

Do not fear sceptics

There are some people who spend all their spare time denouncing the Bible and blaspheming God. This much is commonplace; however there is a small group of quite academic thinkers who go to great lengths to disprove Scripture in considerable technical detail. Such people write books and set up websites announcing that the Bible is full of discrepancies, unfulfilled prophecies and contradictions.¹ There is even a 'Sceptic's Bible' which claims to expose all the errors in every Bible book.

Now most Christians ignore this sort of thing, but occasionally a believer will read one of these provocations and be amazed at the technical argument. Often they are historical, archaeological, critical, academic treatises, many of which are better prepared than most sermons and cheap Christian paperbacks. Indeed, such works often highlight a text that most Christians have overlooked. In 1979 Liberal Robert P Carroll even wrote a book listing failed Biblical prophecies. Some professing Christians have fallen away after reading such devastating sceptical works. Indeed, even for the mature believer they can be quite challenging.

This paper is designed to teach you not to be afraid of such things. If God truly is the author of Scripture, then every seeming discrepancy, every thorny problem, has a good answer. It just has to be found after searching.

One example: Ezekiel's prophecy about Tyre's destruction

In order to explain this I will look at just one difficult problem used by sceptics to aver that Scripture is erroneous: the denunciation of Tyre by Ezekiel. Of necessity, detailed and complex study is required to refute the critics properly.²

'I will make you like the top of a rock;³ you shall be *a place for spreading nets*, and you shall never be rebuilt, for I the LORD have spoken,' says the Lord GOD. Ezek 26:14

Many criticise the whole denunciation of Tyre but this is the most difficult verse to deal with. God says that it will never be rebuilt, but history shows that Tyre continued as a city for hundreds of years, still exists today, and never continued this desolate. At first sight this is a very difficult problem.

To solve this difficulty one has to properly exegete the context, plus have knowledge of history and archaeology, and then spend some considerable time in study. This is why teachers and apologists are needed in the church; members in secular employment cannot be expected to do this. Such hard work is necessary because the sceptical opponents have also put in a great deal of work, which at first sight looks impressive and convincing. Study like this takes time and this is why certain teachers (not all elders) need support.

Points raised by sceptics

- Tyre survived; it was not destroyed.

¹ For example: The Skeptical Review Online or Errancy.org.

² I must mention my indebtedness, in part, to a study by Paul Ferguson, Ph.D, 'Ezekiel 26:1-14: A Proof Text For Inerrancy or Fallibility of The Old Testament?'. In *The Bible and Spade*, Spring 2006 issue.

³ 'Tyre' means, 'a rock'.

- Ezekiel prophesied that Nebuchadnezzar would be responsible for the destruction of Tyre. However, his siege ended in 573 BC with a negotiated settlement. He did not destroy the city.
- Some say that he did not even besiege the city and did not capture the king.
- Ezekiel prophesied that Nebuchadnezzar would get rich from Tyre; he did not.
- Ezekiel 29:17–20 is an apology by the prophet for being wrong.
- The NT mentions Tyre in the present tense (e.g. Acts 12:20) thus they contradict Ezekiel.

Many of the ‘Christian’ answers to the critics have been very poor; one even suggesting that Ezekiel got it wrong and later repented. An example of a Liberal interpretation of this passage (denouncing Biblical inerrancy) is Edwin Burt’s, *Types of Religious Philosophy*, which is used as a source in Philosophy of Religion education.

The basic historical data

- Tyre was a major Phoenician trading city that was extremely wealthy, being the cosmopolitan focus of the ancient Near East. It occupied a part of what is modern Lebanon.
- Tyre was divided into two segments: a mainland conurbation [called *Uzu/Ushu* by Egyptian and Assyrian texts; ‘ancient Tyre’ to Roman historians or *Palai-Tyros* in classical sources] and a separate fortress city on an island 1.2 ml. (2 km.) out to sea [others say 1/3 ml. (600 m.)]. The island city was dependent on food and water from its sister city, ‘Old Tyre’ or ‘Second Tyre’.
- The island city was built originally on two sandstone reefs (islands). King Hiram (ca. 969–936 BC) joined the two reefs with landfill, enlarging it by 40 acres (16 ha.). Later monarchs extended this, creating two ports on the northern and southern sides of the island. It contained wealthy houses.
- Shortly after Ezekiel’s prophecy Nebuchadnezzar besieged Tyre and defeated the mainland city leaving it deserted (587–574 BC). Most of the population, and their valuables, had already moved to the island and negotiated a truce and tribute after 13 years siege. [A good navy was required to defeat the island Tyre, which Tyre had but Nebuchadnezzar did not.]
- A king of Cyprus took Tyre using his fleet in the 370s BC.⁴
- In 332 BC, Alexander the Great took the island city. This was accomplished by taking the debris of the mainland city and using it to build a causeway to the island.⁵ The causeway was a half-mile (0.8 km.) long and 200 ft (60 m.) wide. Although Alexander brought much damage to the city, it still stood. In time sand deposits, washed in by the waves, enlarged the causeway. The island city is now a peninsula to this day. The rubble from Old Tyre was so thoroughly removed that no trace can be found. Thus, the precise location of mainland Tyre is disputed. According to H. J. Katzenstein it was ‘*totally dismantled by Alexander the Great in his famous siege...and disappeared totally*’.⁶
- In 315 BC, Alexander’s former general Antigonus began his own siege of Tyre, taking the city a year later.
- In 126 BC, Tyre regained its independence (from the Seleucids) and was allowed to keep much of its independence, as a ‘*civitas foederata*’, when the area became a Roman province in 64 BC.

⁴ Robin Lane Fox, 1973, page 181.

⁵ Diodorus, 17.40.

⁶ Katzenstein, H. Jacob; *The History of Tyre*, second ed., Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (1997) p15.

- Tyre is mentioned in the NT and was visited by Jesus (Matt 11:21–23, 15:21; Mk 3:8, 7:24; Lk 6:17). Paul also ministered there (Acts 21:3–4).
- The Crusaders captured it in 1124 AD, making it an important city in the ‘Kingdom of Jerusalem’. [The city was the site of the archbishop of Tyre, a suffragan of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem.] After the re-conquest of Acre by Richard in 1191, the seat of the kingdom moved there, but coronations were held in Tyre. In the 13th century, Tyre was separated from the royal domain as a separate crusader lordship.
- In 1291 Mameluke Muslims (Saracens) thoroughly crushed Tyre and left the city in ruins, aside from a small poor town, for hundreds of years.
- The Ottoman Empire ruled it until the modern state of Lebanon appeared in 1920. Over time the area became a peninsula through coastal drift. The causeway is now much wider and ancient parts of the island have vanished.
- In recent decades Lebanon developed the town, known as ‘es-Sur’ (or ‘Sour’), with high rise flats to promote tourism because of its good beaches. It had a population of 14,000 in 1988 and approximately 117,000 inhabitants in 2003 (swelled by refugees). Most of the population is on the mainland, spreading on to what was the causeway up to what was the northern part of the island. The modern city does not reach to the full extent of the ancient island city and the old causeway has been widened significantly by coastal drift. The heart of the original mainland Tyre (Al Bass) and 50% of the island are not built on, being kept as archaeological ruins.⁷

The latest archaeological data about Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Tyre

Source: Jacob Katzenstein’s monumental study on Tyre: *The History of Tyre*, second ed., Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (1997).

- Nebuchadnezzar did besiege Tyre. A tablet shows the provisions for the army against Tyre.⁸
- Nebuchadnezzar did conquer Tyre. The King of Tyre was exiled to Babylon and is listed with all the foreign kings living in Babylon two years after the siege ended. Tablets show that Babylonian governors were ruling Tyre after the siege.⁹
- Nebuchadnezzar conquered mainland Tyre (the place of some wealth, provisions and commerce) but not the island city. Antonio Ciasca confirms that the, ‘*mainland sector of the city of Tyre*’ was destroyed.¹⁰
- In 332 BC Alexander the Great conquered the island city after a seven month siege in order to sacrifice in the Temple of Heracles.
- Tyre’s once massive harbour installations are now under water.
- The reefs that formed the foundation of Tyre’s island fortress are now under water due to erosion, a rise in sea levels and human intervention (the causeway affected water currents). It has been said that it is as if the Tyre of Ezekiel’s day never existed.¹¹ Great structures, such as the palace and temple of Hercules have not been found. Archaeologists are frustrated that they cannot get to ancient remains under the layers of rubble of buildings and rocks. Furthermore, inscriptions from Tyre are virtually absent in Lebanon; even the phrase ‘king of Tyre’ is not found on any inscription from this area. The memory of Tyrian monarchs has perished.

⁷ See <http://mapcarta.com/Tyre>

⁸ Eckhard A. Unger; *Nebukadnezar II und sein sandabaku (Oberkommisar) in Tyrus*. Zeitschrift für alttestamentlich Wissenschaft, (1926), 3: 314–17; cf. Katzenstein, p324.

⁹ Katzenstein; 314-17. E. Unger; 314-17.

¹⁰ Antonio Ciasca; [ed. Sabatino Moscati] *The Phoenicians*, Abbeville, (1988) p147, 148.

¹¹ Negev, Avraham, and Gibson, Shimon, eds.; ‘Tyre’, *Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*, rev. ed. Continuum, (2001) p519, 520.

What did Ezekiel actually say?

Ezekiel 26:1–14 actually agrees with 29:17–20 and history (sceptics says that they are contradictory, that Ezekiel wrote this years later to correct his earlier mistake).

As in many other places, the prophecy concerns a general scenario along with an emphasised detail within that scenario. The general prophecy is that many nations will come against Tyre in waves, that is, in historical successions. This began with Babylon, continued with Alexander and ended with the Muslim attacks. Many nations came against Tyre: the Persians, Macedonians (Alexander), Ptolemies (Post-Alexander), Seleucids (Post-Alexander), and Romans occupied it in turn. The changes from the singular ('he') to the plural ('they') highlights the difference between the general (waves of many nations) and the specific (Nebuchadnezzar).

Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: 'Behold, I am against you, O Tyre, and will cause many nations to come up against you, as the sea causes its waves to come up. And they shall destroy the walls of Tyre and break down her towers; I will also scrape her dust from her, and make her like the top of a rock. It shall be a place for spreading nets in the midst of the sea, for I have spoken,' says the Lord GOD; 'it shall become plunder for the nations.' Ezek 26:3-5

Academics have noted this:

It is the utter restlessness of the ocean. No one wave may bring full destruction... It is the unending succession of waves that destroys even the strongest rock... Equally, the Babylonian opponents of Tyre, included as the "many nations," are imaged in such a way that they appear not as independent powers, but merely as episodes in Yahweh's patient, powerful sovereignty.¹²

The sceptic response is that 'many nations' are the multiple race mercenaries used in the armies of ancient empires. Indeed, it was common that monarchs would enhance their army by adding cohorts or even regiments of foreign warriors, or would conscript foreigners within their lands. However, no historian, let alone Biblical writer, would call this advancing army 'many nations'. The attack of a certain king is always denominated as an attack by that king's country, e.g. Babylonians; even if it contained many different nationalities. For instance, the troops engaged in wars conducted by English monarchs often contained regiments of Irish, Welsh and even contingents of other nations, such as German; yet the warfare was always stated to be conducted by the English army. While Macedonians formed the heart of Alexander's army, his force contained troops from many areas, such as Thessalian or Thracian cavalrymen or even Asiatic hoplites (infantry) but his campaigns were said to be Macedonian (or Greek).¹³

Then again, God says that Tyre will become 'a plunder for the nations', not Babylon. This can only mean what it says, many nations despoil Tyre over a long period. If it referred to the ethnic components of Nebuchadnezzar's army, it would have said that Nebuchadnezzar, or Babylon, would plunder Tyre, not many nations.

Secondly, the beginning of these waves of attacks will come with Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army, this is highlighted in a specific manner since it comes soon after the prophecy.

¹² Carol A Newsom; 'A Maker of Metaphors: Ezekiel's Oracles Against Tyre', in *Interpreting the Prophets*, ed. James Mays and Paul Achtemeier, Fortress, (1987), p192.

¹³ Alexander was actually king of Macedonia, strictly a part of Greece, but also the Commander in Chief of all Greece, with the support of Athens and Corinth (he conquered Thessaly and Thrace). His empire was culturally Greek (or Hellenistic).

For thus says the Lord GOD: 'Behold, I will bring against Tyre from the north Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, king of kings, with horses, with chariots, and with horsemen, and an army with many people. He will slay with the sword your daughter *villages* in the fields; he will heap up a siege mound against you, build a wall against you, and raise a defence against you. He will direct his battering rams against your walls, and with his axes he will break down your towers.' Ezek 26:7-

9

This is exactly what happened. Nebuchadnezzar pillaged the daughter villages and mainland city conurbation, and besieged the island city. Notice the details, 'your strong pillars will fall to the ground' (verse 11); this is exactly what happened. The colonnades and pillars of the mainland city were cast down and it was these that were later used by Alexander to form the foundation for the causeway so that not one is left visible.

They will break down your walls and destroy your pleasant houses; they will lay your stones, your timber, and your soil in the midst of the water. Ezek 26:12

Nebuchadnezzar could not take the island fortress without a good navy, which Tyre had, from which she could continually supply herself. Alexander ignored a naval attack and instead built a causeway using the rubble from the old city. God's word exactly predicted this action.

A historian notes:

Looking down into the water one can see a mass of granite columns and stone blocks strewn over the sea bottom. Until recently the ruins of Tyre above water were few. How was the ancient metropolis of Phoenicia so utterly demolished? Devastated by drawn-out sieges and earthquakes throughout her long history, Tyre from the 18th century onward has served as a "quarry" for the whole coast. Her stones may be found as far away as Acre and Beirut.¹⁴

The full destruction of Tyre came in waves resulting from attacks by many nations. Nebuchadnezzar plundered the conurbation and old city but the chief spoil went to the nations following him. This is as prophesied by Ezekiel in Ezek 29:17–20. Ezekiel gives no timeframe for these waves.

After Alexander Tyre again became prominent, as prophesied by Isaiah 23:15–18. In 274 BC, some 58 years after Tyre's demolition by Alexander, the city was given independent status by Ptolemy II and subsequently prospered under the Greeks and Romans.

However, in 638 AD Arabs conquered the city. In 1124 the Crusaders took it and in 1291 the Mameluke Muslims took it and reduced it to ashes. This was to deny the Crusaders an opportunity to restore it. In 1517 it became part of the Ottoman (Turkish) empire. In the 19th century it had been reduced to a mere village occupied by hovels. In 1838 Edward Robinson visited the area saying,

I continued my walk along the shore of the peninsula, part of which is now unoccupied except as "a place to spread nets upon" [Ez 26:5,14] musing upon the pride and fall of ancient Tyre. Here was the little isle, once covered by her palaces and surrounded by her fleets: but alas! Thy riches and thy fame...Where are they? Tyre has indeed become like "the top of a rock" [Ez 26:4,14]. [Seeing only broken pillars beneath the waves, he remarked:] The hovels that now nestle upon a portion of her site present no contradiction of the dread decree, "You will never be rebuilt" [Ez 26:14].¹⁵

In 1894 D L Miller wrote,

¹⁴ Nina Jidejian; *Tyre Through the Ages*, second ed. Librairie Orientale, (1996) p13–14.

¹⁵ Edward Robinson; *Biblical Researches* 3, Crocker and Brewster, (1852) p395.

When Volney visited the place some years ago he wrote, "The whole village of Tyre contains only 50 or 60 poor families who live obscurely on the produce of their little and trifling fishery".¹⁶

In the early 20th century, only 500 impoverished Persian schismatics lived there in miserable hovels.¹⁷ In 1911, Hasting's *A Dictionary of the Bible* called Tyre 'a stagnant village in a stagnant Turkey.' Tourist steamships avoided it as too insignificant for a visit.¹⁸

The poetic language of the prophecy is progressive, culminating in a shattering denunciation, going through details of the devastation, affecting people, commerce, houses, towers, gates, walls and suburbs. It ends in the condemnation, 'you shall never be rebuilt' (v14); that is, after the final wave of attack by the nations. The findings of archaeologists confirm this situation.

Any rebuilding of the city in Ezekiel's mind (and in the use of the Hebrew word 'rebuilt'), would have to be in accordance with its stature of that day, with fine palaces, temples, colonnades, opulent houses and beauty almost beyond compare in the ancient world. It would also include the vast wealth produced by Phoenician trading that made Tyre so rich and opulent. It would also include a flourishing population, national prominence and influence, strength and security. The promise that Tyre would never be rebuilt means more than just erecting a few buildings on the site. Ezekiel calls it 'perfect in beauty' (Ezek 27:3; see the description in verses 4-11).

The modern high rise, ugly, flats built in recent decades do not accord with this. Tyre has not been rebuilt in international stature and national pride; neither is it influential, prosperous and filled with beauty and commerce. Ezekiel was not saying that there would never be any buildings on the site, there has always been some sort of partial building, but it means that Tyre as it was, in all its glory and wealth, would never be rebuilt.¹⁹ This is the case. The glory of Tyre is underground and under water, as Ezekiel foretold. The essential parts of ancient Tyre are bare rocks or under water today. Most of the modern buildings are on land that wasn't even there in Ezekiel's time.²⁰

Built no more--fulfilled as to the mainland Tyre, under Nebuchadnezzar. The insular Tyre recovered partly, after seventy years (Isa 23:17-18), but again suffered under Alexander, then under Antigonous, then under the Saracens at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Now its harbours are choked with sand, precluding all hope of future restoration, "not one entire house is left, and only a few fishermen take shelter in the vaults" [MAUNDRELL]. So accurately has God's word come to pass.²¹

Thou shalt be built no more - If this refer to Nebuchadnezzar's capture of the city, old Tyre must be intended: that was destroyed by him, and never rebuilt. But I doubt whether the whole of this prophecy do not refer to the taking of Tyre by Alexander, three hundred years after its capture by Nebuchadnezzar. Indeed it may include more recent conquests of this important city. It went through a variety of vicissitudes till 1289,

¹⁶ D. L. Miller; *Wanderings in Bible Lands*, Brethren's, (1894) p587.

¹⁷ Merrill F. Unger; *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Moody, (1966) p1121-22.

¹⁸ George M. Mackie; ed. James Hastings, 'Tyre', *A Dictionary of the Bible* 4, C. Scribner's Sons, (1911) p823-25.

¹⁹ There was a long period from the 14th century to the 20th century when there were few or no proper buildings on the site at all and it was just used by poor fishermen, fulfilling the detail of the prophecy.

²⁰ Due to accretions of sandy deposits on the coastline, island and causeway. Essential parts of ancient Tyre are underwater or remain as bare rocky ruins.

²¹ Jamison, Fausset & Brown, *A Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* on Ezek 26:14, Eerdmans reprint, originally published in 1868.

when it and the neighboring towns were sacked and ravaged by the Mamelukes. Mr. Maundrell, who visited this place, says, "it is a Babel of broken walls, pillars, vaults, etc., there being not so much as one entire house left! Its present inhabitants are only a few poor wretches, harbouring themselves in the vaults, and subsisting chiefly on fishing; who seem to be preserved in this place by Divine Providence as a visible argument how God has fulfilled his word concerning Tyre, that it should be the top of a rock, a place for fishers to dry their nets on."²²

Thou shalt be built no more: this must be understood with some restriction and limitation; as that it should not be built any more in the same stately manner; or be raised to royal dignity, and be governed in the grand manner it had been; or be built upon the same spot; or after its last destruction, to which the prophecy may have respect; it being usual in Scripture for prophecies to regard what is more remote as well as more near; for, upon the destruction of it by Nebuchadnezzar, it was to be restored after seventy years, according to Isaiah's prophecy, Isa 23:15 and, many years after this, new Tyre was besieged, taken, and destroyed by Alexander; and after this it was rebuilt; we read of it in the New Testament; See Gill on Act 21:3, and in Jerom's time it was a most noble and beautiful city, as he on this passage observes; indeed, as Kimchi says, who lived near a thousand years after Jerom, the city then built in his time called Tyre was built upon the continent near the seashore; whereas Tyre destroyed by Alexander was built in the midst of the sea, and was as the top of a rock. It has since been destroyed by Saladine, in the year 1291; and now quite uninhabited, unless by fishermen, who wash, dry, and mend their nets here.²³

It shall be *built no more* (Eze 26:14), not built any more as it had been, with such state and magnificence, nor built any more in the same place, within the sea, nor built any where for a long time; the present inhabitants shall be destroyed or dispersed, so that this Tyre shall be *no more*. For *God has spoken it* (Eze 26:5, Eze 26:14); and when what he has said is accomplished *they shall know* thereby that *he is the Lord, and not a man that he should lie nor the son of man that he should repent.*²⁴

Conclusion

There is no doubt, when carefully studied, that God's word in Ezekiel is absolutely correct and in accord with both historical fact and archaeological discovery. The claims of the sceptics are false. In real terms, ancient Tyre is just a place for the spreading of nets and all the glory of ancient Tyre has vanished.

Of course there are a great many more Scriptures that are difficult to explain at first sight. However, some books have been written specifically to explain some of these. One such work is John W Halley's, '*An examination of the Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*' (Baker, reprint 1977) which deals with discrepancies according to type; or George Sexton's older book, '*Biblical Difficulties Dispelled*' (William Briggs, 1885) which answers set texts. A more modern work would be, Kaiser, Davids, Bruce, Brauch's, '*Hard Sayings of the Bible*' (IVP); though this is not strictly focused on alleged discrepancies. Of course, commentaries on the Bible book containing a possible discrepancy ought to explain such problematic texts also.

²² Adam Clarke [1715-1832]; *Comm. on the Bible*, on Ezek 26:14.

²³ John Gill [1690-1771]; *Exposition of the Entire Bible*, on Ezek 26:14.

²⁴ Matthew Henry [1662-1714]; *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, on Ezek 26:14.

There is yet to be a discrepancy raised by a sceptic that has proved to be impossible to answer. When faced with a seemingly convincing sceptic attack, either spend time researching the truth or find the truth from someone who has already done the research for you. Do not be afraid.

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