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| **Did any of the lost tribes go north?**  ***(Is the “Sambatyon” the Bosphorous?)***  by John Hulley     |  | | --- | | *Holding a BA in economics from Harvard University, Yochanan Hevroni Ben David worked as a senior economist at the World Bank for ten years. He has pubished on subjects ranging from geophysics to trade, in journals such as Nature and World Politics.*  *In 1983 Ben David came to live in Israel, where he settled in Kiryat Arba. This paper is an excerpt from a book in progress on the lost tribes and related topics.* |   ***This article has been updated and retitled:***  ***CROSSING  THE  BOSPHORUS  INTO  EUROPE***  School children in Israel learn an ancient Jewish tradition about the disappearance of the Lost Tribes across a mysterious river named Sambatyon.   But, if they ask where that river may be, their teachers cannot tell them.  It is not on any map, for -- until now -- it has not been found.  If this mysteri­ous river could be identified, its location might help in the search for Ephraim.  **A.   Jewish  religious tradition**            The tradition about the Sambatyon goes back to sacred Jewish texts.[[1]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn1" \o ") According to these it is a very unusual river.  For example Rabbi Akiva[[2]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn2" \o ") is reported to have said that  " . . .  the river Sambat­yon carries stones the whole week but allows them to rest on the Sabbath"  (Gene­sis Rabba 11:5).  Rabbi Nachmanides,[[3]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn3" \o ") commenting on Deuteronomy 32:36, wrote: " . . .  it is called Sabbatyon[[4]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn4" \o ") because of its rest on the Sabbath."  More star­tling, if less consistent, details are given in classical sources,[[5]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn5" \o ") as well as in medieval writings.[[6]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn6" \o ")            Certainly there are rivers which stop when they dry up in summer; but such changes are season­al, not weekly.  At river mouths the incoming tide may block the out-flowing waters; but such interruptions occur roughly twice a day.  What sort of a river would stop once a week?  It has eluded the efforts of rabbis and other explorers to find a river with anything remote­ly resembling the peculiarities described in the tradi­tion.  Today the quest continues, but still without success.            However there is a body of water with unusual characteristics, which the Cimmerians must have crossed -- the Bosphorus.   For it is the only route by which the Lydians could have driven the Cimmerians out of Asia Minor.[[7]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn7" \o ")  The Lydian Empire had reached its maximum dimensions by then.  Covering western Asia Minor, its eastern bound­ary simply led to other countries in Asia Minor, while its other boundaries were all maritime.  The only nearby land outside the region was Thrace across the Bosphorus.   Further evidence for this point of exit may be seen in the fact that the next stage in Cimmerian history occurred in southeast Eu­rope.[[8]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn8" \o ")            The Bosphorus does have characteristics, both real and legendary, which are somewhat reminiscent of the Sambatyon  **B.     How the Bosphorus stops**            The Bos­phorus is the strait through which the waters of the Black Sea rush past Istanbul toward the Aegean.  About once a week the current slows down drastically, stops or even reverses; the inter­rup­tion may last for a day or more.[[9]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn9" \o ")  It is a real hazard for sailors, as can be seen in the pilot's hand­book put out by the British Admiralty for the area.[[10]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn10" \o ")            The phenomenon was known to navigators in classical times.  Strabo mentioned it: ". . . the strait at Byzantium [the Bosphorus] . . . as Hipparchus reports, even stands still sometimes."  (Strabo, Geography 1.3.12)            It must have been on the basis of this knowledge that the Greeks were able to sail into the Black Sea for trade and coloniza­tion.  Since the current averages about three miles an hour, it would have been close to impossible to navigate up the Bos­phorus most days.  It is supposed that Greek ships would wait at the southern end -- for days at a time if necessary -- until the current stopped or reversed.  They might then sail up it in a few hours.            What makes the Bosphorus stop is the wind.  A persis­tent breeze from the southwest can pile up water at the southern end of the strait (i.e. on the northeast­ern shore of the Sea of Marmora); and the same wind will simulta­neously draw water away from the northern end (i.e. from the south­western shore of the Black Sea).  In such conditions the normal gradient of the water in the Bosphorus can be sharply reduced, eliminated or even reversed.  The current will correspondingly slow down, stop or flow backwards.            These effects do not recur on any fixed day of the week, but they do happen about once a week.  One series of observations during a period from April through September yielded an average of 4.8 days per month.[[11]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn11" \o ")  In other words during that particular half-year they occurred on average every 6 days and 8 hours.  In different periods the average might thus easily be once a week.            These characteristics of the Bosphorus are thus rather similar to those of the legendary Sambatyon, without being exactly the same.  In both cases the current stops; but in the first of them it also reverses.  In both cases the periodicity is approximately weekly; but in the second one it is exactly so, and occurs always on the same day of the week.            The significance of this partial simi­larity can best be evaluated in light of another point in the tradition.  **C.    How the stones were stilled**            According to Jewish tradition[[12]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn12" \o ") stones come to rest in the "Sambatyon" on the Sabbath.   A parallel may be seen in the Greek legend of the Argonauts.    In those days such legends were part of every-day conversation.  And this one was the best-known tradition about the Bosphorus.  Anyone crossing it would be likely to hear the story referred to by boatmen and other local inhabitants.            An important feature of the story is a pair of giant rocks at the entrance to the strait from the Black Sea.  Today they are still a peril to shipping; but in times gone by they were still more so.  According to the tradition, they were so loosely emplaced that they would on occasion strike each other; hence their name -- Sym­plegadae (= Clashers).  Boats attempting to sail between them might thus be smashed to pieces.            It had been prophesied that the rocks would come to rest only if and when heroes would successfully pass through them.  This condition was fortunately fulfilled when Jason and his Argonauts passed through in search of the Golden Fleece.  Their ship, the "Argo", sustained only slight damage; and the rocks are said then to have become sta­tionary.  According to the legend, the water link between the Black Sea and the Aegean was thereby opened to naviga­tors from that time forth.            In this case a connection appears between the religious tradition about the Sambatyon and the Greek legend about the Bosphorus.  What they have in common is the concept of rocks coming to rest.  But what is a weekly event in the first case is once and for all in the second.  As in the case of the stopping of the current (see previous sec­tion), the similar­ity with respect to the stones is only partial.  **D.   How the location was forgotten**            If the body of water in question is now known as the Bosphorus, how did it lose the name of Sambatyon?   The probable answer is that Bosphorus -- a word with Greek roots -- was applied to the strait by Greek traders and colonists, who began to penetrate the area in the 7th century.  Their presence then increased only gradually.  The Cimmerians must have crossed late in the 7th or early in the 6th century.[[13]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn13" \o ")  Accordingly they are likely to have heard from the local inhabitants an older pre-Greek name -- Sambatyon.[[14]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn14" \o ")            When information about the crossing reached Jerusalem, no one there may have known where it was.  Neither Sambatyon nor Bosphorus are mentioned in the Old Testament.    After all it is more than 500 miles away to the northwest.  But why was its loca­tion not found out through inquiry?            One reason could be the state of weakness and confusion then reigning in Jerusalem.  The date when the Cimmerians crossed coincided approximately with the deportations to Babylon.[[15]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn15" \o ")  The First Temple was destroyed.            In these terrible circum­stances information coming from a group of exiles from the northern kingdom, too far away to help Israel, may not have received much atten­tion.  The Babylonian exile would have taken priority in the minds of the people of the south­ern kingdom.            By the time of the return from Babylon, led by Ezra and Nehemiah, Greek influence and, with it, Greek names were spreading throughout the east Mediterranean area.  It would have been more difficult to ascertain the whereabouts of a distant river which had once been called Sambatyon.            Meanwhile the Ephraimite escapees too were losing contact with their old home.   On the other side of the Bos­phorus they were entering a different world of Celtic and other tribes.  From there very little news about them reached Israel.  Thus the Sam­batyon -- wherever it might be -- came to be known in Jerusalem as an unknown place the escapees had last been heard from before contact faded out.            Confirmation of this identification of the Sambatyon can be found in a Christian source a thousand years later.  Jerome,[[16]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftn16" \o ") living in Jerusalem ??, recorded a local tradition that the lost tribes were at the Bosphorus.            The Bosphorus can be observed; the Sambatyon at present can only be visualized.  What are the chances that they are the same?  The similarities, partial as they are, could be just a coinci­den­ce.  Neverthe­less the exceptional nature of their distinguishing charac­teristics makes any similar­ity at all more likely to be signifi­cant.            Certainly there is a differ­ence between a river that stops on average about once a week and one that does so exactly on the Sabbath.  Nevertheless, so far as the frequency of stop­ping is concerned, they are much more similar to each other than to any other rivers or straits.  After all, how many rivers or straits are there in the world that stop anywhere close to once a week?            Not only can the remarkable behaviour of the current be explained, but also the movement of the stones.  And the disap­pearance of the name can be ac­counted for too.            Two other factors are worth considering: first, the Cim­merians almost certainly did cross the Bosphorus or nearby waters into Europe, thus putting themselves on the other side of it, in accord with tradition; second, plausible alter­natives to this identification of the Sambatyon are lacking.            The identification cannot be absolute; but the Bosphorus emerges as the best candidate so far proposed for the mysterious Sambatyon of Jewish tradition.  It thus adds further evidence for the identification of the Cimmerians as the lost tribes of Israel.  [[1]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref1" \o ") Sanhedrin (BT) 65b; Jeru­salem Talmud Sanhedrin (JT) 10:6; Lamenta­tions Rabba 2:9; Genesis Rabba 11:5, 73:6; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Exodus 34:10; Nachmanides on Deuteronomy 32:36.  [[2]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref2" \o ")  2nd century, A.D.  [[3]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref3" \o ")  13th century.  [[4]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref4" \o ")  A variant form of the name.  [[5]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref5" \o ")  Pliny, Natural History 31:24; Joseph­us, Wars of the Jews, 7:96-99.  [[6]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref6" \o ") See Rafael Eisenberg, A Matter of Return, Feldheim, Jerusalem, 1980, pp.135-7; Enc.Jud. s.v. "Sambatyon".  [[7]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref7" \o ")   Herodotus, Persian Wars,  Book I, Chapter16.  The Cimmerians have been identified as Ephraimites by various authors, and will be thus identified in a book by this author, now in preparation.  [[8]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref8" \o ")   On the date of the Cimmerian appearance in the Crimea see for example M. Ros­tov­tzeff, Iranians and Greeks in South Rus­sia, Ox­ford, 1922, pp.37,44.  [[9]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref9" \o ")   C. G. Gunnerson and E. Ozturgut, "The Bosphorus" in E. T. Degens and D. A. Ross (eds.) The Black Sea -- Geology, Chemistry and Biology, American Association of Petroleum Geologists, Tulsa, 1974, p.103.  [[10]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref10" \o ") See “Currents” in Black Sea Pilot, Hydrographic Department, Admiralty, London, 1955 edition (or other editions presumably)    [[11]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref11" \o ")  B. W. Labaree, "How the Greeks sailed into the Black Sea", American Journal of Archaeology, vol 61 (1957), pp.29-33.  [[12]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref12" \o ")   Cited at the beginning of this article.  [[13]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref13" \o ")  According to the regnal dates (605-560 B.C.) of King Alyattes of Lydia, who chased them out of Asia Minor.  [[14]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref14" \o ")  The root of the last part of the name Sambatyon could be related to Bithynia, the region on the south shore of the Bosphorus; see my "Did the Lost Tribes go north", B'Or HaTorah, Jerusalem, 1987, pp.131-133 (republished in Hebrew by the same magazine in 1992 ???)   For other background information on the name see Wilhelm Schulze, "Samstag", Zeit­schrift für vergleichende Sprach­forschung, vol. XXXIII (1895), pp.378-84;  Adolphe Reinach, Étude sur le Déluge en Phrygie et le Syncrétisme Judéo-Phrygien, Durlacher, Paris, 1913, pp.4, 5, 68, 72-7.  [[15]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref15" \o ")  Two waves of deportation to Babylon are mentioned in the Bible: one in 597 (II Kings 24:8 ff; Jeremiah 13:18-19; II Chronicles 36:9-10); the oth­er in 586 (II Kings 25:1-21; Jeremiah 39:1-10; 52:1-30; II Chronicles 36:11-21) when the First Temple was de­stroyed.  There was also an earlier one in 605, and a later one in 582 (Enc. Jud. s.v. "History", pp.607, 609).  [[16]](http://www.originofnations.org/books,%20papers/did_any_of_the_lost_tribes_go_north.htm" \l "_ftnref16" \o ")  Commentary on Zechariah 10:11. |

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