WHERE WAS TARSHISH?

John Day

Much of the early career of Hugh Williamson, in whose honour this essay is dedicated, was devoted to the study of the books of Chronicles, while in more recent years his attention has been focused primarily on the book of Isaiah. It is a curious fact that these are the two Old Testament works having the largest number of references to the place name Tarshish (1 Chr 17:7; 7:10; 2 Chr 9:21; 20:36–37; Isa 2:16; 23:1, 6, 10, 14; 60:3; 66:19). Although a number of locations have been proposed, for a long time the consensus has been that Tarshish was located at Tartessos at the mouth of the Guadalquivir in southern Spain, but in recent years a number of scholars, including Arie van der Kooij and André Lemaire, have reargued the older view (first attested in Josephus, War, 7.23; Antiquities, 1.127; 9.208) that it should be equated with Tarsus in Cilicia. Hugh Williamson himself, whilst referring to Tarshish as being “across the Mediterranean” in his Chronicles commentary, which possibly indicates that he had Tartessos in mind, has been persuaded that it was Tarsus in his more recent Isaiah commentary.

The purpose of the present essay is to reinvestigate this matter.

1 The other allusions are in Gen 10:4; 1 Kgs 10:22; 22:49 (Eng. 48); Ps 48:8 (Eng. 7); 72:10; Jer 10:9; Ezek 27:12, 25; 38:13; Jonah 1:3; 4:2.


First I shall consider Ps 72, a psalm whose implication that Tarshish was in the far west has often been overlooked. Speaking of the universal extent of the king’s reign, as ideally conceived, v. 8 declares: “May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.” This is further explicated in vv. 10–11: “May the kings of Tarshish and the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall before him, all nations give him service.” Quite clearly Tarshish and the isles on the one hand and Sheba and Seba on the other represent the furthest known parts of the world (“the ends of the earth”). Sheba is Saba in southern Arabia (the modern Yemen) and Seba is in east Africa; these certainly represent the most remote places in a southerly direction. Tarshish and the isles must correspondingly be located in the furthest known western part of the Mediterranean sea, seeing that the Old Testament regularly depicts Tarshish as being in the west (with the exception of the late Chronicler). This simply does not fit Tarsus, which was more or less due north from Joppa! However, it does fit Tartessos, which was similarly regarded as the furthermost known place in the west by other ancient writers (cf. Strabo, Geography, 3.2.12). A number of places further west than Tarsus are cited elsewhere in the Old Testament, e.g. Crete (Caphtor), Rhodes (Rodanim), Ionia (Javan), Libya (Lubim, Lehabim, Put) and Lydia (Lud), most of which are mentioned in passages that also refer to Tarshish, so we should certainly expect Tarshish to be further west than all of those. Similarly in the book of Jonah we read that in order to avoid his divine call to preach to the Ninevites, the prophet boarded a ship at Joppa going to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was of course to the north-east of Israel, and if Jonah were heading for Tarsus he would actually have been going nearer to Nineveh than if he had stayed in Joppa! A voyage to the furthest known place in the Mediterranean, as indicated by Ps 72, would have been far more appropriate for Jonah’s purpose. Curiously, the discussions by both van der Kooij and Lemaire of the location of Tarshish fail to discuss these implications of Ps 72 and Jonah.

The next piece of evidence bearing on the location of Tarshish which I shall consider is an inscription of King Esarhaddon of Assyria, ca. 671 BCE.

---

5 Cf. Riekele Borger, Die Inschriften Asarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien (AfO 9; Graz: Im Selbstverlage des Herausgebers, 1956), 86. The translation by A. Leo Oppenheim in ANET,