

“Tired of Hearing about Tyre”
Ezekiel and His “Failed” Prophecy
By Joshua Bowen

Introduction

One of the more contentious prophecies found in the Hebrew Bible is Ezekiel’s prophecy against the island city of Tyre in Ezekiel 26:1-21. It predicts the complete destruction and obliteration of the city “in the midst of the sea.” But why does this prophecy of Ezekiel receive so much attention? Because of its apparent failure to come true. Despite a thirteen-year siege of the island city of Tyre, Nebuchadnezzar was unable breach it, a fact acknowledged by the prophet himself (Ezek. 29:17-21). Thus, this lengthy and detailed prophetic word pronounced against the fortress stronghold went not only unfulfilled, but was simply incorrect.

Unfortunately, this failed prophecy ostensibly presents difficulties for many Christians who hold to a particular view of the inerrancy of the Bible. Because the prophet spoke for God, and God cannot lie or be in error, there must be some reasonable solution that explains why the prophecy did not come to pass. Recently, Mr. Mike Winger has attempted to reconcile the prophecy in Ezekiel with historical data in order to justify Ezekiel and his pronouncements. While Mr. Winger acknowledges that Nebuchadnezzar did not take the island city of Tyre, he has concluded the following:

1. The prophecy in Ezekiel 26 speaks of “many nations,” not simply Nebuchadnezzar; this is confirmed in the passage by the change from the pronoun “he” to “they” in 26:12.

Alexander the Great ultimately fulfilled the prophecy when he destroyed the island city centuries later.

2. Nebuchadnezzar did lay siege to Tyre, but it was “Old Tyre” (Ushu) on the mainland, and not the island city of Tyre. After a thirteen-year siege, he *did* breach the walls of Ushu, but found (much to his chagrin) that the inhabitants had been relocating with their possessions to the island city during the siege.

Winger’s argument rests upon two premises: the “many nations” and “they” refer to people or groups other than Nebuchadnezzar and his forces, and that he besieged the mainland city of Ushu, and not the island city of Tyre. I will argue that both of these premises are false; Nebuchadnezzar was the lone instrument of God in Ezekiel’s prophecy, and he besieged (and failed to breach) the island city of Tyre.

“Many Nations” and the “He/They” Distinction

In this section, I will address Mike Winger’s argument concerning Ezekiel’s reference to the “many nations” (v. 3) and the change from the use of the pronoun “he” to “they” in v. 12. As stated above, Winger argues that Nebuchadnezzar was never prophesied to be the only agent to bring about Tyre’s total destruction. In Ezekiel 26:3, we read:

לְכֹן כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה הַנְּנִי עָלֶיךָ צָר וְהֵעֲלִיתִי עָלֶיךָ גּוֹיִם רַבִּים כִּהְעֲלוֹת הַיָּם לְגִלְיוֹ

“Therefore, thus says the Lord God: ‘I am against you, Tyre! And I will bring up against you many nations, as the sea brings up its waves!’”

The reference to “many nations,” at first glance, would seem to strongly indicate that the Neo-Babylonian Empire and its armies, headed by Nebuchadnezzar, would be but the first

“wave” to come against the city of Tyre. Were this the only phrase to go by, it would likely be a very convincing case. Several aspects of this passage, however, argue against this conclusion.

First, Nebuchadnezzar is the only agent of God spoken of in the text (we will deal with the “they” argument shortly). Second, the description of Nebuchadnezzar and his forces in v. 7 likely coincides with the “many nations;” the text reads:

כִּי כֹה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה הַנְּנִי מִבְּיַא אֵל-צָר נְבוּכַדְרֶאֱצַר מֶלֶךְ-בָּבֶל מֵצָפוֹן מֶלֶךְ מְלָכִים בְּסוּס
וּבְרֶכֶב וּבְפָרָשִׁים וְקָהָל וְעַם-רָב

“For thus says the Lord God: ‘I am bringing to Tyre Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, from the north, *the king of kings, with horse and chariot, with horsemen, and a host and many people!*’”

There are several things to note in this transitional verse. First, the particle כִּי “for, because” directly connects the previous section to this concrete identification of the agent of the Lord. Second, the use of the phrase “king of kings,” along with the specific identification of the various parts of the army that will accompany the king (i.e., horse, chariot, horsemen), as well as “a host” and “many people,” are arguably the “great nations” from v. 3. In fact, the adjective “many” in v. 3 is the same adjective used in v. 7 (*rav*) to refer to the “many people.” This has led scholars to identify Nebuchadnezzar and his armies as the “many nations” in v. 3: “The *gōyim rabbîm* portrayed as waves beating on the rock in v. 3 are identified as Nebuchadnezzar (with his title of *melek melākîm*) and his hosts, referred to as *qāhāl we’am rāb*.”¹

Winger’s argument does not rest only upon the phrase “many nations” referring to nation(s) that would attack Tyre after Nebuchadnezzar; it also requires that the shift from the use of the pronoun “he” used in vv. 7-11 to the use of “they” in v. 12 refer to the nation that would

¹ Block, NICOT Ezekiel 2, 39. See Ezek. 30:11 and Jeremiah 21:4-10 for other examples of the Babylonian army depicted with general plurality.

follow Nebuchadnezzar (i.e., Alexander the Great).² In other words, Winger does not deny that Nebuchadnezzar was the agent prophesied about in vv. 7-11; however, in v. 12, the shift to the pronoun “they” refers to Alexander the Great, who would ultimately conquer the island city of Tyre.

There are numerous problems with this interpretation, both with regard to parallel constructions that occur in other prophetic passages, as well as the internal logic of the prophecy in Ezekiel 26. First, there are other prophetic passages that are constructed with similar shifts in pronouns. For example, in Jeremiah 20, the priest Pashhur mistreats Jeremiah, who responds with a prophetic word. In verse 4 we read, “For thus says the Lord, ‘Behold, I am going to make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends; and while your eyes look on, they will fall by the sword of their *enemies*. So I shall give over all Judah to the hand of the *king of Babylon*, and *he* will carry them away as exiles to Babylon and (*he*) will slay them with the sword.” Notice that not only are the “enemies” plural, but the “king of Babylon” is the agent who will kill Pashhur’s friends and bring the exiles to Babylon. However, in verse 5 the text reads, “I shall also give over all the wealth of this city, all its produce, and all its costly things; even all the treasures of the kings of Judah I shall give over to the hand of their *enemies*, and *they* will plunder them, take them away, and bring them *to Babylon*.” We know, not only from this text, but from history, that Nebuchadnezzar brought the kingdom of Judah into exile, and he was the lone agent of the prophecy. Yet, there is a clear change in pronoun use from “he” to “they” in the passage.³

² We will set aside the fact that the “many nations” in Ezek. 26:4 would only refer to two attacking nations (Babylonia and Greece) seems problematic.

³ This third person singular/plural shift is also seen in Jeremiah 21:4-10, as the King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, and his army, are referred to in both the singular and the plural, although the army of Babylonia is the single referent.

If the switch from the 3rd person singular pronoun “he” to the plural “they” does not refer to a future nation that would come up against Tyre, to what is it referring? The internal logic of the passage makes it clear that Nebuchadnezzar’s soldiers are the ones referred to as the “they.” In Ezekiel 26:7, Nebuchadnezzar is described as coming with his horses, chariots, cavalry, a host, and many people. He would kill the inhabitants on the mainland, set up a siege, set up battering rams, tear down the towers with swords, etc. Of course, while Nebuchadnezzar would indeed be responsible for performing these actions, as the leader of the army, it is in no way intended by the prophet that he himself would bring the towers down with a sword, or set up the battering ram himself; it would be the work of his soldiers.

This idea is carried into verses 10 and 11, as the horses enter the city, raise a cloud of dust, shake the walls, trample the streets, and kill the inhabitants of the city. In verse 12, the use of “they” simply refers to the soldiers who have just breached the city and killed its inhabitants: “And they will plunder your riches and make a spoil of your merchandise, and they will break down your walls and destroy your nice houses, and throw your stones and your timbers and your debris into the water.” Greenburg notes this shift to the third person: “*They*. Nebuchadnezzar’s soldiers; the shifts in subject portray the action from different viewpoints. In G all the verbs of this verse are singular, continuing the person of the previous verb.”⁴ Greenburg points to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of this verse, which *maintains the third person singular pronoun “he,”* demonstrating its understanding of the agent of destruction to be Nebuchadnezzar, as in the immediately preceding verses.⁵

⁴ Greenburg, *Ezekiel*, 534.

⁵ There is not only internal logic to connect verse 12 to the preceding section, but the literary structure of the chapter unifies the prophecy and its topics. Block writes, “The expository function of the material within this framework [7-14] is evident from the numerous links between these verses and the preceding vv. 3-6” (Block, *Ezekiel*, 39. I will note here only the lexical connections, as they will suffice: *bare rocks* and *nets* (4-5; 14); *ruddle* and *dust* (4; 12); *midst of the sea* and *midst of the water* (4; 12); “self-identification formula” (6; 14); “signatory formula” (5; 14); “slaughtering your daughters on the mainland with the sword” (6; 8).

To briefly summarize, the first pillar upon which Mr. Winger's argument is based is the distinction that he argues for in Ezekiel 26, where the "many nations" in verse 3 refer not only to Nebuchadnezzar and his armies, but also to Alexander the Great and his army. This is evidenced, in his opinion, by the shift from the third person singular pronoun "he" in verses 7-11 to the third person plural "they" in verse 12. However, as we have hopefully demonstrated, the "many nations" almost certainly refer to the "many people" that make up the armies of Nebuchadnezzar referred to in verse 7. Secondly, the shift in pronouns is merely a change in perspective, as the "he" refers to Nebuchadnezzar as the representative of the armies, while v. 12 changes perspective to the soldiers themselves. This conclusion is supported by the reading of the LXX in verse 12, which maintains the third person singular pronoun "he" throughout. In short, there is no reason to suggest that anyone other than Nebuchadnezzar and his armies are referred to in the prophecy of Ezekiel 26.

Tyre vs. the "Daughters" on the Mainland

The second pillar of Mr. Winger's argument is the identification of the besieged city of Ezekiel 26:7-11 as the mainland city of Ushu or "Old Tyre." Winger argues that, for thirteen years, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to the mainland city of Ushu, and ultimately breached the city. However, when he entered the mainland city, much to his chagrin, he discovered that, during the siege, the people of the city had moved secretly to the island city of Tyre, along with their possessions. Thus, Ezekiel's prophecy was accurate, for Nebuchadnezzar did breach the mainland city, but was unable to receive any plunder, for it had been taken to the island city of Tyre.

Unfortunatley for Mr. Winger, this interpretation is all but untenable, for any number of reasons. First, the distinction between the city of Tyre (island city) and the city of Ushu

(mainland city) is almost always kept distinct in the ancient sources. Thus, the judgment prophesied against Tyre by Ezekiel was clearly against the island city, evidenced not only by this ancient distinction, but by the language of the passage itself. Secondly, we know a fair amount about the mainland city of Ushu and the role it played in the day-to-day life of Tyre. Although Ushu likely had fortifications, it had been captured and conquered throughout history (even recent history from Ezekiel's perspective), and that with little effort. Finally, the siege of the island city of Tyre was predicated upon cutting off its supply lines, which came from the mainland, particularly Ushu! Let us examine these points in detail.

The island city of Tyre was distinct from its vulnerable mainland or "daughter" cities, including Ushu.⁶ Not long before the time of Ezekiel, the Assyrian army had laid siege to Tyre under several Neo-Assyrian kings. For example, around 671 B.C.E., Esarhaddon writes, "In the course of my campaign, I set up fortifications against Ba'alu, the king of Tyre, who trusted in his friend Taharqa, the king of Kush, threw off the yoke of the god Aššur, my lord, and kept answering (me) with insolence. I cut off the supply of food and water that sustained their lives."⁷

Ashurbanipal, Esarhaddon's son, had a similar experience with Tyre:

On my third campaign, I marched against Ba'alu, the king of the land Tyre who resides in the middle of the sea. Because he did not honor my royal command(s) and did not obey the pronouncement(s) from my lip(s), I set up outposts against him. To prevent his people from leaving, I reinforced (its) garrison. By sea and dry land, I took control of (all of) his routes (and thus) cut off (all) access to him. I made water (and) food for the preservation of their lives scarce for their mouths. I confined them in a harsh imprisonment from which there was no escape. I constricted (and) cut short their lives. I made them (the people of Tyre) bow down to my yoke.⁸

⁶ Katzenstein, *History of Tyre*, 217. "Situated, as it was, 'on an island in the midst of the sea,' Tyre's chief interest was her wide-spreading trade. While her mainland was vulnerable to attack, her splendid isolation was Tyre's trump card, which the king of Tyre knew how to play."

⁷ Esarhaddon 34, lines 12'-14' in Erle Leichty, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680-669 BC)* (RINAP 4; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011) 87.

⁸ Inscription of Ashurbanipal, 003: ii 38-49 [ORACC RINAP5 (<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/rinap/rinap5/Q003702>)].

From these two sections of these inscriptions, we can see that Tyre was situated “in the middle of the sea,” and that a significant aspect of besieging the city was cutting off supply lines, both from the land and the sea. Ushu represented a significant source of freshwater for Tyre, and during a siege, the invading king would begin by cutting off its supply lines to the island.⁹ The repeated military actions against Tyre is unsurprising, as noted by Katzenstein:

A repetition of events, certainly a siege against the island of Tyre, which had to start with the occupation of Ushu, is quite normal, for a march against Philistia and Egypt had to pass this strip of country situated along the highways. As long as the Phoenician coastal towns were on friendly terms with the Assyrian king, no hostile action against them was necessary. But in alliance with Egypt each town might endanger the long lines of communications.¹⁰

That Ushu was comparatively easy prey for invading armies can be seen in another inscription of Ashurbanipal: “On my return march, I conquered the city Ušû (Palaetyrus), whose location is situated on the shore of the sea. I slew the people of the city Ušû who had not been obedient to their governors by not giving payment, their annual giving. I rendered judgment on those insubmissive people: I carried off their gods and their people to Assyria.”¹¹ Notice the distinction between Tyre, which was “in the middle of the sea,” and Ushu, which was “situated on the shore of the sea.”

To briefly summarize this section, there was a clear distinction drawn between the island city of Tyre and the mainland city of Ushu, along with other mainland cities along the coast. It has also been demonstrated that Ushu was a source of freshwater for the city of Tyre, and because of this, an initial stage of any siege included either directly controlling Ushu or cutting

⁹ Katzenstein, *History of Tyre*, 14-15.

¹⁰ H.J. Katzenstein, *The History of Tyre: from the Beginning of the Second Millennium B.C.E. until the Fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C.E.* (2nd edition; Jerusalem: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1997) 279.

¹¹ Inscription of Ashurbanipal, 011: ix 115-121 [ORACC RINAP5 (<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/rinap/rinap5/pager>)].

off the supply lines between Ushu and Tyre. Finally, the relative ease with which armies were able to conquer the cities of the mainland has been observed.

The situation was no different in these respects for Nebuchadnezzar when he began his siege of Tyre around 586 B.C.E. With respect to siege tactics that were historically used against Tyre, the first thing that we would expect Nebuchadnezzar to do is defeat and secure the vulnerable mainland cities, cutting off supply lines (particularly of water) to the island of Tyre.

Block notes, “The description [in Ezekiel 26] begins appropriately with the fate of the mainland Tyrian settlements, which must be the first to experience Nebuchadnezzar’s attack, followed by a more detailed account of the assault on the island city itself.”¹² Katzenstein concurs:

Nebuchadnezzar started a special Phoenician campaign, and apparently quickly conquered and subdued Sidon and Arvad. The mainland of Tyre, was occupied by the Babylonian forces too, but the island of Tyre did not open its gates to the Babylonian king. Thus in about 585 B.C.E., the seventh year of Ethbaal III, the siege of Tyre started . . . We must assume that the siege of Tyre was actually a blockade of the island, from the mainland opposite. After the Tyrian mainland had been occupied . . . the siege of the island itself started. But the island was surrounded by strong and high walls, strengthened by high and mighty towers.¹³

This, of course, presents a significant problem for Mr. Winger’s argument. His contention is that Nebuchadnezzar did not besiege the island city of Tyre, but the mainland city of Ushu. After a thirteen year siege, he eventually did enter the gates of Ushu, but found that, during the siege, all of the inhabitants had relocated to the island fortress. This interpretation not only flies directly in the face of what is recorded in the text of Ezekiel (which specifically differentiates between Tyre and its “daughters” [mainland cities]), but it contradicts this historical (and logical) progression of events in the siege. Even if no other historical data were available to us concerning this siege, it seems difficult to imagine that Ashurbanipal (for example), on a return

¹² Block, *Ezekiel*, 40.

¹³ Katzenstein, *History of Tyre*, 330-331.

from a separate campaign, could conquer the mainland coast and Ushu, but Nebuchadnezzar and his hosts could not breach the walls of this mainland city for thirteen years! It seems even more fantastic to suggest that Nebuchadnezzar would only besiege the mainland side of Ushu (under this suggested scenario), allowing (without him being aware!) the inhabitants of Ushu to “sneak out the back door,” relocating with their possessions to the island. This seems all but ludicrous, particularly because of the common practice of setting up a blockade to cut off Ushu and the mainland cities’ supplies from Tyre.

To sum up this section, the prophecy of Ezekiel 26 is pronounced against Tyre, the island city, and not Ushu, the city on the mainland. Although Ushu was likely fortified to protect its freshwater springs, it was vulnerable to attack and was repeatedly conquered during the first millennium, along with the other mainland cities. In fact, a siege of the island city of Tyre would begin with either conquering or isolating Ushu and the other cities on the mainland in order to cut off supply lines. Thus, in addition to the historical evidence available to us, as Ushu was weak and repeatedly conquered, and blockades were the norm when laying siege to the island, it is extremely unlikely that Nebuchadnezzar would lay siege to Ushu, and only from one side, allowing its inhabitants to “sneak” out of the city and flee to Tyre during the 13-year siege.

Conclusion

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, laid siege to the city of Tyre following the fall of Jerusalem. The prophet Ezekiel dedicated a lengthy section of his writings to oracles against the this island city. In chapter 26, he prophesied the complete destruction of Tyre; however, this prophecy did not come to pass. It has been argued by Mike Winger that the prophecy did not fail, but rather referred to two separate agents of Yahweh’s destruction: Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander the Great. Mr. Winger argues for this interpretation based on the phrase “many

nations” and the shift in pronouns from “he” to “they” in verse 12. Furthermore, he argues that Nebuchadnezzar did not besiege the island city of Tyre, but the mainland city of Ushu.

I have attempted to demonstrate that neither of these conclusions are justifiable. First, the agent referred to in chapter 26 is Nebuchadnezzar alone. Attempting to assign any portion of the prophecy to a later agent is extremely problematic. The “many nations” very likely refers to Nebuchadnezzar and the vast hosts that he brought against Tyre, and the shift in pronouns was identified in other prophetic passages that clearly refer to only one referent. In Ezekiel 26:12, it is almost certain that the “they” refers not to some future nation, but to the soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar, shifting the perspective of the text, evidenced by the continued use of the singular “he” in the LXX. Finally, I sought to demonstrate that the normal, and historical process of besieging Tyre began with conquering or isolating the mainland cities, particularly Ushu, as it was a supply line for food and fresh water for the island. It seems highly unlikely that, having been easily and repeatedly conquered by previous kings, Ushu would not only hold out a siege by Nebuchadnezzar for 13 years, but would be able to leave the city to flee to the island of Tyre.

This brief analysis of Mr. Winger’s argument should be considered in no way exhaustive. Further analysis of the literary structure of chapter 26, Ezekiel’s reaction and amended prophecy in chapter 29, and the failed Egyptian prophecies of chapters 29-30 are also significant aspects of this discussion. However, this paper is intended to address the two primary arguments upon which Mr. Winger’s interpretation rest. However one interprets the prophetic work of Ezekiel, it should be done with as strict an adherence to the historical and linguistic context of the book. It is my hope that this short paper has provided an example of how to approach a difficult text in this way.