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BY EDWARD ROBERTSON, D.LITT., D.D.
PROFESSOR OF SEMITIC LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER.

II.
THE SAMARITANS AND THE SABBATIC RIVER.

In a letter\(^1\) composed by the Samaritan Meshalmah ibn Murjān (Ab Sakhwah) at Nablus (Shechem), and ad-
dressed to the community of the Israelites “wherever
they be found in whatever corners” they are invited to enter into communication with their brethren
at Shechem, and to send “two or three men of wisdom,
discernment and understanding.” At this point in the letter there
occurs a passage which has caused much perplexity to scholars. Transcribed in Hebrew characters it is as follows:

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\text{אַנָּמִי אֵת מֵאַרְעָה מְחַלָּלָה תְּשֵׁנַי לֵן בּוּבְרָה תְשֵׁבְתָּה יָאֵם}
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M. Heidenheim was one of the first to offer a translation. This
particular passage he translated, “Say what you can inform us
about the true Sabbath, and perhaps you could . . . and in it
go.”\(^2\) The gap indicated occurs in the translation of Heidenheim
who was thus obliged to acknowledge his inability to understand

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\(^{1}\) The letter appears to have been written in the year A.H. 1147 (1734). It was first published in Samaritan script by M. Heidenheim, *Schreiben Meschalma ben Ab Sechuah’s an die Samaritaner* in the short-lived *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für englisch-theologische Forschung und Kritik* (Gotha, 1861), i. pp. 78 ff. It has been printed afresh from a copy found in a MS. in the British Museum [B.M. MSS. Add. 19791], transcribed in Hebrew characters and re-translated by M. Gaster, *The Samaritans* (London, 1925) [Schweich Lectures, 1923], pp. 171 ff.

and translate. A. Geiger recognised the faultiness of Heidenheim’s rendering and offered an improved translation. But if you say you cannot reach us because of the Sabbath, that is quite true, only you can make a ship and journey in it.” But Geiger, too, was puzzled and added by way of explanation of the excuse that the Sabbath might prevent them from starting out on the journey, that the Sabbath was a day “in which they must rest, nor could they meet any co-religionists on the road with whom they could lodge.” And the reason for making a ship he suggests was that it would be permissible for them to travel by water on the Sabbath. But Geiger must have forgotten that such advice would come strangely from the Samaritans who are such rigid observers of the Sabbath. Indeed, when a young Samaritan of the same period as Meshalmah was pressed to make a journey to England he refused because the ship would not cease sailing on the Sabbath.

Attention was drawn to the pointlessness of the translations of both Heidenheim and Geiger by M. Grünbaum who suggested that זונ in the text did not mean the Sabbath day, as had been assumed not unnaturally, but the river Sabbation or Sambation, a river famous in Jewish legend which was said to cease flowing on the Sabbath day. He pointed out in support of his contention that in one of the Samaritan letters to Scaliger there occurred the passage, “And we hear of you and the River Sabbath and what is beyond it,” and also that the Samaritan guide employed by Robinson when he ascended Mt. Gerizim

2 Geiger recognised that זונ was an orthographic error, or a Samaritan scriptio plena, for הזון the ark (of Noah).
3 “Of their niceness in keeping the Sabbath and fear to offend against the command of doing no work in it the aforesaid Bishop [Bishop Huntington of Raphoe] gives us an account of a young Samaritan who was pretty inclinable to take a voyage to England to visit those whom they took for their brethren there, but at last utterly refused it when he understood the ship was to sail on the Sabbath as well as on the other six days.”—An Account of the Samaritans in a letter to M— Esq. (Anonymous), London, 1714, p. 100.
had spoken of a River Sabt. So little impression was made by Grünbaum's identification that it was quickly lost sight of, and M. Seligsohn in the article *Sambation* in the Jewish Encyclopaedia is content to rate the possibility of the Sambation legend being current amongst the Samaritans as a conclusion of Grünbaum's. It was evidently overlooked by M. Gaster, when he made his fresh translation. At the passage we are considering he reads as text:

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ואך אמרים המות흘 בולא תשים תם 누 ובعرو
המחפ מת אתם אבל כלם במכ (sic) ערב

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and translates: “If you ask what good you can do for us, you may inform us as to the way of keeping the true Sabbath. For you may have a true way of keeping it.” Realising evidently the improbability of such an assertion and admission on the part of the Samaritans at Nablus, he adds as footnote: “This passage is somewhat corrupt in the text, and the rendering here is tentative.” But unfortunately in this case it is Dr. Gaster himself who has unwittingly corrupted the text. I have had an opportunity of examining the original through a photographic reproduction and have verified the text as that given by Heidenheim. Dr. Gaster has been led into error by the practice of the Samaritans in writing words, which spilled over the end of a line, upwards in the margin so that they crossed at right angles the ends of several lines. In this case the words בולא תשים are so written and Dr. Gaster has attached them to the end of the wrong line. It is a mistake naturally and easily made more particularly where one is, like Dr. Gaster, casting about to supply meaning to an obscure passage. The translation, giving the general sense of the passage, should be “And if you say you cannot reach us because of the [River] Sabbath, you speak truly.

1 "On being asked if there were Samaritans in any other part, he (i.e. the guide), said there were others living beyond the River Sabt which could be crossed only on a Saturday; but as the Samaritans do not travel on that day nothing more was known about them."—E. Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine*, etc. (London, 1856), ii. p. 279.

2 This is Gaster's own query.

3 Dr. Gaster very kindly gave me the use of his photographs of the manuscript.
But why not make an ark and make the voyage [over the River] in it?  

That Grünaum was right in his conjecture that the Sabbatic River and not the Sabbath day is referred to in Meshalmah’s letter is borne out by an addition in Arabic to a Samaritan Codex in the Rylands Library. It occupies one of the surplus pages of Codex XXII. Unfortunately the text has suffered slightly through damage to a part of the margin, and possibly also by the trimming of the folios at the hands of the European binder. It tells of the visit to Nablus of an Indian, his assurance in reply to interrogation that there was a community in India, known as the People of Moses who dwelt on and beyond the “sea of the Sabbath,” and gives details of the route to be followed in order to reach them. The handwriting of the manuscript is naskh in a rather loose style, but is on the whole clear and easily decipherable except in respect of one or two words. The name of the scribe is not revealed. I give here both text and translation. The dotted lines in the text are gaps due to the damage aforesaid.

**Text.**

Ryl. Sam. XXII, fol. 3b, addition.

1 The text is of interest for its mixture of Arabic and Hebrew. "א" is and "ש" is, of course, "ת" is, probably the only kind of ship of which they had knowledge.
2 This took place before it came into the possession of the Library.
On this date in the month of Muharram of the year 1179, there arrived a certain Indian, a man of fine address, and we inquired of him concerning his country and had he heard in his land any word of the Samaritans or no? He replied, "I hear tell of the country of the People of the Lord Moses, Son of Amram," on whom be peace." He proceeded to describe to us their circumstances. [He informed us] that their book is the Torah of the Prophet Moses, that on the Sabbath day they do not go forth from their dwellings, and in respect of their slaughtering, their cooking, their eating and their drinking no one other than one of their own number may venture near. They have priests and sages whose command they must not

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1 June-July, A.D. 1765.

2 The text here is difficult and puzzling. The word after جل appeared to be either ناس or ناوء either of which would present difficulties of translation, especially in conjunction with ملاج which could be interpreted in various ways. I am convinced, however, that the word is نائب [— 'eminent'] with the diacritic point on the ف omitted.

3 The usual Arabic rendering of Amram.

4 Or perhaps sorcerers—the word being used in that sense.
transgress. We asked him to acquaint us with the boundaries of their land. He answered: “He who would seek their land must proceed from Damascus to Baghdad and thence to Qandār 1 of the land of Irāq, and thence to Huzārah (?), and thence to Shaqarqand, 2 and thence to Balq of Buchārah, and thence to Qābul, and thence to Nahūr, 3 and thence to Delī, 4 the capital of the Sultan of India, and thence to Mūltān, and thence to Qashmīr, a Christian land, and thence to Rājā, the land of the People of Moses, on whom be peace . . . land of the ‘sea’ of the Sabbath and beyond, and it is the land of England . . . and its name is Bandar Abu Shihr 5 . . . town of Bandar Siṭarah . . . town Qala‘at Qulaīfūr, 6 in which is their sultan, belongs to them, and some of them are under the sway of the Sultan of England . . . these four towns according to what this Indian told us in each of them are thousands, a vast multitude beyond excess. The most common of their manufactures is Indian calico, muslins, and expensive fine stuffs (?). May our Lord bring near [the time of] their gathering together in the noblest of hill-country, 7 for he has power to do what he wills. And this we have written according to what this Indian informed us, and we have made inquiry of Indians besides him who have told us that from the Sabbath Sea and beyond there is a land whose inhabitants they designate the People of Moses, and they are in number beyond computation. And God is all-knowing.

Note.—The text speaks of مَرُفرُقَةٕ lit. “Sea of the Sabbath” and it may well be that the Samaritans, or at least some of them, thought of it as a sea, or an arm of the sea. We have seen that in a letter to Scaliger they speak of نَهْرُ السَّبَتْ, the “River Sabbath.” It may be that they made use of the word مَرُفرُقَةٕ, as the Arabs do, in the sense also of large river, as e.g.

1 Is this supposed to be Kandahar?
2 Probably for Samarqand. The diacritic points on the sh and the first q look as if they might have been added later.
3 Possibly for Lahore.
4 Delhi, properly spelled Dehli.
5 Bandar is “seaport.” Abu Shihr is Bushire.
6 Kolapore.
7 Probably the hill-country of Ephraim including Mount Gerizim.
the “River Nile.” The notion that arms of the Great Sea (Mediterranean), flowing as rivers, surrounded the habitable globe was a current belief as late as the twelfth century, at least amongst Rabbinic writers. The mention of England is due to the fact that the India of that time was the India of the East India Company and of Clive.

It is not surprising that legends should cluster round the disappearance of the Ten Tribes whom Tiglath-Pileser III and later Shalmanassar IV or Sargon II deported from their land. The thought that such a large portion of the Chosen Race should be merged with the peoples amongst whom they were forcibly settled and lose their character as a Peculiar People and their identity, does not readily occur. It is in the light of lineal descendants of the deported Israelites that the British race appears to “British-Israel” to-day.  

The basis of the legends is found in the Old Testament accounts of the deportation in the books of Kings and Chronicles. The brevity of the references, and the form in which they were cast, contributed much to the mystery and speculation which enveloped the disappearance of the Ten Tribes. We are told that they were deported and settled “in Halah, and in Habor, the river of Gozan, and the cities of Media” (2 Ki. xvii. 6; xviii. 11). In Chronicles we have, “he brought them to Halah, and Habor, and Hara and the river of Gozan to this day” (v. 26). The Greek version has read “mountains of Media” (rather instead of שָׁמַיִם), and the “to this day” עַד כְּשֶׁשָּׂא of

1 “The wise men of Arabia agree that the Great Sea, in which the waters flow, surrounds the whole habitable globe which is formed like a sphere. Every one knows that the habitable globe is divided into three parts, while Jerusalem is the navel of the earth; beyond lie Egypt, Cush, the Land of the Hittites, etc.”—Dodi Venechdi, of Berachya Hanakdan, ed. H. Gollancz (Oxford, 1920), p. 11.

2 Cf. 2 Ki. xv. 29.

3 Cf. 2 Ki. xvii. 6; xviii. 11.

4 There is no reference to this in the Books of Kings and Chronicles, but Sargon’s annals claim that he deported 27,280 Israelites after the fall of Samaria (Keil. Bib. ii. 54 sq.). Shalmanassar IV. died during the siege. The name of Sennacherib is also included in this list by Rabbinic writers.

Chronicles may well be due to a misreading of the מַדָּי. It is not disputed, I think, that Gozan 1 is the region גְּזָן of Assyrian inscriptions and the Παυζανίς of the geographer Ptolemy, 2 in the neighbourhood of Nisibis in N. Mesopotamia, and that Habor is a tributary of the Euphrates, the Habur of the Assyrians and of modern times and the Chaboras of classic writers. Then Halah, although attempts have been made to identify it also as a river, is most probably the town or district of Ḥalaḥhu or Ḥalaḥha of Assyrian texts, also to be sought in the same region. The English versions in reading "by the river of Gozan" (A.V.), and "on the river of Gozan" (R.V.) mislead, for they imply that Habor is the name of a town or district. This is in violation of the Hebrew text. Equally unlikely, though textually permissible, is the interpretation of Gozan as the name of a river. It was an interpretation favoured by the Rabbinic writers.

The district to which the Ten Tribes were deported by the Assyrian kings is thus very clearly indicated in the Old Testament. But the fact of their crossing a river in their migration seems to have caught the imagination of later generations of those left behind. Their history told them that when the Israelites left Egypt the waters of the Red Sea were drawn asunder to permit a crossing on foot. Again on their entry into the Promised Land the waters of the Jordan ceased to flow to permit them to pass over dry shod. It was natural to associate this further crossing of a river with a miraculous happening of the same nature. The name given to the river on that account may well have been the River Shabbath, or river of cessation.

In the first century A.D. the Jewish historian Josephus records that Titus, when peregrinating through Syria providing lavish spectacles in the cities and using Jewish captives to that end, came upon a strange river between Arkea and Raphanea: "for when it runs its current is strong and has plenty of water; after which its springs fail for six days together and leave its channel dry as anyone may see; after which days it runs on the seventh day as it did before, and as though it had undergone no change

1 The LXX has Παυζανίς (but not in all MSS.) in 2 Ki. xvii. 6.
2 Geog. v. 18. 3.
at all; it hath also been observed to keep this order perpetually and exactly; whence it is that they call it the Sabbatic River—that name being taken from the sacred seventh day amongst the Jews.”

Josephus, be it noted, does not associate the flow of the river with the Sabbath day as such. Pliny, also, as Kohut in his Aruch Completum remarks has “heard a whisper” of it. In his account of strange rivers, writing at a slightly later date than Josephus, he observes, “In Judaea, there is a river which is dry on Sabbaths.” If this is the same river to which Josephus has made reference it is here very definitely associated with the Sabbath day as a day of rest. But neither Josephus nor Pliny in any way connect the rivers of which they speak with the deportation of the Ten Tribes.

The Ezra Apocalypse, which may date towards the end of the first or beginning of the second century A.D. and thus in all probability later than either Josephus or Pliny, has something more to say of the river over which the Ten Tribes were carried captive.

“These are the Ten Tribes which were carried away prisoners out of their own land in the time of King Hosea, whom Shalmaneser the king of Assyria led away captive, and carried them over the waters and so came they into another land. But they took this counsel amongst themselves that they would leave the multitude of the heathen and go forth into a further country where never mankind dwelt, that they might there keep their law, which they had never kept in their own land. And they entered into

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1 *Bell. Jud.* vii. 5. 1, tr. Whiston. This river was identified by E. Robinson [Abriss einer Reise in Palastina im Jabre, 1852, *Z.D.M.G.* vii. (1853), p. 75], as the intermittent spring now known as Fuwār ed-Dér, the source of the Nahr el-Árūs, below Qa‘at el-Husn and near the monastery of Mar Jirjis (St. George). “The waters flow every three days but that does not prevent the Moslems affirming that the waters run only on the seventh day, to wit—Friday.”—So A. Neubauer, *La Géographie du Talmud* (Paris, 1868), pp. 33 f., Rabbi Petachia (twelfth century) remarks that in Jabneh there is a spring which flows during six days of the week and ceases on the Sabbath [*Sibbub*, ed. Prague, p. 5, cf. Jew. Enc. s.v. *Sambation*].

2 s.v. *Sabation*.

Euphrates by the narrow passages of the river. For the Most High then showed signs for them and held still the flood till they were passed over. For through that country there was a great way to go, namely, for a year and a half; and the same region is called Arsareth. Then dwelt they there until the latter time, and now when they shall begin to come the Highest shall stay the springs of the stream again that they may go through.”¹

The Ten Tribes not merely cross the river but the river ceases to flow to permit them to do so. A new feature introduced here is the far-off place which the Ten Tribes make their final destination and eventual home. There is no suggestion that the passage was made on the Sabbath—as how could it?—or that the river continued to make a weekly practice of ceasing to flow. By the beginning of the third century or a little later the exile assumes new features.

According to the Midrash Rabbah, R. Judah ben Simon said, “The tribe of Judah and Benjamin was not exiled to the same place as the Ten Tribes. The Ten Tribes were exiled previously beyond the river Sambation. The tribe of Judah and Benjamin was scattered in all the lands.”² A definite river now comes into view called the Sambation beyond which is the final settlement of the Ten Tribes. Sambation (σάμβατος) is the Rabbinic rendering of το Σάββατον, the Sabbath. Dissimilation, a process familiar enough in Aramaic, has led to the form Sanbation and then to Sambation.³ What is of special interest is that the tradition has evidently a Greek basis, implying that it was from a Greek writing that the word was taken.

¹ 2 Esdras [more generally called 4 Esdras], xiii. 40-47.
³ Apart from the dissimilative process the intrusive m before a labial is not unknown. Thus we have Gk. λαμπάς, Heb. צלע; Lat. tympanum, Gk. τύμπανον, Heb. צל; Gk. σαμβύκη, Heb. צעbec; Fr. timbale, Arab. طيل etc. The צע, as a termination need not be regarded as a rendering of the -ov in Σάββατον. It is used for a whole variety of Greek terminations including -os. Vid. M. Schwab, Mots grecs latins dans les livres rabbiniques, in Semitic Studies in Memory of A. Kohut (Berlin, 1897), pp. 514 sqq. L. Herzfeld, Geschichte d. Volkes Israel, i. p. 366, was badly misled when he attempted to identify etymologically Sambation with Zabatos, the Zab river.
The Sabbatic River with the magical properties implying by its name, is now indissolubly linked with the Ten Tribes. As by this time the Ten Tribes were regarded as exiled to the most distant part of the habitable globe, the River Sambation, almost inevitably, became the final river which they had to cross to reach their last settlement. Soon it becomes an isolator and a separator of the Ten Tribes, or a portion of them, from the rest of mankind, a prison wall as well as a last line of defence. At first the breadth of its stream and its raging torrent were regarded as sufficient for the purpose. But gradually, in atune with its magical cessation of flow on the Sabbath, it gathered to itself new marvels. Marvels which made other rivers famous were attached to the Sambation. In one of the legends which gathered round the name of Alexander the Great it is recorded that when he was journeying through the lands to the south of Egypt he came to a river which flowed with water for three days and with sand for three days.\(^3\) Evidently there was here a Sabbatic river. Mas‘ūdi in the tenth century affirms that there was a river of sand in Africa, perhaps basing his information on the Alexander legend.\(^1\) Yet before Mas‘ūdi’s time sand and stones had began to oust the water of the Sabbatic river. Midrash Tanhumah records a dispute between R. ‘Aqiba and Tyrannus (or Tineius) Rufus where the latter asks how it is known that the day observed as the Sabbath is the original Sabbath. ‘Aqiba replies that the Sambation testifies to it since it rolls down stones and sand on the six days of the week but ceases on the Sabbath.\(^3\) Here the rolling down stones and sand is probably nothing more than an indication of the force of its torrent. But the rolling stones and flowing sand had an appeal of their own. Later ages began to hear more of them. In the

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\(^1\) *Vid.* T. Nöldke, Beitr. z. Geschichte des Alexanderromans, p. 48.

\(^2\) *Muriż al-Dhahab*, i. 161.

\(^3\) `אַחַר שָׁדַע אֲלָא נִרְבֶּה מְפָּכְסָד מְצִיד שַׁבְבוֹל יִפְלוּ יִוְיָה מֶפֶּשׁ—33, יִרְחַם תֵּבעא אָבוֹן הָבֵּית וּבָּשְׂתָּה נַח `4 This Midrash is reputed to be the work of R. Tanhumah ben Abba (fourth century). R. ‘Aqiba died c. A.D. 132. The Babylon. Talmud tractate Sanhedrin (65, 2) gives the story in a fuller form where Sambation is but one of the proofs. It makes no reference to stones and sand. The Babylonian Talmud was completed not later than sixth century A.D.
Latin version of a letter of Prester John we are told: “One of the wonderful things on earth is a waterless sea of sand; for the sand is agitated and swells in waves like every other sea and is never at rest. At a distance of three days from this sand sea are certain mountains from which descends a river of stones without any water. It flows through our territory and falls into the sea of sand. Its current is maintained only for three days in the week; on the other four days the river is fordable. Beyond this river of stones dwell the Ten Tribes, who, though pretending to have kings of their own, are our subjects.” This represented the Christian viewpoint, but the Hebrew version of the letter alters that viewpoint considerably. “Know that from this stony sea there flows a river whose source is in Eden. It runs between our territory and that of the great King Daniel. The river runs all the days of the week and on Sabbath it ceases to flow. It contains no water but it causes everything in its course to drift to the sand sea. No one can cross it except on Sabbath. We are obliged to place guards at the borders of our territories to defend it from the incursions of the Jews.” Prester John’s river of stones was not associated with the Sabbath day in the first instance, but we see how quickly such an association was created.

The location of Sambation was not very clear to Jewish minds. It was very far distant, of that they were sure, in a place where the tribes dwelt in seclusion a sort of purgatory without torments. The Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan expands Exodus xxxiv. 10 to include the explanation, “This means it will place my covenant among them and will not abhor them nor mix them with other nations; but from them there shall arise many just and good people; and I will make signs and do wonders among them when captive in Babylon and deliver them

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1 The original letter, subject of much controversy, dates from the twelfth century.

2 The geographer Qazwinī records that the angel Gabriel, when asked by the Prophet to take him to the Banu Mousā (Children of Moses), replied that it would take six years to reach them and six to return and even then he would not be able to arrive at them because they were surrounded by a river of sand which flows fast as an arrow, resting only on Sabbath.—Athār u’il-bilād, ed. Wuestenfeld, II, 17.
and conduct them to the other side of the River Sambation. And I will do unto you what I have done unto no other people nor country, and in its terror and greatness it shall surpass everything that was done before.”

The Ten Tribes having set forth to their captivity in an easterly direction it was natural to look for Sambation, both river and land, in the regions of the east. But when the River Sambation became a river of sand and stones the regions south of Ethiopia began to claim it. Towards the end of the ninth century there appeared in Cairo, Kairwan and Spain a famous figure, concerning whom there has been much controversy, who was known as Eldad the Danite. According to his story he came from beyond the waters of Ethiopia and belonged to the tribe of Dan. He explained that the tribe of Dan refused to fight against Judah and Benjamin in the days of Rehoboam and in consequence migrated to Ethiopia. The tribes of Asher, Gad and Naphtali later joined it there, the remainder of the Ten Tribes settling in Arabia, Babylonia and the lands of the Medes and Persians. His story, which he wrote for the Jews of Spain, proceeds:

“As to the tribe of Moses, our teacher . . . the sea surrounds them, three months journey by three months. They dwell in glorious houses and fine buildings and castles, and they train elephants for themselves in their times of joy. No unclean thing is to be found with them.”

He then goes on to tell of their wealth in possessions and the fertility of the soil which they cultivate, how they are of perfect faith and live each 100 or 120 years, how all are equal with no servants among them. All are Levites and abide in the sanctity of Moses:

“Moreover they see no man and no men see them except these four tribes who dwell on the other side of the rivers of Ethiopia. There is a place where they can see each

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1 This work, known also as the First Jerusalem Targum appears to belong to the latter half of the seventh century.


3 *i.e.* Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali.
other and hear if they cry out, but the River Sambation is between them, and they say 'Thus it happened to us in wartime,' and they tell all Israel what happened to them. When they want anything important they have a kind of pigeon known among them, and they write their letters and fasten them to the wings or to the feet of the pigeon, and these cross the River Sambation and the pigeons come to their kings and princes. They also have very many precious stones and silver and gold, and they sow flax and they rear cochineal and make pleasant garments without end, and are five times as numerous as those that came out of Egypt for they are innumerable. The breadth of that river is 200 cubits bowshot, and the river is full of large and small stones and the sound of them rumbles like a great storm, like a tempest at sea, and in the night the sound of it is heard a day's journey off; and they have with them 6 wells and they all unite into one lake and therefrom they irrigate their land and therein are clean edible fish. The river runs and the stones and sand rumble during the six working days, but on the seventh it rests and is tranquil until the end of the Sabbath. And on the other side of the river, on the side where the four tribes dwell, is a fire which flames on Sabbath and no man can approach within a mile.

Evidently Eldad was not always consistent with his story for when the men of Kairwan appealed to the Gaon Zemach inquiring whether they were to accept Eldad's account as true, they furnished the Gaon with some fresh details. According to what Eldad said the sons of Moses, together with their tents and all their possessions, were carried by a cloud to the land of Havilah and deposited there in the night:

"Moreover he (i.e. Eldad) said to us that our fathers had heard from their fathers that in that night there was a great noise and in the morning they saw a big and mighty army but they were surrounded by a river which ran with stones and dust in a place where there had never been a river before; and this river still flows with stones and dust without water with a great rumbling and a great noise and would
be scattered did it not meet a mountain of iron. And the river flows all the six week days with stones and dust without a drop of water but it rests on the Sabbath day; and at the time when it gets evening at dusk a cloud descends upon it, and no man can touch it till the end of the Sabbath, and its name is Sambation.”

The Gaon’s response, however, upheld Eldad’s version:—

“And as to the Sons of Moses being near them [i.e. the tribes of Dan, Asher, Gad, Naphtali], and the Sambation surrounding them he spoke truth, for thus say our Rabbis in the Midrash. Nebuchadnezzar sent into exile the Levites, the Sons of Moses, sixty myriads, and when they came to the rivers of Babylon, they and their harps, it happened to them as Rabbi Eldad related to you.”

Towards the end of the fifteenth century the Italian rabbi Obadiah da Bartinoro, famous for his commentary on the Mishnah, who spent the last thirteen years of his life in Jerusalem, wrote from there in the year 1488:—

“I made inquiries concerning the Sambation and I hear from one who has been informed that a man has come from the Kingdom of Prester John, and has related that there are high mountains and valleys there which can be traversed in a ten days’ journey and which are certainly inhabited by dependents of Israel. They have five princes or kings and have carried on great wars against the Johannites for more than a century but unfortunately the Johannites prevailed and Ephraim was beaten. The Johannites penetrated into their country and laid it waste, and the remembrance of Israel had almost died away in these places. . . . But God had mercy, other kings succeeded in India who were not so cruel as their predecessors, and it is said that the former glory of the Jews is now in a measure restored.”

Again he writes:—

“Jews have come here [i.e, to Jerusalem] from Aden. . . . These Jews told us that it is now well known through

1 *Jewish Travellers*, p. 18.  
Arabian merchants that the River Sambation is fifty days journey from them in the wilderness, and like a thread surrounds the whole land where the descendants of Israel dwell. The river throws up stones and sand and rests only on the Sabbath, therefore, no Jew who is travelling in that country is likely to violate the Sabbath. It is traditional among them that the descendants of Jacob dwell there. This river throws up stones and sand and rests only on the Sabbath, therefore, no Jew can cross over it otherwise he would violate the Sabbath. It is traditional among them that they are all descendants of Moses, all pure and innocent as angels, and no evildoers in their midst. On the other side of the Sambation the Children of Israel are as numerous as the sand of the sea, and there are many kings and princes among them, but they are not so pure and holy as those surrounded by the stream. The Jews of Aden relate all this with a certain confidence as if it were well known, and no one ever doubted the truth of their assertions.

From the foregoing narratives there emerges the fact that the River Sambation surrounded only the Levites, the Children of Moses, the other tribes, or some at least of them, dwelt in the same neighbourhood but on the other side of the Sambation. It is clear also that to some Jews the Kingdom of Prester John was in the region of India.

About the same time as Bartinoro, or shortly afterwards another famous traveller David Reubeni wrote an account of his travels from 1522-1525. He thus gives account of himself:

“I am from the wilderness of Habor and we have thirty times ten thousand Jews there (may the Lord increase them a thousand fold). They are the Sons of Reuben and Gad, and of the half-tribe of Manasseh, and King Joseph, my brother, is their king and I am the lord of his host; and the other nine and a half tribes are in the land of the blacks in Ethiopia in four places, and the Sons of Moses are in another place, and live on the River Sambation, beside the two tribes of Simeon and Benjamin, who dwell at the head of the River Nile and the White river behind it. They are
between two rivers, beyond the Kingdom of Sheba. These two tribes send men to us and we send men to them, and they tell us what we hear and know of the other tribes in the land of blacks which are near to them, and our country is far from them as we are in the east."  

Although Africa with its rivers of sand and stones was a natural location of Sambation, India as representing the Far East was perhaps the more favoured. In the confused ideas of geography prevailing, that did not represent such a big divergence of locality as might be supposed, for India was pictured as over against Ethiopia, separated by a strip of sea. Rabbi Petachia, who travelled the East in the twelfth century, declared that the prophet Ezekiel's tomb was a distance in the desert of a day or a day and a half from Baghdad, and from the tomb of Ezekiel to the Sambation is a further forty days. Another Jewish traveller Elijah of Ferrara (15th cent.) says, "An old man informed me that he had been in India, which is in the Far East facing Cush (Ethiopia) to the west, a sea and a desert separating them. . . . The Children of Moses live upon an island in the River Sambation; the tribe of Manasseh live opposite them. Beyond the river are the tribes of Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher." He goes on to give the location of the other tribes very much in accord with Eldad's version.

Early in the sixteenth century the French rabbi Abraham Peritzol of Avignon wrote a work entitled מראות העולם (Paths of the World). In his preface, he speaks of the River Sambation "which is in India above Persia in their settlements." He places the source of the Sambation in the regions of Upper India which lie amidst the rivers Ganyas "which is in our tongue Gozan." He informs us that Halah and Habor are higher in the continent.

1 Jewish Travellers, pp. 295 f.
2 Ibid., pp. 74 f.
than Mecca and Calicut. The source of the River Sambation is above Calicut “and separates those Indians from part of the Kingdom of the Jews; and there you will assuredly find it.”

Peritzol was very definite as to the locality but he does not say that he visited the Sambation and saw it with his own eyes. All the evidence adduced by travellers was always hearsay evidence. No one was able to say he had stood on its bank and been thrilled by its marvels. It is not surprising then to find a Jew with his heart set on reaching the river and prepared to adventure in search of it. It is the story of such an one which it now falls to us to consider. In the year 5578 A.M. (A.D. 1817), a certain Moses Edrehi, a native of Morocco who claimed descent from the tribe of Naphtali, wrote a book in Hebrew entitled מֵאַרְאֶה נִבְרָאָה which he subsequently translated into English with the title A Book of Miracles. In his book he quotes largely from another book with the title רָקִיִּי עֵשֶׂר (The Straight Road). There is given in it the account of a journey undertaken in the year 1630 by a Jew whose imagination was stirred by what he had heard of the Ten Tribes and who determined to seek them out. This Jew is not mentioned by name by Edrehi, but he must, I think, be Gershon ben Eliezer who travelled in India in that year and wrote a work entitled נִבְרָאָה אַרְיָא (The Bounds of the Land of Israel). But where to look for the Ten Tribes our traveller found no easy matter. “There are those who say they live near the River Sambation; and others that they are on the other side of the river; some again say they are after you pass the River Gozan; and others that they dwell on the other side of the שֵׁרֶשׁ הָרֶץ (the mountains of darkness). Whilst I was being told of their greatness, their kings, etc., my heart leaped for joy”. He made inquiries in Alexandria to the same end, “but one said one thing and another another.” Eventually he got word of a caravan which had reached Salonica to go to Sambation. He proceeded thither and made overtures to the leader to join it.

1 L.c. col. 193/4.
2 M. Edrehi, A Book of Miracles: An historical account of the Ten Tribes settled beyond the River Sambatyon in the East; with many other curious matters relating to the state of the Israelites in various parts of the World, etc., London, 1836.
3 Edrehi, l.c., p. 32.
“I went to him, I was well received and asked all I wished to know about the journey and the expense. He satisfied all my questions, the subject and substance of which was that from Salonique to Sam, called Mecca by the Mahometans, it takes twelve months, sometimes eight, six, and even five months; but it all depends upon the weather. He informed me of the whole road from place to place through the whole journey to Sambation, all of which I noted down in my memorandum book; and, as I could speak their language well, the Arabic, and was acquainted with their manners and customs, I was the more emboldened to speak and to go with them; and anxious, like many of my brethren, to describe the wonders of Sambation, I asked whether I might be allowed to purchase some iron and trade in it like other merchants; and I was answered in the affirmative.

So, friendly reader, if I were to write at length what I have seen in the cities, towns, provinces and countries, it would fill a thousand books. I will, however, tell you in brief: I arrived at Mecca and Guda near the sea of Sus, near which country is the burial-place of Mahomet, besides other curiosities. From thence we went to Siquetny, Aystera, and the desert near there: and I saw many curious things; among others I saw some strange animals having five feet, three eyes, and being six feet in height. After passing many deserts as far as the mountains of Tafton we arrived at a city called Kibar. After leaving these we came to a city called Dbrei Vaben, near the river Guenias or Gozan, on the banks of which is situated the city Guena. From that city begin the cities of Kalikut filled with rich Jewish merchants. Beyond the desert of Kalikut is the River Sambation; but as the desert is infested with robbers I did not cross it. Notwithstanding there were many in the caravan we went by sea. We went from place to place till we came to Maray Francos. From Maray Francos to Sambatyon, is two days' journey. When we came to the city near to Sambatyon,

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1 Perhaps Jeddah.
2 We are told that the author of the book wrote in his preface “I swear by the living God of Israel, in whose hands are the souls of all men, that I will not tell them a falsehood in this book.”
3 Perhaps the Gihon (גיהון), or Ganges (?).
we heard a great noise and roar, as of a tempest; and the nearer we approached Sambatyon the greater was the noise. We were told what it was, namely, the river, and that we ought not to go out of the city we were in a single step on account of the danger from the Jews who threaten the Pristians, because the king of the Pristians' country injured the merchants and citizens of that place, who are posted, armed, as guards of the River Sambatyon out of affection to the Jews who come from the other side of Sambatyon and carry on war against the Pristians whose king pays tribute to the Jews; and when he wishes to free himself, the Jews of Sambatyon wage war against the Pristians. . . . We were obliged to remain three weeks during which time I made many inquiries concerning the River Sambatyon of the Jews who live there, and respecting the city of Pristian. Of everything I asked I obtained a separate answer.”

“Touching the river they told me that every day in the week the stones rise to the height of a house. When they said that I asked them why did they need guards as nobody could pass during the week, including the Jews, for fear of the stones? they answered that they were wanted only two hours before Sabbath, when the stones remain still and quiet and that many Jews come mounted on good horses and cross the river in less than an hour. . . . On Sabbath there is no guard, it is not permitted. Respecting the history of the Jews in Sambatyon they told me that when they make war, they destroy the cities and take away everything they find therein until they oblige their enemies to pay the annual tribute. They then go to the city and cross the River Sambatyon an hour before Sabbath, and return home cheerful and contented. . . .

“The river in some places is seventeen miles broad, and all the week the stones are thrown as high as a lofty house; the noise is so great as to be heard at the distance of two days' journey; and on the Friday, two hours before the Sabbath they remain undisturbed. The river dries up and the stones disappear and nothing is seen but very white sand, and on the

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1 People of Prester John. The confusion of Ethiopia and India current in early times is probably the reason why the mysterious Prester John was first of all associated with India and the East.
going out of the Sabbath everything continues as it was before. On the Sabbath the Gentiles are heard making a great lamentation, because they can get no water to drink as the river is holy and reposes on the Sabbath. They allow no quadrupeds to approach or live near it; and persons afflicted with leprosy by washing in that water become clean."

Then marvellous tales follow of the Sambatyon horses, fed on sheep's flesh cut up small and given wine to drink. They neigh prodigiously, kick furiously and cross the River Sambatyon in one hour. The name of the principal king is Eleazar, a giant nine feet tall with a sword six fingers broad and three yards long. He can kill 800 at once. There is also another king, Daniel, who has a cronocal (carbuncle), which gives as much light as seven candles, and is brought out to give light on the Sabbath day. They have wonderful stuffs including silk, cotton, and linen goods as well as gold, silver and diamond mines.

"Now, my friends, I will tell you a wonderful story which I swear before God to be true, that in that year (5390 = 1629) the King of Pristian sent five governors with a present to King Eleazar; and as in the city they were not aware of my being a Jew, I was invited to see it. It was a wonderful man without a head, whose mouth and eyes were in his breast. He was a savage and his food was fish alone."

They could not, however, send him across Sambatyon because he was uncircumcised. Also our traveller reports that in the year 5308 (1547) eight Jews came from Europe and crossed Sambatyon on the Sabbath day. They were haled before the King who asked them how they dared cross the river on the Sabbath day thus profaning it and incurring the penalty of death. They claimed that they did so fleeing for their lives, and having survived an examination in the Hebrew books they were permitted to settle there.

"Thence I went travelling these remote parts till I came to some high mountains called the Netbon. But before I proceed further I will relate what happened in the last country adjoining Sambatyon. I made my fortune by the iron I took with me which weighed three hundred and thirty-six pounds Turkish,
which I exchanged with the Jews of Sambatyon for the same weight in gold. . . . I travelled as far as the Netbon mountains which were far off on the other side of Kalikut which are noted for their pearls; and beyond them is the place where the four tribes of Dan, Naphtali, Zebulon, and Asher are settled whose lands are very extensive."

He tells us he proceeded thence to the River Guechon (くなります) "from which place begins the country of Cush" (Ethiopia). He then pursued his adventurous journey back to Greece encountering on the way "fourteen birds which spit on the people in the caravan; and the people died from their spit, as it was virulent poison and issued from their beaks like fire." So failed another effort to reach the mysterious Sambatyon entered upon with such high hopes. But if our traveller failed when within striking distance of his goal he has at least added much to our knowledge of river, land and people!

But we have kept the greatest witness to Sambation to the end. It is a letter sent by the Jews on the farther side of the River Sambatyon to the Rabbis of Jerusalem. It is unfortunately only a copy with which we have to deal.

"The copy is preserved in the library of the learned Rabbi Solomon Dobna, of glorious memory, and when I, Moses Edrehi, the author of this work, studied the Talmud in the famous Portuguese Jews' Academy at Amsterdam I made a copy of that letter. The letter which was sent to Jerusalem by the Sons of Moses on the other or further side of Sambatyon called Beni Moseh (נעים ונ揃) arrived there anno mundi 5407 [1646], copies of parts of that letter were sent to various congregations, the whole letter being too long as it contains a minute description of Sambatyon and its inhabitants." ¹

The chief Rabbis of the Holy Land in sending out copies of the letter proceed to explain how they chanced to come by it. It was their practice to send abroad messengers, chosen by lot, to collect contributions on which they were dependent. In the year 5407 it fell to Rabbi Baruch to go to Muca (מוכה) and the Levant. His caravan was attacked in the middle of the desert and R. Baruch alone escaped with his life. Whilst wandering

¹ Edrehi, l.c., p. 55.
on, famishing and spent, he encountered a horseman who wanted to kill him, but on hearing he was a Jew alighted and embraced him, supplied him with food and, having given him a Kaminga

The horseman returned in three days with the letter for the Rabbis of Jerusalem, furnished R. Baruch with food, as well as gold and diamonds, and set him safely on the road to Babylon.

The letter of the men of Sambation tells of the state of the Children of Israel who dwell on the farther side of the river and who weep day and night on account of the destruction of the Holy Temple and the length of their bitter captivity and solitude in these distant regions. They repeat the tale of the river with which the reader has become familiar. “No one can approach us, for being surrounded by the River Sambatyon over which nobody can cross, as the stones all the week dash against each other with fury and noise, besides the flames of fire which are round the river. The only time to cross it is on a Sabbath, which being over the river returns to its usual state; and when the four tribes come to speak to us we are on one side and they on the other.”

They describe the wealth and comfort they enjoy, and add that they are not allowed to write what they hear, for all the week they hear a very extraordinary and loud voice from heaven, Bath Kul

In conclusion they say, “You will not say that we are not the Children of Moses; for we are many millions and have twenty-four kings and are more powerful and rich than any other nation on the earth; such also are the four tribes on the opposite side of Sambatyon, who are powerful and strong and rich, as numerous as the sand of the sea, great warriors and able to assist you and deliver you from captivity; only we cannot leave our territories, for such was the decree of God, until we shall be able to do so at the hour of rejoicing which is to come and which is promised in the prophecies of Isaiah “say to those that are in prison, be free; and to those that are in darkness, see the light.”

The Sambation tales might now appear to have reached the

1 An amulet.  
2 Isaiah xlix. 9.
limit of creative imagination. Or perhaps not quite. One more magical element falls to be added to the tale.

"Now, kind and honourable readers, I, the author of this work, declare on my word of honour, that I have heard it said by many respectable and trustworthy persons, that they saw at Rome, amongst many other curious things which are there, a sand glass the sand of which was taken out of the River Sambatyon. The sand runs all the week and stops on the Sabbath day. It has also been seen at Leghorn; and, consequently, my friendly readers, with the understanding God has given you, you will judge by this wonderful history that it is true and certain, and, moreover, that it is a thing which is written about in the Talmud, etc." 

From the Samaritan side the evidence of the existence of a tradition involving the Sabbatic River is meagre, yet it is sufficient to reveal a marked divergence from the Jewish standpoint. We know that the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, and the converse is also true. It is well illustrated in this cycle of legends regarding the fate of the Ten Tribes in which the Samaritans claim to have a more direct interest than the Jews. While both agree in placing the Ten Tribes either beside or beyond a river which observes the Sabbath, there is no indication that the Samaritans ever evolved for their river the highly magical features of the Sambation. Their river flowed with water. It does not roll down stones and sand, nor is its Sabbath calm disturbed by flaming fire, nor darkened by murky cloud. In the eighteenth century they can still think of it as a relatively tranquil arm of the sea, or a broad river over whose waters an "ark" can still float. If there should arise any question of the relative age of the traditions the Samaritan has the better signs of age. They called the river by its Hebrew name Shabbath (םבש), or its corresponding Arabic name Sabt (סבת). The Jews used the Greek-Hebrew Sambation (סמנט), which betrays both the age and the source of the tradition. The Jews down the

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1 Edreihi, l.c., p. 18. A similar statement is made by Manasseh ben Israel (17th cent.) in his ZAKIM, x. 39, to the effect that when the sand of Sambation is kept in a glass it is agitated during six days of the week and quiescent on the Sabbath.
ages have produced many great travellers. No race had better facilities for travel. In every city of importance in every corner of the known world there were Jewish communities prepared to assist a traveller of their own faith. Judging from their narratives travel in the early days seemed to incite those who indulged in it to stretch credulity to its utmost limit. But how the people of ages, not even very far removed from our own, loved such travellers' tales and thrilled to their recital! There were, of course, even in those days, sceptics. One such was C. B. Otho, who, a few years after Meshalmah's letter was written, attacked the Sambation legend in vigorous Latin. After tearing it to pieces he laid down his pen with the words:

Ivimus itaque per concitatos monstrosi fluminis impetus, exhaustus saxosos, qui damnosa naufragia minabantur, gurgites, sedavimus qui per arenosos vortices grassabantur turbines, et perpetuis Sambationem feriari jubemus Sabbathis.²

¹ Dissertatio de Flumine Sabbathico, Ugolini, Thesaurus, vii.
² Ibid. col. 1031.