

MISTAKE 10

THE YOUNG LIONS OF TARSHISH IN EZEKIEL 38:13 IS NOT REFERRING TO THE UNITED STATES

In the Book of Ezekiel, chapters 38 and 39, the Scripture predicts a last days invasion of Israel by a number of nations. This includes the modern nations of Russia, Iran and Turkey. When the invasion takes place there are a few nations who will protesting what is taking place. Ezekiel records their objections:

Sheba and Dedan and the traders of Tarshish with all its young warriors will say to you, “Have you come to loot? Have you assembled your armies to plunder, to carry away silver and gold, to take away cattle and goods, to haul away a great amount of spoils?” (Ezekiel 38:13 NET).

Most commentators believe that Sheba and Dedan are located in the modern country of Saudi Arabia or somewhere in that locale.

However, there is no consensus of opinion as to the meaning of the “merchants, or traders, of Tarshish or its “young warriors,” literally “young lions.” Indeed their identity is highly debated.

Some have attempted to equate Tarshish with Britain or Spain and the young lions, or young warriors, with the United States. In other words, it is claimed that the United States is mentioned in last days Bible prophecy.

However, as we shall see, because there are so many uncertainties with this view, it is a mistake to make such a claim. The evidence is as follows:

TARSHISH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

As was true of Sheba and Dedan, Tarshish is said to be made up of merchants or traders. From the various descriptions in Scripture we can make a number of conclusions.

To begin with, we read in the Old Testament about the “ships of Tarshish” which were large oceangoing vessels. We read earlier in Ezekiel:

The ships of Tarshish were the transports for your merchandise. “So you were filled and weighed down in the heart of the seas” (Ezekiel 27:25 NET).

Furthermore, these ships would carry valuable cargo including gold and silver. We are told the following about King Solomon:

The king had a fleet of trading ships at sea along with the ships of Hiram. Once every three years it returned, carrying gold, silver and ivory, and apes and baboons (I Kings 10:22 NET).

“Trading ships,” in Hebrew has the literal meaning of, “a fleet of Tarshish [ships].” This probably refers to large ships either made in Tarshish, or capable of traveling to the distant western port of Tarshish.

Elsewhere the Bible states that the ships of Tarshish brought people from afar. Isaiah wrote:

Surely the islands look to me; in the lead are the ships of Tarshish, bringing your children from afar, with their silver and gold, to the honor of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor (Isaiah 60:9 NET).

The Young Lions Of Tarshish Is Not Referring To The United States (Ezekiel 38:13)

Thus, we can conclude that Tarshish was a distant port from Israel. These merchants also traded in iron, tin, and lead as Ezekiel had earlier written:

Tarshish did business with you because of your great wealth of goods; they exchanged silver, iron, tin and lead for your merchandise (Ezekiel 27:12 NET).

From these various passages in Scripture, we discover that the ships of Tarshish were the largest seagoing vessels known to the Ancient Near East. Furthermore, the name was eventually applied to any large ocean-going vessel. Indeed, the ships of Tarshish became a proverbial expression of sea power.

WHERE WAS TARSHISH?

From Scripture we can deduce that Tarshish was some distant seaport from the coast of Israel. But exactly where in the ancient world was Tarshish located? Many answers have been given.

OPTION 1 THE SEPTUAGINT: CARTHAGE (MODERN DAY TUNISIA)

The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, renders Tarshish with the Greek word which refers to ancient Carthage. Today this would denote the modern North African country of Tunisia. Many of the ancient Hebrew lexicons, or dictionaries, agree with this designation.

OPTION 2 THE LOCATION IS UNCERTAIN

However, many contemporary lexicons assume that we do not know the location with any certainty. One of the modern Hebrew lexicons had this to say about Tarshish.

The actual site within the lands of the Mediterranean has not been established” (Koehler Baumgartner)

Thus, while the older lexicons accepted the identification with Carthage, the modern ones are more skeptical. Other commentators also take this same position—the exact location is unknown.

OPTION 3 BRITAIN

In the past, there has been the suggestion that Tarshish can be identified with modern day Great Britain. However, this identification has not convinced many scholars though it is still popular in some circles.

OPTION 4 SPAIN

The best answer seems to be that Tarshish was a wealthy trading community on the extremity of the Mediterranean world. It is the ancient Tartessus which is in the present-day nation of Spain. Ralph Alexander writes:

Tarshish is . . . commonly thought to be located in southern Spain. An inscription from Esharhaddon’s reign implies that it is located at the west end of the Mediterranean Sea (Ralph Alexander, *Ezekiel*, Expositors Bible, Commentary, Zondervan, p. 794).

THE ANCIENT PHOENICIANS

If this view is correct, then the merchants of Tarshish are in some way connected with the seafaring Phoenicians of 3,000 years ago. These Phoenicians merchants established trading posts that were scattered along their various routes in the Ancient Near East during the time of Solomon and thereafter.

with all its (young warriors, leaders, young lions, villages)

Along with Tarshish we have the phrase that has been variously translated, “with all its young warriors” “leaders,” “with all its young lions,” “with all its villages.” Why do we find these different translations?

In a nutshell, here is the issue.

THE REASONS AS TO WHY THE VERSE IS VARIOUSLY TRANSLATED

The present Hebrew text reads, “with all its young lions.” Yet this does not solve the question. The original Hebrew text consists of consonants only—there are no vowels. The vowel points were added in the seventh century A.D. by Jewish scribes known as the Masoretes.

The vowel points the Masoretes placed in this verse makes the text read, “young lions.” However, the same set of consonants could be repointed with other vowels to read “with all its villages.”

In fact, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, has translated the Hebrew as, “with all its villages.” The ancient Syriac version also has this reading.

The NIV of 2011, as well as the Revised Standard Version, follow this understanding of the Hebrew text. This explains why certain translations, and certain commentaries, will refer to the traders of Tarshish “with all its villages.”

YOUNG LIONS IS OBVIOUSLY SYMBOLIC

Now if one believes that “young lions” is the best way to understand the original text, then the question becomes what do these words mean? Obviously, “young lions” is used symbolically in this context. But what is it symbolic of?

There is no agreement on this. This is why we find certain translations interpret the phrase “young lions” to be its “young warriors,” or “leaders,” or something like that. In these cases, there is usually a note in the margin which says the Hebrew word literally reads, “young lions.”

Thus, if we accept “young lions” as the proper reading then who is it referring to?

OPTION 1 IT REPRESENTS STRONG LEADERS OR GREEDY RULERS

Young lions could refer to the *nature* of the rulers. Charles Feinberg writes:

The young lions of Tarshish are taken to mean either strong leaders or princes or greedy rulers of these commercial communities (Charles Feinberg, *Ezekiel*, p. 223)

Young lions are often used as figures of energetic rulers (Ralph Alexander, *Ezekiel*).

A strong or energetic ruler is not necessarily the same as a “greedy ruler.” This is why English Standard Version safely translates the verse, “all its leaders.”

OPTION 2 IT REPRESENTS OTHER WESTERN NATIONS

Some see the phrase “the young lions” not referring to individual leaders but rather to the nations that came out of ancient Tarshish—namely Spain. However, this identity is debatable.

The Young Lions Of Tarshish Is Not Referring To The United States (Ezekiel 38:13)

Others view this as a reference to the nations of Central and South America and possibly the United States since Spain was involved in discovering North America and ruling over parts of it for a time.

Still others think that Tarshish, the farthest known land to the west of Israel, could be referring to all the nations of Western Europe. Either way, these commentators believe that certain nations of the western world are identified here rather than specific leaders.

It has also contended that this reference to the far western colony of Tarshish was meant as a representation of the large “last days” empire of the Final Antichrist.

Consequently, it has been suggested that Tarshish, or modern Spain, could have been used by Ezekiel to represent all of the western nations which join with the Persian Gulf states in responding to this invasion.

IF VILLAGES IS ACCEPTED AS THE CORRECT READING

Now, if “all its villages” is accepted as the proper reading here, then one could seemingly argue the same way. And this is exactly what we find with many commentators. They believe the text is telling us that some of the countries, or villages, that come out of Tarshish will be involved in this “last days” scenario.

NOT ALL BIBLE STUDENTS AGREE

However, a number of commentators do not think that the phrase “with all its young lions” or “with all its villages” has any such meaning. All that it is saying is that the leaders of Tarshish are involved in these questions to the leader of this invading force, Gog.

In other words, it has nothing to do with any nations that might have sprung from the location of ancient Tarshish. Hence, the meaning of Tarshish and its young lions in this context is anything but settled.

Therefore, the claim that the young lions of Tarshish, or Tarshish and all its villages, has something to do with the United States of America is going way beyond the evidence. Therefore, it is a mistake to insist that it is a reference to the USA.