

**Vayechi- Bracha of Zevulun
Among the First Visitors to America
by Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh**

In Bereishis 49:13 we read of the following Bracha Yaakov gave to Zevulun. The verse reads, 'Zevulun shall settle by the shore of the seas. He shall be at the ship's shore and his border will reach Tzidon.' Based on these words, the symbol for Zevulun was a ship.

Rashi explains, based on our Midrashim, that Zevulun was known to engage in commerce to support the Torah of his brother Yissachar and this required him to travel to faraway places overseas. Also, to facilitate such a lifestyle, Zevulun had to have his territory by the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. His borders extended to Tzidon which is known by historians to be Phoenicia.

The Kli Yakar also quotes the Midrashim about Zevulun engaging in commerce to support his brother Yissachar. The Kli Yakar also points out that Yaakov's brachos were similar to the brachos Moshe gave to the tribes of Yissachar and Zevulun. Moshe stated, [Devarim 33:18] 'Rejoice Zevulun in your going out and Yissachar in your tents,' which is again a reference to the partnership of Zevulun learning Torah to support Yissachar. The Kli Yakar further explains that money only has a value if it is spent and not simply in possession of it. If one has millions of dollars in his bank account but cannot spend it, what really is the pleasure of having it? However, the Torah is different in that its pleasure is not dependent on its ability to be used as one can learn Torah and be happy in 'his own tent.' By contrast, we see that those who are constantly pursuing wealth are constantly on the move and are never in one place. The wealthy person's home might be in one place and the business in a second and the person is constantly in a ship or, in our times, on a plane to go from one place to another. We see Zevulun setting the example for this type of life.

The Kli yakar also brings a verse from Sefer Yeshaya to support the suggestion that Tzidon was a major port city. In Yeshaya 23:2, regarding the fall of Tzor and Tzidon that Yeshaya was receiving a prophecy about, the verse reads, 'Be silent dwellers of the Isles, commerce of Tzidon will pass, the sea will fill you up.' In the verse before we read about ships from Kittim coming to destroy them. Rashi over there and in Bamidbar 24:24 translates Kittim as Romans as is understood by our Midrashim. We know that the Carthaginians who later inhabited Northwest African Coast are descended from the Phoenicians. With this in mind, Yeshaya Hanavi may have been making reference to the fact that Rome will destroy Tzidon not as Phoenicia but as Carthage as actually happened. We also know that Shlomo Hamelech had a strong alliance with Chirom the king of Tzor who donated cedar woods that grew in his land as well as other building

materials to the construction of the Bais Hamikdash. Moreover, Chirom was happy to do it as we see in Sefer Melachim I 5:21.

We know that the Phoenicians were expert seamen. They went all over the Mediterranean Sea. They were even commissioned by other countries to do sea expeditions as they were very unwilling to give out their navigations secrets and did a good job of holding on to them. The Phoenicians were the only ones brave enough to sail away from the coasts where no land could be seen as a referenced point to navigate from. They used the stars to navigate on the open sea which was unique to them in the ancient Mediterranean world. There is a very good possibility that they came to the shores of the American Continents long before Columbus. We certainly have much evidence that White men had been in the Americas in ancient times. The Celts were known to migrate across Europe and settle in the British Isles. Julius Caesar made references to their ocean-going vessels. We know that the Celtic Christians were later running away from the persecutions of the Pagan Vikings. They took refuge in Iceland Newfoundland and later on the American continent. Later, the Vikings followed them and left much evidence of their presence in the Americas. From the other side, many Native American tribes have in their oral traditions legends of white visitors. Perhaps the best known of these legends is the Aztec legend of the white g-d Quetzequotal who visited and promised to return and the Aztecs mistook the Spanish explorer Hernando Cortez for him.

But was it even possible to make a voyage of that distance in the days of Tanach? There are Egyptian legends of expeditions across great oceans which suggest that it must have been done. TC Johnson, in his book, Did the Phoenicians Discover America, considers the possibility that the Phoenicians did include people from Am Yisroel which most likely would have been people from the tribe of Zevulun as they were closest in territory and in interests to the Phoenicians. This, again, can be supported by the alliance that Shlomo Hamelech had with King Chirom of Tzor. They could have very well worked together to obtain many precious materials from all over the world. Johnson further claims that Ophir, which was a source for gold, was in the Americas. Others make this claim as well. This fits very well with the fact that the Aztecs, Mayas and especially the Incas possessed a great abundance of gold. Much will remain a mystery because when the Romans destroyed Carthage they destroyed so much of the civilization as well as their secrets. Also, most of what historians know of Carthage comes from documentation by their enemies and not by them. But with all the above considerations, it is quite possible that the tribe of Zevulun did sail to the New World for business and knew about the Americas long before it was known to the world at large.