

## “Have you heard of the Decapolis?”

### Mark 7:31-35 NIV

“Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.

“**32** There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him. **33** After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue. **34** He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, “*Ephphatha!*” (which means “Be opened!”).

“**35** At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. **36** Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. **37** People were overwhelmed with amazement. “He has done everything well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

**Languages tend to change over time.**

**The English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer lived from 1340-1400 AD.**

**In my college Chaucer course, the professor required us to memorize the opening lines of Chaucer’s famous *Canterbury Tales*.**

English has changed so much that if I were to quote some of that 14<sup>th</sup> century poem, you would not recognize most of the words from their pronunciation.

If you were to try to reading them, you might also have trouble identifying them from their spelling.

**For various reasons, languages undergo change.**

**Think, too, of the oft-used word “surprise.”**

The primary meanings of surprise are: “attack without warning,” and “take unawares.”

**Contemporaries are apt to use “surprise” in describing “amazement” or “astonishment.”**

Noah Webster, whose name is found on many dictionaries, was a language perfectionist.

One tale attributed to Webster relates to a day his wife caught him kissing their maid in the pantry. The wife was aghast, of course.

“Noah, I am surprised,” she exclaimed.

“No, my dear,” Webster corrected her, “I am surprised; you are merely astonished.”

**You can bet she was plenty angry, too.**

**The growing use of text messages is rapidly changing English and other languages.**

I understand that the newest edition of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary has about 840 new words or expressions.

**One of the dictionary’s new terms is an acronym, “TL; DR:” which stands for, “Too long; did not read.”**

**The Bible’s length may be a principal reason not many people have read it.**

I found these stats on an Apr 25, 2017 [www.lifewayresearch.com](http://www.lifewayresearch.com) posting:

**About 11 percent of Christians has read the entire Bible once; 9 percent has read “almost the entire Bible;” and 15 percent has read “at least half.”**

**That means that only about a third of Christians has read half or more of the Bible--“TL;DR: Too long; did not read.”**

**I pray that you agree with me that our Creator inspired the Bible.**

He intended that we read it and pay attention to what His Word informs us.

The Bible was written by about 40 authors over a period of 1500 years, yet its 66 books have common themes.

**What are those shared topics?**

**God created all life.**

God taught people how to obey and retain life.

When we gratefully honor God, obey Him, and treat one another well, we enhance life.

**But He gave us freedom to make choices.**

**The first human couple chose wrongly and the consequences have affected all humans since.**

**That is why we all die.<sup>1</sup>**

**The Book of Genesis tells the full story of human rebellion.**

It relates numerous examples of human selfishness.

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<sup>1</sup> See Romans chapter 5.

**Genesis also tells us how God will help us overcome our egotistic blunders.**

- Most Old Testament books predicted that God would send a gifted person with extraordinary power.
- The OT books gave evidence so folks could identify Messiah or Christ when he came.

**Jesus fulfilled all those predictions in God’s Word; he is the Living Word.**

He is the lone reliable life-role-model; the sole person who can permanently better our lives.

**God’s truth improves our smarts, corrects a lot of ignorance, and helps us avoid time-wasting, wrong directions.**

**Yet how many folks in this country do you suppose get up each morning thanking God and asking him to help them make right choices for the day?**

**The Bible makes this truth clear: except for electric gadgets and fossil fuel propulsion, life scarcely differs from eons past.**

**Language evolves; customs cycle and recycle.**

**But human behavior is unchanged.**

Folks bicker on Facebook and tweet on subjects the Bible dealt with long ago.

Jealousy, envy, making extra bucks, worry about tomorrow, sibling rivalry, making out, aching backs, and petty excuses: these are the stuff of iPhone conversations and texting today, but they dominated talk of donkey and camel riders 5,000 years back.

**Here are a few Bible examples:**

**About 3,700 years back, the following happened.**

You probably know the story of Joseph and his Technicolor Jacket.

- Rampant sibling rivalry constantly erupted in Joseph’s family.
- Joseph tended to brag and show off.
- Some of the brothers resented Joseph so strongly, they wanted to kill him.

**Do you know any 21<sup>st</sup> century families where sibling rivalry causes bitterness?**

**The Book of Genesis relates how the father, Jacob, had assigned the ten elder brothers responsibility for tending his sizable flocks of sheep.**

Grazing animals have to be frequently moved and Jacob was concerned about them.

He sent Joseph to check on their welfare.

**Joseph was told that his brothers were in a place called Dothan so he went there:**

“So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing— 24 and they took him and threw him into *an empty cistern*.

“25 As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

“26 Judah said to his brothers, ‘What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? 27 Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.’ His brothers agreed.

28 So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.”<sup>2</sup>

**Sibling bitterness is strongly evident here, but business and trade also were occurring as they have for millennia.**

Those ships of the desert were loaded with spices, balm, and myrrh; Joseph, the newly acquired slave, likely walked.

**Those cargo references in verse 25 tell us more.**

- **Without spices, food is boring, isn’t it? Pizza, chicken wings, and ribs would likely have sold well back then, too.**

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 37: 23-28 NIV Some Bible students see no distinction between Midianites and Ishmaelites. Both were descended from Abraham, but by different mothers (See Genesis 16 regarding Ishmael and Genesis 25:1-4 regarding Midian). Most Jewish translations (as does the Septuagint) distinguish between the two groups. They translate the text indicating that the Midianite merchants pulled Joseph from the cistern and sold him to the Ishmaelites.

- **Concerning balm; every day on TV aging football and baseball stars pitch blue stuff that helps with aches and pains, and “It doesn’t stink,” they claim.**

If the balms do not work, some move on to stronger prescription stuff or possibly illegal opioids.

- **Myrrh is extracted from a rare plant.**

Cosmetologists have used it for thousands of years to make women more beautiful.

Sometimes people mixed myrrh with strong drink to make painkillers.<sup>3</sup>

**Little has changed in 3700 years, has it?**

Those caravaneers traveled an ancient trade route that began in present Iran, went north to Iraq, south to Damascus, Syria, through Israel and then toward Egypt.

As human traffickers do today, they would buy and sell anyone anything for a profit.

Some captured and sold entire communities—men women, and children. Realizing that a young, strong, guy brought a premium in Egypt, the Ishmaelites measured out eight ounces of silver to buy Joseph.<sup>4</sup>

Those traders who bought Joseph hoping to get a good price for him were possibly his third cousins, twice removed.

The beginnings of Ancestry.com were already at work

**The Bible is true and it informs us that human behavior is unchanged over history.**

**What does this have to do with our text?  
“Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.”**

Tyre and Sidon (in present Lebanon) were Phoenician cities notable for trading and their sea-worthy ships.

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<sup>3</sup> That’s the compound Jesus refused on the cross. See Mark 15:23 NIV

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<sup>4</sup> Coins were not used until about the 5<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.



*Tyre & Sidon were in what is now Lebanon at the far right of this World Atlas map.*

**Many assume that international trade is unique to our generation.**

Phoenician cargo vessels traversed the Mediterranean Sea (2,300 miles east to west).

**They traveled all the way to Spain, Tarshish, as it is known in the Bible.**

**The *Book of Ezekiel* (600BC) tells how extensively ancient merchants traded:**

“Tarshish (Spain) did business with you because of your great wealth of goods; they exchanged silver, iron, tin and lead for your merchandise. **13** “Greece, Tubal and Meshek did business with you; they traded human beings and articles of bronze for your wares.

**14** “Men of Beth Togarmah (possibly Armenia) exchanged chariot horses, cavalry horses and mules for your merchandise.

**15** “The men of Rhodes traded with you, and many coastlands were your customers; they paid you with ivory tusks and ebony.

**16** “Aram did business with you because of your many products; they exchanged turquoise, purple fabric, embroidered work, fine linen, coral and rubies for your merchandise.

**17** “Judah and Israel traded with you; they exchanged wheat from Minnith and confections, honey, olive oil and balm for your wares. **18** “Damascus did business with you because of your many products and great wealth of goods. They offered wine from Helbon, (an area N.W. of Damascus known for its grapes) wool from Zahar **19** and casks of wine from Izal (in the upper Tigris Valley) in exchange for your wares: wrought iron, cassia and calamus.

**20** “Dedan traded in saddle blankets with you.

**21**“Arabia and all the princes of Kedar were your customers; they did business with you in lambs, rams and goats.

**22** “The merchants of Sheba and Raamah traded with you; for your merchandise they exchanged the finest of all kinds of spices and precious stones, and gold.

**23**“Harran, Kanneh and Eden and merchants of Sheba, Ashur and Kilmad traded with you.

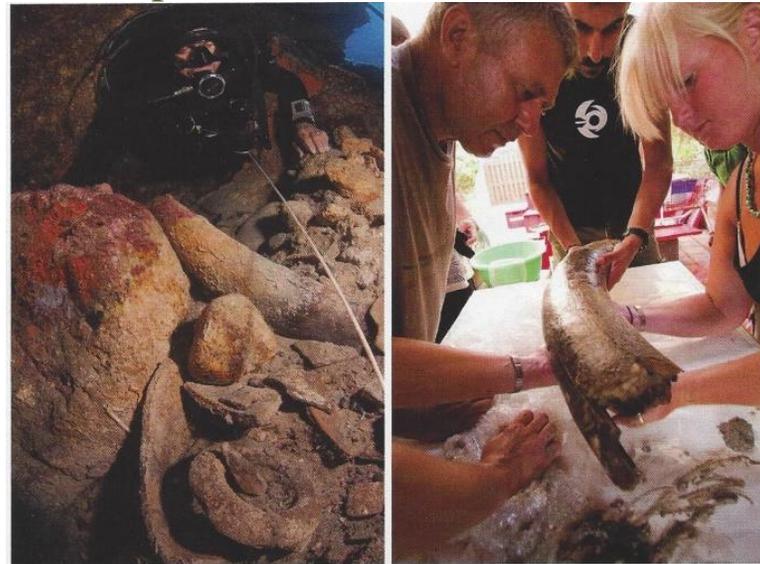
**24** In your marketplace they traded with you beautiful garments, blue fabric, embroidered work and multicolored rugs with cords twisted and tightly knotted.

**25**“The ships of Tarshish serve as carriers for your wares. You are filled with heavy cargo as you sail the sea.”<sup>5</sup>

**Archaeologists have recently been recovering items from a Phoenician cargo ship that sank off the coast of Spain in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC.**

A comparison of the list of commodities and articles carried by Phoenician ships listed in

Ezekiel shows a remarkable correspondence with what archaeologists discovered on the ocean floor from the ship that sank in the same period Ezekiel wrote.



An archaeologist (above, left) examines a concentration of artifacts on the seafloor, including an elephant tusk. More than 50 elephant tusks (above, right) have been found at the site, including 11 that bear Phoenician religious inscriptions.

Note ivory & 19 re: which shipped to those sunken



verse 15 regarding tusks and verses 18 wine, would have been in amphorae similar found near the Phoenician vessel. Photos:

*ARCHAEOLOGY* May/June 2016  
Article: “Masters of the Ancient Mediterranean”  
Regarding Phoenician Ships and Trade

<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel 27:12-25 NIV

About a century before, King Ahab of Israel and Ben Hadad, ruler in Damascus were at war. Ahab and Israel defeated Ben-Hadad.

A major cause of the conflict was trade. Note the conversations in 1Kings 20: 33, 34 as Ben-Hadad’s defeated troops approach Israelite King Ahab as he arrived in his chariot:

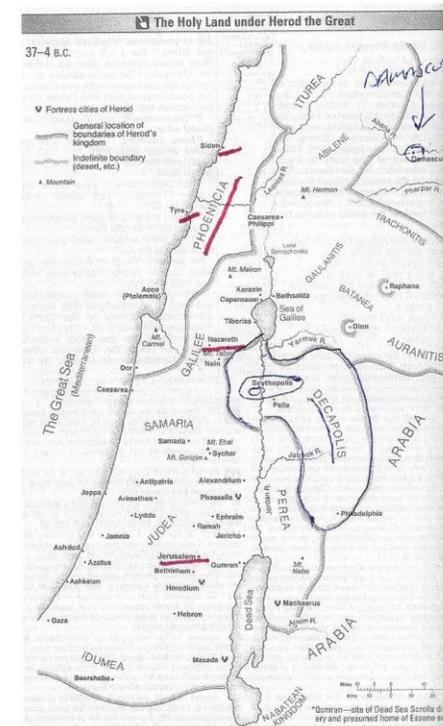
“Wearing sackcloth around their waists and ropes around their heads, they went to the king of Israel and said, ‘Your servant Ben-Hadad says: “Please let me live.”’ The king answered, ‘Is he still alive? He is my brother.’ 33 The men took this as a good sign and were quick to pick up his word. ‘Yes, your brother Ben-Hadad!’ they said. ‘Go and get him,’ the king said. When Ben-Hadad came out, Ahab had him come up into his chariot. 34 **‘I will return the cities my father took from your father,’ Ben-Hadad offered. ‘You may set up your own market areas in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria.’ Ahab said, ‘On the**

**basis of a treaty I will set you free.’ So he made a treaty with him, and let him go.”**

Finally, the Decapolis (meaning ten cities) was a group of Greek cities that had formed likely for purposes of trade and because they shared similar culture.

Think of an ancient smaller prototype of the European Common Market.

Most of the cities were located south and east of the Sea of Galilee.



Map from the NIV Study Bible (personal size) copyright 1995 by Zondervan, p 1540. Color explanatory notes by Bob.

**But far off Damascus belonged to that league or group.**

Even more fascinating to me, Scythopolis, known as Beth Shan (Shean) in the OT belonged to that group of cities.

**It was the only city in the Decapolis west of the Jordan River.**

Scythopolis was about 17 miles from Nazareth, Jesus' home town.

**What all this means is that history and human behavior continue to recycle.**

They remain the same.

**They will not change.**

**We must change, though, by honoring God and seeking to know his will, repenting, and becoming more like Jesus every day.**

**God will richly bless you.**

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