

DID ANCIENT HEBREWS REALLY "FEAR THE SEA"?

by Steven Collins (1994)

An article in the 1991 edition of the *Epigraphic Society Occasional Publications (ESOP)* entitled "The Davenport and Newark Inscriptions," by Charles Moyer asserted that certain ancient North American artifacts and inscriptions could not be Hebrew because "the ancient Hebrews feared and hated the sea and have never shown any evidence of being a sea-faring people..." I do not believe that assertion can be substantiated, and the word "never" particularly misstates the historical reality of the ancient Hebrews. This article will document that the ancient Hebrews (i.e. "Israelites") had well-developed sea-faring skills. It will also show why historians have failed to recognize this fact.

Concerning ancient Israel's pre-monarchial period, it is stated in Judges 5:17; "Why did Dan remain in ships?" This comment is made in what is called "Deborah's song," and is a commentary describing what various tribes of Israel did (or did not do) in a victorious

military battle. This biblical comment indicates that the tribe of Dan was, at that time, closely identified with a maritime way of life. Some Bibles offer a date of 1200 B.C. as a guide for dating that battle.

Interestingly, Egyptian and Greek sources record that one of the tribes of the Sea Peoples, a sea-raiding people in the eastern Mediterranean at that time, were called the "Danauna" or the "Danaans." The Encyclopedia Britannica (1943 Ed., see Heading "Troy") cites the Egyptian and Greek accounts of these sea raiders and dates them to being present in the Levant "between 1230 and 1190 B.C." [Other sources render the spelling of these people as Danaouna or Danaoi, but all spellings cited include the easily recognizable root word "Dan"]. It is noteworthy that the secular historical dates coincide with the biblical dates for the tribe of Dan being a maritime tribe. Since one of the traits of the tribe of Dan was naming things after its tribal name (Joshua 19:47), it is not surprising that this maritime tribe would have its name recognizable in Egyptian and Greek accounts about them.

Also, the Hebrew tribes of Israel developed very strong maritime skills during the reign of King Solomon via their close alliance with the Phoenicians. Indeed, this alliance was so close that Solomon's alliance with King Hiram of the Phoenician city-states (which began under King David) led to many thousands of Israelites working in Phoenicia and vice-versa as the Hebrews and Phoenicians jointly implemented Solomon's prodigious building projects (I Kings 5). King Hiram shared the special maritime skills of the Phoenicians with the Israelite Hebrews (II Chronicles 8:18 records that Israelite mariners were taught by Phoenicians "who had knowledge of the sea.") II Chronicles 9:21 notes that the Israelites and Phoenicians jointly crewed a common navy. II Chronicles 9:10 and 21 mention Ophir and Tarshish as ports of call for their joint fleet, and the cargo manifest of "ivory, apes and peacocks" indicates their trading fleet had (at a minimum) African and Asian ports-of-call. Contained in my pending four-book set on Israelite history will be information documenting the specific technologies used by the Israelite/Phoenician mariners to navigate the world's oceans. As readers will see when these book are released, the Phoenicians had invented ingenious

devices to enable them to navigate planned courses and headings on the open oceans, even in unfavorable weather! These ingenious devices were shared with the Israelites as part of the “knowledge of the sea.” After receiving these technologies, the oceans began navigable highways for the Israelite mariners.

I Kings 9:26-27 records that King Solomon built a fleet which was home-ported in Ezion-geber on the Red Sea, in which Phoenicians also served to teach the Israelites the “knowledge of the sea.” This indicates that King Solomon's Israelite navy became a “two-ocean fleet” as his Mediterranean fleet could sail to Atlantic destinations, and his Red Sea fleet could sail to African, Asian and Pacific ports. I Kings 10:22 adds that the Israelites had at sea a “navy of Tarshish.” Does this refer to a trading fleet that sailed to “Tarshish,” or is there distinct and separate meaning in the word “Tarshish?” Since “Tarshish” was the proper name of one of the patriarchs of the tribe of Benjamin (I Chronicles 7:10), it is possible the writer of I Kings used an Israelite clan name to designate a particular group of Israelites who were assigned to naval service. If so, they would have been readily known to the writer’s contemporaries, but not to readers in the 20th century.

At any rate, Israelite mariners learned their “knowledge of the sea” from what are widely-acknowledged to be the very best maritime teachers available in the ancient world! There is no indication that the Hebrews “feared and hated the sea.” Indeed, it appears King Solomon and the tribes of Israel under his rule were eager to learn the secret maritime skills of the Phoenicians and build their own naval fleets. Why wouldn’t they be eager to learn such knowledge? There would have been a tremendous commercial, economic advantage to joining the Phoenicians’ monopoly of the ancient world’s sea routes.

The Egyptians were also very skilled mariners at that time, and Solomon's first father-in-law was the Pharaoh of Egypt (I Kings 9:9-16). This marriage between the royal houses of Israel and Egypt resulted in a tripartite Phoenician-Israelite-Egyptian alliance in Solomon's time.

After the Hebrew tribes divided into a northern kingdom (Israel) and a southern kingdom (Judah), the Bible records that they became perennial enemies, fighting many wars against each other (albeit with a few interludes of peaceful relations). Biblical accounts show that while the northern kingdom, Israel (which was more populous as it contained ten Israelite tribes and Judah retained only two tribes), remained in alliance with Egypt and Phoenicia, Judah was afterward excluded from the Phoenician alliance. Indeed, the first ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel after the Israelite schism was Jeroboam, a prominent Israelite noble who had previously been a courtier of Egypt's Pharaoh Shishak (I Kings 12:40).

This would have resulted in very favorable relations between Egypt and the ten-tribed kingdom of Israel. Evidence that Jeroboam retained a very strong affinity to Egypt is clear in his instituting Egyptian religion (calf-worship) in the northern kingdom of Israel (I Kings 12:25-30). It is evident that Israel’s alliance with the Phoenicians was long-lasting as, almost a century later, we find the royal houses of Israel and the Phoenician city of Sidon intermarried during the reign of King Ahab of Israel (I Kings 16:31). Likewise, Israel's long-standing attachment to the fertility practices of the Phoenicians also argues that the Israelite-Phoenician alliance was quite durable.

The alliances of Israel, the northern Hebrew Kingdom, with Phoenicia and Egypt, and their longstanding fealty to Egyptian and Phoenician religions, would have caused the northern kingdom of Israel to become culturally more like their allies, and progressively less like the

Jews, their fellow Israelites from whom they were estranged. The Bible records that the Kingdom of Israel never seriously returned to the worship of the Bible's God, but remained steadfastly in the cultural and religious camp of the Egyptians and (especially) the Phoenicians. This would have resulted, as decades and centuries passed, in the "Hebrew" language of the kingdom of Israel becoming more like the already similar Semitic tongue of their close allies (the Phoenicians) and less like the "Hebrew" language of Judah (the Jewish Hebrew nation).

I Kings 12:25-33 records that severing his people's religious and cultural ties to Judah was a deliberate, state policy of King Jeroboam of Israel! Given this fact, the northern kingdom of Israel would have progressively merged with the culture of their close allies in Tyre and Sidon. Modern archaeologists, who do not realize this fact, routinely label as "Phoenician" the artifacts and inscriptions made by Israelites of the northern Kingdom of Israel. The people of Judah, who retained a more distinctly "Hebrew" culture and language were much less numerous and were excluded from the Phoenician alliance, giving the mistaken impression that ancient "Hebrews" were an insignificant and land-bound people.

Given the historic alliance and affinity between the Phoenicians, Egyptians and Israelite Hebrews (all of whom were maritime powers during their mutual alliance in Solomon's reign), it would not be surprising to see them cooperating in maritime ventures long after Solomon's death. The "Davenport inscriptions" are evidence of such cooperation, as it has Egyptian as well as Phoenician-Hebrew characters. In *America B.C.*, Dr. Barry Fell observed on page 263 the presence [on the Davenport stele] of "some signs resembling Hebrew and others resembling Phoenician." This is what one would expect to find if Israelite Hebrews were a part of this ancient exploration fleet which reached central North America (the modern state of Iowa). The Israelites, having become closely linked to the Phoenicians (politically, economically, culturally, and religiously), would also have become linguistically like the Phoenicians as well!

One would expect the written language of the northern kingdom of Israel to reflect a Phoenician/Hebrew amalgam. Because of the longstanding hostility and mistrust between Israel and Judah, the language and writing of Israel would inevitably have become more "Phoenician" in nature and less like the "Hebrew" of the Kingdom of Judah. For this reason, epigraphic remnants of the Israelites of the ten-tribed, northern kingdom of Israel will be found in Phoenician (i.e. Punic) contexts, *not* in those of the Hebrew language of the kingdom of Judah. When inscriptions are found that seem to blur the distinction between Hebrew and Phoenician, it is very possible (indeed, likely) that those inscriptions are a product of Israelites from the northern Hebrew kingdom of Israel who had blended their cultural identity with the Phoenicians.

There is an event in King Ahab's reign that also argues for a diffusionist perspective in biblical historical accounts. In I Kings 17 and 18, it is recorded that the prophet Elijah was hiding from Israel's King Ahab, and that Ahab searched in every nation for him. I Kings 18:10 cites the following incredulous response of one of Ahab's officials when he finally found Elijah "in his own backyard" in the nation of Israel:

"As the Lord your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom whither my lord [King Ahab] has not sent to seek you; and when they would say,

'he is not here, ' he would take an oath of the kingdom or nation, that they had not found you.'

This is one of those biblical passages that biblical critics huff and puff about, regarding it as an example of hyperbole or outright fabrication, believing that there was no way that King Ahab of Israel could command enough respect among the nations to "take oaths" of them or demand that they conduct national searches for a missing prophet. They also scoff at the idea that Ahab could have had access to "all nations and kingdoms" on the earth at that time. However, now that the discoveries and efforts of The Epigraphic Society have demonstrated the diffusionist nature of the ancient world, a context for a literal understanding of this episode readily presents itself. King Ahab and Israel were still closely allied to the Phoenicians, the dominant maritime power of that time. Indeed, King Ahab was married to a Phoenician princess, Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon. His continuing close alliance with the Phoenicians meant that Ahab had the ability via the Phoenician (and his own) fleets to send searchers wherever these fleets sailed and traded in either the Old or New Worlds.

The Davenport stele, with its record of "mixed Hebrew and Phoenician signs," and the other Phoenician inscriptions found in the New World argue that the sailors of the allied Phoenicians and Israelites (of the northern kingdom) were present in the New World as well. Therefore, there was a means, readily available to King Ahab, to send ships to nations all over the world in search of Elijah. His ability to demand a national search for Elijah, and exact oaths from the leaders of those nations indicates considerable influence on the part of King Ahab of Israel. What was the nature of that power?

The answer is obvious. The long-standing Phoenician/Israelite alliance on the sea controlled access to the ancient world's maritime commercial routes. Any nation that did not cooperate with Ahab's request could have had their goods and ships forcibly embargoed from the sea routes by the Phoenician/Israelite navies. If the Egyptians were then still cooperating with the Phoenicians and Israelites (the Davenport stele argues that periods of such cooperation between their language groupings still did exist), Ahab's threat would have been backed by not two, but three powerful navies! Ahab was not an insignificant king on the land either. An alliance of nations (including King Ahab's Israel) fought the Assyrian Empire under Shalmaneser III to a stalemate in the battle of Karkar (or "Qarqar") in 854 B.C. Ahab's search occurred during what the Bible records as a three and one-half year drought caused by God at the instigation of Elijah. Ahab's period of searching would have occurred during that drought. There was time enough for Ahab to send messenger ships to all known nations, have those nations search for Elijah (basically checking to see if anyone answering to Elijah's description had arrived on any vessel from Israel's region of the world), and send word back to Ahab via the same messenger ships.

Regarding Judah, one biblical account shows that the Jews (the Hebrews of Judah) were also unafraid of sea travel. I Kings 22:44-49 and II Chronicles 20:36-37 record that during one of the rare reapproachments between the estranged Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judah, Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah attempted to build a fleet of ships at Ezion-geber, the home-port of one of Solomon's previous international fleets. This is hardly the action of a people who "feared and hated the sea." The project was wrecked by an "act of God," but it is interesting to note that Israel's king (Ahab's son) offered to let his sailors assist the crews of the new ships that Judah was building. Since Judah was trying to reestablish itself as a maritime force, this offer only makes sense in the same vein in which King Hiram's offer was

made to Solomon when Solomon was building his fleets--that Israel's king was offering to share "the knowledge of the sea" with Judah's novice sailors.

This offer provides biblical confirmation that the Israelites of the northern kingdom possessed the sophisticated maritime skills of the Phoenicians during the time of King Ahab and Israel's subsequent kings. It also indicates that Judah's intent in building these ships was to create a fleet capable of long, "open-water" voyages, not mere coastal-hopping trips down the Red Sea. For such a fleet, Judah would have needed skilled mariners to teach them such arts as celestial navigation, sailing to take advantage of trade winds, recognizing predictable oceanic currents, etc. The king of Israel knew Judah would need such help, and his offer was likely an effort to ingratiate himself to the Jewish king, Jehoshaphat (who was wealthy and powerful). Such skills would have been completely unnecessary in small coastal vessels that were intended for short, land-hugging voyages. Jehoshaphat was clearly attempting to restore some of Solomon's glory by replicating Solomon's construction of a major fleet at Ezion-geber, but the effort was abortive.

The effort of the Jews during Jehoshaphat's reign should not be construed to mean that they finally worked up the courage to venture forth on the "fearful sea." Rather, it is a reflection of the role national economic strength played in determining maritime power in the ancient world. It took a great deal of money to build a fleet, train sailors, finance its operation over time, etc. As is clear from the Bible's accounts, the reign of King Jehoshaphat was a time of restored economic power and national wealth for the kingdom of Judah. Therefore, Jehoshaphat's effort to build a great fleet was simply a predictable function of his nation's restored ability to fund and support a large trading fleet.

The above observations refute any contention that the Hebrews were either afraid of the sea or insignificant maritime powers. Indeed, during the time that all the tribes of Israel were united under King Solomon, the Hebrews built large fleets and became privy to the Phoenicians' "knowledge of the sea." After the Israelite tribes divided into two nations, the northern kingdom of Israel remained closely linked to the Phoenicians, sharing the strong maritime tradition of their allies. Even the smaller Jewish kingdom of Judah, excluded from a Mediterranean maritime presence by the more powerful Phoenician/Israelite alliance, displayed an eagerness to build a large fleet of ships on the Red Sea as soon as economic and political circumstances allowed such a project to be implemented.

Charles Moyer's article, in commenting on the biblical commandment against graven images, states: "history has shown us that the Jewish people have quite thoroughly followed this commandment." His line of reasoning was that the Newark stones [artifacts inscribed in ancient Hebrew which were found in the Mound-Builder sites in ancient America's Ohio River Valley] were not likely to be ancient Hebrew artifacts because of an assumed depiction of a deity. Such an assertion indicates a lack of awareness that there were two very different Hebrew nations in the ancient world. It is a common historical misconception that the terms "Jew" and "Hebrew" were synonymous in the ancient world. That was not the case. As we have seen, the larger, non-Jewish Hebrew kingdom of Israel was usually an enemy of the Jewish kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel regularly disregarded the biblical laws of God, including the injunction against making or depicting a graven image. Therefore, Hebrews from the kingdom of Israel would rarely have had any qualms about making or depicting a figure of a deity.

However, Jews from the southern kingdom of Judah also sometimes made or depicted graven images. There were several periods in Judah's history where fealty to the laws of God was forgotten (and even scorned) for extended periods of time. Consider the following examples. King Manasseh of Judah instituted infant sacrifice, compelled the Jews to worship foreign gods, and was openly-contemptuous of God and his laws. Judah was also once ruled by Queen Athaliah, a devotee of Baal and foreign gods. She also caused the Jewish nation to openly disobey biblical laws (including the one against graven images). Indeed, by the time Josiah became king of Judah, the Jews had become so lax about the laws of God that no one even knew what the laws of God were any more! In Josiah's eighteen year as king (circa 621 BC), the Jews found a forgotten scroll of the law and had to relearn the laws of God "from scratch." [The above examples are described in II Kings 11 and II Chronicles 33.] Therefore, one has to be cautious about asserting that Jews would never make graven images because there are periods of Jewish history when their making graven images would have been common! Coupled with the fact that their fellow Israelite tribes in the northern kingdom of Israel regularly made and served graven images associated with the gods of Phoenicia (or other lands), there is no basis to reject an inscription as being Hebrew simply because it depicts a graven image.

While the supposed "graven image" on the Newark stones is actually a representation of Moses (not a deity), as noted in Bill Rudersdorf's article "Lost Horizons," *ESOP*, 1991, it is worth noting the inaccuracy of asserting that a particular inscription could not be Hebrew merely because it contained a depiction of a deity. Additionally, the discussion of the Hebrews' maritime alliance with the Phoenicians and the Phoenicians' willingness to share "the knowledge of the sea" with the Israelites meant that the ancient kingdom of Israel would have been a maritime power for much (if not all) of its existence. On the other hand, the Jews (the kingdom of Judah) were apparently not a significant maritime power after the division of the Israelites into two kingdoms. However, they were eager enough to build a large fleet of ships when their national strength and finances permitted them to do so. Given the above, I see no evidence that the Hebrews ever "feared the sea." Indeed, the Bible's historical accounts describe events which make literal sense when considered in light of the political alliances of that time and a diffusionist view of ancient mankind's actual abilities and far-flung contacts.

[this is an updated version of an article which originally appeared in the April, 1994 issue of the epigraphic journal, *Louisiana Mounds* and the November, 1994 *Origin of Nations* magazine.]