

Chapter 23

23:1-5 "The burden of Tyre. Howl, ye ships of Tarshish; for it is laid waste, so that there is no house, no entering in: from the land of Chittim it is revealed to them. Be still, ye inhabitants of the isle; thou whom the merchants of Zidon, that pass over the sea, have replenished. And by great waters the seed of Sihor, the harvest of the river, is her revenue; and she is a mart of nations. Be thou ashamed, O Zidon: for the sea hath spoken, even the strength of the sea, saying, I travail not, nor bring forth children, neither do I nourish up young men, nor bring up virgins. As at the report concerning Egypt, so shall they be sorely pained at the report of Tyre."

Tyre and Zidon, the two cities of the Phoenician seaboard, were both great mercantile centres. With their development and extension of sea trading, for centuries they dominated all international commerce except that which necessarily depended on the land routes. Zidon was the older city, called "great" even in the time of Joshua. But a few centuries later Tyre surpassed it in development and enterprise.

Because of their tremendous mercantile prosperity, these cities became the target of a long series of greedy expansionist Assyrian kings. Time and again inscriptions mention "the tribute of the ships of Tyre and Zidon." When these invasions came, the usual Tyrian policy was to buy off the aggressor. It had to be this because their small country did not have the man-power to match the might and the mercenaries of Nineveh. But the heavy payments exacted by the Assyrians could always be recouped in the form of increased charges to their international customers. To this very day the shopkeeper does the same thing.

The extent of the prosperity of Tyre may be judged from the fact that whereas Shalmanezar V records his extortion of ten talents of gold from Hoshea, king of the ten tribes of Israel, from tiny Phoenicia he squeezed 150 talents of gold.

Almost certainly Isaiah's "burden of Tyre" belongs to Sennacherib's famous campaign, the third against the land of Canaan. His inscription mentions success against Zidon, but Tyre is omitted, perhaps because of lack of success against the developing island-Tyre, but it may be taken that the mainland city was plundered.

The identification of Tarshish is a problem which has never been completely settled. Equation with Phoenician Carthage can be ruled out, for there are several mentions of Tarshish before even Carthage was founded. There are four possibilities:

- a. Tarshish was the name of island-Tyre (cp. Ps. 72:10).
- b. Tarsus. One authority claims that Gen.10:4 is decisive in favour of this.
- c. Tartessus in southern Spain. The tarshish stone is chrysolite, and this is known to be found in Spain.
- d. Cornwall. It is very, very doubtful whether the Tyrians came to England at such an early date as this prophecy. And in any case, the metallic leads in Ez. 27:12 are better satisfied by Tartessus.

The most probable solution is that Tarshish was island-Tyre ("ships of Tarshish" meaning, quite simply, ships that sail from Tarshish). But of course all colonising nations have taken homeland names with them overseas: New York, Boston, Plymouth, Perth — nearly every English and Scottish place name is duplicated somewhere round the globe — and this phenomenon would explain the evidence for more than one Tarshish, especially in the far Isaiah east (cp. 2 Chr. 20:36,37; Jer. 10:9) The opening words of this burden present a dramatic picture of Phoenician ships on their way home from a long voyage learning with dismay when they touch at Kittim (Kition, Cyprus) that their home harbour is now in enemy hands.

Similarly (v.5) the ill news has reached Egypt, referred to here also as Sihor (black), with reference to the black silt of the Nile. Tyre was the carrier of the massive corn harvests of Egypt. The two countries were considerably interdependent. When the judgments of God shattered Egypt in the time of Moses, "sorrow took hold of the inhabitants of Palestina" (Ex. 15:14). And now there is consternation in Egypt at the ill-fortune befalling Tyre.

23:6-9 "Pass ye over to Tarshish; howl, ye inhabitants of the isle. Is this your joyous city, whose antiquity is of ancient days? her own feet shall carry her afar off to sojourn. Who hath taken this counsel against Tyre, the crowning city, whose merchants are princes, whose traffickers are the honourable of the earth? The Lord of hosts hath purposed it, to stain the pride of all glory, and to bring into contempt all the honourable of the earth."

Archaeological evidence suggests that although Sennacherib overran Phoenicia and subjugated Zidon, he did not entirely capture Tyre. Doubtless the mainland city became his. Psalm 83:7 points to this, and no doubt the Tyrians sought Assyrian favour by contributing fighting men and naval aid down the coast for the furthering of Sennacherib's campaign against Judah.

But until the time of Alexander the Great, island-Tyre was inviolate. "Pass ye over to Tarshish." There have been plenty of parallels to this in history. When Alexander besieged, Tyre's women and children were sent off to Carthage. When Napoleon invaded the Iberian Peninsula, the Portuguese royal family fled to Brazil. In the eighteenth century when French power looked like swamping the Lowlands, Dutch merchants made plans to transfer all their activities to the Dutch East Indies.

But the ancient mainland city of Tyre, going far back in history (much farther than Josh. 19:29), though not so long established as Zidon, was bound to suffer when "her own feet carried her far off to sojourn" — it is a picture of captives being led away to a distant land (to use their ship-building skills on the Euphrates?).

And such a fate as this is in store for proud Tyre, called here "the crowning city" because of its many overseas colonies each having its ruler appointed from the mother city. Hence Jeremiah's phrase: "all the kings of Tyre" (25:22). Such was its wealth that lesser kings in not a few countries were on its pay-roll, selling mercantile privileges to these men of Phoenicia.

"Merchant princes" was a phrase first put to use by Isaiah. The word for "traffickers" is really "Canaanites"; the connection sprang first from Zidon being the son of Canaan, Noah's grandson (Gen. 10:15) and became established in later generations when the traders of Tyre became the best-known internationally of all the peoples of Canaan (Zech. 14:21).

Besides the materialistic self-sufficiency of Tyre, God also abhorred its religion: The Lord of hosts hath purposed it, to profane (RV) the pride of all glory." The worship of Melkart (=king of the city) was modelled on that of Jehovah — as a direct consequence of the close friendship between Solomon and Hiram. Hence is explained the remarkable language of Ezekiel 28:12ff concerning the "king" of Tyre. Over the centuries the pattern of worship had continued the same, but the religious character of it was greatly debased, and in this evil form had been exported back to the people of God in the time of Jezebel. Tyre deserved judgment as much as does modern London.

23:10-14 "Pass through thy land as a river, O daughter of Tarshish: there is no more strength. He stretched out his hand over the sea, he shook the kingdoms: the Lord hath given a commandment against the merchant city, to destroy the strong holds thereof. And he said, Thou shalt no more rejoice, O thou oppressed virgin, daughter of Zidon, arise, pass over to Chittim; there also shalt thou have no rest. Behold the land of the Chaldeans; this people was not, till the Assyrian founded it for them that dwell in the wilderness: they set up the towers thereof, they raised up the palaces thereof; and he brought it to ruin. Howl, ye ships of Tarshish: for your strength is laid waste."

Just as "the daughter of Zidon" (v. 12) means Zidon, so also "the daughter of Tarshish" means Tarshish-Tyre. The opening phrase describes the rush of a river to the sea. It is a figure appropriate enough to the Phoenicians abandoning their small but very fertile and prosperous plain in order to crowd on to ships that will take them away to safety (as they hope). The girdle ("strength") of defences on the landward side can do nothing to fend off the invader. The divine decree has gone forth against "the merchant city" (Hebrew: "Canaan").

Zidon had hitherto gone unravaged by war, for although before this there had been several Assyrian invasions, the payment of tribute had bought off the plunderer. But now Sennacherib, the latest of these marauders, would work his will on "the oppressed virgin daughter of Zidon."

Even flight across the sea to colonies in Cyprus was to provide no lasting comfort. It is not certain whether Sennacherib was able to achieve a sea-borne invasion of that island, but his successor Esarhaddon certainly did.

In the received text, verse 13 is full of difficulty, but the reading in the LXX is perfectly straightforward: "And if you depart (being led away captive) to the land of the Chaldeans (i.e. to Babylon), this also is laid waste by the Assyrians, for their wall is fallen."

About the same time that Sennacherib overran all the territory from Assyria southward to Judah he also had a very successful campaign against Babylon, and promptly led off thither many of his captives from "the western land." There would be no joy for his Tyrian prisoners there.

So this burden ends, as it began, in misery: "Howl, ye ships of Tarshish."

23:15-18 "And it shall come to pass in that day, that Tyre shall be forgotten seventy years, according to the days of one king: after the end of seventy years shall Tyre sing as an harlot. Take an harp, go about the city, thou harlot that hast been forgotten; make sweet melody, sing many songs, that thou mayest be remembered. And it shall come to pass after the end of seventy years, that the Lord will visit Tyre, and she shall turn to her hire, and shall commit fornication with all the kingdoms of the world upon the face of the earth. And her merchandise and her hire shall be holiness to the Lord: it

shall not be treasured nor laid up; for her merchandise shall be for them that dwell before the Lord, to eat sufficiently, and for durable clothing."

Because of the repeated emphasis elsewhere on Israel's seventy years of captivity in Babylon (Jer. 25:11; 29:10; Dan. 9:2; 2 Chr. 36:21; Zech. 1:12; 7:5) there is a general inclination among commentators to apply this prophecy to the same seventy years. But this is irrelevant.

Isaiah prophesies about his own times and about the Messiah, as foreshadowed in his own times. This principle of interpretation must dominate. Again, the fact has to be faced that neither in Isaiah's day nor in the time of the Babylonian captivity was Tyre "forgotten" for a period of seventy years. It was not until long after the Christian era that Tyre dwindled away from its high commercial status.

But when this passage is read as a reminder of how for a period of seventy years the long-standing alliance between Tyre and Jerusalem lapsed or was interrupted, it has immediate relevance to all that the prophet has to say in these burdens. That period would come to an end "in the days of a certain great king" (reading B for K, a common confusion; and taking *echad* in its frequent idiomatic sense, as in Ex. 11:1; Gen. 48:22; 2 Sam. 7:23 etc.), and then "the Lord will visit Tyre (in blessing)" and the old alliance be resumed, with all the finest of that city's resources being again available for the temple service (v. 18).

The king referred to is, of course, Sennacherib who swamped all the Levant in his imperious conquest. Yet as a direct result of the cataclysmic destruction of his army at Jerusalem, Tyre, who had paid tribute and supplied mercenaries for the Assyrian campaign (Ps. 83:7), was now happy to return to its former close connection with Jerusalem (Ps. 87:4; 45:12; 2 Chr. 32:23).

The language of harlotry, so unseemly in the modern ear, is the prophet's very apt figure for the eager Tyrian emphasis on trade. As the harlot's way of life combines pleasure and profit, so also did the international commerce of Tyre's big business. Nahum (3:4) uses the same figure about Nineveh. In verse 17, LXX interprets the figure: "she shall be a market for all the kingdoms." The hire of a harlot was not to be brought into the sanctuary of the Lord (Dt. 23:18), but when Tyre turned in reverence to the God of Israel, then this other "harlotry" could be tolerated (cp. Lk. 7:37).

It remains to consider what further fulfilment this Tyre prophecy might have in the last days. Such a reference seems to be called for by the sweeping assertion that "thou shalt no more rejoice" (v. 12) — that is, in the self-indulgence and self-glorification of a harlot's trade. Yet the prophecy does conclude on a very different note.

The days have gone when it was possible to speculate that in a last-day sense "Tyre" is Britain (although the 70-year period from 1917 is tempting). And in this connection why the marked disinclination to apply Ezekiel 26-28 to Britain?

On the other hand, the Book of Revelation interweaves allusions to Tyre with caustic references to both Babylon and Jerusalem (Rev., pp.208ff). "Harlotry" with the kings of the earth (v.8 = Rev. 18:23; v.17 = 17:2) is followed by a time when she is ravaged by a great king (v.15=17:10). Yet the unexpected outcome is a Jerusalem adorned as a bride for her husband, precisely as happened in Hezekiah's day.

It is remarkable that whereas certain of the Arab powers seem to be marked out for hard discipline or even utter destruction in the time of the end (e.g. Is. 34; Obadiah), there is to be a willingness on the part of others to acknowledge God's King in Jerusalem. Is it relevant that there are more (nominal) Christians among the Arabs in Lebanon than in any other part of the Arab world?

Then, although there has been no friendship in Lebanon for the new state of Israel, perhaps this seventy-year estrangement is due to be replaced with a new spirit of amity and service.