

Oracles about Tyre: Pride before a Fall

■ by Richard Higginson



■ ■ ■ Richard Higginson

Tyre has an important but little-known place in Scripture. Richard Higginson argues that Ezekiel 26-28 is crucial to current debates about trade justice because it can help the West get a properly nuanced understanding of its situation. This article is best read with a Bible open to follow up the references.

On the whole, trade is something that is treated implicitly rather than explicitly in the Bible. It is something that bubbles away in the background of the biblical narratives. The language which Jesus habitually used - especially in his parables about the kingdom of God, the central theme of his teaching - positively throbs with illustrations taken from the market-place. It features farmers going out to sow (Mark 4:3-9), merchants purchasing precious stones (Matthew 13:45-46), builders working out their estimates (Luke 14:28-29), and middle managers faced with the sack making provision for their future (Luke 16:1-8) - to name only a few examples. Jesus certainly engaged in a major critique of wealth, repeatedly warning against the tendency to idolise money. But he took for granted a world of work and exchange where buying and selling were everyday human activities. The need to count the cost, increase one's talents, and

take risks with one's resources, attitudes that could be taken for granted on an earthly level, were carried over into Jesus' understanding of how we relate to God and the destiny he has in store for us. Jesus affirmed the world of trade even in the act of widening people's horizons and drawing people into a vision of something much bigger.

However, there are three major biblical passages where trade is the subject of biblical writers' attention in a more overt and concentrated way. These chapters have not usually received the attention they deserve, even from those seeking to make a case for trade justice from Scripture. They are 1 Kings 5, Ezekiel 26-28 and Revelation 18. Interestingly, there's a connecting link between them. That link is the city of Tyre, the famous ancient seaport on the coast of Lebanon.

1 Kings 5 is a fascinating description of the negotiations between King Solomon of Israel and King Hiram of Tyre about

the purchase and supply of timber for the building of the temple in Jerusalem. It's a deal between two powerful and successful kings. There is an approximate balance of power which makes for peace and harmony between them, for a satisfactory and fair trading agreement: Solomon has money but Hiram has the sought for material resource and the skilled labour. The trading relationship is sustained over a period of at least 20 years but by the events of 1 Kings 9 there seems to have been some shift of power, with Solomon becoming the dominant party. We find Hiram complaining about the payment Solomon gives to him, twenty settlements in Galilee with which Hiram is not impressed. Tensions in the relationship eventually surface.

In the centuries that followed, the balance of power changed again. After Solomon's reign, Israel went into decline as the kingdom divided into two, Judah in the south separating from Israel in the north. Neither kingdom ever

achieved the domination and prosperity enjoyed by David and Solomon. In contrast, Tyre did rather well. It consolidated a pre-eminent position in world trade, which was largely due to its favourable natural situation. Tyre was blessed with two excellent harbours, one on the mainland where a portion of the city was built and the other on an island, just offshore, which gave Tyre its name - Tyre means rock. The two were connected by a causeway that was built by the same King Hiram in the 10th century BC. This doubled the trading potential of the city. As a commercial centre Tyre was famous for her glassware and its dyed materials, using purple and scarlet dye made from local shellfish.

True, Tyre was a small country, and so was vulnerable to interference from whichever major power happened to be dominating Middle Eastern politics at any one time. It came under the sway of Assyria when Assyrian power was its height,

'Aha, broken is the gateway of the peoples'

but retained a partial autonomy through paying a substantial amount of tribute. Tyre's wealth meant that it had the capacity to pay off grasping politicians. From about 630 BC Assyria was in decline, and Tyre regained much of its autonomy. For the next 45 years Tyre's sea-trade flourished. However, it saw the coming threat from Babylon, which was in the process of replacing Assyria as the major force to be reckoned with in the area. From Jeremiah



David Roberts - *Tsur, ancient Tyre from the Isthmus. April 27th, 1839*

27 we learn that in 594 it was involved in negotiations in Jerusalem for an alliance of smaller countries against the Babylonian threat - plans which came to nothing.

Ezekiel devotes three chapters of prophecy to Tyre: chapters 26-28. They are remarkable chapters in which Ezekiel reaches a height of poetic splendour unsurpassed in the whole book. Each chapter takes a rather different tack - they feel like three separate 'words of the Lord' - though there are some connecting links between them. They were written, almost certainly, in 586 BC, just after Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians.

Ezekiel 26

In chapter 26, God's judgement is pronounced on Tyre because it has rejoiced over the downfall of Jerusalem, saying 'Aha, broken is the gateway of the peoples' (v2). 'Gateway' suggests a point of intersection of international trade routes where tolls were probably

exact. It sounds as if Tyre was congratulating itself that it has lost a serious commercial competitor. Perhaps Ezekiel had heard reports of some Tyrian traders gloating over Jerusalem's fall. Even though Jerusalem's fall lay within the will and purpose of God, as a punishment for the sins of the Jewish people, it is not for other nations to take pleasure in such things. Tyre as well therefore incurs God's displeasure.

Tyre's punishment is that it will become a bare rock (vs 4, 14), a clear play on its name - a rock with no buildings and no soil for any cultivation. All Tyre will be fit for is fishermen spreading their nets out to dry. Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon - impressively described as 'king of kings' - is seen as the instrument of God's judgement, bringing all his formidable military resources to bear on Tyre in a relentless siege operation (vs 7-14). We have a lengthy prediction of a thundering attack by war-

chariots through breaches made in the city wall, followed by scenes of plundering and destruction (vs 10-12).

The neighbouring principalities, which are dependent on Tyrian trade for their prosperity, will be shocked and dismayed at the city's downfall (vs 15-18). They lament. The coastlands (the small city-states of the Mediterranean seaboard) feel a shudder go through them as they witness the overthrow of the apparently impregnable island fortress. Their rulers act as their spokesmen, and put on mourning robes as they express their horror at what is happening.

Ezekiel pictures Tyre's ruin as being so complete it will be like a descent to the Pit or Sheol (vs 19-21). Sheol was usually thought of as a place under the earth, but here the image is combined with the notion of primeval chaos symbolised by water. In highly figurative language the city is described as being submerged beneath the waves of the sea, gone to inhabit an underworld from which there is no return. A watery end is appropriate for a city-state that based its claims

to greatness on a maritime existence. Tyre actually experienced such a demise in 551 AD, when the Lebanese coast was hit by a major earthquake and tsunami, and most of the island city disappeared under water.

Ezekiel 27

Chapter 27 has a different feel to it. The story of Tyre's downfall is told in a contrasting way. This is a *lamentation* rather than a proclamation: Ezekiel is told by God to 'raise a lamentation' (v2), and there is even the unusual literary device of a lament within a lament (v32). In an inspired feat of poetic imagination. Ezekiel begins by picturing Tyre as a magnificent ship, superbly fitted out and expertly crewed, with planks, mast, deck, sail, awning and oars made out of timber of the highest quality or brightly coloured fabrics. He describes in highly specific detail the places that all these materials and men came from - 16 different locations are named. Keel of fir planks from Hermon, mast from cedar of Lebanon, oars of oak from Bashan east of the Jordan, deck of pine imported from Cyprus...so it goes on. Vs 8-11 mentions several categories of people who provided valuable service to Tyre: rowers, pilots, caulkers (applying pitch to the seams), mercenary soldiers. All of them made a notable contribution: 'they gave you splendour' (v10); 'they made perfect your beauty' (v11).

Next Ezekiel describes in great detail the countries

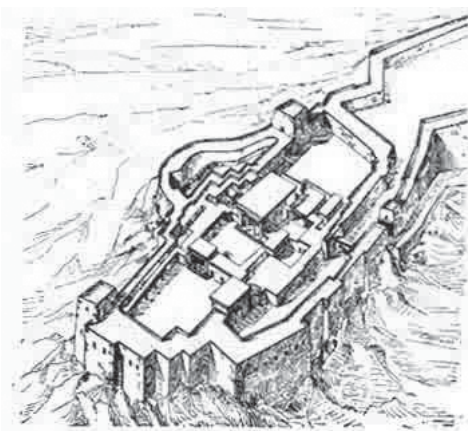
that Tyre traded with and the products in which she traded - see vs 12-25. This time 26 different places are named, systematically arranged from Tarshish in the

Ezekiel begins by picturing Tyre as a magnificent ship

west up to Damascus in the north and then on to exotic Arabian place-names in the east. Judah and Israel are in the middle of the list, which makes sense geographically, but they are not given special prominence: they are mentioned for their agricultural produce. No less than 40 different items of merchandise are itemised, and a fascinating selection they are: fine linen, ivory tusks, white wool, wrought iron, sweet cane, precious stones, top quality carpets... All this detail is consistent with what we know of Tyre's trading exploits from other sources.

Why does Ezekiel give us so much information about Tyre's trading exploits? I think it is to build up an impression of power through the amassing of cumulative detail. We are confronted by a city that is highly self-confident, a confidence borne of affluence, commercial skill, and putting to use the most advanced technology of the day. Tyre is no mean city. It's a very prosperous one.

The irony is that the fine ship Tyre is so laden with merchandise that in heavy seas and a fierce east wind she sinks to the bottom of the ocean (vs 25-27). The disaster happens very quickly. Tyre's downfall takes place 'in the heart of the seas' - a phrase that recurs three times (vs 25, 26, 27) - which was the very place where Tyre



Burg von Tyrins (Rekonstruktion von R. Restle)

felt secure and supreme. And its fall inspires lament - the mariners and all the pilots of the sea 'stand on the shore and wail aloud over you' (vs 29-30). As in chapter 26 we have a picture of an intense and prolonged process of mourning. It ends in 27:36 with the striking phrase 'The merchants among the peoples hiss at you' - hiss not in the sense of deride, more a whistle through their teeth in dismay. To this day

Tyre had a very good opinion of itself. Was that the seed of its downfall?

whistling through the teeth is a typical Mediterranean reaction of amazement and consternation.

Notice how the seafarers give credit to Tyre's achievements: 'When your wares came from the seas, you satisfied many peoples; with your abundant wealth and merchandise you enriched the kings of the earth' (v33). Solomon back in the 10th century was a notable example. Tyre had been a creator of wealth not just for itself but for others as well. There is no explicit criticism of Tyre in ch.27. For Ezekiel, this is an astonishingly neutral piece of reporting. But verse 3 contains a hint of God's perspective, though this too feels like it is spoken in sorrow rather than anger: 'Thus says the Lord God: O Tyre, you have said, "I am perfect in beauty". Tyre had a very good opinion of itself. Was that the seed of its downfall?

Ezekiel 28

Chapter 28 answers that question in the affirmative. Here the

prophet is back in judgement mode. He pronounces that it is precisely because Tyre's heart is proud and has said 'I am a god' that the real God is bringing enemies against it. Even here, however, there is a rather plaintive, regretful sense about what is happening. The fact is that Tyre *had* a very impressive record of achievement. Vs 3-4 say 'You are indeed wiser than Daniel...by your wisdom and understanding you have amassed wealth for yourself, and have gathered gold and silver into your treasures. By your great wisdom in trade you have increased your wealth... It is interesting that in Zechariah 9:2 Tyre and Sidon are described as 'very wise'. Tyre may have been blessed with a fine natural situation, but she had certainly made the most of it: all credit to the initiative and ingenuity which her trading record revealed. Nevertheless, she had become proud, which is always a peril of success. Tyre is sternly reminded twice: 'You are but a mortal, and no god' (vs 2 & 9). The king or prince of Tyre at this time was Itoaal II, but the criticism feels not so much a personal attack on him (no details are given about the king) as a comment on the ethos or culture of Tyre as an entirety.

In verses 11-19 the story is retold in an unexpected way. The king of Tyre is pictured as an epitome of perfect primeval man, in the garden of Eden, which is also - intriguingly - described as 'the holy mountain of God' (v14). How interesting that a non-Israelite monarch should be described in this way. He is

dressed in magnificent precious stones - no less than 10 different stones are mentioned in v13 - which are a clear allusion to Tyre's prosperity. This oracle is a fresh take on the story of Genesis 1-3. Ezekiel brings out just as clearly as the writer of Genesis *both* the perfection of God 's human creation: 'You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty' (v12); 'you were blameless in your ways, from the day that you were created' (v15), *and* the headlong nature of man's fall: "I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, v16; 'I cast you to the ground, v17. Make no mistake: it is precisely the *greatness* of Tyre's position that serves to accentuate the tragedy of its fall.

The main problem seems to have been Tyre's self-congratulatory pride: 'Your heart was proud because of your beauty' (v.17). But Ezekiel now makes some adverse comments about Tyre's practice of trade: 'In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence and you sinned' (v16); 'In the unrighteousness of your trade, you profaned your sanctuaries' (v18).

It is precisely here, of course, that we would like to know more. In what way was Tyre *filled with violence* in the abundance of its trade? In what respects was its trade *unrighteous* or unjust? Was one objectionable feature the way that it traded in human beings (see 27:13, 'they exchanged human beings and vessels of bronze for your merchandise') - Amos 1:9-10 and Joel 3:6 likewise hint of Tyre selling peoples as slaves. Did the power of its position lead it to bully and

threaten trading partners? That would be a natural consequence of its pride.

Isaiah 23 and Revelation 18

Isaiah has a much briefer prophecy against Tyre (Isaiah 23), but it may be that he provides a clue to the flaw in its trading practice. Isaiah describes her in no uncertain terms as a prostitute (vs 15-17). Like a prostitute, Tyre had financial intercourse with many partners, but its underlying motive was money. It shamelessly pursued money wherever it could find it.

Description of Tyre as a prostitute provides the connecting link to the other great biblical passage which focuses on the practice of trade, Revelation 18. This is the description of the fall of Babylon, the writer's code-name for Rome. When John the seer comes to describe Rome's economic influence, her trading exploits, it is the image of the harlot that he uses¹. In doing so, he was undoubtedly influenced by the prominence of that image in

the Old Testament. Revelation is full of allusions to Old Testament prophecy. In particular, chapter 18 is a remarkable patchwork of allusions to Jeremiah's major oracle against Babylon (Jer 50-51) and Ezekiel's oracle against Tyre. But it also picks up on oracles against Babylon and Tyre found in other prophets, notably Isaiah. For John, Rome was the heir of Babylon in her political and religious activity, but she was more the heir of Tyre in her economic activity.

It is striking how many similarities there are between Ezekiel 27 and Revelation 18. Again, there is a long list of items of merchandise in vs 11-13. Again, there is the vivid sight of people mourning her downfall - though this urban collapse is a case of going up in smoke (v9) rather than sinking into the sea. Again, the mourning is led by the three groups of people who had benefited most from Rome's commercial activity -

rulers (v9), merchants (v11) and mariners ('shipmasters, seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea', v17). Again, there is a combination of wistful lamentation on the part of the bystanders and fierce condemnation on the part of the voices from heaven.

And when we come to ask the question: 'what did Rome do wrong?' the answers are much the same as with Tyre. In particular, there is an underlying attitude of

Isaiah describes Tyre in no uncertain terms as a prostitute

self-congratulatory pride.

Revelation 18:7 is key: 'As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a like measure of torment and grief. Since in her heart she says, "I rule as a queen: I am now widow, and I will never see grief"'. This is a precise echo of attitudes attributed to Babylon in Isaiah 47:8 but it is also very similar to Tyre's proud boast "I am a god, I sit in the seat of the gods". God discerned the same overweening arrogance on the quaysides and in the luxury homes of the people of first century Rome.

Here's the Rub

Is all this of merely historical interest? I don't think so. In all the current debates about globalisation, capitalism, poverty and trade justice, I venture to suggest that there is no more relevant portion of Scripture than Ezekiel's oracles against Tyre.

In these debates, there is a crucial underlying question which is



David Roberts - General view of Tsur, ancient Tyre, April 27th, 1839

what we in the West think of ourselves. In particular, how do we regard our current relative prosperity and the means by which we have become prosperous and stay prosperous? Do we feel uneasy and guilty about this, or do we rush to our defence and have heads held high? The polarisation of opinion on this is neatly expressed by Harvard

‘By your great wisdom in trade you have increased your wealth, and your heart has become proud in your wealth’

historian David Landes at the start of his wide-ranging investigation into *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*. Landes asks the questions:

How did the rich countries get so rich and the poor countries so poor? In particular, why did Europe (the ‘West’) take the lead in changing the world? Most answers, he thinks fall into one of two schools. ‘Some see European wealth as the triumph of good over bad. The Europeans, they say, were smarter, better organised, harder working. The others were ignorant, arrogant, lazy, backward, superstitious.’ Others see it as a triumph of bad over good. ‘The Europeans, they say, were aggressive, ruthless, greedy, unscrupulous, hypocritical; their victims were happy, innocent, weak - waiting victims and hence thoroughly victimised’ (p.xxix). It’s worth pausing for a moment to ponder this polarity of opinion.

I wonder which side of that debate you come down on. Personally, I believe there are elements of truth in both. The West (or North) can take some credit for what it has achieved in terms of wealth creation. In particular - and this is a point that is apt to get submerged in the current debate - the North has generated wealth partly through certain commendable *cultural* habits. The way in which material rewards are distributed is effected by such factors as a disciplined work ethic, high standards of integrity in public service, and the capacity to innovate and demonstrate economic enterprise. I would sum these up as three key ‘I’s: industriousness, integrity, innovation.

National cultures vary how strongly they score on these different criteria. But here’s the rub - sixth century Tyre and first-century Rome could probably have claimed the same. They too appear to have displayed industriousness, innovation and probably integrity as well. They did have much to commend them - one can feel the power of seduction that the biblical writers acknowledge by their choice of metaphor: the word ‘harlot’. But the fact that there is much in Tyre’s achievements, Rome’s achievements and the North or West’s achievements which is good and impressive should not blind us to the things that are bad and unjust. The North has also generated wealth for itself partly

through treating the countries of the South unfairly - through bullying, through exploitation, through trade rules that justify protectionism for rich countries and rule it out of order for poor ones. And so we too fall under the judgement of God. We are exposed to his critical scrutiny, and challenged about how we intend to change our ways.

Ezekiel’s oracles against Tyre can help the countries of the North to get a properly nuanced understanding of our situation. They can help us to appreciate our achievements, but they warn us in the severest possible way of the dangers of getting carried away with them.

‘By your great wisdom in trade you have increased your wealth, and your heart has become proud in your wealth.’ (Ez.28:5) ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’ ■

Richard Higginson lectures in Ethics and Leadership at Ridley Hall Theological College, Cambridge. He is Director of the Ridley Hall Foundation and co-editor of Faith in Business Quarterly.



Note

¹ The implication of the image is that there is a proper place for trade just as there is for sex. Within marriage sex can be a revered gift and an expression of love and caring for the other. Within the trading relationship the provision of products and services can be a means of expressing love and care for other people. But when the money-maximising motive takes over it dehumanises trade just as going to a prostitute dehumanises sex.

