

Lebanon In The Holy Scriptures

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By Cornelia B. Horn

Ph. D. candidate in the Early Christian Studies Program at The Catholic University of America.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Lebanon, named “the white one” by the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 18:14) because snow covered it most of the year, is a long mountain range extending over a distance of about 160 km from southwest to northeast along the Mediterranean coast, from Nahr el-Litani to Nahr el-Kebir. It comprises two parallel mountain ranges, the Lebanon as the western mountain range and the Anti-Lebanon as the eastern mountain range. Enclosed between the two mountain ranges lies the Beqa’ Valley, which the Old Testament author of the Book of Joshua simply called “the Lebanon Valley” (Joshua 11:17, 12:7). The same author named the southern part of the Anti-Lebanon Mount Hermon (Joshua 11:17).

Lebanon’s roots go far beyond those of a country whose borders were defined as a result of the divisions of the Ottoman Empire after World War II. Being home to the Phoenicians for thousands of years, Lebanon was the cradle of a great civilization. The fact that its name, landscapes and

inhabitants are mentioned several times in the Old Testament and the New Testament emphasizes its character as a sacred land, a holy ground in the sight of God.

Lebanon's name was mentioned 71 times in the Old Testament, its regions are referred to several times in the New Testament, and extra-canonical literature speaks about it in ten cases. The Old Testament is full of praise for Lebanon's natural beauty and resources. The cedars of Lebanon were the most precious and costly wood desired by rulers of the surrounding countries. In images of Lebanon's imposing heights, the wealth and variety of plants, and the sweet odor of its perfumes and fragrances, God's love for men and women is celebrated. Lebanon's role in the history of salvation becomes even more evident in the writings of New Testament authors. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, visited the Phoenician cities along Lebanon's coast, preached to the people there and healed the sick.

This article will review the most important passages in the Scriptures where Lebanon was mentioned directly or referred to in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Essential themes concerning Lebanon will be extracted and summarized. An attempt will also be made to view these passages in their proper context.

II. ORIGIN OF THE NAME "LEBANON"

The etymological origin of the name "Lebanon" (lebanôn) is explained in several ways. The most likely and most widely-held view states that the name "Lebanon" is derived from the Semitic root lbn, "white, to be white" (Houston Smith 1992: 269; Honigmann 1926: 4; Abel 1933: 340; Mulder 1984: 462). It is reasonable to assume that the almost perennial "white snow" on the top of the mountain ("Does the snow of Lebanon ever leave the rocks of its slopes?" Jeremiah 18:14) suggested such a name. The white color may also have been seen in reference to the chalk and limestone walls that give the Lebanon range

its characteristic features (cf. Gangloff 1997: 4). Nevertheless, other explanations have been advanced. Lewy found in the name a reference to the moon-deity Laban (Lewy 1944: 455f; cf. Mulder 1984: 463), and Eusebius, in his *Praeparatio Evangelica* I.9, recorded a euphemistic legend told by Philo Byblius according to which the names of Mount Lebanon, the mountain range of the Anti-Lebanon and other Syrian mountains were derived from the name of a giant who once dwelt there (Eusebius 1974: 188-190; Honigmann 1926: 8; Mulder 1984: 463; Green 1995: 449). In early times, most high mountains were thought of as the abode of a god. In the case of Mount Lebanon, it would have been Baal Lebanon, sometimes identified as Hadad (Avi-Yonah 1982: 1542). However, neither of these last two etymologies for the name seem very likely.

One final suggestion for an explanation of the name is more plausible. The Hittite and Hurrite words for "cypress" and "juniper" are very similar in appearance when compared to the Hittite and Hurrite words for "Lebanon Mountains" (Haas and Thiel 1979: 343f; Mulder 1984: 463; Green 1995: 449). It is reasonable to assume that the famous cedars of Lebanon could have been the source of the name of both the mountain and the country. In various ancient languages, the name differed only slightly: "Levanon in Hebrew, Libnah in Phoenician, Labnanu in Assyrian, and Lablani or Niblani in Hittite" (Avi-Yonah 1982: 1542).

III. LEBANON IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

With their abundance in wood, towering heights and eternal snow, the mountains of Lebanon fascinated the ancient peoples. They left behind deep traces in the literature, theology and the world of symbols of the Israelites, and thus in the Old Testament. Lebanon was mentioned more than seventy times in the Old Testament (Khalaf 1985: 23; Kinet 1997: 876) and "more than ten times in extra-canonical literature" (Gangloff 1997: 4). Lebanon was the single most flattered, venerated and desired region in the eyes of the authors of the Old Testament

(cf. Gangloff 1997: 4).

A. Lebanon as part or boundary of the Promised Land.

Kinet has made a clear distinction among three different viewpoints through which the Old Testament considers the territory of Lebanon as part of the Promised Land (Kinet 1997: 876-7). As an idealization, in several instances the Old Testament claims the land of Lebanon as part of the territory of Israel (Deuteronomy 1:7, 3:25, 11:24; Joshua 1:4, 11:17, 13:6; 1 Kings 9:19 par; Chronicles 8:6; Zechariah 10:10). In other instances, the writers of the Old Testament think of Lebanon as the northern boundary of the land God promised to his people (Joshua 1:4, 9:1f., 11:17, 12:7, 13:5; Judges 3:3). In two instances (Joshua 13:5; Song of Songs 4:8), "Lebanon" is used to describe all the hill country in middle Syria.

For ancient peoples, passages like these may have been important as a basis for territorial considerations. The real significance of the claim of Lebanon as part of the Promised Land, however, only can be understood fully in a spiritual sense. Lebanon's mountains offered choice woods to build the sanctuary where the glory of God dwelt and was venerated: no other wood was precious enough for that purpose. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, traveled through Phoenician cities, nowadays part of Lebanon. The soil on which he walked is "holy ground." Inasmuch as Christians see themselves as the people of God and as true followers of the Son of God, any place or material chosen by the Lord and set aside for His worship is sacred and any place that received the footprints of the Word Incarnate is sacred land, the sign of God's ongoing presence with His people.

The following section presents the most important passages of the Old Testament that shows Lebanon as a land that is part of God's promise. The passages are arranged in their order of appearance in the Old Testament.

Deuteronomy 1:7

Leave here and go to the hill country of the Amorites and to all the surrounding regions, the land of the Canaanites in the Arabah, the mountains, the foothills, the Negeb and the seacoast; to Lebanon, and as far as the Great River [the Euphrates].

Deuteronomy 3:25

Ah, let me cross over and see this good land beyond the Jordan, this fine hill country, and the Lebanon!

Deuteronomy 11:24

Every place where you set foot shall be yours: from the desert and from Lebanon, from the Euphrates River to the Western Sea, shall be your territory.

Joshua 1:4

Your domain is to be all the land of the Hittites, from the desert and from Lebanon east to the great river Euphrates and west to the Great Sea.

Joshua 9:1-2

When the news reached the kings west of the Jordan, in the mountain regions and in the foothills, and all along the coast of the Great Sea as far as Lebanon: Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, they all formed an alliance to launch a common attack against Joshua and Israel.

Joshua 11:16-17

So Joshua captured all this land: the mountain regions, the entire Negeb, all the land of Goshen, the foothills, the Arabah, as well as the mountain regions and foothills of Israel, from Mount Halak that rises toward Seir as far as

Baal-gad in the Lebanon valley at the foot of Mount Hermon. All their kings he captured and put to death.

Joshua 12:7

This is a list of the kings whom Joshua and the Israelites conquered west of the Jordan and whose land, from Baal-gad in the Lebanon valley to Mount Halak which rises toward Seir, Joshua apportioned to the tribes of Israel.

Joshua 13:1.2a.5

When Joshua was old and advanced in years, the Lord said to him: "Though now you are old and advanced in years, a very large part of the land still remains to be conquered. This additional land includes . . . and the Gebalite territory; and all the Lebanon on the east, from Baal-gad at the foot of Mount Hermon to Labo in the land of Hamath.

Joshua 13:6

At the advance of the Israelites I will drive out all the Sidonian inhabitants of the mountain regions between Lebanon and Misrephoth-maim; at least include these areas in the division of the Israelite heritage, just as I have commanded you.

Judges 3:1a.3

The following are the nations which the Lord allowed to remain, . . . the five lords of the Philistines; and all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites who dwell in the mountain region of Lebanon between Baal-hermon and the entrance to Hamath.

1 Kings 9:17a.19 (parallel in 2 Chron 8:6)

Solomon then rebuilt Gezer, . . . all his cities for supplies, cities for chariots and for horses, and whatever else Solomon decided should be built in Jerusalem, in Lebanon, and in the

entire land under his dominion.

Song of Songs 4:8

Come from Lebanon, my bride, come from Lebanon, come! Descend from the top of Amana, from the top of Senir and Hermon, from the haunts of lions, from the leopards' mountains.

Zechariah 10:10

I will bring them back from the land of Egypt, and gather them from Assyria. I will bring them into Gilead and into Lebanon, but these shall not suffice them.

These passages illustrate that in Old Testament times, Lebanon functioned as the northern border for the tribes of Israel. When Joshua occupied the land east and west of the Jordan to gain it for the Israelite tribes, his expansion stretched north up to Lebanon. Yet even when he was older and advanced in years, the territory of the Israelites extended only to that border. It was God's explicit promise to the people dwelling in these northern regions that they should remain there.

B. Praise for Lebanon's Wealth of Natural Resources

In antiquity, Mount Lebanon was especially famous for its cedars, other coniferous trees (firs, juniper), and plane trees (2 Kings 19:23 and par., Isaiah 14:8, 37:24, 60:13; Zechariah 11:2, Ezekiel 31). The prophet Isaiah was full of praise for Lebanon's cypresses, plane trees and larches (Isaiah 60:13; cf. Avi-Yonah 1982: 1543). The cedars of Lebanon are exalted as the finest of trees (1 Kings 5:13). In the parable of Jotham, these cedars are compared to bramble bushes (Judges 9:15, cf. Avi-Yonah 1982: 1543).

Several books of the Old Testament – particularly the Song of Songs – are full of praise for Lebanon's nature, wild animals, waters, trees, flowers, wine, and the plants and snow of the

high mountains of Lebanon (cf. Avi-Yonah 1982: 1543). Lebanon was known as a country characterized by blooming flowers (Nahum 1:4). Its opulent nature supplied the authors of the Old Testament with abundant material for metaphors and parables (Judges 9:15; 2 Kings 14:9 par.; 2 Chronicles 25:18; Ezekiel 17:3; Jeremiah 18:14, 22:6.23; 1 Kings 5:13). The mountain range could serve as a type of creation itself (Psalms 104:16; 2 Kings 19:23 par.; Isaiah 37:24).

The wealth of Lebanon's trees is promised to the sanctuary of the Lord in Zion (Isaiah 60:13). Ancient imagination pictured a special garden of God, a garden of abundance. In relation to this concept of a garden of God, Lebanon functions as its image (cf. Lipinski 1973). In the context of this image, the cedars of Lebanon are to be understood as the trees in the garden (Stolz 1972). The tradition of a garden of God can be found in biblical and extra-biblical sources, especially in the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh (Stolz 1972: 149) and an Assyrian poem entitled "A Prince's Vision of the Nether World" (Lipinski 1973: 358).

The original composition of the Assyrian poem dates to the seventh century BC. The poem contains an account of a prince, possibly Assurbanipal, who dreamed about the spirit of a dead king, most likely Sennacherib. The god Ashur had blessed the king and allowed him to "rebuild the holy New-Year's-temple-of-the-Countryside in the garden of abundance, the image of Lebanon," (quoted from Lipinski 1973: 358). The poem of "A Prince's Vision of the Nether World" parallels the garden of the god Ashur with "the image of Lebanon." In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah is using a very similar metaphor in his description of how "the glory of Lebanon," i.e., the trees of the Lebanon, beautify God's sanctuary on Zion. Even if Isaiah does not necessarily refer to a literal garden of God, which would be the sanctuary on Zion, the reference to "the glory of Lebanon," implying the trees of Lebanon, nevertheless evokes the garden imagery. Lipinski grants that

“the aim of such expressions is to suggest the beauty and the wealth of the sanctuary or of the palace” (Lipinski 1973: 358), namely beauty and wealth imparted by the best of what Lebanon has to offer, one might add.

The most important passages in the Old Testament that praise Lebanon’s rich and abundant nature are listed in the following section in their order of appearance.

Judges 9:15

But the bramble replied to the trees, “If you wish to anoint me king over you in good faith, come and take refuge in my shade. Otherwise, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.

1 Kings 5:13

[Solomon] discussed plants, from the cedar on Lebanon to the hyssop growing out of the wall, and he spoke about beasts, birds, reptiles, and fishes.

2 Kings 14:9 and 2 Chronicles 25:18

King Jehoash of Israel sent this reply to King Amaziah of Judah: “The thistle of Lebanon sent word to the cedar of Lebanon, ‘Give your daughter to my son in marriage,’ but an animal of Lebanon passed by and trampled the thistle underfoot.”

2 Kings 19:23 and par

Through your servants you have insulted the Lord. You said: With my many chariots I climbed the mountain heights, the recesses of Lebanon; I cut down its lofty cedars, its choice cypresses; I reached the remotest heights, its forest park.

Psalms 104:16-18

Well watered are the trees of the Lord, the cedars of Lebanon,

which he planted; in them the birds build their nests; fir trees are the home of the stork. The high mountains are for wild goats; the cliffs are a refuge for rock-badgers.

Isaiah 14:8

The very cypresses rejoice over you, and the cedars of Lebanon: "Now that you are laid to rest, there will be none to cut us down."

Isaiah 29:17

Is it not yet a very little while until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest?

Isaiah 37:24

Through your servants you have insulted the Lord: You said, "With my many chariots I climbed the mountain heights, the recesses of Lebanon; I cut down its lofty cedars, its choice cypresses; I reached the remotest height, its forest park.

Isaiah 60:13

The glory of Lebanon shall come to you: the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to bring beauty to my sanctuary, and glory to the place where I set my feet.

Jeremiah 18:14

Does the snow of Lebanon desert the rocky heights? Do the gushing waters dry up that flow fresh down the mountains?

Jeremiah 22:6

For thus says the Lord concerning the palace of the king of Judah: Though you be to me like Gilead, like the peak of Lebanon, I will turn you into a waste, a city uninhabited.

Jeremiah 22:23

You who dwell on Lebanon, who nest in the cedars, How you shall groan when pains come upon you, like the pangs of a woman in travail!

Ezekiel 17:3

Say, "Thus says the Lord God: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar."

Ezekiel 31:3

Behold, I will liken you to a cedar in Lebanon, with fair branches and forest shade, and of great height, its top among the clouds.

Ezekiel 31:15

Thus says the Lord God: When it goes down to Sheol I will make the deep mourn for it, and restrain its rivers, and many waters shall be stopped; I will clothe Lebanon in gloom for it, and all the trees of the field shall faint because of it.

Ezekiel 31:16

I will make the nations quake at the sound of its fall, when I cast it down to Sheol with those who go down to the Pit; and all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, will be comforted in the nether world.

Nahum 1:4

He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither, the bloom of Lebanon fades.

Zechariah 11:1-2

Open your doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour your cedars! Wail, you cypress trees, for the cedars are fallen, the mighty have been despoiled. Wail, you oaks of Bashan, for the impenetrable forest is cut down!

It is obvious that the most important and recurrent theme in these passages are the trees of the high mountains of Lebanon, and the cedars of Lebanon rank first. With such an abundance of precious wood to be found in the land, it should come as no surprise that in ancient times the cedars were the country's most important and highest-priced export goods.

C. Exploitation of Lebanon's Wood Resources by Egyptians and Assyrians.

From 2700 BC on, overseas trade in wood between Lebanon and Egypt was in full bloom. Egyptian texts often characterized the famous wood imported from Lebanon using the adjectives "true" and "new" (Couroyer 1973: 356). Byblos functioned as one of the most important seaports of Lebanon. Because of its wealth in cedars and other valuable trees, Lebanon was soon the object of desire and the goal of several expeditions of the rulers of Egypt and Mesopotamia (Honigmann 1926: 1; cf. Avi-Yonah 1982: 1542). Assyrians and Babylonians (Habakkuk 2:17), Alexander the Great, the Seleucids as well as the Romans exploited Lebanon's abundance and wealth in wood (cf. 2 Kings 19:23 par., Jeremiah 37:24).

In recent years, scholars have conducted archeological-botanical surveys at various sites in Israel and they were able to point out the use of wood from the cedars of Lebanon (*cedrus Libani*) for special construction purposes and objects throughout different historical periods and in a variety of regions of the country (Liphshitz and Biger 1991: 175). While in the earlier times the wood of the cedars from Lebanon was mostly used as building material for palaces and temples, during the Hellenistic and Roman times it seems to have been used almost exclusively for constructing ships (Honigmann 1926: 4). As of the twelfth century, real competition arose between the Egyptians and the Assyrians over the wood resources of Lebanon (Avi-Yonah 1982: 1542). In the response of the Lord God to the prayer of the Jewish King Hezekiah, the scriptures describe the devastation of the cedars and firs

caused by the Assyrian King Sennacherib. King Sennacherib had boasted, "With my many chariots I climbed the mountain heights, the recesses of Lebanon; I cut down its lofty cedars, its choice cypresses; I reached the remotest heights, its forest park" (2 Kings 19:23). In a satire of the Assyrian King Sapor, whom Isaiah called "the morning star" who had "fallen down from the heavens" (Isaiah 14:12) – a title which the Vulgate translated as "Lucifer" and the fathers of the Church understood as a reference to Satan – the prophet Isaiah let the cypresses rejoice and the cedars of Lebanon say to the violent Assyrian King, "Now that you are laid to rest, there will be none to cut us down" (Isaiah 14:8). In the Old Testament, the trees of Mount Lebanon are often used as an image for man's hubris, against which God will step in (Isaiah 2:13, 10:34, 37:24; Jeremiah 22:6.20.23).

Unfortunately, today there are not many of the rich, ancient cedar groves left. Sporadic remnants can be found in Bcharre, on Arz Tamurin, on Jebel al-Qaraqif and on Jebel al-Baruk (Kinet 1997: 876).

From the following list of scripture passages, one can see how often greed and desire has caused harm, both to the cedar forests of Lebanon which were exploited and to the exploiters themselves.

2 Kings 19:23 and par

Through your servants you have insulted the Lord. You said: With my many chariots I climbed the mountain heights, the recesses of Lebanon; I cut down its lofty cedars, its choice cypresses; I reached the remotest heights, its forest park.

Psalms 37:35

I have seen a wicked man overbearing, and towering like a green cedar.

Isaiah 2:13

Against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan.

Isaiah 10:34

He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.

Isaiah 14:8

The very cypresses rejoice over you, and the cedars of Lebanon: "Now that you are laid to rest, there will be none to cut us down."

Isaiah 37:24

Through your servants you have insulted the Lord: You said, "With my many chariots I climbed the mountain heights, the recesses of Lebanon; I cut down its lofty cedars, its choice cypresses; I reached the remotest height, its forest park.

Jeremiah 22:6

For thus says the Lord concerning the palace of the king of Judah: Though you be to me like Gilead, like the peak of Lebanon, I will turn you into a waste, a city uninhabited.

Jeremiah 22:20

Go up to Lebanon, and cry out, and lift up your voice in Bashan; cry from Abarim, for all your lovers are destroyed.

Jeremiah 22:23

You who dwell on Lebanon, who nest in the cedars, How you shall groan when pains come upon you, like the pangs of a woman in travail!

Ezekiel 27:5

They made all your planks of fir trees from Senir; they took a

cedar from Lebanon to make a mast for you.

Habakkuk 2:17

For the violence done to Lebanon shall cover you, and the destruction of the beasts shall terrify you; because of men's blood shed, and violence done to the land, to the city and to all who dwell in it.

Because of its unique and precious quality, builders wanted to use cedar for special projects. One of the most outstanding constructions in the history of God with His people was King Solomon's building of the Temple. To provide a proper dwelling-place for God, Solomon chose the wood of the cedars of Lebanon as one of the building materials.

D. Lebanon and the Temple

The Old Testament refers to the wood of the cedars of Lebanon in particular in connection with the Temple built by Solomon (cf. 1 Kings 5:16-25.27f., 7.2f.) and Serubbabel (Ezra 3:7). When Solomon built the Temple, he was supplied with cedars from Lebanon by his ally Hiram, king of Tyre (1 Kings 5:15-24), who sent the logs in floats to a harbor near Jaffa (Tell Qasila: 2 Chronicles 2:15). When the Second Temple was being constructed, the same procedure was repeated. This time, however, the forests belonged to the king of Persia (Ezra 3:7, cf. Avi-Yonah 1982: 1543).

One of Solomon's palaces in the neighborhood of the Temple was named the "House of the Forest of Lebanon" or the "Hall of the Forest of Lebanon" (1 Kings 10:17.21 par.; 2 Chronicles 9:16.20; cf. Isaiah 22:8; Jer 22:23). The "House of the Forest of Lebanon" (1 Kings 7:2-5) was a special building, in that it was constructed only of cedar wood. Its interior is described in 1 Kings 7:2 and its interior in 1 Kings 7:3 ff.

The "House of the Forest of Lebanon" was used by Solomon as a kind of reception hall for public functions and it was

accessible to a variety and multitude of people (Mulder 1976: 100-101). The architecture of the building seems to have been unique (Mulder 1976: 100). Whereas adjacent buildings were constructed from both stone and wood, the "House of the Forest of Lebanon" was built solely using the wood of the cedars of Lebanon. Three rows of fifteen pillars made of cedar divided the interior of the hall into four naves. The hall had an imposing height of about 25 meters (Mulder 1976: 105 and n. 28). For Solomon's contemporaries and people of later ages, the "House of the Forest of Lebanon" bore witness to Solomon's exquisite taste (cf. Mulder 1976: 101).

Over the years, scholars have compared the architecture of various ancient temples and buildings all throughout the Middle East with the biblical description of Solomon's Temple and the "House of the Forest of Lebanon." Davey found that the Phoenician temple at Kition had certain structural similarities with the "House of the Forest of Lebanon," but was not related to Solomon's Temple, whereas long-room temples in northern Syria appear to be antecedents to Solomon's temple building (Davey 1980).

Vermes and Gordon have pointed out that in the Old Testament, the Targums and the texts found at Qumran, the word "Lebanon" had "a number of midrashic equivalences" that were associated with it in ancient times. The three most common associations were "temple," "nations," and "king." After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, the "temple" association was the dominant one (Gordon 1992:93; cf. Vermes 1958, Vermes 1973: 26-39).

Vermes showed that the Palestinian haggadah saw a connection between Lebanon and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. Yohanan ben Zakkai, the last survivor of the Great Sanhedrin, who managed to escape the attack and siege of Jerusalem by Vespasian and Titus, reinterpreted two prophetic passages, Isaiah 10:34 and Zechariah 11:1 as referring to the catastrophe (Vermes 1958: 8). Yohanan ben Zakkai's

reinterpretation of Zechariah 11:1 is recounted in Yoma 39b as follows:

“Our masters taught: Forty years before the destruction of the Sanctuary . . . its doors opened of themselves, and remained open until Yohanan ben Zakkai rebuked them, saying, ‘O Temple, Temple, why are you afraid? I know that finally you will be destroyed. Zechariah son of Iddo has already prophesied concerning you: Open, O Lebanon, your doors, and let the fire devour your cedars.’” (Yoma 39b, quoted according to Vermes 1958: 8)

Using Isaiah 10:34 and reinterpreting it, Yohanan ben Zakkai also predicted to Vespasian that he would become emperor of the Romans, because Lebanon, i.e., the Temple, could only be destroyed by a king. The following story can be found in the Palestinian haggadah:

“Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai went forward among the soldiers of Vespasian and asked them: ‘Where is the king?’ They went to tell him: ‘A Jew desires to greet you.’ He replied to them: ‘Let him come.’ When he was in his presence, he said to him: ‘Vive Domine Imperator!’ [i.e., May you live, Lord Caesar!]. Vespasian said to him: ‘You give me a royal greeting although I am not king. Should the king hear this, he would kill me.’ Yohanan answered: ‘If you are not yet king, you shall be later. Indeed, this Temple shall not be destroyed except by a king, for it is written, And Lebanon shall fall by the majestic one.’” (Lam. R. i. 5, paragraph 31, quoted according to Vermes 1958: 9)

It is less relevant here that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s quote of Isaiah 10:34 does not correspond exactly with the version of the verse of Isaiah as found in the present text of the Hebrew Bible. It may be part of ben Zakkai’s reinterpretation, or a form of the verse as found in extra-biblical traditions.

The Habakkuk Commentary of Qumran contains a disconcerting exegesis of the word "Lebanon" in connection with Habakkuk 2:17. Habakkuk Commentary 12.3-4 states that "Lebanon is the Council of the Community, and the beasts are the Simple of Judah" (Vermes 1958: 7). Vermes was able to explain that this identification of "Lebanon" with the "Council of the Community" had its roots in the interpretation of "Lebanon" as "Temple," which had become a tradition in Jewish exegesis before 200 BC (Vermes 1958: 12). This was connected with the teaching of the Qumran community that "held that the Council of the Community constituted the true Temple" (Vermes 1958: 7, and cf. Vermes 1957: 324).

The following scriptural passages illustrate the use Solomon made of the wood of the cedars of Lebanon to build the Temple and the "House of the Forest of Lebanon" as his reception hall.

1 Kings 5:15–32

When Hiram, king of Tyre, heard that Solomon had been anointed king in place of his father, he sent an embassy to him; for Hiram had always been David's friend. Solomon sent back this message to Hiram: "You know that my father David, because of the enemies surrounding him on all sides, could not build a temple in honor of the Lord, his God, until such a time as the Lord should put these enemies under the soles of his feet. But now the Lord, my God, has given me peace on all sides. There is no enemy or threat of danger. So I propose to build a temple in honor of the Lord, my God, as the Lord predicted to my father David when he said: 'It is your son whom I will put upon your throne in your place who shall build the temple in my honor.' Give orders then, to have cedars from the Lebanon cut down for me. My servants shall accompany yours, since you know that there is no one among us who is skilled in cutting timber like the Sidonians, and I will pay you whatever you say for your servants' salary."

When he had heard the words of Solomon, Hiram was pleased and said, "Blessed be the Lord this day, who has given David a wise son to rule this numerous people." Hiram then sent word to Solomon, "I agree to the proposal you sent me, and I will provide all the cedars and fir trees you wish. My servants shall bring them down from the Lebanon to the sea, and I will arrange them into rafts in the sea and bring them wherever you say. There I will break up the rafts, and you shall take the lumber. You, for your part, shall furnish the provisions I desire for my household."

So Hiram continued to provide Solomon with all the cedars and fir trees he wished; while Solomon every year gave Hiram twenty thousand kors of wheat to provide for his household, and twenty thousand measures of pure oil. The Lord, moreover, gave Solomon wisdom as he promised him, and there was peace between Hiram and Solomon, since they were parties to a treaty.

King Solomon conscripted thirty thousand workmen from all Israel. He sent them to the Lebanon each month in relays of ten thousand, so that they spent one month in the Lebanon and two months at home. Adoniram was in charge of the draft. Solomon had seventy thousand carriers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the mountain, in addition to three thousand three hundred overseers, answerable to Solomon's prefects for the work, directing the people engaged in the work. By order of the king, fine, large blocks were quarried to give the temple a foundation of hewn stone. Solomon's and Hiram's builders, along with the Gebalites, hewed them out, and prepared the wood and stones for building the temple.

1 Kings 7:1-7

His own palace Solomon completed after thirteen years of construction. He built the hall called the Forest of Lebanon one hundred cubits long, fifty wide, and thirty high; it was supported by four rows of cedar columns, with cedar capitals

upon the columns. Moreover, it had a ceiling of cedar above the beams resting on the columns; these beams numbered forty-five, fifteen in a row. There were three window frames at either end, with windows in strict alignment. The posts of all the doorways faced each other, three at either end. The porch of the columned hall he made fifty cubits long and thirty wide. The porch extended the width of the columned hall, and there was a canopy in front. He also built the vestibule of the throne where he gave judgment – that is, the tribunal; it was paneled with cedar from floor to ceiling beams.

1 Kings 10:16-17 and par. at 2 Chronicles 9:16

Moreover, King Solomon made two hundred shields of beaten gold (six hundred gold shekels went into each shield) and three hundred bucklers of beaten gold (three minas of gold went into each buckler); and he put them in the hall of the Forest of Lebanon.

1 Kings 10:21 and 2 Chronicles 9:20

In addition, all King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the utensils in the hall of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold. There was no silver, for in Solomon's time it was considered worthless.

2 Chronicles 2:8

Send me also cedar, cypress, and algum timber from Lebanon, for I know that your servants know how to cut timber in Lebanon. And my servants will be with your servants. (Twice)

2 Chronicles 2:15

For our part, we will cut trees on Lebanon, as many as you need, and float them down to you at the port of Joppa, whence you may take them up to Jerusalem.

2 Chronicles 2:16

And we will cut whatever timber you need from Lebanon, and bring it to you in rafts by sea to Joppa, so that you may take it up to Jerusalem.

Ezra 3:7

Then they hired stonecutters and carpenters, and sent food and drink and oil to the Sidonians and Tyrians that they might ship cedar trees from the Lebanon to the port of Joppa, as Cyrus, king of Persia, had authorized.

Isaiah 10:34

He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.

Isaiah 22:8

On that day you looked to the weapons in the House of the Forest....

Jeremiah 22:23

You who dwell on Lebanon, who nest in the cedars, How you shall groan when pains come upon you, like the pangs of a woman in travail!

Habakkuk 2:17

For the violence done to Lebanon shall cover you, and the destruction of the beasts shall terrify you; because of men's blood shed, and violence done to the land, to the city and to all who dwell in it.

Zechariah 11:1

Open your doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour your cedars!

E. "Lebanon" in the Song of Songs

The Song of Songs is the only post-exilic book in the Bible in which the word "Lebanon" has special importance (Vermes 1958: 11). "Lebanon" is mentioned seven times in the Song of Songs. Kinet pointed out that the mention of Lebanon has a special role in the amorous play between lover and beloved, or between bride and bridegroom, as found in the Song of Songs (Song of Songs 3:9, 4:8.11.15, 5:15, 7:5) (Kinet 1997: 878). Lebanon becomes the place from where the beloved, the desired one, is descending or to which the beloved is compared. "Lebanon" is synonymous with the peak of what is desired. In the words of the prophet Hosea, the cedar of Lebanon and the vine of Lebanon illustrate the ultimate stability and fullness of pleasure which God's people experience when they return to Him (Hosea 14:5-9).

The Song of Songs was inserted in the canon of the scriptures and became part of the Passover liturgy, most significantly because of its symbolic significance (cf. Vermes 1958: 11). The words Lebanon and lebonah, the Hebrew word for "incense", are derived from the same root (Vermes 1958: 12). For example, this may explain why in Song of Songs 4:11 the bridegroom wishes to compare the fragrance of the garments of his bride to the fragrance of Lebanon.

According to Cogan, the biblical toponym "the top of Amana" or "Mount Amanah" (Song of Songs 4:8) can be identified with Mount Ammananu-Ammanu in cuneiform sources. This site is located on the Anti-Lebanon range overlooking Damascus from the west (Cogan 1984: 259).

The following is a list of the passages where the scriptural book of the Song of Songs and the prophet Hosea make use of the word and images of "Lebanon."

Song of Songs 3:9

King Solomon made himself a carriage of wood from Lebanon.

Song of Songs 4:8

Come from Lebanon, my bride, come from Lebanon, come! Descend from the top of Amana, from the top of Senir and Hermon, from the haunts of lions, from the leopards' mountains.

Song of Songs 4:11

Your lips drip honey, my bride, sweetmeats and milk are under your tongue; and the fragrance of your garments is the fragrance of Lebanon.

Song of Songs 4:15

You are a garden fountain, a well of water flowing fresh from Lebanon.

Song of Songs 5:15

His legs are columns of marble resting on golden bases. His stature is like the trees on Lebanon, imposing as the cedars.

Song of Songs 7:5

Your neck is like a tower of ivory. Your eyes are like the pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath-rabbim. Your nose is like the tower on Lebanon that looks toward Damascus.

Hosea 14:5-9

I will heal their defection, I will love them freely; for my wrath is turned away from them. I will be like the dew for Israel: he shall blossom like the lily; He shall strike root like the Lebanon cedar, and put forth his shoots. His splendor shall be like the olive tree and his fragrance like the Lebanon cedar. Again they shall dwell in his shade and raise grain; they shall blossom like the vine, and his fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon. Ephraim! What more has he to do with idols? I have humbled him, but I will prosper him. "I am like a verdant cypress tree"—Because of me you bear fruit."

In the Songs of Songs in the Holy Scriptures, Lebanon is used

to express and illustrate individual aspects of the relationship between God and the people He loves. The last passage quoted above, from the writings of the prophet Hosea, also indicates what will happen to God's people when, in the end, they will return to their God. In several other eschatological passages in the scriptures, Lebanon has a significant role to play in the end of times. Aspects of this function shall be reviewed below.

F. Lebanon in Eschatological Texts

Lebanon is referred to in several eschatological texts of the Old Testament scriptures (Isaiah 35:2, 40:16; Zechariah 10:10; Psalms 72:16; cf. Psalms 104:16). It is the place where the Theophany of the Lord will occur (Psalms 29:5 ff.; Ezekiel 31:15), as the following passages indicate.

Psalms 29:5-6

The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon leap like a calf and Sirion like a young bull.

Psalms 72:16

May there be an abundance of grain upon the land; on the tops of the mountains the crops shall rustle like Lebanon; the city dwellers shall flourish like the verdure of the fields.

Psalms 104:16

Well watered are the trees of the Lord, the cedars of Lebanon, which he planted.

Isaiah 33:9

The land mourns and languishes; Lebanon is confounded and withers away; Sharon is like a desert; and Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves.

Isaiah 35:1-2

The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song. The glory of Lebanon will be given to them, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.

Isaiah 40:16

Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor its beasts be enough for holocausts.

Ezek 31:15

Thus says the Lord God: on the day he went down to the nether world I made the abyss close up over him; I stopped its streams so that the deep waters were held back. I cast gloom over Lebanon because of him, so that all the trees in the land dropped on his account.

Zechariah 10:10

I will bring them home from the land of Egypt, and gather them from Assyria; and I will bring them to the land of Gilead and to Lebanon, till there is no room for them.

At the end of times, God will manifest His awesome power. The scriptures can use the strength of the cedars of Lebanon in order to illustrate that the Lord's power and might when He comes will level those majestic trees. The blessings to be poured out on God's people in the end of times are only comparable to the natural blessings that the inhabitants of Lebanon already enjoy now. Lebanon will be part of the area to which God will bring back His people who had been scattered over distant lands.

Not only is Lebanon land where the Theophany of the Lord God occurred in Old Testament times, but the New Testament accounts bear witness to the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ

himself set foot onto soil that is now part of the state of Lebanon. He made his glory manifest there and sanctified the land.

IV. LEBANON IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

In the New Testament, Lebanon is not mentioned by name. Nevertheless, the evangelists Matthew and Mark attest to Christ visiting regions in the far north of Palestine and beyond. Matthew (Matt 16:13) records that Christ visited the district of Caesarea Philippi (Dan, or Panias). According to authors of the New Testament, Christ also visited the region of two of the cities of modern-day Lebanon, Sidon and Tyre. In the Old Testament, the narrow strip of land along the Mediterranean coast, including the territory of the cities of Tyre, Sidon and others, was not considered part of what was then known as Lebanon but was instead part of Phoenicia (Houston Smith 1992: 269, 270). Matthew records that after Jesus had stayed for a while on shore at Gennesaret (Matt 14:34), "Jesus left that place and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon" (Matt 15:22, cf. Mark 7:24 and 7:31). Jesus wished to remain hidden in these areas, but His presence did not go unnoticed and he healed the daughter of the Canaanite (Matt 15:22-28) or Syro-Phoenician (Mark 7:24-31) woman in the territory of Tyre.

The scriptures describe the site of the Transfiguration of Jesus (Matt 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-9; Luke 9:28-36) simply as the "high mountain" or "mountain" (for "high mountain," see Matt 17:1, Mark 9:2; for "mountain," see Matt 17:9, 17.20; Mark 9:9; Luke 9:28, 9:37). Traditionally, this "high mountain" is understood as Mount Tabor in northern Palestine. However, some speculate and identify this mountain with Mount Hermon or Great Hermon (New Jerusalem Bible: Matt 17:1, note b on p. 1639; cf. Houston Smith 1992: 270), also known as Jabal el-Sheikh. In his second letter, the apostle Peter later recalled what he had experienced when he had been with Jesus "on the

holy mountain" (2 Peter 1:18). The commentators in the New Jerusalem Bible understand Peter's reference to the mountain of the Transfiguration as "the holy mountain", either as an allusion to Zion (cf. Psalms 2:6, Isaiah 11:9) or "as a suggestion that the mountain of transfiguration was the antitype of Sinai" (New Jerusalem Bible: 2 Peter 1:18, note m on p. 2009). If the identification of the mountain of the transfiguration with Mount Hermon is correct, then Peter would be alluding to that mountain here.

Not only Jesus himself, but also his disciples and the members of the early Christian community went outside of the boundaries of Palestine, even if not voluntarily. The author of the Acts of the Apostles writes that "those who had scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, but they proclaimed the message only to Jews" (Acts 11:19).

The following passages gathered from the New Testament scriptures will provide the supporting material for what has been indicated, namely that Jesus himself visited areas that are part of modern-day Lebanon.

Matt 15:21-29

Then Jesus went from that place and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not say a word in answer to her. His disciples came and asked him, "Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us." He said in reply, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But the woman came and did homage, saying, "Lord, help me." He said in reply, "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters." Then Jesus said to her in reply, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And

her daughter was healed from that hour.

Moving on from there Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, went up on the mountain, and sat down there.

Matt 16:13

When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

Matt 17:1-9

After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, conversing with him. Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud cast a shadow over them, then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell prostrate and were very much afraid. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and do not be afraid." And when the disciples raised their eyes, they saw no one else but Jesus alone."

As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, "Do not tell the vision to anyone until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Matt 17:20

He said to them, "Because of your little faith, Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Mark 7:24-31

From that place he went off to the district of Tyre. He entered a house and wanted no one to know about it, but he could not escape notice. Soon a woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit heard about him. She came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth, and she begged him to drive the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." She replied and said to him, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps." Then he said to her, "For saying this, you may go. The demon has gone out of your daughter." When the woman went home, she found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

Again he left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis.

Mark 9:2-9

After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them. Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified. Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; then from the cloud came a voice, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them.

As they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone, except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead."

Luke 9:28-37

About eight days after he said this, [Jesus] took Peter, John,

and James and went up the mountain to pray. While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were conversing with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem. Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, but becoming fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As they were about to part from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." But he did not know what he was saying. While he was still speaking, a cloud came and cast a shadow over them, and they became frightened when they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my chosen Son; listen to him." After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. They fell silent and did not at that time tell anyone what they had seen.

On the next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him.

Acts 11:19

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that arose because of Stephen went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but Jews.

2 Peter 1:17-18

For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that unique declaration came to him from the majestic glory, "This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain.

V. LEBANON IN APOCRYPHAL BOOKS

While the following passages are taken from books that, according to some Christian communities, do not belong to the

recognized inspired writings of the scriptures, they nevertheless provide evidence that at the time of the Maccabees' lively interaction was taking place between the cities of Phoenicia and regions to the south, regions around Jerusalem and along the coast.

Baruch 3:22

She has not been heard of in Canaan, nor seen in Teman.

1 Macc 5:14-15

While they were reading this letter, suddenly other messengers, in torn clothes, arrived from Galilee to deliver a similar message: that the inhabitants of Ptolemais, Tyre, and Sido, and the whole of Gentile Galilee had joined forces to destroy them.

1 Macc 10:69

Demetrius appointed Apollonius governor of Coelesyria. Having gathered a large army, Apollonius pitched his camp at Jamnia. From there he sent his message to Jonathan the high priest.

2 Macc 3:5

Since he could not prevail against Onias, he went to Apollonius of Tarsus, who at that time was governor of Coelesyria and Phoenicia,

2 Macc 4:4

Onias saw that the opposition was serious and that Apollonius, son of Menestheus, the governor of Coelesyria and Phoenicia, was abetting Simon's wickedness.

2 Macc 4:18-19a

When the quinquennial games were held at Tyre in the presence of the king the vile Jason sent envoys as representatives of the Antiochians of Jerusalem, to bring there three hundred

silver drachmas for the sacrifice to Hercules.

2 Mac 4:22

After going to Joppa, he proceeded to Jerusalem. There he was received with great pomp by Jason and the people of the city, who escorted him with torchlights and acclamations; following this, he led his army into Phoenicia.

2 Macc 4:32

Then Menelaus, thinking this a good opportunity, stole some gold vessels from the temple and presented them to Andronicus; he had already sold some other vessels in Tyre and in the neighboring cities.

2 Macc 4:44

When the king came to Tyre, three men sent by the senate presented to him the justice of their cause.

2 Macc 4:49

For this reason, even some Tyrians were indignant over the crime and provided sumptuously for their burial.

2 Macc 8:8

When Philip saw that Judas was gaining ground little by little and that his successful advances were becoming more frequent, he wrote to Ptolemy, governor of Coelesyria and Phoenicia, to come to the aid of the king's government.

2 Macc 10:11

When Eupator succeeded to the kingdom, he put a certain Lysias in charge of the government as commander in chief of Coelesyria and Phoenicia.

2 Macc 14:1-2

Three years later, Judas and his men learned that Demetrius, son of Seleucus, had sailed into the port of Tripolis with a powerful army and a fleet, and that he had occupied the country, after doing away with Antiochus and his guardian Lysias.

VI. CONCLUSION

As attested by Old and New Testament scriptures, Lebanon was a precious country, chosen and blessed with natural beauty and resources as well as being distinguished by the presence of the Lord Jesus on its soil.

“Holy” for a Christian describes anyone or anything filled with the presence of God. Two thousand years ago, God became man and lived on this earth among us as our brother. When multitudes of pilgrims travel to Israel this year to visit the very sites where Jesus lived and walked, to touch the ground that His feet touched, they express that, for them, Israel is a “holy land.” In the same sense, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan are “holy lands” for a Christian. Egypt is a “holy land” because it has experienced the physical presence of Jesus when the Holy Family fled there to protect baby Jesus from the persecution of King Herod. Lebanon is a “holy land” since it has a special function in God’s plan for His people.

Some aspects of the Lord’s loving and tender care for Lebanon and its people were already revealed when the Lord healed the young girl in Tyre. May Lebanon and its people follow the example of their ancestors, the young girl and her mother and stretch out to the Lord in a desire for His healing presence.

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