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The Cock in the Old Testament

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IN tracing the history of the domestic fowl, one is commonly confronted with the statement that there is no mention of the cock in the Old Testament, although it is evident, from the New Testament, that, in the first century of our era, it was a familiar and well-known bird in Palestine.

According to Rabbinic interpretation, however, the cock is mentioned twice in the Old Testament. The earlier of these two passages is Isaiah 22 17, the prophecy against Shebna, the Grand Vizier. The word here interpreted cock is the familiar Hebrew word **גִּבּוֹר**, which regularly means "man" and more particularly "man as strong, distinguished from women, children and non-combatants, whom he is to defend; chiefly poetic,"—so the Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius.

This passage is a somewhat difficult one to translate. The **גִּבּוֹר** has been introduced in a perplexing manner, apparently with the intention of a sort of a pun on the word **קִבְרֵי** in the preceding verse.¹ Commentators, practically without exception, regard the word as having here its regular meaning. The Greek translators so interpreted it and apparently also the Syriac and Targum. Jerome, however, translates it by *gallus gallinaceus*, evidence that at his time the Rabbinical tradition was well established, as indeed it may be verified from extant sources. Elsewhere in Rabbinical literature it has the same meaning, according to Jastrow, who cites Yoma I. 8, 20^b; Y. Shek. V, 48^d bot.; and perhaps Y. Succ. V, 55^c.

¹ For fuller discussion of this passage cf. my article on The Cock in *JAOS*, 1914.

Presumably the meaning cock was given to the word in Rabbinical literature as a derivation from the sense "male".² It was the obscurity of the passage which led to the interpretation of the word here in this unusual sense by the Rabbinical exegetes. There is no good ground, however, for attributing the meaning "cock" to the word נָכָר in classical Hebrew, or to suppose that the cock was known by this name until some time after the commencement of our era.

The second passage in which, according to the Rabbinical interpreters, the cock is mentioned, is Job 38 36. The word here used is שָׁכָר. This word is an ἀπαξ λεγόμενον. The general sense of the passage is apparent from the context, which is a description of the "ordinances of the heavens," and more particularly of the workings of the clouds, the waters, the lightnings, &c. The corresponding word in the first half of the verse is סְחוֹת, which occurs in one other passage in the Bible, Psalm 51 8, where it is translated, apparently correctly, "inward parts" and has for its correspondent סֵתֶם, "secret". In our passage סְחוֹת appears to mean those things which are hidden behind the clouds, in the inwards of the clouds, and its parallel, שָׁכָר, in the second half of the verse, would have substantially the same meaning. It is translated in the English Bible "heart" (A. V.), "mind" (R. V.), with the suggestion in the margin of "meteor". This verse evidently caused much difficulty at an early date. The Septuagint rendering is a fanciful guess, showing plainly inability to translate. Jerome renders שָׁכָר *gallus*, evidence that by his time the Rabbinic interpretation had been accepted. The whole context of the passage makes this translation quite impossible; it simply converts the verse into nonsense.

Jastrow, in his Dictionary of the Targumim, gives the word as meaning "cock", with a feminine form שָׁכָרָא meaning "hen", but the passages quoted by him mention the word as a sort of curiosity in nomenclature, said to be used for the cock in some other place, Rome, Arabia, &c. In classical Hebrew certainly שָׁכָר did not mean "cock", and the context proves that the cock is not mentioned in Job 38 36.³

² According to Jastrow it sometimes means *male member*.

³ For fuller discussion and for origin of this interpretation cf. *JAOS*, 1914.

There is, however, a passage in the Old Testament in which the cock is mentioned, which has been strangely overlooked by commentators and lexicographers. The passage in question is Prov 30 29-31. This is one of the collection of "three and four" riddles contained in that chapter. The Hebrew text, as it has come down to us in the Masoretic recension, is manifestly imperfect. It reads as follows:—

שְׁלֵשָׁה הֵמָּה מִיִּמְכֵי צֶעַד וְאַרְבָּעָה מִיִּמְכֵי לָכֶת:
 לֵישׁ גְּבוּר בְּבֹהַמָּה וְלֹא־יֵשׁוּב מִפְּנֵי־כָל:
 וְרִיר מְתַנִּים
 אִז תִּישׁ
 וּמֶלֶךְ אֱלֻקִּים עִמּוֹ:

The first two verses are complete and intelligible:—

Three there be stately of march and four stately in going.

The lion, lord of beasts, that turneth before none.

There should be, according to the analogy of the other riddles in this collection, besides the lion, three other creatures "stately of march", and symmetry requires that these should be described in lines in general of the same length and character as that describing the lion. There are, in fact, three creatures mentioned. The first is the **וְרִיר**. This word, an *ἄπαξ λεγόμενον*, the Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius derives from **וּר** meaning "press", "compress". It is followed by the Hebrew word for loins, **מְתַנִּים**. The creature named has commonly been supposed to be described by these two words as "pressed together" or "well girt in the loins". The Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius suggests for this alleged animal the greyhound or war-horse, but notes that the older versions make it the "cock" and the Talmud the "raven". Further it notes that in New Hebrew the word **וְרִיר** means "starling", except in this passage, where it is interpreted as "war-horse". In Aramaic it means "starling". A similar word appears in Arabic, **وَرِير**, with the same sense, but is probably a loan-word. The modern interpreters in general render the two words **וְרִיר מְתַנִּים** "greyhound", "war-horse" or "well girt in the loins", except Toy in the International Commentary, who strangely omits this line altogether.

With regard to the third creature who marches well, there is no question. The word שִׁי is good Hebrew for "he-goat"; but the whole of the remainder of the line after the word he-goat, which should describe his march or the reason for including him in the riddle, is omitted.

The fourth creature is the king, but the words that follow, עַמֵּי אֱלֹקִים, make no sense whatever. Indeed, the first of them is not a word, but a collection of letters, so that Geiger thought it to be the proper name, Alcimus, and hence assigned the proverb to the Maccabaeian period. Toy renders "the he-goat", with a series of dashes for the rest of that line, and "a king", with a similar series of dashes for the remainder of that line. Others have interpreted the last line as "the king against whom there is no rising", or "the king when his army is with him". The Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius inclines, apparently, to the latter meaning, equating אֱלֹקִים with the Arabic الْقَوْمُ "people", and translating it "band of soldiers". Others have suggested that אֱלֹקִים is a textual error for אֱלֹהִים.

The Greek, Syriac and Targum, the latter practically a duplicate in this passage of the Syriac, give an entirely intelligible text for these three verses, hopelessly defective in the Hebrew, and one to the correctness of which the remains of the Hebrew text seem to me to testify in the most unmistakeable manner. The Greek text reads:

Καὶ ἀλέκτωρ ἐμπεριπατῶν θηλείαις εὐψυχος
 Καὶ τράγος ἠγούμενος αἰπολίου
 Καὶ βασιλεὺς δημηγορῶν ἐν ἔθνει.

The Peshitto Syriac:

אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים
 אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים
 אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים

The Targum:

ואבכא דמידרביל בינת תרנוגלי
 ותישא דאזיל בית גיורא
 ומלכא דקאים וממליל בית עממיה:

The three agree, and may be translated as follows:—

“And the cock, strutting pompously among the hens;

“And the he-goat, leader of the flock;

“And a king that (standeth and⁴) speaketh among his people.”

תַּתִּימִים of the word **תַּתִּימִים** in the first line of the Masoretic text of verse 31 is a fragment of the participial form of a hithpael verb. עִמּוֹ, the last word of the last line, is correct in the Hebrew and simply mispointed. עִמּוֹ “with him”, for עִמּוֹ “his people”. The second word of the last line, אֶלְקוֹם, as testified by the Targum, contains some part of the verb קוּם, to rise. For this we have also the testimony of the Vulgate version: *Nec est rex qui resistat ei*. In the other two lines of verse 31 the Vulgate reads *gallus succinctus lumbos; et aries*, following the Masoretic text. It would appear that by Jerome’s time the Masoretic text had become, so far at least as the first and second lines of verse 31 are concerned, mutilated and unintelligible⁵, as at present; but still the tradition remained that the cock was the creature named in the first line.

I think the evidence is sufficient to justify the translation of **קִרְיִר** in the first line of verse 31 as cock. With this compare also the Arabic **قِرْيَر** or **قِرْيَر** “cock”. **قِرْيَر** and **قِرْيَر** are both words of the onomatapoetic type, and indicating the sound made by a bird. Originally probably such words were applicable to more than one bird. Ultimately the Hebrew and Aramaic words were applied to the starling; the similar Arabic onomatapoeticon was applied to the cock.

Presumably this passage dates the knowledge of the cock among the Hebrews and in Palestine as early as the third century B. C.

So far as archeological remains are concerned, the earliest evidence of the cock in Palestine or Syria is the Chthonic cock found by Dr. Thiersch and myself in the painted tombs in the Necropolis at Marissa.⁶

⁴ Only in the Targum.

⁵ For the reason of the elision and consequent mutilation of the Hebrew text cf. article in *JAOS*.

⁶ I am indebted to Dr. Richard Gottheil for some kind help in the Aramaic and Arabic references.