

DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS

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*Others go down to the sea in ships,
ply their trade in the mighty waters;
They have seen the works of the Lord
and His wonders in the deep (Ps. 107:23).*

THE SEA

The Land of Israel runs from sea to sea – the Great Sea (Mediterranean) on the west to the Lower Sea (Red Sea), on the south.¹ The sea and seafaring were familiar to Israelites, from their coastlines and from their ports and estuaries where foreign ships could load and unload cargoes and take on supplies, and sailors could spin their yarns. Some dwelt beside the sea and some sailed upon it, and they knew its vastness, its depths, and the often strange teeming life therein; unfathomable and turbulent, governable only by Divine might.

The earliest recorded link of Israelites to the sea is in Jacob's combined blessings and forecasts for his sons, among them Zebulun, who '*shall dwell by the seashore, he shall be a haven for ships*' (Gen. 49:13). After the settlement in the Land, the tribe of Zebulun was not directly on the seacoast but it was close to it, and the Kishon River that flows through its tribal territory gave it access to what is now called Haifa Bay. In the Song of Deborah, two more tribes are given maritime connections: *And Dan – why did he linger by the ships?/Asher remained at the seacoast/ And tarried at his landings* (Jud. 5:17). Dan would then have been still in the territory first allotted to it on the coast not far from the port of Jaffa.² The tribal territory of Asher did have a strip of coastland, adjacent to Phoenician Tyre with its wide-ranging merchant fleets.

The Israelites, from experience or observation or hearsay, knew of the remoteness and loneliness *in the heart of the seas* (Ezek. 28:2; Jon. 2:4). Even during the wandering in the desert, they were well enough aware of the

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hardship and perils of a maritime journey to be told: *Neither is it [the Torah] beyond the sea, that you should say 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?'* (Deut. 30:13).

They also knew that the farthest reaches and deepest depths of the seas were the dominion of the Lord:

*And if any conceal themselves from My sight
At the bottom of the sea,
There I will command
The serpent [nahash] to bite them* (Amos 9:3).

The moods of the sea, its sounds and its furies, provided similes and metaphors:

*Ah, the roar of many peoples
That roar as roars the sea,
The rage of nations that rage
As rage the mighty waters –
Nations raging like massive waters!* (Isa. 17:12-14).

As to the denizens of the deep, God said, *'Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, . . . God created the great tanninim and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind . . .* (Gen. 1:20-21). This category of *every living creature* subsumes fishes, cetacean mammals, octopi, squid, crustaceans, sea turtles, and other species, but in Genesis only the *tanninim* are singled out by name, perhaps because they were the most awesome of all. The *tannin* cannot now be taxonomically identified and some translators resort to the generic "monster." In modern Hebrew, *tannin* is used for crocodilians and that may be the original usage as well, for in past ages a salt-water crocodile did slink through the waters of the Mediterranean. In opposition to this, however, is Lamentations 4:3, where the *tannin* is a mammal: *Even tanninim offer the breast and suckle their young.* Perhaps, then, the King James Version is correct in rendering the *tanninim* of Genesis as "whales."

The *tannin* may have been fearsomely real, but other things thought to lurk in the depths of the sea derive not from nature but from Canaanite mythology. Among them were Leviathan, imagined as a large twisting and writhing creature with seven heads,³ the gruesome Rahab,⁴ and Yamm, a deity of seas

and rivers. To the Israelites, who may have had some notion of them only as characters in old stories, these were all merely obstreperous critters, subjects of the Lord, to be disciplined when unruly.⁶ And thus they are depicted:

*There is the sea, vast and wide,
With its creatures beyond number,
living things, small and great.
There go the ships,
and Leviathan that You formed to sport with all of them* (Ps. 104:25-26).

*You rule the swelling of the sea;
When its waves surge You still them.
You crushed Rahab; he was like a corpse* (Ps. 89:10-11).

*In that day, the Lord will punish,
With His great, cruel, mighty sword
Leviathan the Elusive Serpent —
Leviathan the Twisting Serpent;
He will slay the tannim of the sea* (Isa. 27:1).

It may even be that some biblical references to "yam [sea]" originally meant the mythological Yamm, rather than the waters themselves, especially in passages where *yam* is defeated or subdued. If so, the identity of Yamm was so long forgotten that most – though not all – of those references include the definite article, that changes the proper noun Yamm to the common noun "ha-yam [the sea]." One example may be in Psalm 74, where the control of the sea appears in company with the destruction of sea-monsters:

*It was You who drove back ha-yam with Your might,
Who smashed the heads of the tanninim in the waters;
It was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan* (vv. 13-14).

In Job 7:12, *yam* appears without the definite article and so might be citing a tale of pagan mythology: 'Am I *yam* or the tannim that you have set a watch over me?'

In other passages, Job does speak of "the sea," but in conjunction with the sea-monster Rahab:

*Who by Himself spread out the heavens,
And trod on the back of ha-yam*

. . . Under Him, Rahab's helpers sink down (9:8, 13).

By His powers He stilled ha-yam;

By His skill He struck down Rahab (26:12).

THE SHIPS

The first ship mentioned in the Bible is the Ark, that proved eminently seaworthy. It is likely that once the children of Israel were settled in their land, they made light craft for fishing on the Kinneret and for carrying travelers and goods by river, but they lacked the large, strong, timbers needed for sea-going vessels and had few good harbors and estuaries for anchorage.

Advanced nautical construction was complex and required expert skills, then found primarily among the near-by Phoenicians and the farther off peoples of the Aegean. Ships were assembled from a framework covered with wooden planks, with a deck above and a hold below, carried along by a single sail and one or two banks of oars. In the earliest days of sea-faring, the captains stayed cautiously near to shore, but in time ventured out into open waters, where lacking instruments of navigation they probably set course by observations of the sun and the pole-star.

Even if the Israelites themselves were rarely master mariners, they knew enough about sailing to recognize a disheveled ship as comparable to a disheveled ship-of-state:

Your rigging hangs loose,

The mast is not held secure,

the sail is not spread (Isa. 33:21).

Nevertheless, the techniques of navigation could also be puzzling:

Three things are beyond me . . .

How an eagle makes his way over the sky;

How a snake makes it way over a rock;

How a ship makes it way through the high seas (Prov. 30:19).

Shipbuilding began for the sake of making journeys and exchanging trade goods. Thus it is said of the Woman of Valor: *She is like a merchant fleet bringing her food from afar (Prov. 31:14).* In time, and in the natural course of human conduct, ships came to be used for piracy and naval warfare, so Daniel could report *the king of the north will attack him with chariots and riders and many ships (Dan. 11:40).*

The largest and most sumptuous fleet was that of the Phoenician mini-kingdom of Tyre-Sidon, apostrophized in Ezekiel 27:4-5.

Your borders are in the heart of the seas; Your builders have perfected your Beauty. They have made all your planks of fir trees from Senir; They have taken a cedar from Lebanon to make a mast for you. Of oaks from Bashan they have made your oars; With ivory they have inlaid your deck of boxwood from the coastlands of Cyprus. Your sail was of fine embroidered linen from Egypt Your awning was blue and purple from the coastlands of Elishah All the ships of the sea and their sailors were with you in order to deal in your merchandise.

Most vessels were not so bedizened, but plain working craft, carrying cargoes and fare-paying passengers, like the one that Jonah boarded in Jaffa outward bound to Tarshish. The account of his voyage gives a glimpse of life at sea: A captain, concerned for his crew and his ship, the sailors plying a perilous trade and showing themselves – in this tale at least – as decent fellows. Such seamen dared storm and shipwreck, endured cramped quarters, coarse cuisine, and exposure to the elements. The standard term for these mariners was a slight variation on the word "salt" [*m-l-h*], just as in colloquial English a seasoned seaman is dubbed "an old salt."

If it is correct to identify Tarshish with the Phoenician colony of Tartessos, then Jonah was fleeing as far away as he could hope to go, for it was on the western coast of Spain, on the outer edge of the known world. To reach it, a ship had to leave the familiar Mediterranean and pass through the Pillars of Heracles (Gibraltar) into the strange and wild Atlantic. The voyage might be deemed worth the risk, for homeward bound the hold would be loaded with silver (*Silver beaten flat, that is brought from Tarshish . . . [Jer. 10:9]*). For this trade, there was a style of vessel especially designed for a heavy cargo of ore, known as a "Tarshish ship" regardless of whether or not it sailed to and fro the city of Tarshish.

Tarshish ships must have been impressive indeed, for Isaiah counts among examples of hubris *all the ships of Tarshish and all the gallant barks* (2:16).

As Tarshish was the farthest destination westward, Ophir was the farthest eastward – in a location undefined but likely to be on the northwest coast of India.⁵ If so, a ship bound there had to navigate the length of the Red Sea and

then across the Indian Ocean, and then wait out the monsoon season before tackling the homeward journey. Ophir could not be reached from the Mediterranean, but fortunately for King Hiram of Tyre he had a good friend and ally with just the right port:

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. Hiram 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 Kg. 9:26-28, 10:11, 21-22; cf, II Chron. 8:17).

The Tarshish-ship designed to carry silver ore from Tarshish, served as well to carry gold from Ophir.⁶

Some two centuries later, King Jehoshaphat of Judah tried to revive the Red Sea-Indian Ocean trade, but the venture failed before the fleet was even aweigh: *Jehoshaphat built Tarshish ships to sail to Ophir for gold, but he did not set sail for the ships were wrecked at Ezion-geber* (I Kg. 22:49). In this version of the failed expedition, King Ahaziah of Israel offers and Jehoshaphat declines a new joint enterprise: *'Let my servants sail with your servants on the ships'* (v. 50). The ruler of the Northern Kingdom may indeed have produced better shipwrights and sailors, perhaps recruited from his near neighbor and kinsman the incumbent King of Tyre. The Chronicler has a different version, in which he confuses "tarshish" as classification of a ship with Tarshish as the name of a city, and attributes the wreck to Jehoshaphat's indeed being in partnership with the sinful Ahaziah (II Chron. 20:35-37).

The Israelites, then, were not landlubbers. They were familiar with the sea and the creatures that dwell therein and the ships that sailed upon it. They knew its vastness and its depth and its wildness, that they understood as

demonstrations of the wonders of the Lord's Creation and the omnipotence of His rule over it.

NOTES

1. In biblical as in contemporary usage, "sea" was used also for inland bodies of water, among them the Sea of Reeds, the Dead Sea [Salt Sea], and the Kinneret [Sea of Galilee]. It was also used for the large bronze pool that stood outside of the Temple.
2. The tribe of Dan, unable to establish itself in its first site, removed to another one well inland. That shift is adumbrated in Joshua 19:47, but is not described in detail until Judges 18. It can be supposed that at the time of Deborah they were still *by the ships*.
3. Leviathan, that can be identified with the similar Lothan, was depicted on a seal as early as the mid-third millennium. It is, as a multiple-headed reptilian monster, comparable to the Hydra and Typhon of Hellenic mythology, and – like the dragons of the Middle Ages – a creature to be challenged in heroic combat.
5. Rahab came to be a general term for arrogance, and ineffectual noise and tumult, and specifically a scornful epithet for Egypt (Ps 87:4, Isa. 30:7, 51:9-11, Job 26:11-14). It has no connection to the name of Rahab of Jericho, from which it differs in spelling and gender.
6. On the transformation of pagan mythology into Hebrew literary allusion, see Yehezkel Kauffmann. *The Religion of Israel From the Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (New York: Schocken Books, 1960).
7. The Israelites had sources of gold that were not far off or difficult of access, so the prized gold of Ophir must have had some special quality to be singled out in Isaiah 13:12, Psalm 45:9, and Job 22:24, 28:16. Writing on a shard of the biblical period, found at Tel Qasile on the outskirts of Tel-Aviv, is an invoice or receipt for "30 shekels of gold of Ophir for Bet Horin."