

CHAPTER 16

Phoenicia

THE last of the Semitic neighbours of ancient Israel to deserve discussion are the Phoenicians. It may be disputed, however, whether they should really be included with Israel's "enemies", since there was little political hostility between the Phoenicians and the Israelites. At most there was occasional friction; and to this we may add that there was certainly some religious tension from time to time.

"Phoenicia" is not a word we meet in the Old Testament (though it occurs once or twice in the New). Its inhabitants called themselves "Canaanites" in Old Testament times, but it is convenient to have a different name for them; to avoid confusion with the normal use of the term Canaan to denote the whole of pre-Israelite Palestine with its occupants. The term Phoenicia was coined by the Greeks, and is conceivably a translation of the word Canaan, both names deriving from the purple dye for which the area was noted in ancient commerce.¹

Ethnically, the Phoenicians were Canaanites; their homeland was the one area of the ancient Levant where the Canaanites were not permanently overrun by some other nation. Like the Canaanites before them, their land was not normally a political unit, but was split up into small independent city-states. Their most notable cities were Tyre, Sidon and Byblos (the Old Testament Gebal), all of them Mediterranean ports; the Phoenicians were great maritime traders, and expanded westwards across the Mediterranean, thus avoiding to a great extent territorial conflicts with their neighbours.

1. For further information on the Phoenicians see D. R. Ap-Thomas in *POTT*, chapter 11; he discusses the meaning of the names "Phoenicians" and "Canaanites" on page 263.

The mountains of Lebanon, in any case, formed a natural geographical frontier and defence on the east side of Phoenicia. Their southern border, with Israel, shifted from time to time, and it is possible that it was the subject of more hostilities than the Bible and other ancient documents record.

Phoenician history goes far back into antiquity, though it is not well documented. In the second millennium B.C. the Phoenician cities suffered attacks from various major powers, particularly the Egyptians, who laid claim to the whole Levant coast. Then came an invasion from the sea, *c.* 1200 B.C., by the Philistines and associated peoples, and Ugarit and Byblos were among the cities which were destroyed at that time; at this date Sidon was the most influential Phoenician city (and in consequence the Old Testament uses the term "Sidonian" for the Phoenicians in general), but by 1,000 B.C. Tyre was the most powerful, and its King Hiram I,² who established good terms with his contemporaries David and Solomon, dominated Phoenicia as a whole. In general, however, the city-states acted independently of each other.

In the ninth century Phoenician power began to wane, as the Assyrians began their incursions to the west. If Hiram's treaty with David had been primarily a commercial arrangement, the ninth century treaty between Eth-baal³ of Tyre and Omri of Israel was no doubt to cement a defensive alliance. The Syro-Palestinian confederacy which fought with the Assyrian armies at Qarqar in 853 B.C. included a contingent from the most northerly of the Phoenician cities, Arvad. Several times during this century the Phoenician cities had to pay tribute to Assyria. Shalmaneser III records that in 841 B.C. he "marched as far as the mountains of Ba'ali-ra'si, a headland by the sea, and put up on it a representation" of his royal person.⁴ Hereabouts (at the mouth of the Dog River) some of Shalmaneser's inscriptions, cut in the rock face, have survived to this day.

A century later the kings of Tyre ruled Sidon as well, but their greater realm gave them no greater strength with which to confront the Assyrians. Tiglath-pileser III and his successors put strong pressures on the Phoenician capital and though Tyre — one of the most impregnable cities of the ancient world, due to its island location — did not fall, its king Luli was forced to flee to Cyprus in 701 B.C. (the year when Sennacherib besieged Hezekiah's Jerusalem). It was Esarhaddon, Sennacherib's successor, who brought Phoenicia into the Assyrian provincial system, after sacking Sidon and besieging Tyre. Phoenicia looked to Egypt for help throughout the seventh century, but as vainly as Judah did, until at last

2. A shortened form of "Ahi-ram".

3. Or Itto-baal.

4. Cf. *DOTT*, p. 48.

Assyria's rapid decline set in. Phoenicia's independence was regained then, but it was the last flicker before the Babylonians crushed the flame of independence for ever. Tyre suffered a thirteen-year siege before finally submitting in 572 B.C. to Nebuchadrezzar.

Sidon was later to revolt against Persia, and soon afterwards Tyre tried to oppose the advance of Alexander the Great; the result was that both cities were laid in ruins during the second half of the fourth century, and the old distinctive Phoenician culture broke up and was overlaid by the Hellenistic ways imported by Alexander. The old Phoenician language, too, like Hebrew a dialect of Canaanite, gave way before Aramaic. In terms of language, culture and political units the New Testament use of the term "Syro-Phoenician" is wholly appropriate for later centuries.

Outside their homeland, however, there were Phoenicians who held on to power and independence for a much longer period. As the early Phoenicians had developed their maritime commerce, they had established trading-posts here and there across the Mediterranean, and in course of time some of these posts became independent Phoenician colonies. In their heyday such colonies were to be found right across the Mediterranean from Cyprus to Spain, though nowhere so strongly as in North Africa, in what is today Tunisia. The most powerful Phoenician city in North Africa was Carthage, which proved such a formidable rival to Rome from the fourth century on, until finally the Romans sacked it in 146 B.C. In the colonies the Phoenician language survived longer than in the homeland. The Malta on which St. Paul was ship-wrecked in the first century A.D. was still Phoenician-speaking, to judge by Luke's term *barbaroi* (Acts 28:2), i.e. people who did not speak Latin or Greek. The name "Carthage" meant "new city" (like "Neapolis" in Greek, which survives in the names Naples and Nablus) in Phoenician;⁵ its famous sons such as Hannibal and Hasdrubal bore Phoenician names.

The cultural accomplishments of the Phoenicians were considerable. Unfortunately few of their literary achievements have survived, but there is no doubt that the Phoenicians mediated much of the learning of the east to the Greeks. Their alphabet was one of the earliest to be invented. The city of Byblos ("papyrus") was so named by the Greeks because they saw papyrus scrolls in full use here; the name Byblos is a distant relative of our word "Bible". The Phoenicians' abilities as sea-farers were second to none, and it is clear that Solomon and his successors knew where to turn when the Israelites wished to embark upon maritime trade. Again, as architects and builders they were highly skilled; it was to Hiram of Tyre that Solomon was obliged to turn for both building materials and

5. The original spelling of the name Carthage will have been *qart chadasht*.

skilled craftsmen. The temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem owed much for its beauty to the cedars of Lebanon and the architects of Tyre. Perhaps we may say that this temple was the Phoenicians' major legacy to Israel.

Phoenician Religion

Nevertheless, the Phoenicians are not always described in neutral or complimentary terms in the Old Testament. One reason for this, we may be sure, is that the Phoenicians maintained, on the very borders of Israel, the ancient Canaanite religion to which the Israelite prophets were so vehemently opposed. Canaanites existed within Israel too, and were not without influence there, but the religious dangers they posed were more subtle and insidious; in Phoenicia, the full-orbed Canaanite religion continued unchecked by the Israelites and the Israelite faith.

The Canaanite religion is given some description elsewhere in this book, but we may here specify one element of the Phoenician faith, namely the veneration accorded to the god Melqart. This deity was worshipped in Carthage too, and his name is to be seen in the Carthaginian personal name Hamilcar,⁶ i.e. "servant of Melqart". He was worshipped in Aramaean circles as well, as we have seen, but to the Phoenicians he was the patron deity of Tyre, the "Baal of Tyre" (just as Ekron had its own Baal, Baal-zebul, cf. 2 Kings 1:2). It seems highly probable that the Baal worship fostered in Israel by Jezebel, a Tyrian princess, and in Judah by her daughter Athaliah, was specifically Melqart worship; and that the Baal challenged by Elijah on Mt. Carmel was again Melqart.⁷ (See plate 11 facing p. 208).

Prophetic Denunciation of Tyre and Sidon

It seems, however, that religious tensions do not fully account for the prophetic denunciations of Tyre and Sidon. Amos castigated the Tyrians thus:

For crime after crime of Tyre
 I will grant them no reprieve,
 because, forgetting the ties of kinship,
 they delivered a whole band of exiles to Edom.
 Therefore will I send fire upon the walls of Tyre,
 fire that shall consume its palaces.

(Amos 1:9f.)

6. I.e. 'Abd Milqart.

7. But cf. D. R. Ap-Thomas in *PEQ* 92 (1960), pp. 146-155.

This brief passage is intriguing; we are not even told the nationality of the "whole band of exiles". Perhaps their nationality is irrelevant; H. L. Ellison finds here an allusion to slave trading, about which he writes: "It was the Phoenician, more and more enslaved by the conscienceless commerce that had become his life, who had made it a reality in the western Fertile Crescent, until in the craze for gain solemn treaties . . . were swept away."⁸ Ezekiel (two centuries later than Amos) would certainly have agreed with the phrase "conscienceless commerce"; he pronounced doom on a Tyre characterized by its "wicked trading" (28:18).

But is it equally possible that Amos was thinking in specific terms of some Phoenician breach of treaty obligations towards Israel. Jehu's violent overthrow of Omri's dynasty in Samaria, with the assassination of the queen-mother Jezebel, must have caused considerable ill-feeling against Israel in Phoenicia, and it may be that Amos knew of some unrecorded reprisals taken by the Tyrians. The slave-trade he denounced may have consisted primarily of the sale of Israelite prisoners of war.⁹

Once the commercial greed of Tyre set her upon such a course, she did not look back. In the early sixth century, Ezekiel's disgust with Tyre had reached epic proportions; his denunciations occupy almost three chapters (26:1-28:19). His opening words depict vividly the callous selfishness which characterized Tyre, which could gloat thus over Jerusalem: "I grow rich, she lies in ruins" (26:2). As Gottwald comments, "Tyre thinks only of her own trade advantage when other peoples are destroyed".¹⁰

Finally, there is some reason to think that there were social aspects to the prophet's feelings about Tyre. When Ahab, though king of Israel, met a rude rebuff from Naboth, who exercised his ancestral rights in refusing to sell his vineyard, Jezebel expressed her scorn in these words, "Are you or are you not king in Israel?" (1 Kings 21:7). Clearly her conception of kingship and its privileges differed from Ahab's, and we may well attribute the difference to the fact that she was the daughter of a king of Tyre. For a sweeping and devastating invective against kingship as exercised in Tyre there is nothing to equal Ezekiel 28. It has long been recognized that the portrait of the Tyrian monarch in that chapter is larger than life, but it is quite unnecessary to look beyond Tyre for an explanation of the fact (as has sometimes been done). The portrait may be said to represent Tyre as a whole, but more particularly all its monarchs and their concept of royal rule. The king is set against the background of Eden, which at once recalls Genesis 2f., but it is an Eden

8. H. L. Ellison, *The Prophets of Israel* (Exeter, 1969), p. 73.

9. Cf. N. K. Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth* (New York, 1964), pp. 104-109.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 315.

with one or two differences, in particular the holy mountain for which one looks in vain in the Genesis account. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the prophet is drawing upon a Phoenician version of the story of Eden, and that the royal ideology of Tyre was founded upon the story as they knew it. Thus the king of Tyre claimed to be the living embodiment of Adam, created god-like and perfect in every respect, but especially in wisdom. The claim to deity or at least semi-divine status was characteristic of most monarchies in the Near East of B.C. times; but in the case of Tyre, Ezekiel observed that the proud boasts were coupled with an unfeeling arrogance, a total disregard of the needs and conditions of peoples outside Phoenicia. N. K. Gottwald sees Ezekiel's denunciation as an attack on an egocentric commercialism. To worship at the shrine of Commerce leads, Professor Gottwald would say, to "inordinate pride, to violence of hand and hardness of heart".¹¹ Ezekiel 28 is also an attack on a certain type of kingship, and it is of special interest that this denunciation was made precisely when in Judah the dynasty of Davidic kings had come to its inglorious end, thereby writing its own sermon on the fallibility and failings of human monarchies. The experience of both Tyre and of Jerusalem pointed the desperate human need for a government of a different order entirely.

To Ezekiel, it is evident, the major enemies of Judah were Tyre and Egypt, not Babylon as one might have predicted. The prophet was convinced that the Babylonians were God's instrument to punish Judah for its sins; but the ever-optimistic Judaeans, even in exile, were pinning their hopes on the anti-Babylonian nations to defeat Babylon (and so free the exiles and liberate Jerusalem). And of all the nations, Tyre and Egypt were at the time the most doggedly hostile to Babylon. Ezekiel therefore denounced them both vigorously, and prophesied disaster and destruction for them both. Not all the vaunted wisdom of the kings of Tyre would avert calamity from the Phoenicians — nor rescue Judah and its people from the pit they had dug for themselves.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 316.