SHIPS AND OTHER SEAFARING VESSELS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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It is widely held that the ancient Israelites regarded ships and activities that took place on the sea with a measure of scepticism. For example, Joseph Blenkinsopp relates this attitude to “...the typical Israelite allergy to the sea, seafaring, and international trade”¹ and Hugh Williamson writes more generally that “By and large, the Israelites were not a nautical people, and indeed they seem to have been deeply suspicious of most things to do with the sea.”² Nevertheless, trade via cargo vessels was one facet of the economy of the ancient world and the term for ships appears not infrequently within the Old Testament (roughly 50 times).³ A re-examination of the role of ships can shed new light on how they function within the rhetoric of the Old Testament and provide a topic of interest for Professor Williamson, who constructs, sails, and races model yachts off the Suffolk coastline in Great Britain.⁴

I. WHERE ARE SHIPS AND SHIPPING FOUND?

Ships are referred to in a variety of ways in the Old Testament, but the main terms share the consonants of the root אנה from which we have אני (7 times), אניה (5 times), and אוניות.⁵ Also attested are צים, צים, and ספינה as well as the hapax legomena כלים, and שיטות.⁶ As a collective term for ships or more accurately a fleet of ships the singular אני is found primarily

³ If I were to include all 26 times the ark appears in Gen 6–9, this number would be just under 75.
⁵ There is no implicit claim here that the nouns are derived from the verbal root. See the concerns about the “root fallacy” expressed by James Barr, The Semantics of Biblical Language (1961; repr., London: SCM, 1996), 100–106.
⁶ A possible third hapax legomenon would be the root bar understood as some type of shipping/freighting vessel in Isa. 43:14. This would require a slight emendation to the text. It has not been included here as it remains fairly controversial, but there is a discussion of the translation in conjunction with a discussion of the verse.
in the chronicles about kings within the books of Kings (1 Kgs 9:26–27; 1 Kgs 10:11; 3x in 1 Kgs 10:22), although one time it appears in the prophecy of Isaiah (Isa 33:21, parallel to יַש). As might be expected the references to ships in the monarchical literature appear in conjunction with rulers. King Solomon of the united kingdom of ancient Israel and King Hiram of Tyre (Phoenicia) are said to have had fleets of ships. Solomon’s fleet was stationed at Ezion-Geber on the Red Sea in Edom (1 Kgs 9:26 // 2 Chr 20:36). Both kings used their fleets for trade (1 Kgs 10:11, 22). In addition, references to ships reinforce the impression of a strong relationship between the two kings by speaking of Hiram sending ships with his own sailors together with those of Solomon (1 Kgs 9:27). Moreover, Solomon had stationed his Tarshish ships7 alongside those of Hiram (1 Kgs 10:22 // 2 Chr 9:21). Tarshish here is generally agreed to refer to the type of ship—capable of long distance travel replete with cargo—rather than a place.8 The final reference to יַש in the singular occurs in a late prophecy within the book of Isaiah, which speaks of a divine age of peace, described at one point as “a place of broad rivers and streams, where no rowing boat (יַשִּ֑יט) with oars can go” (Isa 33:21).

The feminine יַשָּׁה, a seeming derivative of יַש, appears strikingly less. It is found confined to proverbial or allegorical uses as in Prov 30:19 and in the prophecy of Jonah (Jonah 1:3, 4, 5 twice), which itself is arguably an allegory. In Proverbs a ship sailing on the high seas is part of an example of those things beyond the comprehension of the human mind. In the book of Jonah, the ship functions as part of the setting for the book and becomes personified in order to heighten the tension in the narrative (Jonah 1:4). Again, we find a sea-going vessel related to Tarshish. In this instance, Tarshish represents the geographical location to which the boat travels and which is Jonah’s intended destination (Jonah 1:3).

The plural form יָנוֹת appears the most frequently of the nouns related to יַש. Its use overlaps that found already, but it conveys new ranges of meaning as well. It appears in a wide range of passages in the Hebrew Bible including, alongside kings (1 Kgs 9:27; twice in 22:49–50 [Eng. 48–49]; 2 Chr 8:18; 9:21; 20:36–37), within prophecy (Deut 28:68; 7 References to Tarshish occur ten times in biblical literature with references to ships, see 1 Kgs 10:22 (twice); 22:49; 2 Chr 20:36; Ps 48:8; Isa 22:6; 23:3, 14; 60:9; Ezek 27:25. See the overview by David W. Baker, “Tarshish,” in ABD 6:331–33.

8 See the discussion in Williamson, Isaiah 1–5, 199.

9 יש ‘oar’ is a hapax legomenon, but has been related to the root יש ‘to lash or whip,’ conveying the sense of lashing the sea.