

Isaiah 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 23. The oracle concerning Tyre. Wail, O ships of Tarshish, for Tyre is laid waste, without house or harbour. From the land of Cyprus it is revealed to them.
- Be still, O inhabitants of the coast. The merchants of Sidon who crossed the sea have filled you. And on many waters your revenue was the grain of Shihor, the harvest of the Nile.
- You were the merchant of the nations. Be ashamed, O Sidon, for the sea has spoken. The stronghold of the sea, saying, I have neither laboured nor given birth. I have neither reared young men nor brought up young women.
- When the report comes to Egypt, they will be in anguish over the report about Tyre. Cross over to Tarshish. Wail, O inhabitants of the coast. Is this your exultant city whose origin is from days of old?
- Whose feet carried her to settle far away? Who has purposed this against Tyre? The bestower of crowns? Whose merchants were princes? Whose traders were the honoured of the earth?
- [0 : 5 9] The Lord of hosts has purposed it. To defile the pompous pride of all glory. To dishonour all the honoured of the earth. Cross over your land like the Nile, O daughter of Tarshish.
- There is no restraint any more. He has stretched out his hand over the sea. He has shaken the kingdoms. The Lord has given command concerning Canaan to destroy its strongholds.
- And he said, You will no more exult, O oppressed virgin daughter of Sidon. Arise, cross over to Cyprus. Even there you will have no rest. Behold the land of the Chaldeans.
- This is the people it was not. Assyria destined it for wild beasts. They erected their siege towers. They stripped her palaces bare. They made her a ruin. Wail, O ships of Tarshish.
- For your stronghold is laid waste. In that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years. Like the days of one king. At the end of seventy years. It will happen to Tyre as in the song of the prostitute.
- [1 : 5 8] Take a harp. Go about the city, O forgotten prostitute. Make sweet melody. Sing many songs that you may be remembered. At the end of seventy years. The Lord will visit Tyre.
- And she will return to her wages. And will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world. On the face of the earth. Her merchandise and her wages will be holy to the Lord. It will not be stored or hoarded.
- But her merchandise will supply abundant food. And fine clothing for those who dwell before the Lord. The series of oracles and prophecies. Concerning the nations that began in chapter 13.
- With the oracle concerning Babylon. Ends in chapter 23. With an oracle concerning Tyre. Babylon and Tyre were cities with international reputations. And significance in the ancient world.

Global cities of their day. Even when they were not centres of imperial might. They remained places of immense wealth and trade. Historical significance. And cultural influence.

[2 : 54] If Babylon was more like the London, Paris or Rome of that day. Tyre might have been the Hong Kong, Singapore or Dubai. Situated to the north of the region of Galilee. On the Mediterranean coast.

At the south of modern day Lebanon. Tyre was one of the oldest cities in the world. Founded around 2750 BC. Taking its name from the Ireland rock that it was built upon.

Tyre was originally at the border of the territory given to Asher. Although it does not seem that Asher ever controlled a city. During the reigns of David and Solomon. Hiram of Tyre had a close relationship with Israel.

Providing wood and artisans for the building of the temple. In exchange Solomon had given Hiram 20 Galilean cities. Although their relationship soured a bit. As Hiram was not pleased with them.

Commonly paired with Sidon. Tyre was the primary city of the maritime civilisation of the Phoenicians. Who had lucrative trade routes throughout the Mediterranean. And colonies at many points along the North African coast.

[3 : 53] And in places like Cyprus, Sicily and Malta. Hiram had assisted Israel in developing its own sea trade. At the height of the kingdom under Solomon. Over a century later.

In addition to their fabulous wealth. They were a technologically advanced and skilled civilisation.

The citadel of Tyre was originally built on an island just off the mainland. And since it was also well fortified. It was considered by many to be impregnable. There was also a city on the mainland.

From which people could retreat to the island. If ever under attack. It was only after the seven month construction of causeway. Constructed using the stones of the demolished mainland city of old Tyre.

And the use of the largest ever siege towers used in warfare. That Alexander the Great was able to take the city in 332 BC. During the period of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

[4 : 48] Tyre was a tributary of Assyria. After the power of Assyria started to rise again in the region. Under Tiglath-Pileser III. The Assyrians tried to increase their control over the city.

The Assyrians during the reign of Shalmaneser V. Had unsuccessfully besieged the city. Between 725 BC and 720 BC. Later it was also besieged by Sennacherib.

He did not succeed in taking Tyre. But Tyre lost its territories and their king had to flee. From that point Tyre adopted a pro-Assyrian foreign policy. And their king supported Assyria.

Esau-Haddon and Ashurbanipal. Who came after Sennacherib and ruled from 680 to 669 BC. And 669 to 631 BC respectively. Both overcame Tyre and destroyed its wider lands.

Even though they did not take the city itself. It is most likely that this prophecy relates to the period just before Sennacherib came up against Jerusalem. Around 701 BC. The 70 years of Tyre being forgotten mentioned in verse 15.

[5 : 49] Probably refers to the period of tighter Assyrian dominance. From that time until the death of Ashurbanipal in 631 BC. After which time the Neo-Assyrian Empire started to crumble.

The oracle is framed as a lament over Tyre. Some commentators regard this lament as satirical in character. Although considering the fact that Jerusalem was probably hoping that Tyre would be able to help to stem the flow of Assyria in the region.

The lament may well have been genuine. The failure of Tyre would have been very bad news for Hezekiah and the rulers of Judah. The oracle begins by instructing the ships of Tarshish.

Large mercantile ships with sailors returning to Tyre from Spain. To wail. As news that Tyre has fallen reaches them at or from Cyprus. The merchants of Sidon.

Another great city of Tyre and the Phoenicians. Are called to join in the morning. As prosperous traders of Egyptian grain. The Phoenicians were at the heart of international commerce.

[6 : 45] Tyre was like the great child of the sea. But now the sea itself is bereft. Robbed of its offspring. News of Tyre's fall spreads throughout the Mediterranean. Egypt laments the cutting off of its commerce and trade.

Recognizing that its own wealth will start to dry up. Tarshish and peoples in various Phoenician colonies throughout the Mediterranean will also mourn. The once great and rich city of Tyre which planted colonies all along the coasts has been humbled.

The prophet makes clear that Tyre was not the victim of mere happenstance. The Lord himself has determined to humble its pride. A recurring theme in the book of Isaiah. The Lord's purposes are over all of the affairs of man.

And he alone is the exalted ruler. All others who would lift themselves up will be brought low. The meaning of verse 10 is difficult to ascertain. It might refer to forsaking trading for farming.

Perhaps the claim is that the power of Tyre has been brought low. And its former colonies are no longer restrained and could plunder her. Or it may refer to the fact that they are no longer defended by her. The Lord is the true master of Tyre's fate.

[7 : 51] Has stretched out his hand over her seas. And will shake the earth and bring down Tyre's kingdom. They might flee to Cyprus as their king historically did. But they will not find rest and security there.

The Lord's hand through Assyria and other means will still hang over them. Gary Smith suggests that verse 13 is instructing the people of Tyre to attend to the defeat of Meridak Baladan.

And the Babylonian rebellion against the Assyrians shortly before this in 703 BC. Tyre's fate at the hands of the Assyrians would be similar. Christopher Sites reads the verse very differently.

As a claim that it was Babylon, not Assyria, that brought down Tyre. Referring it to Babylon's siege of Tyre later on. Verse 13 is a very obscure one. The section ends by returning to its opening summons to the ships of Tarshish to wait for Tyre.

The main section of the oracle is followed by a secondary elaboration of its message. Elsewhere, Jeremiah speaks of 70 years of Babylonian dominance in the region. The 70 years mentioned here is most likely not the same as that of Babylon's dominance.

[8 : 56] Rather, it might relate to the period of Assyrian dominance until the death of Ashurbanipal. That said, we are probably justified in recognising the symmetry. Tyre would again be eclipsed during the period of Babylon's dominance.

It is also possible that the 70 years mentioned here is more idiomatic than literal. When the 70 years come to an end, Tyre would be revived and start trying to sell her wares once again as she formerly had.

The prophet compares her to a forgotten and perhaps ageing prostitute who is returning to the streets and singing a song in hopes that people will remember her and that she might get some new custom.

However, after the period of her suppression, Tyre would rise again. The Lord, verse 17 puts it, would visit her, language typically used of the Lord's redeeming of his own people.

This should be read along with other material in Isaiah speaking of the glorification of Jerusalem and the lifting up of Zion over the nations. Tyre, once the greatest city of maritime trade, would bow to Jerusalem and Tyre's riches would flow up to Zion.

Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you. For in my wrath I struck you, but in my favour I have had mercy on you. Your gates shall be opened continually, day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession.

[11:16] The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet. They shall call you the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

Beginning the series of oracles against the nations with Babylon, and ending it with Tyre, suggests the comprehensive character of the judgment of the Lord that is coming upon the face of the earth.

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