that David behaved in true Ḥabirū fashion when he and his band joined Achish, king of Gath, as mercenaries. One might indeed ask: 'Was this Ḥabirū role of David the result of his persecution by Saul, or was that his true character when he first appeared on the political scene?'

Julius Lewy, in the aforementioned article, makes a convincing case for regarding the *'ebed 'ibri* of Exodus xxi:2ff. and in the expanded version of Deuteronomy xv:12-16, not as an Israelite slave at all, but as a Ḥabirū who entered into slavery. He points out that, according to Leviticus xxv:39-46, an Israelite who, because of poverty, entered into the service of a fellow Israelite, was not to be treated as a slave and that, in fact, the acquiring of a free-born Israelite as a slave was expressly forbidden (v. 42). There were, then, two categories of non-Israelite slaves. The one followed the general pattern of slavery common throughout the Near East, though the Israelite attitude towards their slaves was much more humane than, for example, that of the Babylonians. There was also a small category of special slaves, namely, that of the Ḥabirū. In peacetime, some of the Ḥabirū who had fought alongside the Israelites moved on to fresh enterprises, while others remained on, perhaps as *גרים* or protected aliens. When, in accordance with their general mode of life, some Ḥabirū entered slavery voluntarily,¹⁴ their interests and, indeed, their future were safeguarded by law in a special way. Their period of slavery was fixed and, according to the Deuteronomy version of this law, on regaining their freedom they were to be endowed with capital in kind, to enable them to begin an independent life.

13. R. DE VAUX, *Ancient Israel, its life and institutions* (translated by John McHugh), (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1961), p. 218, writes, 'From time to time two enemy forces would agree to settle the issue by a single combat'.

There is evidence of this custom as early as the 18th century B.C.E. Cf. also II Samuel, ii:14ff.

14. C. H. GORDON, *The living past* (The John Day Co., New York, 1941), p. 161.

If we can sustain the reconstruction we have offered of the part played by the Ḥabirū in helping the Israelites overcome their main rivals for power, namely, the Philistines, then it would reasonably follow that the placing of the Ḥabirū in a specially favoured position within the framework of slavery may be construed as Israel's acknowledgement of their debt to them. It would, furthermore, be plausible to suggest that this

law was devised after the pacification of the Philistines and their incorporation into Israel as a province or dependency. That would surely be the time for the resident Ḥabirū to follow his peaceful pattern of life and enter voluntarily into slavery, thus necessitating new legislation to regulate this new and special category of slaves. One would imagine this happened at the latter part of David's reign.