EZEKIEL, THE WORDSMITH, 
AND HIS PROPHECIES AGAINST TYRE

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Ezekiel was a literary virtuoso – arguably the most accomplished prophetic writer. The book of Ezekiel spans twenty years of prophetic activity, enabling Ezekiel to give full rein to his prodigious skills as a writer. The vividness and intensity of his writings, combined with his unique visionary experiences, make the book of Ezekiel stand out within the prophetic corpus. Ezekiel’s captivating use of dramatic imagery and expansive vocabulary add an undeniable richness to his pronouncements.

Embedded within this magnificent work are chapters 26-28:19, devoted to the anticipated fall of the Mediterranean port of Tyre at the hands of the Babylonian army. Although this section is usually overlooked in favor of more significant theological and religious discourses, it is precisely herein that Ezekiel’s extraordinary literary talents are in abundant evidence. Three aspects of his literary virtuosity are discernible in his forceful critique of Tyre: creative imagery and phrasing, use of unusual and even unique words (hapax legomena) and further expansion of biblical vocabulary through neologisms (invented words).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Tyre was an important Phoenician port and mercantile center in ancient times. It was an island, located half a mile from the Mediterranean coastline, approximately 30 miles north of Israel. With the reign of Hiram I (980-947 BCE), Tyre became the most important city-state within the Phoenician confederation. Tyre is best known for its export of Tyrian purple dye, which was manufactured from the shell of the Murex trunculus sea snail. Even the name Phoenicia stems from the Greek Phoinikes, alluding to Tyrian purple. It is most likely that the biblical tekhelet, a bluish cord that was mandated in Numbers 15:38 to be affixed to the corner fringes (tzitzit), was derived from this dye.

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Hiram I established warm relationships with both King David and King Solomon. *King Hiram of Tyre sent his officials to Solomon when he heard that he had been anointed king in place of his father; for Hiram had always been a friend of David* (I Kgs. 5:15). Thereupon Solomon and Hiram entered into an arrangement whereby Hiram provided cedar and cypress logs for construction of the Temple in Jerusalem, as well as masons to shape its stones (see vv. 22 and 32). In return Solomon supplied Hiram with vast quantities of wheat and oil (v. 25).

Owing to its commercial importance, Tyre was frequently the target of military campaigns by the regional superpowers. The Assyrians tried unsuccessfully on a number of occasions to capture Tyre. One of these occasions was in 701 BCE when Sennacherib’s army marched southwards along the Mediterranean, capturing the Phoenician cities of Byblos/Gebal and Sidon, and the Philistine cities of Ashdod and Ashkelon. Both Tyre and Jerusalem were able to withstand being besieged by Sennacherib. Although Ezekiel anticipated that Tyre would soon fall to an onslaught by the Babylonians, the port was able to negotiate paying tribute to the Babylonians in exchange for its safety. It was only in 332 BCE, after a seven month siege of Tyre by Alexander the Great that the city finally fell to an invading army. Alexander succeeded by having his army build a causeway from the mainland to Tyre.

**CREATIVE IMAGERY AND PHRASING**

In order to begin to appreciate why Ezekiel devotes far more attention to condemning Tyre, as opposed to Israel’s historical enemies, one can glean much from the opening line of his critique. Therein God addresses the prophet: *O mortal, because Tyre gloated over Jerusalem, “Aha! The gateway of the peoples [daltot ha-amin] is broken, it has become mine; I shall be filled, now that it is laid in ruins”* (Ezek. 26:2). Marvin Sweeney asserted that *daltot ha-amin “lit. ‘gateways,’ indicates Judah’s role in controlling inland trade routes.”* Another more plausible explanation has been proposed by Martin Corral. He rendered *daltot ha-amin “the people’s ports,” namely the Philistine ports that had previously been Jerusalem’s natural outlet to the sea. With their recent destruction by the Babylonians, Tyre was gloating that now*
it would control all of the eastern Mediterranean mercantile trade; thereby diminishing the status of Jerusalem.\(^2\)

Ezekiel’s assumption that Tyre’s haughtiness would soon be quashed undoubtedly consoled the prophet, even as he, like his contemporary Jeremiah, also anticipated the imminent fall of Jerusalem.\(^3\) Ezekiel divided his treatment of Tyre into four distinct sections, each exhibiting a dominant image or metaphor. In 26:1-21 he focuses on Tyre as a barren, rocky island that is destined to be engulfed by an enormous wave, so devastating that her only remaining utility will be as *a place for drying nets* (Ezek. 26:5). Undoubtedly, here Ezekiel is associating the Hebrew name of Tyre, i.e. *Tzor*, with *tzur*, rock. In Ezekiel 27:1-36 Tyre is depicted as a magnificent merchant vessel, laden with exotic cargo that sinks when beset by a violent storm. Ezekiel shifts his focus in 28:1-10 to the king of Tyre. The king is so prideful and arrogant that he imagines himself to be a god. Eventually, he will perish at the hands of uncircumcised strangers. Finally, Ezekiel 28:11-19 begins with a *dirge over the King of Tyre* and ends with the death knell for the port. *All who knew you among the peoples are appalled at your doom. You have become a horror and have ceased to be, forever* (Ezek. 28:19).

Ezekiel accomplishes this blending of the fate of Tyre’s king and Tyre itself by evoking imagery from Genesis 2-3. The king is depicted as the *seal of perfection, full of wisdom and flawless in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God* (Ezek. 28:12-13). In an interesting and unexpected play on the Genesis story, the king is also identified as an angelic cherub. *I created you as a cherub with outstretched shielding wings; And you resided on God’s holy mountain* (Ezek. 28:14). In Genesis after Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, God stationed cherubim as guards to protect the Tree of Life from violation by returning humans. In Ezekiel, however, it is the cherubic king that has transgressed and is punished by expulsion from God’s mountain. *I have cast you to the ground, I have made you an object for kings to stare at* (Ezek. 28:17).

**HAPAX LEGOMENA AND RARE WORDS**

Ezekiel’s penchant for unusual wording is already evident in the opening chapter of his book, where we encounter the term *hashmal* in 1:4 and 1:27. This is a word of unknown origins and variously translated as amber, bronze,
electrum and burnished metal. Based upon its context, it seems to be referring to a shiny, fiery colored substance. Additionally, Ezekiel incorporated more than thirty hapax legomena in his work. Although most are evenly dispersed with one or two appearing in a specific chapter, four are found in chapter 16, Ezekiel’s lengthy and impassioned portrayal of Jerusalem, and seven occur in the second half of chapter 27. This is part of Ezekiel’s treatment of Tyre as an extraordinary merchant vessel stocked with exceptional cargo. Therein one finds more hapax legomena and other rare words than in virtually any other chapter of Tanakh.

Ezekiel 27:15 reads: The people of Dedan were your merchants; many coastlands traded under your rule and rendered you tribute [eshkareikh] in ivory tusks and ebony [havnim]. Eshkareikh from eshkar is found only here and in Psalm 72:10, a psalm attributed to Solomon. Although JPS renders this term as “tribute,” Moshe Greenberg notes that the trading partners of Tyre were not its tributaries and suggests instead that it is a “contract,” which he derives from Akkadian. Concerning havnim, there is consensus among Cohen, Greenberg and JPS that havnim is a hapax legomenon, referring to ebony. It is also found in Ugaritic and appears to be an Egyptian loanword.

Ezekiel 27:16 reads: Aram traded with you because of your wealth of merchandise, dealing with you in turquoise, purple stuff, embroidery, fine linen, coral [ramot], and agate [kadkod]. Ramot is rendered by both the JPS and Greenberg as “coral”. It is also found in Proverbs 24:7 and Job 28:18. Greenberg notes that over the centuries it has been translated by a variety of other terms, but there is an Arabic cognate meaning seashells, which would support the translation “coral.” In terms of kadkod, its only other occurrence is in Isaiah 54:2, which is post-exilic and therefore later, possibly influenced by Ezekiel. Although JPS translates kadkod as agate, Greenberg prefers rubies and notes that Semitic cognates refer to something that is red.

Ezekiel 27:17 reads: Judah and the land of Israel were your merchants: they trafficked with you in wheat of Minnith and Pannag, honey, oil and balm. Both Cohen and Greenberg assume that pannag is not a place name, but rather a hapax stemming from Akkadian and referring to some type of cake or meal. In Ezekiel 27:20 we encounter the expression bigdei hofesh lerikhbah, which is rendered as saddle clothes for riding. Hofesh is a unique usage and its etymology is uncertain. Based upon the context it is clear that it
is an item that facilitates riding an animal, hence the translation “saddle cloths.” In Ezekiel 27:24 we find the peculiar expression ginzei beromim. In this context ginzei appears to refer to carpets and beromim indicates that they have a multi-colored trim, with a parallel in Akkadian. Finally, in Ezekiel 27:28 there is use of the term migroshot. Although migrash and variants of its plural form migrashim are often found in Tanakh (even in Ezekiel) and refer to open areas, such as fields and pastures, the form migroshot is unique. Given the general context of sea travel, the anguished cry of the sailors in the first half of the verse and the doomed voyage described in the preceding verse, Greenberg reasonably translates it as "waves" and similarly JPS as “billows.”

NEOLOGISMS

More than any other biblical writer, Ezekiel acknowledges the limitations of language, especially in reference to discussing the Divine realm. This is already seen in the opening chapter of Ezekiel, which focuses on his initial prophetic vision. That was the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of the Lord (Ezek. 1:28). Note that he offers two prefatory qualifiers, “appearance” and “semblance,” before identifying his subject. This awareness of the deficiencies of vocabulary to accurately express himself may have been the impetus for Ezekiel to coin new terms.

Ezekiel exploits the root rkhl, signifying trading, to innovate unique word forms. Rekhulah and variants appear four times in Ezekiel 26:12, 28:5, 16 &18, referring to either merchandise or commerce. Rokhelet and its plural appear three times in chapter 27: 3, 20 and 23. Although Greenberg consistently translates these occurrences as a noun, i.e. dealer/s, in the JPS its appearance in vv. 20 and 23 is similarly rendered as merchant/s, but in v. 3 it is represented as a participle [w]ho trade. Ezekiel 27:24 concludes with the word be-markhultekh, translated as among your wares. Greenberg, however, renders it “in your market” and notes that it is a “difficult word to construe.”

Another root that Ezekiel transformed was shr. Although its basic meaning connotes “going around”, it is frequently used in Tanakh to refer to travelling merchants. Only in Ezekiel do we find the particular form sehorah. In Ezekiel 27:15 there is the phrase sehorat yadekh, rendered in the JPS as
traded under your rule. Greenberg, however, translates sehorah not as a verb, but more accurately as a noun in construct form, “agents of your trade.” He also notes that this is “[a]n obscure phrase, lit. 'the merchandise of your hand'.” Another variation of the root shr that Ezekiel created is sohartekh, found in Ezekiel 27:12, 16, 18. JPS consistently translates it as a verbal expression traded with you. Greenberg, on the other hand, views it as a noun, rendering it as “your trader” and posits it as a parallel to Ezekiel’s previously discussed neologism rokhelet, dealer.

Ma’arat and Izavon are a favorite pair of Ezekiel’s neologisms. Ma’arat appears nine times and izavonim seven times, but they are both only found in chapter 27. Although JPS translates both words as “wares,” Greenberg argues that these two words are counterparts for imports and exports. He is, however, puzzled as to why the former only appears in singular and the latter always in plural. Greenberg contends that ma’arat is derived from the verb ‘arat, signifying an offering and therefore an import. In terms of izavonim, he bases himself on earlier scholars and argues that the verb azav indicates something/someone that is left behind, i.e. an export.

One of the richest verses for peculiar vocabulary is Ezekiel 27:24: These were your merchants in choice fabrics [be-makhlulim], embroidered cloaks [be-glomei] of blue, and many-colored carpets [ginzei beromim] tied up with cords and preserved with cedar [aruzim]---among your wares [be-markhultekh]. The JPS translation comments on this entire verse: “Meaning of the Heb. uncertain.” Makhlulim represents a unique occurrence of this word. It is a variant of kalil, connoting perfection, and is anticipated in Ezekiel 23:12, levushei mikhlo “gorgeously clad,” which is also used in Ezekiel 38:4. Glomei is a unique usage in Tanakh. It is presumably connected to the verb form glm, which only appears once. In II Kgs 2:8 Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up [vayiglom] and struck the Jordan with it, whereupon the river divided in two. Hence the translation here in Ezekiel as “cloaks.” The phrase ginzei beromim has been discussed above as two distinct hapax legomena. Aruzim is a unique occurrence of this word. Throughout Tanakh erez always appears as a noun and refers to a cedar tree. Here Ezekiel uses it as an adjective in reference to the durability of cords. Both the JPS translation and Greenberg rendered it as “preserved with cedar.” Greenberg endorses an
earlier suggestion that the ropes were smeared with cedar oil to maintain them.22 The concluding word be-markhultekh has been discussed above.

CONCLUSION

The use of all of these hapax legomena and neologisms underscores that Ezekiel was a highly literate individual. Although many of these words may have had to be coined by Ezekiel for practical reasons, to describe new kinds of Tyrian trade items, the full effect of Ezekiel overloading his discussion of Tyre with these peculiar words underscores Tyre’s significance. During the time of Solomon she was the major supplier of material and labor for the Temple and currently she was Jerusalem’s primary regional economic competitor. It is a special and significant place, so much so that new words need to be created to describe aspects of it. For both of these reasons Ezekiel is emphasizing that no one should assume that it will be spared the Divine punishment that has also been slated for Jerusalem.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the second half of chapter 27 with his depiction of Tyre as an extraordinary merchant ship bearing exotic cargo and doomed to capsize. Ezekiel’s use of seven hapax legomena and numerous neologisms therein serves to highlight the magnitude of the catastrophe that awaited Tyre on the eve of its anticipated destruction by Babylon. As noted above, Tyre was not captured by the Babylonians. In a prophecy some thirteen years later concerning Egypt in 573 BCE, Ezekiel commented upon the conclusion of Babylon’s protracted, unsuccessful siege of Tyre by interjecting that King Nebuchadrezzar and his army have had no return for the labor he expended on Tyre (Ezek. 29:18). Nor was Ezekiel the first prophet to erroneously predict the imminent destruction of Tyre. Almost two hundred years earlier, Amos conveyed God’s wrath at Tyre’s transgressions: I will send down fire upon the wall of Tyre, And it shall devour its fortresses (Amos 1:10). Tyre eventually succumbed to the army of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, thereby offering a measure of validation to both Amos and Ezekiel.

NOTES


3. Jeremiah 25:18-26 identified all of the region’s major cities and states that would soon fall to the Babylonians, including Tyre in v. 22.


8. Ibid. Commenting on these particular items, Sweeney notes that “[t]he exact identity of these stones is uncertain.” *Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1094.


13. Ibid., pp. 545-6


15. Ibid., p. 546.

16. Ibid., p. 555.

17. Ibid., p. 553.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., p. 551.

20. Ibid., p. 553.

21. The only other use of the root *glm* is in Psalm 139:16 with the word *golmi*. It is translated as *my unformed limbs* and is the source of the rabbinic term *golem*; however, it seems irrelevant to Ezekiel’s use of this same root configuration.