

# THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF TYRE

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To the north of Israel, along a strip of coastland between the Mediterranean Sea and the Lebanon Mountains, ran a strand of city-states peopled by Canaanites distinguished from other Canaanites by the name the Hellenes gave them: Phoenicians.<sup>1</sup> With good natural harbors, fine growths of timber for ships, and constricted by the meagerness of their hinterland, the Phoenicians early took to the sea. Their merchant fleets ranged the Mediterranean and beyond the Pillars of Heracles into the Atlantic, and a small flotilla of Phoenician ships made the first recorded circumnavigation of Africa.<sup>2</sup>

The wares the Phoenicians produced and sold were luxury goods for rich customers, among them the splendid cedars of the Lebanon that far-off kings sought for their palaces and temples. They also long held a virtual monopoly on making purple dyes, an industry prodigiously profitable, for the wearing of purple was held to confer such dignity that it is even today the royal color.

The Phoenicians were resourceful and successful, but Plutarch describes them as “a grim people, averse to good humor.” Homer deems them to be master mariners but greedy and tricky. Both Homer and Herodotus recall accusations of kidnapping and abduction, and that correlates with the denunciations of biblical prophets. Amos in the eighth century speaks of the Phoenicians of Tyre selling a people with whom they had *a covenant of brotherhood* into captivity in Edom (Amos 1:9). Joel in the fifth century addresses the Phoenicians of Tyre and Sidon as well as the Philistines: *You have sold the people of Judah and the people of Jerusalem to the Ionians, so you have removed them far away from their homeland* (Joel 4:6).

Each city-state of Phoenicia had its own king, at times an independent sovereign and at times a vassal of an imperial power. Among those city-states, Sidon was early pre-eminent; so much so that in biblical usage “Sidonians” came to mean all inhabitants of southern Phoenicia. After the 12th century BCE, pre-eminence shifted to Tyre, and eventually Tyre and Sidon were united under one ruler.<sup>3</sup> Tyre was the Phoenician city-state closest to Israel, some 20 miles north of what is now called Haifa Bay, adjacent to the territory

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of the tribe of Asher. The demarcation line may at times have been flexible, for when King David took a census of his people Israelites were found dwelling at the verge of Tyre and Sidon (II Sam. 24:6-7).

The name Tyre [Hebrew *Tsor*] means “rock,” and the city originally founded on the mainland did indeed have its citadel on an isle of rock some quarter-mile out to sea. Here, on a territory better measured in acres than miles, stood the *fortified city of Tyre* (Josh. 19:29), so stoutly walled that it withstood sieges for months and even years at a time.

With its industries, its colonies and daughter-cities dotting the littorals and islands of the Mediterranean, its far-ranging merchant fleets and overland caravans, Tyre became the opulent entrepôt apostrophized in the sixth-century Book of Ezekiel: *O, dweller at the entrance to the sea, merchant of the peoples to many isles . . . O, Tyre, you have said, ‘I am the perfection of beauty.’ In the heart of the seas are your borders. Your builders made perfect your beauty* (27:3-4). There follows (vv. 12-25) an exotic catalogue of far-ranging commerce in valuable wares. Of Tyrian affluence, Zechariah commented, *She [Tyre] has amassed silver like dust, and gold like the mud in the streets* (Zech. 9:2).

In such a society it was not declass   to be in trade. On the contrary, the men who conducted its business were the ruling elite of a city that Isaiah called *Tyre, the crowning city whose merchants were princes, whose traders the earth honored* (Isa. 23:8). Even in the days of this glory, the prophets were confident that that the hubristic arrogance of the Tyrians would eventually bring their downfall (Isa. 23; Ezek. 26-28; Joel 4:47; Amos 1:9; Zech. 9:2).

#### THE CANAANITE-PHOENICIAN CULTS

The Phoenicians shared the Canaanite pantheon of gods and goddesses with entangled titles, provinces, attributes and relationships. The rulers of Phoenician cities took prominent roles in religion, with kings and queens serving as priests and priestesses. The clergy also included ecstatic prophets, diviners, and ritual prostitutes of both genders.

The biblical texts refer to any Canaanite god as the *baal*, a title meaning “lord” or “master,” bestowed on both male deities and mortals of high rank. Each *baal* had his own personal name, but the biblical writers did not bother to distinguish between one *baal* and another, nor do those English transla-

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tions that use “Baal” as though it were itself a proper name. By the first millennium, Tyre’s tutelary god was Baal-Melqart [Baal King-of-the-City], and they credited him with the invention of their lucrative process for making purple dye from the murex snail.

Besides the plethora of *baalim*, the Phoenicians adored the goddesses Ash-tarte, Asherah and Anat. Ashtarte, equivalent to the Mesopotamian Ishtar, was a blatantly sensual fertility goddess, hailed as Queen of Heaven or Holy One, depicted in small, crude and very popular images. With her name deliberately distorted by the contemptuous biblical writers, she became the *Ash-toreth of the Sidonians* patronized by Solomon (I Kgs. 11:5).<sup>4</sup> The Phoenician Asherah was a matronly female deity, but in biblical usage *asherah* refers not to a persona but to a consecrated tree or indecent wooden object venerated by her devotees. The *asherah* and the rites performed around it were forbidden to the Israelites in a ban often violated.

Canaanite idolatry and its attendant ritual debaucheries and perversions were sternly forbidden but kept some kind of allure throughout the age of the Judges and of the First Temple. That allure extended even to the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice at a ceremonial site called a *tophet*. There was such a *tophet* outside Jerusalem in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom [תּוֹפֶת־בֶּן־הִנּוֹם – *Gai Ben-Hinnom*] that as a place of horror has given its name to Gehenna. There Ahaz and Manasseh, Kings of Judah, gave their own offspring to *pass through the fire according to the abominations of the heathen* (II Chron. 28:3, 33:6). It is not known how far, if at all, the Tyrians practiced human sacrifice, but they did at least consider it as a defense strategy against Alexander of Macedon, and its daughter city Carthage was notorious for immolation of its babies and toddlers.

The idolatry and corruption of the Canaanites were at once abhorrent and seductive to the children of Israel, bad examples for those weak in mind and spirit. But it was only by way of Tyre that there were calculated programs to impose them on Israel and Judah by force.

## DAVID, SOLOMON AND HIRAM

The first record of a direct connection between Israel and Tyre comes when the new Kingdom of Israel began to flourish and King David had established

his capital in Jerusalem. Tyre's youthful King Hiram seems to have taken the initiative in making himself useful to a neighbor on the rise: *David waxed greater and greater, for the Lord the God of Hosts was with him. And Hiram, King of Tyre, sent messengers to David and cedar trees and carpenters, and masons, and they built David a house* (II Sam. 5:10-11).

These adjacent realms were both ascendant, and the interests of Israel as an agrarian land power and Tyre as a commercial-maritime power were complementary rather than competitive. David's victories over the Philistines and the Arameans enhanced the security of a Tyre that enjoyed his good will, while Hiram could offer building and technical skills as yet unknown to the Israelites.

This was the start of an entente that continued between Solomon and Hiram, who were friends, allies, partners, and perhaps in-laws, passing between them goods, craftsmen, letters, riddles and wagers.<sup>5</sup> The Temple was an innovation in Israelite religious life, and when Solomon began construction he turned to Hiram, an experienced builder of temples:

*'Please, then, give orders for cedar trees to be hewn for me out of the Lebanon. And my workers shall be with your workers. And I will pay you all wages you say for your workers, for you know there is no man among us who knows how to hew timber like the Sidonians.'*

[. . .] *So Hiram gave Solomon all the cedar wood and cypress wood he desired, and Solomon gave Hiram 20,000 kor of wheat, food for his household, and 20 kor of beaten oil. So Solomon paid to Hiram year by year* (I Kgs. 5:20-25).

Hiram delivered the timber by floating logs down the Mediterranean coast to Jaffa. Solomon, in exchange, sent wheat, barley, wine and oil. This is an example on a royal scale of how Israel provided urban Tyre with produce of the land, as it was still doing centuries later in the catalogue of Ezekiel 27: *Judah and the land of Israel were your merchants, they trafficked with you in wheat . . . honey, oil, and balm* (v. 17). Tyre, in exchange, might find a nearby market for its own wares, and as Israel grew in population and prosperity so too would grow demand for the luxuries in which the Phoenicians dealt.<sup>6</sup>

The decorative arts were well known to the Israelites, but when Solomon raised the Temple his father had designed he entrusted its embellishment to

Hiram's own master of all arts, the son of an Israelite mother and a Tyrian father, and also named Hiram. He came with his King's recommendation as:

*'. . . a wise man, knowing how to work in gold, in silver, in bronze, in iron, in stones and in wood, in purple, in blue, and in fine linen, and in crimson, and to engrave any kind of engraving and devise anything that is given to him . . . [to work] with your skillful men and the skillful men of my lord David your father'* (II Chron. 2:13; cf. I Kg. 7:13-14).

This Hiram cast Yachin and Boaz, the twin bronze pillars of the Temple in Jerusalem. Perhaps he also cast the pillars of King Hiram's temple to the Tyrian god Baal-Melqart. The Hellenes oddly equated Melqart with their own Heracles, so this is likely the same temple that impressed Herodotus 500 years later:

I made a voyage to Tyre in Phoenicia, hearing there was a temple of Heracles at that place, very highly venerated. I visited the temple and found it richly adorned with a number of offerings, among which were two pillars, one of pure gold, the other of emerald, shining with great brilliancy at night. (*The Persian Wars*, Book II:44)

The Tyrians who built and adorned David's palace and Solomon's Temple thereby introduced into Israel the Phoenician styles and techniques that were to be embedded there for generations to come.

Solomon and Hiram became partners in lucrative merchant-marine ventures. Israel had a port at Ezion-geber (Elath), with access to the rich trade-lanes of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, but it had little experience with shipbuilding and seafaring. Tyre had the ships and the sailors, but lacked access to the southern and eastern waters. So the two kings pooled their respective resources to acquire the pure gold of Ophir, a gold finer and therefore more treasured than any other gold (Isa. 13:12; Ps. 45:10; Job 22:24, 28:16).<sup>7</sup> They also imported thence exotic goods rare in their own parts, perhaps in quantities that left them enough to be traded to other countries. The fleets must also have carried out exports for sale or barter in Ophir, but it is only a guess that Israel sent agricultural products – olive oil, wine, honey, balm, nuts – while Tyre sent luxury consumer goods.

*King Solomon also built a fleet of ships at Ezion-geber, that is near Elath on the shore of the Red Sea in the land of Edom. Hi-*

*ram sent servants of his with the fleet, mariners who were experienced on the sea, to serve with Solomon's men. They came to Ophir. There they obtained gold in the amount of 420 talents [16 tons] which they delivered to King Solomon. . . . Hiram's fleet, which carried gold from Ophir, brought in from Ophir a huge quantity of almug wood and precious stones. The King used the wood for decorations in the House of the Lord and in the royal palace, and for harps and lyres for the musicians. . . . For the King had a Tarshish fleet on the sea, along with Hiram's fleet. Once every three years, the Tarshish fleet came in, bearing gold and silver, ivory, apes and peacocks (I Kgs. 9:26-28, 10:11, 21-22).*

The Chronicler later gives a similar account, but adding weight to the cargo:

*At that time, Solomon went to Ezion-Geber and to Eloth on the seacoast of the land of Edom. Hiram sent him, under the charge of servants, a fleet with a crew of expert seamen. They went with Solomon's men to Ophir, and obtained gold there in the amount of 450 talents [17 tons], which they brought to King Solomon (II Chron. 8:17). The fleet traveled to Tarshish with Hiram's servants . Once every three years the Tarshish fleet came in bearing gold and silver, ivory, apes and peacocks (II Chron. 9:21).*

Fabled Ophir was somewhere on the shores of the Indian Ocean, perhaps on the western coast of India. Tarshish – the destination of the runaway prophet Jonah when he sailed from Jaffa (Jon. 1:3) – can be identified with Tartessos on the Atlantic coast of Spain. So the mention of *Tarshish fleets* defines not the destination of the fleet but the design of its ships; the design the Phoenicians devised for vessels to carry the heavy silver ore they imported from Tarshish and could just as well be used to carry the heavy gold ore from Ophir. Perhaps when the Chronicler reported that the fleet *traveled to Tarshish* he supposed that a Tarshish ship sails only to and fro Tarshish, as a later landlubber might suppose that a Yankee Clipper sails only to and fro the northern United States.

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After the days of Solomon and Hiram, a few generations pass without a mention of Tyre in the Bible. During this time, the line of Hiram ended and there came a period of shaky regimes, assassinations, usurpations and fratricides that concluded with the ascension of Ittobaal, a priest of Astharte, who founded a dynasty that was to last for about a century. Ittobaal appears in the biblical record as *Ethbaal, King of the Sidonians* (I Kgs. 17:31). The contrast with Hiram's style as "King of Tyre" indicates that at this time Tyre and Sidon were merged in a single realm that embraced all of southern Phoenicia.

Ethbaal came to power in Tyre at nearly the same time that Omri founded his dynasty in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. These rulers of adjacent realms would have had interests in common rather than at odds. The Omrides, aspiring to material prosperity, would benefit from links with the rich merchant-state so near by. Unlike Solomon, Omri could not offer Tyrian fleets access to Ezion-geber, but he did control long miles of the King's Highway and other important caravan routes. The value to Tyre of the use of those roads would be balanced by the value to Israel of having them well used. Urban Tyre could buy grain, olive oil, honey and other produce from agrarian Israel, and perhaps some of the wool that the King of Moab had to deliver to the King of Israel (II Kgs. 3:4) was used in the textile industry of Tyre. Town life was burgeoning in Israel, with a newly affluent urban class to buy Tyre's wares, and employ Tyrian craftsmen and artisans. Samaria, the new capital, would be a particularly good market.

It is plausible to suppose that Israel and Tyre now had mutually profitable commercial relations. It is only speculative that they may have had a diplomatic entente. It is doubtful that they had a military alliance, for tiny Tyre, dependent on foreign mercenaries to man the fortifications of its rock, would have little to contribute. When an aggressive and ferocious King of Assyria was approaching, Tyre-Sidon did not join the regional coalition for mutual defense but bought its own security with lavish tribute-gifts. If Israel ever received any encouragement much less support from Tyre in its stand against Assyrian aggression, or when it was twice invaded by Aram of Damascus, there is no extant record of it.

AHAB AND JEZEBEL

The details of the bond between the ruling dynasties of Israel and Tyre-Sidon are vague, but one facet of it is certain: Omri's son Ahab married Ethbaal's daughter Jezebel. When Ahab took the Phoenician princess to wife many at his court may have thought it a brilliant match. It can be imagined that the nuptials were an occasion for the grandeur and high hopes reflected in Psalm 45, introduced as *a love song to be sung to the tune "Lilies,"* that celebrates the wedding of an Israelite king and a *daughter of Tyre* (v. 13). But Ahab's marriage to a daughter of Tyre turned out to be a curse on him and his dynasty:

*And Ahab ben-Omri reigned over Israel . . . in Samaria for twenty-two years. And Ahab ben-Omri did the evil thing in the eyes of The Lord above all who were before him.*

*And it came to pass – as if it were a light thing his walking in the sins of Jeroboam ben-Nebat – he took a wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, King of the Sidonians, and went and served the baal and bowed down to him.*

*He erected an altar to the baal in the temple of the baal that he built in Samaria and he made an asherah (I Kgs. 16:29-32).*

This passage interweaves Ahab's marriage with his religious lapses, as though they were cause-and-effect. Either he made a foreign pagan woman his consort because he lacked religious values, or she seduced him into religious infidelity, or both. The Narrator explicitly attributes Ahab's misdoings to the influence of the Phoenician princess and his own submission to it: *Surely, there was none like Ahab, who sold himself to do the evil thing in the eyes of The Lord whom Jezebel his wife stirred up* (21:25).

The accusation that he *sold himself* hints that he abandoned or even betrayed his own inclinations to follow hers. If in that sense he sold himself, what was the price? An alliance with Tyre-Sidon would be a considerable enticement if it brought a share in its wealth, access to its timber and its building skills, the use of its fleets and perhaps lucrative joint-trade ventures. Such opportunities could well tempt a ruler who aspired to make his realm more urban, more commercial and therefore more affluent, and therefore more powerful.

It may be that such advantages entailed a real or imagined need to please the Phoenician princess and her father. Be that as it may, Ahab was extraor-

dinarily indulgent with her, permitting her to wield power beyond the rights of the King himself much less his consort.

Solomon's many foreign wives prevailed upon him to join in the worship of the deities of their own lands, but Jezebel went far beyond that. She maintained in her service *450 prophets of the baal and 400 prophets of Asherah who eat at Jezebel's table* (18:19), far more than would suffice to minister to her personal spiritual needs. A temple to a *baal* in the capital city of Samaria and other *baal* shrines were probably erected to please her. She did not mean merely to follow her own faith in her new home, or even to foster her pagan cults alongside Israelite worship. She meant to force her Tyrian cults on all of her husband's subjects, in place of their own ancestral faith. Her method of dealing with those who opposed her was simple: She killed them. She massacred Israelite prophets who were true to the Lord (18:3,13). Her homicidal threats put the prophet Elijah to flight into exile (19:1-3). Her contempt for all Israelite law was demonstrated in the judicial murder of Naboth the Jezreelite (Ch. 21). And she perpetrated her crimes unchecked by her husband the King.

Jezebel survived Ahab, and lived through the reigns of her sons Ahaziah ben-Ahab and Jehoram ben-Ahab. To the end, she was regarded as the source of the most egregious wrongdoings of the dynasty. Just before the rebel officer Jehu slew Jehoram, he taunted him with the charge that there could be no peace with the royal house '*. . . while the whoredoms of your mother Jezebel and her witchcrafts are so many*' (II Kgs. 9:22). Adherence to pagan cults is often deemed "whoredom" so the charge may have been against the religious rather than carnal practices of the now aging Jezebel. Usually, the record of rebellions against a royal house emphasize that all the males were slain. This time, the rebel singled out a female as an arch foe. When Jezebel's own servants obeyed his command and threw her from a window, the House of Omri fell with her. This daughter of Tyre had done more than any of its kings to precipitate that fall.

The Phoenician influences brought into Israel in Jezebel's dowry were carried into the Southern Kingdom of Judah by another royal match: The marriage of Jehoram ben-Jehoshaphat, crown prince of Judah, to Ahab's sister Athaliah. Though she was not a daughter of Tyre, she was at least a foster-daughter in her character and conduct. She dominated her husband King Je-

horam and her son King Ahaziah ben-Jehoram. She seized power in Jerusalem by murdering her own grandsons to eliminate any other heir. During the six years of misrule before she was overthrown, Athaliah looted the Temple for materials to build and adorn a temple to a *baal*, that was placed under the management of a priest with the Phoenician name of Matan (11:18).

Thus these two lethal ladies between them brought ruin to the House of Omri and near-ruin to the House of David.

From the mid-ninth century onward, there is sparse mention of Tyre in the biblical record. Its men still appear as merchants; not as Isaiah's merchant princes but as fishmongers, who provoked Nehemiah's complaint that *Tyrians who lived there brought fish and all sorts of wares and sold them on the sabbath to Judeans in Jerusalem* (Neh. 13:16).

Tyre eventually lost its independence and accommodated itself to vassalage to foreign overlords, and *the crowning city* made a long slow decline into insignificance.

#### NOTES

1. On the history and culture of Phoenicia see Donald Harden, *The Phoenicians* (New York: Praeger, 1962); Sabatino Moscati *The World of the Phoenicians*, trans. Alistair Hamilton (New York: Praeger, 1968).
2. For the tale of this voyage, see Herodotus, *History of the Persian Wars*, IV:42.
3. On the history of Tyre, see H. J. Katzenelson, *History of Tyre* (Jerusalem: Schocken Institute for Jewish Research, 1972).
4. The consonants of Ashtarte were combined with the vowel sounds of *bosheth* [shame] to form Ashtoreth. The same technique was used for the element *baal* in masculine names, after the once neutral "master" became identified with the pagan deity. Thus Ishbaal and Meribaal of II Samuel became Ishbosheth and Mephibosheth in II Chronicles.
5. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book VIII:2,5. Josephus drew on the now lost work of the Hellenistic historian Menander, who used material in the archives of Tyre. He asserts that the documents were still extant in his day.
6. On trade between Israel and Tyre, see further Shulamit Geya, "Archaeological Evidence of Trade Relations Between Israel and Tyre," *Eretz Yisroel* 82 (Hebrew) pp. 44-46.
7. A shard found at Tel Qasile on the outskirts of Tel-Aviv is an invoice or receipt for "30 shekels of gold of Ophir for delivery to Bet Horin."



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