

The Cedars of God

(an elegy for Lebanon)

The mountain cedar is one of the great glories of Lebanon and has been prized since ancient times for its colour, fragrance and durability. The Cedars of God in the Kadisha Valley of northern Lebanon are some of the last surviving remains of the extensive forests which once stretched across this region. The trees, standing straight and aspiring to the sky, can sometimes grow to 40m and have been venerated by local people since antiquity, even to the point of placing altars among them. It is therefore little wonder that the cedar features as an emblem on the national flag.

There are many references to Lebanon in the writings of the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 3 we read of Moses pleading with God to be allowed – verse 25 “to go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan – that fine hill country and Lebanon”. But God forbids him to go and tells him to send Joshua instead. Lebanon – or more properly Phoenicia – formed part of Canaan, the land which God had promised to Moses and the Children of Israel. Phoenicia mainly comprised the narrow coastal strip of the Mediterranean with its city-states of Tyre and Sidon, which is still the geography of today’s southern Lebanon.

Tyre, lying half-way between modern Beirut and Haifa, was the largest of the Phoenician cities and had a thriving economy under their king Hiram who was contemporary with Solomon, the son of king David. The Tyrians had good ships and harbours and developed a significant reputation as commercial traders, exporting their highly prized cedar wood. Hiram provided Solomon with all the materials and craftsmen he needed for the building of the great First Temple in Jerusalem – as we learn from chapter 2 of 2 Chronicles. In verse 8 Solomon asks not only for cedar but also for pine and algum, and, in reply, (verse 16) Hiram promises to cut the logs and float them down to Joppa on rafts so that Solomon can take them up to Jerusalem. Hiram also promises to send with them his skilful carpenter and metalworker, Hiram-Abi, who will work alongside Solomon’s team of builders.

The writer of Psalm 92 uses the fabulous growth and longevity of the Lebanon cedar to celebrate how the righteous will flourish in the courts of God. In verses 14 and 15 we read “they (the righteous) will still bear fruit in old age. They will stay fresh and green, proclaiming “The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in Him”.

When not ruling Israel with consummate wisdom and building his Temple and Palace, Solomon was also a love poet, writing the lovely Song of Songs. In chapter 3 we read of the Beloved seeing Solomon’s carriage coming up from the desert - verse 9 “King Solomon made his carriage for himself from cedar wood of Lebanon” - and in the following chapter Solomon exhorts his Beloved (verse 8) to “come with me from Lebanon” as the writer refers poetically to lovely features of the landscape. In verse 11 the fragrance of the Beloved’s garments is compared with that of Lebanon – perhaps an allusion to the sweet-smelling cedar or other spices.

In Jeremiah 18 we have the image of the disobedient Children of Israel set against the never-changing natural wonders of Lebanon. Verse 14 - “does the snow of Lebanon ever vanish from its rocky slopes (perhaps thinking of Mt Hermon)? Do its cool waters from distant sources ever cease to flow?”

Lebanon today is a country in grave crisis. The explosion in Beirut has fallen hard on the heels of many years of civil war and economic mismanagement, with a refugee crisis and coronavirus. As we pray for its people and their future, let us remember the Cedars of God and all the country’s natural beauty, that God will restore the land and its people. There are Christians in Lebanon, particularly the Maronites. Let us support them in our prayers.

