

Barron Barnett Lodge  
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*The Phoenicians* by R.W.Bro.Evan Newton

Introduction:

In speaking on the Phoenicians tonight I want to make it clear that what I am saying is my interpretation of what others have written and what I have read about this subject. It is my interpretation of this very complex subject. While, in preparing for this lecture, I have read extensively on the subject, I do not consider myself to be an expert, merely a very interested student, on the subject of Phoenician history. I trust everybody understands this disclaimer.

I'd like firstly to say that talking about the Mediterranean in ancient times is a subject which could encompass many hours of information as so much happened over so many years. It is very difficult to accurately depict it in a short time.

I chose the subject of the Phoenicians as a particular course of investigation that we could focus on. The Phoenicians, in fact, were actually Canaanite peoples and were a prolific race and I'll cover a bit more about how they began their civilisation, I guess you could call it, after I've given a bit more background of that part of the Eastern Mediterranean, that area which is often called The Levant, from Asia Minor down to what is the Red Sea, Arabia and the Arabian Gulf and so on.

The point I was making before about history sometimes going away from fact, for example, the historian Herodotus who wrote around about the fifth century BC referred to the Red Sea as the Arabian Gulf and yet we know now that the Arabian Gulf is not that particular body of water but is on the other side of Arabia. He also referred to Africa as Libya, in totality, but we know that there is much more to the continent than that.

Around about 10 thousand years ago, at the end of the last major ice age an event occurred in what is now referred to as the Fertile Crescent which is now Iraq, a discovery was made of a particular plant which changed the course I guess you could say of humanity and of civilisation, and that discovery was *einkorn* wheat.

Until that time the populace generally had been hunter-gatherers, which meant they were nomadic. They went wherever they could. They didn't favour any particular structures, they used caves and whatever shelter they could find. But at this particular time when they discovered a self-perpetuating form of sustenance, which they could cultivate, accumulate in terms of storage or use for trade, this made a huge difference to the way they had to live their lives. They didn't have to go chasing after animals and looking for other forms of food or sustenance and they had what they needed at their beck and call.

And in the process of accumulating sufficient stores and other facilities they established small habitations, which grew into villages and into cities and so forth. They domesticated animals, they settled down and really took to agriculture, they used stored food for sustenance and for trading, and so on, they started to have a government, they

started to have rules of behaviour and action, they started to function like a community. So I think that can be thought of as what we now broadly refer to as the beginning of civilisation.

The first group of individuals, citizens who lived there were the Sumerians. And certainly in the favoured land between the Tigris and Euphrates which at that time was far more fertile than it is now, and also in that area near the Indus region in North Western India or what is now Pakistan they were the first settlements, and I use the term settlements advisedly, of people settling down to cultivate and to inhabit a certain area, to build a society and to build all the necessary supports for that society.

The Sumerians were in fact one of the first people to provide a whole range of facilities in terms of support for the populace, in terms of governance, they used all sorts of different tools and metals that they conceived, it was in fact the beginning of the Bronze age towards the end of that particular civilisation, and at that time they made some very significant strides one of which was in fact the invention of the wheel at around 3500 BC or if you prefer, BCE.

Around about 3000BCE a group of people began to establish a settlement on the coast of what is today Lebanon, and they formed a habitation, a society, a village which later grew into a city, which was called Byblos and the archeological evidence shows that this is one of the oldest continuously-inhabited cities in the world which dates back to about 6000BCE, which is quite extraordinary and archeological evidence, carbon dating, has all confirmed the age of that particular habitation.

Other towns grew up along that coastal area, Sidon, Tyre and Gubla, which later on became today's Beirut. These were in fact, city states, each particular city had its own society, it was at the one time, part of a wider society or civilisation but nonetheless incorporated in that particular area or that city, they had all their own rules and controls and disciplines and in fact, their habitation became very, very sophisticated.

They were Canaanites, they were Semitic people. The term Phoenician, just to clear that point, came from the Greeks, who use the word phoenicius (Phoinikē) to infer the colour purple or crimson referring to the activity of the people along the coast who harvested the Murex sea snail. And from that they would derive the purple dye. And it was such a laborious process that particular facility became very very expensive and some said it was worth more than gold.

It was so difficult to obtain and became such a centre of their trade, that royalty used this colour to decorate their robes, and some historians believe that that was the beginning of the term the Royal Purple, meaning the royalty side of things. In other words, the only people entitled to wear this colour were the very wealthy or the royalty, that may or may not be true, I don't know.

The other major asset that these people had was the Cedars of Lebanon, although it was not called Lebanon at that time. The mountains came right down to the sea, and these

particular civilisations became seafaring traders, and were indeed extremely efficient in both trading, and in all of the sea travel. They ranged throughout the Mediterranean establishing many other ports and places of trade and connections throughout the various peoples who surrounded that body of water. They even in fact went beyond what was then called the Pillars of Hercules, the Rock of Gibraltar and Monte Hacho in Ceuta in North Africa and they were the only people who dared to go beyond these in that time which was the 1000 to 2000 BCE range.

Very quickly the fact that the Phoenicians had copious amounts of cedar to offer all the civilisations around the Mediterranean made them a very very proficient and wealthy set of traders. One of the most coveted areas of trade was between the Phoenicians and the Egyptians, who used an enormous amount of cedar for building, requiring a constant shipping backwards and forth of all the wood derived from harvesting the cedar tree in Lebanon.

The Egyptians used it in building their palaces and strangely, used in the process of mummification. I always wondered what cedar could have to do with the process of mummification, so I looked up the whole process and sure enough one of the products they use, one of the particular mixes they use is made up primarily of cedar oil, not only for embalming the body but also to cover the body before it was finally wrapped – so there you are.

And we have in the early ADs a reference from scribes in Egypt complaining about the fact that trade had been halted between Egypt and the producers of the cedar oil and they said “What will we do without the cedar for our mummies?” and we have that in writing today.

Perhaps one of the most important outcomes of the Phoenician civilisation was the fact that up until the mid second millennium or about the fifteen hundreds BCE mark, the whole process of writing was a mixture of hieroglyphs and cuneiform. The Sumerians in particular used to put their writing in this form, a very angular almost geometrical form of writing on clay tablets. We have a huge number of these recording a lot of the processes and thoughts of the Sumerian civilisation which of course, is incredibly valuable. But the variety of meanings in the whole range of characters they used made it somewhat difficult to interpret.

Hieroglyphs were even harder because there were thousands and thousands of pictures which in fact was what that was – word pictures. And so the Phoenicians in order to facilitate the trading they were doing with the different nations and civilisations around the Mediterranean developed a 22 character phonetic alphabet. I was looking some time ago at an old copy of the Torah and I was amazed at the similarity between the Phoenician script and ancient Hebrew so there again there is a connection back to the Canaanites and the Semitic background.

The Greeks were very glad to get hold of the Phoenician script and get rid of the multitude of hieroglyphic and cuneiform symbols. The Greeks didn't just take what the

Phoenicians produced, but they improved it by adding vowels. Eventually that went on to the Romans and they improved it even further; and that particular structure and that particular discipline forms the basis of what our alphabet is today.

So we already have some incredibly important events which emanated from the Phoenician civilisation. The fact that they traded so strongly with Egypt made a huge difference to the Egyptian civilisation and so much of what they did there was taken by the Phoenicians and used in many ingenious ways. In particular papyrus, which is a double-edged sword because so much of what the Phoenicians wrote down about their civilisation was written on papyrus, which after all is simply dried reeds and has perished. Thus, we have virtually no records of the Phoenicians.

The Greeks, however, to some extent came to our aid, because some of their historians use their own particular way of recording information about the Phoenician civilisation. Aristotle, Plato and Socrates all spoke very highly of the Phoenician civilisation, their accomplishments, their rules of law, the things they created, were all very highly regarded by the Greeks. One of the particular facilities which were required by so many of the civilisations of the time, especially the Egyptians, was the use of the metals of copper and tin, the alloys of which they made into bronze.

Copper at that time was more commonly used for many things, especially weapons, and they learned to alloy copper and tin and make bronze, which was far more durable. But it produced the problem: where were they to get sufficient supplies of copper?

The Phoenicians had already, as I said before, ventured beyond the Pillars of Hercules, into the Atlantic Ocean. They had populated both the east coast of Spain as well as the west, and had gone to the southern coast of what is now Britain, the United Kingdom. Because of what they were told by other traders in that area, especially the Norse and some of the Germanic Tribes, they discovered one of the greatest sources of tin which is available even today, in Cornwall, south-west England. It is clear from archeological records and carbon dating that they extracted huge amounts of tin from Cornwall and took it back by land and by sea to their own country.

But, where to get copper? There were no natural sources of copper around the Mediterranean. In their travels, almost unbelievably, they went straight across the Atlantic, and ended up in the north-eastern United States, and found there were very extensive copper reserves in that particular region. There are something like five states which have large reserves of copper, but perhaps the greatest of those were in that region particularly around Lake Superior, and there were so many artifacts and so much information provided by archeological excavation and by carbon dating that they can prove very conclusively that the Canaanites (or you could even call them the Semitic people, or even call them some of the Tribes of Israel, because that's what they became) spent a lot of time mining and bringing back huge reserves of copper from the USA in 2000BCE. When I went to school, I learnt that in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue and discovered America.

And of course, one of the most prolific users of bronze and copper who wanted tremendous amounts of it was King David and subsequently, King Solomon for the building of the temple at Jerusalem, which contained a huge amount of copper and bronze. So between the Egyptians and King Hiram of Tyre helping King Solomon build his temple, we have a huge amount of copper and bronze being utilized.

As an aside, it's also interesting that Herodotus for one, when he visited Tyre, he found a temple dedicated to Melkart. Melkart was one of the gods which the Phoenicians, (the Canaanites) had at that time. In fact another name for Melkart was Heracles, which was the Greek name for Melkart. The Greeks called The Pillars of Hercules the Pillars of Heracles.

So if you like, the name Hercules is simply a derivation of the Greek version of the Phoenician god Melkart. They had built a most magnificent temple to Melkart in Tyre, and then when King David passed on to Solomon his wish to build the most magnificent structure to the glory of his Lord, Solomon, of course, looked for assistance to Tyre. They were these wonderful navigators who could bring back whatever they needed to assist with the building, and it's been conclusively proven that the structure of the temple of Tyre to Melkart is extremely similar to that of King Solomon's temple, which unfortunately we don't have anymore because it's been destroyed twice. Nonetheless...

What else can we say about the Phoenicians? At one stage in Egypt there was a pharaoh in Egypt called Necho, he also has another name which I won't attempt to pronounce because it's very long, Necco II. He was having a lot of trouble with Nebuchadnezzar and he wanted to find some way to attack the Babylonians without going across the areas they controlled where he'd been thrown out of. So he asked the Phoenicians to find some way to attack the Babylonians from the south, from the sea, and this led to one of the most magnificent feats of navigation that the ancient world had seen - that was, they ended up circumnavigating Africa in 600BCE.

How do galleys with sails and five men to an oar get around Africa? They did it in three years. They took their time, they went as far as they could using the prevailing winds and currents. Quite often they had to battle quite a bit to make any headway and they would go ashore after some months at sea. They would create an agricultural area, they would plant crops, when those crops were ripe they'd harvest them and while they were waiting they'd repair and prepare their ships. They left what is now the Red Sea just south of where the Suez Canal now goes through, and they went down through the horn of Africa and around the Cape of Good Hope, and up the other side. They had a lot trouble when they got to places, for example where .....is now, and areas like that, they got around and back into the delta of the Nile in 3 years, a most incredible feat.

And again when I was in school in 1492 we were told the first circumnavigation of Africa (or not even a full circumnavigation) was by Bartholomew Diaz in 1488 and we know for a fact now the Phoenicians did it three thousand years ago.

The Phoenicians are called the forgotten civilisation, and I can see why: so much of what they did I was unaware of until I started researching them.

And perhaps one of the most amazing outcomes of the Phoenician civilisation was the whole situation with regard to the Punic wars. In the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Phoenicia had established an outpost at Carthage in Northern Africa in what is now Tunisia. They established many others as well but in particular Carthage flourished and the Romans called Carthage “Punic” and that was the derivation for the Punic Wars.

The first one started because the Carthaginians who were of course Phoenicians, had large land holdings and trade in Sicily and in fact controlled the sea passage of the whole Western Mediterranean at that time. They were such great sailors and they created the Bireme, which was a very large boat which had two tiers of oars. Then they created the trireme which had three tiers of oars which gave the boat its speed. This was “upgraded” when they started the First Punic War, in 261BCE, they had quinquiremes with five tiers of oars.

The Romans however, had absolutely no expertise, they weren't a naval civilisation and had just subjugated the Italian peninsula and had gone no further. And some three or four hundred thousand men later and another 120 years of three Punic Wars, the Romans defeated the Carthaginians and viciously razed Carthage, absolutely burned it, knocked it down, flattened it and sowed the ground with salt everywhere so that there was no way of growing any crops, and it was hundreds of years before it was able to be inhabited again. In fact it was the Romans who built another city there again.

But the Romans, in doing what they'd done, got this wonderful prize: the whole of the empire of Carthage. The Carthaginians, all around the Mediterranean in the Iberian Peninsula, right up into Southern England was taken over by the Romans, and that was the beginning of the Roman Empire. I find that incredible.

Another point which I find amazing in the Second Punic War; the Carthaginian general Hannibal, with all his 40 thousand or whatever troops and so many elephants forged his way into northern Italy over the Alps, itself an amazing feat, and put to the sword the Romans in 4 huge battles, got as far as Rome and stopped. There is no doubt that had he wished to do so, he could have subjugated Rome, but for some inexplicable reason he didn't. Now just imagine what would happen to world history if Rome had become another Carthage, but it didn't, but here is another case where history is stranger than fiction.

I said before that the Phoenician Empire was often called the forgotten empire. But when you look at their achievements – it was conclusively proven from their maps, which were discovered in the Third Century, that they had reached the Pacific and had gone to Polynesia. Some of the maps which they used at that time, when they were reconstructed, clearly show, and this is another side-issue, that there was huge difference in the land mass of Antarctica which makes you wonder if there was a similar situation to what we

have now with global warming, but they had certainly sailed the Southern Ocean and observed Antarctica. A boat powered by several men and oars with sails, had got that far.

A couple of things in particular I could mention about the Punic wars, the first of them of course was that the Phoenicians were absolutely fanatical about design. They were really excellent architects and builders, which is one of the reasons they were used in the construction of King Solomon's Temple. They were incredible stonemasons but they were really good builders.

When they built the seagoing vessels, the biremes, the triremes they actually had plans showing which bits went where and during the First Punic War, on a number of occasions because of really bad weather and because of an invention that the Romans came up with, the Romans captured unscathed some Carthaginian vessels and copied them. They were very good at that, and in the space of a few months, they built hundreds of ships. They used a huge number of people in labour and one of their ingenious inventions was a thing called a Corvus. In those days naval warfare consisted in ramming the opponent and trying to sink it. But the Romans invented this facility called a corvus which was very much like a ramp, a very solid ramp built on the front of the boat with a hinge structure which could be pulled up with a rope. They'd ram into a Carthaginian ship and let this thing down, and it had a great big metal spike which would ram into the deck of the opposing ship, and of course over went the troops and that was the end of that particular Carthaginian ship. So that was the sort of things which happened. The Punic Wars themselves there is so much to talk about, that it could be a whole separate subject.

I'd just like to leave you; I think I've taken up enough of your time, with another fascinating piece of information. The Sistine Chapel in Rome was completed in 1484 at the orders of Pope Sixtus the Fourth, after whom it was known, the Sistine Chapel. It was 40.93 long and 13.41 m wide and 20.7m high, and those measurements we are told are the exact dimensions of King Solomon's Temple.