

גורן נכון IN 2 SAM. 6 6

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IN 2 Sam. 6 6 occurs the expression: ויבואו עד גורן נכון. This phrase גורן נכון has been explained in the following ways:

1. נכון (or its textual equivalent) is construed as a proper name. 1 Chron. 19 9 has כידון. G^A has Ναχών, G^B Νωδαβ. The rendering ἀλω Ὀρνα τοῦ Ἰεβουσαίου of G^LLagarde is likewise based upon the notion that a proper name must be read here: in this instance the נכון, an unintelligible "name", has been displaced by that of a well-known threshing floor (2 Sam. 24 18 ff.).¹ The Vulgate has *Nachon*, and so most versions. The Jewish interpreters, with the exception of the Targum and Aquila, have uniformly read a proper name.² Most modern commentators read a proper name; so Wellhausen, Löhr, Nowack, Ehrlich, Smith, Dhorme, Budde, Driver.

2. נכון is interpreted as a Niphal participle of כון.

a. In the sense of a "certain" threshing floor. So Schmidt: *ad aream aliquam, vel certam aliquam*; Klostermann: *zu einer*

¹ For a similar interpretation see Rashi on b. Soṭah 35b: "I have heard (the following interpretation) attributed to R. Menahem bar Ḥelbo: גורן נכון is the same as גורן ארונה היבטי".

² Where the variant of Chronicles is noted, the commentators (e. g., David Kimḥi) follow a midrashic passage in b. Soṭah 35b (Bemidbar Rabba 4) and, in general, Rashi's commentary thereon (to Soṭah 35b). As usual, they attempt to harmonize by having recourse to the simple meaning of the words נכון and כידון. כידון is taken in its most natural sense: *firm, established, permanent*. Of the various fanciful etymologies given to כידון, some have been repeated by moderns. Compare Thenius on Samuel, first edition, "Tenne des Todes"; and Schloegl on Chronicles, "Die Tenne sei hier proleptisch *Todestenne* genannt".

bestimmten Tenne; Schloegl: *zu einer gewissen, bestimmten Tenne*. So also, most recently, Morgenstern.³

b. In the sense of "prepared". So Targum, Peshitta, Aquila, Drusius. Arnold⁴ admits the possibility of this interpretation as an alternative to his own, which is given below.

c. In the sense of "fixed, permanent". So Böttcher, followed by Thenius in his second edition: "*eine feste Tenne*". This meaning, though with a different interpretation, has been assigned to the word most recently by Arnold.⁵

The object of this paper is to show that the evidence supports the last interpretation.

The arguments for a proper name are at best inconclusive. In the first place, the readings of the Greek and of Chronicles prove nothing, unless by their very divergence they prove that the word נִכּוֹן offered difficulties.

The second contention, namely, that the context demands a proper name, is no better. The sense of the passage would not be affected in the least if we had simply: "And they came to a threshing-floor". We should hardly desiderate the name of its owner.

The interpretation of נִכּוֹן as equivalent to "a certain" has been upheld most recently by Morgenstern. He cites as parallels 1 Sam. 23 23 (with Schmidt), and 26 4. But even accepting his interpretation "a certain definite" in those passages, the cases are by no means parallel. In both those passages נִכּוֹן could very well be replaced by a proper name, whereas in our passage such a name would hardly be congruous. As bearing upon an episode about to be recorded, what we desiderate is an adjective descriptive of the גֹּרֶן.

נִכּוֹן in the sense of "prepared" offers no difficulty so far as concerns the simple meaning; for הִכִּין of course does mean to prepare. This interpretation would have two considerations to commend it: 1) נִכּוֹן would be used in a perfectly familiar sense. 2) The word, so used, would describe more fully the scene of the accident exactly what we expect of the word qualifying גֹּרֶן—a smoothly swept threshing floor would mean that Uzzah

³ *JBL* xxxvii, 144.

⁴ *Ephod and Ark*, p. 62.

⁵ *Loc. cit.*

was more likely to slip.⁶ But if נכון is to be taken in this sense, we are left with a very abrupt sentence. 'And they came to a prepared threshing-floor' seems to require further explanation. Prepared, according to Arnold's alternative interpretation, for the season's threshing: i. e., smoothed and swept. But if our author meant: "They came to a threshing floor which had been swept smooth for the season's threshing", he probably would have said so. Evidently, what we should read is: "And they came to a (particular kind of) threshing floor", that is, a threshing-floor of such a sort as would make the ensuing accident more likely to occur.

Böttcher, who was the first to adopt the interpretation *fixed* in our passage, is not quite convincing: "גורן נכון: sehr wohl erklärbar als 'eine feste Tenne', d. h., eine solche, die anders als die mit dem Platze wechselnde Sommer-Tenne (Dan. 2 35) durch alle Jahreszeiten an Einer Stelle blieb, daher auch wohl Obdach und Futtermorräthe hatte. Von der Witterung oder Wahrnehmung der letzteren mochten die Rinder verlockt worden sein, zu stark oder seitwärts anzuziehen."

Much simpler and closer to the primary meaning of נכון, *fixed, made fast*, is the interpretation of Arnold:

"I have taken נכון to signify in this connection *firm, hard, permanent*, that is, a threshing floor of bare rock, as distinguished from one made of levelled or hardened earth."

No possible objection can be raised to either of these interpretations on the ground that a far-fetched meaning has been given to נכון. The most common meaning of the word is invoked. But objections have been made on other grounds. So Wellhausen (followed by Driver) says: "Eine feste Tenne genügt dem Sinne nicht." But we have seen that the sense *is* satisfied if the description can be shown to have some direct bearing on the accident.

A more serious objection is the supposed lack of evidence for the actual use of נכון with גורן in precisely this semi-technical sense. It is true that we have no direct O. T. evidence of such a usage. But we may confidently assume it on the basis of a passage in the Mishnah (Baba Bathra ii, 8) in which

⁶ Note that I follow Arnold's interpretation of השל.

there is mention of a **גורן קבוע**. That **קבוע** is the exact equivalent of **נכון** a cursory glance at the lexicons, to say the least, will demonstrate.

Granting, then, the existence of such a thing as a "permanent threshing floor", we face the problem of Böttcher and Arnold: Just what were the characteristics of such a threshing-floor? Our only sources for answering this question consist of this one Mishnic passage and the Gemara thereon.

The text of the Mishnah is as follows:

A permanent threshing-floor must be kept fifty cubits from the town. A man may not construct a permanent threshing-floor on his own property unless he has fifty cubits of space on every side. A man must keep (his threshing-floor) at such a distance from the plants or the plowed ground of his neighbor as will prevent harm (to his neighbor's property when the threshing takes place).

The Mishnah itself, it is apparent, furnishes no definition of the **גורן קבוע**. From the context, we might guess that the reason the *permanent* threshing-floor, **גורן קבוע**, as distinguished from the *temporary* threshing floor, **גורן שאינו קבוע**, had to be removed a certain distance from the town, was because a greater amount of grain was threshed there, and consequently there was greater likelihood of injury to the townspeople.

The Jerusalem Gemara makes no attempt to define the **גורן קבוע**. The Babylonian Gemara gives (Baba Bathra 24b) what seems, at first glance, to be intended as an *explanation* of the name **גורן קבוע**, but yet is not. Because of this seeming attempt at definition, however, a discussion of the passage is necessary.

In the Gemara, after Abaye has insisted, in opposition to R. Ashi, that the last clause of the Mishnah refers to a *temporary* threshing floor (**גורן שאינו קבוע**) the question is asked: "What is called a temporary threshing floor?" The answer, in the name of R. Jose b. Hanina, is: "Wherever the winnowing is not done by a shovel (**רחת**)".

Rashi explains further:

“Wherever the winnowing is not done by a shovel, &c.” That is, where the pile (of wheat) is not large, so that it is not necessary to winnow with the shovel, but where, instead, the wind blows through the pile and the chaff is blown off of itself . . . When, on the other hand, the pile is large (as in a permanent threshing-floor), it is necessary to pick up the grain on a winnowing shovel, and throw it up in the air, so that the wind may blow through it and carry the chaff away.

According to this, then, the difference between a *permanent* threshing floor and a *temporary* one has to do with the different methods of winnowing the grain, or, better, and as Rashi explains, with the *amount* of grain deposited on the threshing floor. If there is a large amount, the threshing-floor is called a *permanent* threshing floor; if a small amount, it is called a *temporary* one.

But if that were so, the bearing of such an interpretation upon 2 Sam. 6 6 would not be clear. The point of the matter is that the Babylonian Gemara is not concerned with defining the גורן קבוע; since in the Mishnah and the Palestinian Gemara, it is assumed that everybody knows just what a „permanent threshing-floor” is. To understand the passage, we must go back to what evidently was the simple sense of the Mishnah, as surmised at the start. The train of argument would then run as follows:

Threshing-floors must be kept away from the city, because the chaff may harm the plants and the inhabitants as well. But if only a small amount of grain is threshed, there is no need for this prohibition, since no harm is likely to be done. Therefore, in stating the Mishnah, it is expressly provided that only the *larger* sort of threshing-floor, the *permanent* threshing-floor, are to be kept at this distance. But this is too general; the point at issue is, after all, *the amount of grain threshed*. Then, say the Amoraim, let the amount of grain threshed decide. Those threshing-floors where much grain is threshed shall be considered *in a class with* permanent threshing-floors; those where only a small amount is threshed shall be considered in a

class with temporary threshing-floors. The objective test shall be the use of the winnowing shovel. Thus, instead of saying, "A permanent threshing-floor is one where the winnowing shovel is used," we should say: "The use of a winnowing shovel is the test whereby, for purposes of administering the Mishnic law, a given threshing-floor, of whatever nature, is considered to involve the same consequences as the larger threshing-floor known as the permanent threshing-floor."

In other words, **גורן קבוע** in the Babylonian Talmud, as in the Mishnah itself and the Palestinian Talmud, is still undescribed. We know that it was probably *large*, so much might be guessed from the name itself. But the way is still open for interpretation of II Sam 6 6, and we come back to our old query: What characteristic of the large, permanent threshing-floor could have a bearing on the accident to Uzzah?

We shall have to admit that Arnold's interpretation, once granted the existence of a *permanent threshing-floor* (which is all the Baba Bathra passage proves), is the most natural one. The question may indeed be raised as to whether Arnold is justified in basing the distinction between permanent and temporary threshing-floors upon the *material* of which the floor was constructed. A permanent threshing-floor, as we know from present agricultural conditions in Palestine, might well be constructed out of hardened earth; indeed, the sense of II Sam 6 6 is not altered in the least by such an interpretation. The reader, upon being informed that the oxen had come to a "permanent threshing-floor," would immediately picture a floor either of rock or of very hard earth, on which a slip such as that of Uzzah was quite natural. Böttcher's notion of the supplies of fodder and all, besides being a bit far-fetched, involves the additional difficulty that there is no evidence that permanent threshing-floors were so provided: if all, or most, were not, then the significance of the word **נכון** for the passage is lost.

What was the "temporary" threshing-floor? We know, from knowledge of modern Palestinian agricultural conditions as well as from Biblical sources, that it is by no means uncommon to convert a level bit of ground or of rock into a temporary

“threshing floor,” for the purpose of threshing *a small amount of grain*. Gideon (Judges 6 11) and Ruth (Ruth 2 17) beat out, in just such places, what they had gleaned. We may note that no winnowing shovel was used for such a small amount—the wind carried off the chaff “of itself”—and so the Talmudic test could apply.

Whatever may have been the precise nature of the *permanent threshing-floor*, we do know that such a floor existed in Mishnic times; and the identification of such a floor with the גורן נבון of II Sam 6 6 is perfectly justified.