



HIRAM, KING OF TYRE

Presented at William O. Ware Lodge of Research by Edwin L. Vardiman

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The name of Hiram, King of Tyre, brings recognition to all of us here tonight. As Master Masons we are aware of this man who is known as a friend of the Illustrious King Solomon, and who has a major part in the events portrayed in the Legend of the Temple. Who was this man who was in the confidence of King Solomon? What had he done, as the king of a neighboring country, to be so valuable to the Kingdom of Israel? Was he a true and living person whose life and reign were recorded in history, or was he merely a convenient symbol for the early playwright who developed the much beloved portrayal of the events in the Master Mason Degree? For a few minutes, let's attempt to answer these questions as we think upon the connection of Hiram, King of Tyre, to our Fraternity.

What of the country of Tyre? It was a real country and one that made considerable contributions to our civilization. Its origins extend back into the dim beginnings of history, and it had influence far greater than its size indicates on the ancient Mediterranean world, our language and even our world today.

Tyre's name reflects the foundation of its island existence. The basic meaning of the word "Tyre," going back through the Greek and Hebrew words, means "rock." Although the first settlement was on the eastern Mediterranean shore, in what is now southern Lebanon, the city did not emerge into a thriving commercial center until after it was constructed on two rock islands of no more than half a mile wide. The islands lay about 500 to 500 yards off the coast and gave the people of Tyre a secure position from which they could battle invaders. Remember, brethren, we are talking literally thousands of years ago as we discuss the early history of this city. It has been estimated that the city started over 2,000 years before the time of Christ, and some of the details are not fully established. But, these are some of the things upon which scholars agree:

The early city, along with Sidon, which is located about 30 miles north of Tyre, became commercial centers under the protection of ancient Egypt. The Egyptians used these ports on the eastern Mediterranean Sea as contact points with ancient civilizations to the east. The first mention of Tyre in the Bible is found in the 19th Chapter of the Book of Joshua, where it is described as "the fortified city." By about 1200 years before Christ, Tyre had withstood the

rivalry and invasion attempts of many surrounding countries and had managed to survive. Perhaps it was about this time that the city got its Hebrew name, “Tsur.” The word, as I have said, means “rock,” but it also describes a city under siege and also a “stiff-neck” person. Both these pictures aptly fit the history of Tyre and its unwillingness to capitulate to foreign aggression.

The period after the twelfth century B. C. was relatively quiet – the great powers were non-threatening. It was during this period that the Phoenician cities (of which Tyre and Sidon were a part) began their colonization efforts throughout the western Mediterranean area. Colonies were established on the north shore of Africa, the main settlement being Carthage, and even as far west as what is now Spain. As they explored and settled, the Phoenicians took their civilization with them, including what is undoubtedly their greatest contribution to us today. That contribution is the alphabet. Scholars agree that the Ancient Greeks adopted the Phoenician alphabet. The Romans used the Greek alphabet in writing Latin, and even the modern English alphabet finds its ultimate heritage in the ancient city of Tyre.

But what of the wealth and influence of Tyre? After all, Solomon was one of the wealthiest men of all time. It isn’t likely that a king of a poor and petty kingdom would have been considered a friend of such a powerful potentate as was Solomon. As you can well suppose, Tyre was not a poor or petty kingdom during the time of Hiram. About 900 years before the time of Christ, Israel emerged under David’s leadership and later under Solomon. At the same time, Tyre also rose to greatness under the leadership of Hiram I (as he is known in history). Tyre was the center of a very productive and lucrative commercial operation. Tyre’s industries included fishing, trade, purple dye making and the training of fine craftsmen, including shipwrights and stone masons. Hiram’s civic improvements included filling in the area between the islands and thus making them one solid whole.

In the beginning of David’s reign, he sent messengers to Hiram, asking for assistance in building his palace. Hiram supplied the Israelite king with “cedar-trees, and carpenters, and masons: and they built David a house,” 2 Samuel 5:11. Nearly forty years later, when Solomon ascended the throne and began to build the Temple, he sent to the old friend of his father for the same kind of assistance. The King of Tyre gave a favorable response and sent workmen and materials to Jerusalem, by the aid of which Solomon was enabled to carry out his great design. Thus, the peaceful relations with David led to a firm treaty with Solomon and to a close relationship between the two kings. The arrangements covering the furnishing of the cedars of Lebanon is covered in 1 Kings 5: 7 – 12, and in 1 Kings 7: 13 – 14 we read that King Hiram sent to Solomon another by the name of Hiram to assist in the building of the Temple.

Solomon paid well for these services. In return to Hiram of Tyre, Solomon gave 20,000 corim of wheat (about 20,000 bushels) and about a million gallons of oil – an incredible amount, but not out of proportion to the magnificent expenditure of the Temple in other respects. (Perhaps we should also note here that these tremendous expenditures which were raised by taxes on the people and forced labor ultimately led to the splitting of the Israelite Kingdom and the end of the glory of the ancient Jews.) After Solomon had finished his work, he presented the King of Tyre with twenty towns in Galilee, but when Hiram viewed these places, he was so

dissatisfied with their appearance he called them the land of Cabul – which meant barren or desolate – saying reproachfully to Solomon, “Are these, my brother, the towns which you have given me?” Upon this incident, the Scottish Rite has founded the Sixth, or Intimate Secretary, Degree.

As pointed out by Mackey in his Encyclopedia of Freemasonry:

“The connection of the King of Tyre with King Solomon in the construction of the Temple has given him great importance in the legendary history of Masonry. In the Book of Constitutions written by Anderson in 1738, the tradition is that King Hiram had been Grand Master of all Masons; but when the Temple was finished, Hiram came to survey it before its consecration, and to commune with Solomon about wisdom and art; and finding that the Great Architect of the Universe had inspired Solomon above all mortal men, Hiram very readily yielded the pre-eminence to Solomon, the beloved of God. He is called in the rituals one of our ‘Ancient Grand Masters,’ and when the mythical Master’s Lodge was held in the Temple is supposed to have acted as the Senior Warden. It is said, too, that in the symbolic supports of Masonry, he represented the pillar of strength, because ‘by his power and wealth he assisted the great undertaking’ of constructing the Temple. He is reported, also, to have visited Jerusalem several times (a fact on which history is silent) for the purpose of consulting with Solomon and his great architect on the symbolism of the Word, and to have been present at the time of the death of the latter. Many other legends are related of him in the Master’s Degree and those connected with it, but he is lost sight of after the completion of the first Temple and is seldom heard of in the high degrees. Hiram reigned over the Tyrians for thirty-four years; he permitted Solomon’s ships to participate in the profitable trade of the Mediterranean, and Jewish sailors, under the instructions of Tyrian mariners, were taught how to bring from India the gold to enrich their people and beautify the temple of their king. Traditions says that Hiram gave his daughter in marriage to King Solomon.”

Of course, since Solomon is reported to have had 999 other wives, I don’t know how much this gesture may have impressed the Jewish king.

Thus, we have the story of Hiram, King of Tyre, and of Solomon, King of Israel. But what of the island fortress of Tyre after Hiram’s death? The city was set upon by the Assyrians about one hundred years after the death of Hiram, and they succeeded in forcing the people of Tyre to pay tribute over a period of about two hundred years. The city was able to avoid destruction, however, until the year 585 B. C. (one year after the destruction of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem) when the city was besieged by the Babylonians of Nebuchadnezzar. The siege lasted for thirteen years and the mainland settlement was completely destroyed. However, the island city held out, but at terrible cost. The western trade to the colonies had been disrupted. Many families had suffered great losses. The city would never again regain its great wealth and power.

Tyre's decline continued during the years following the siege by Nebuchadnezzar, but its end did not come until in July 332 B. C. when the city was finally overwhelmed by the army of Alexander the Great. The city of Sidon had capitulated to the victorious Greeks, but the Tyrians said they would not bow to the conqueror. Alexander, angered by this rejection, blockaded the harbor, and built a causeway sixty yards wide from the mainland to breach the city wall. Despite a fierce defense, the city fell in just seven months. Some 8,000 Tyrians were killed and another 30,000 were sold into slavery. Thus, the mighty and wealthy city was humbled and the heritage of Hiram I came to an end.

There is, however, another chapter to the story of Hiram. Hiram had a great-granddaughter who has made history in her own name. Her father, the grandson of Hiram, was named Ethbaal, and he offered his daughter as the bride of the King of Israel, Ahab. The name of Hiram's great-granddaughter was Jezebel, but that, my Brothers, is another story.