

THE MEANING OF THE NAME PHOENICIANS

The name Phoenicians (Phoinix) originally appears in Greek Literature with Homer. Most scholars saw the term as a Greek appellation, and tried to find an explanation for it in the Greek language.¹ Many scholars derive the name "Phoinix" from the Greek word "Phoinos" meaning—"blood red". Why were they called so? The explanations are various. 1. The Phoenician sailors that arrived to Greece after a long journey in the sea were spoken of as "red men" because of their sun-burnt skin (Pietschman, Evans, Fick)². 2. The land of the Phoenicians like Caria was noted for its red skies in the morning (Beloch).³ 3. The Phoenicians were experts in the extraction of red purple dye from Murex shells (Myer).⁴ 4. They were so named because of their origins from the Red Sea area (Speiser).⁵ 5. The torrential waters hurling down

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- 1 Speiser, *The Name Phoinikes*, p. 324
Contenau, *La Civilisation Phénicienne*, p. 288.
Autran, *Phéniciens*, p. 52.
Dunand, *Byblia Grammata*, p. 7.
Harden, *The Phoenicians*, p. 22
Slouschz, *Hebreo – Phéniciens et Judeo – Berbères*, p. 41.
Astour, *The Origin of The Terms, Canaan, Phoenician and Purple*, JNES, 1965, p. 348.
Kaperlud, *Phoenicia, the interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*.
Muhly, *Homer and The Phoenicians*, Berytus, (19), 1970, p. 19.
Bonfante, *The Name of The Phoenicians*, *Classical Philology*, (36), 1941, pp. 9–10.
Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*, Macmillan, 1921, vol. I. p. 9.
Berard, *Les Phéniciens et L'odyssée*, vol. II, pp. 12, 33.
Moscati, *The World of The Phoenicians*, London, 1968, p. 3.
Whitaker, *Motya – A Phoenician Colony In Sicily*, p. 8.
Wathelet P., *Les Phéniciens et La Tradition Homérique*, pp. 235 – 236; STU. PH. II, 1983.
Baurain, c., *Portées chronologique et géographique du terme "phénicien"* pp. 13; 25. STU. PH.
IV, Namur 1986.
Vandersleyen, c. ; *L'etymologie de phoinix, "phénicien"*. P. 20, STU. PH. V.
 - 2 See: Evans, *ibid.* p. 9.
Pietschman – *Geschichte der Phöenizer*, p. 107 as cited by Speiser, *ibid.* p. 325.
Fick – *Griech. Orten*. p. 123, as cited by Berard, *ibid.* II. p. 35
 - 3 Beloch, *Griechische Geschichte I*. 2 p. 70 as cited by Speiser, *ibid.* p. 325
 - 4 Myer. *Op. Cit. Geschichte des Altertum*, I. 2 1. 97; 2, 66, as cited by Speiser, *ibid.* p. 325.
 - 5 Speiser. *ibid.* p. 331.

to the sea is made red by iron laden soil.⁶ 6. The country of origin of the Phoenicians being Edom.⁷ etc. Such explanations are perhaps etymologically possible but are not logically tenable. A nickname is usually given to someone with a distinctive trait (characteristic) peculiar to him and exceptional for the environment. We will never call someone "dark skinned" or "red skinned" if our own skin is identical to his, dark or red. Geographically Greece is not far from Sidon and the climate of Greece does not differ much from the Sidonian climate, Hence there is no reason whatsoever for the skin colour of the Sidonians to be conspicuous. Moreover, a man who becomes sunburnt has reddened skin only for the first days, but then it takes on a bronzed tan. Phoenician sailors arriving to Greece after a journey of several months by sea, could not possibly have remained red skinned, and it would be ridiculous for the Greeks to refer to their bronzed tan as being of red colour, especially so when their own skin tan was the same.

Regarding the conjectures that the name Phoenicia derives from the red colour of the sky in Phoenicia, or the colour of torrential waters, it seems that such conjectures were devised, with great effort to explain the "blood Red". Surely it is incomprehensible that the Greek people would give a surname referring to phenomena not seen with their own eyes, occurring in a far off country. Also are such phenomena of red skies, or red torrential waters peculiar only to the region of Tyre and Sidon? Are they not seen over the entire Middle East? Why would the Greeks specifically call the region of Tyre and Sidon Phoenicia? According to Vandersleyen there is no linguistic basis whatsoever to regard "phoinix" as derived from "phoinos".⁸

A certain conjecture links the name Phoinix with the Egyptian name "PNH", which Sethe believes refers to the region of Israel and Syria. According to Brugsch the name Fanhu was later associated with the Red colour. Countering this Speiser⁹ asks: "Why the Greeks should have combed Egypt in search of a suitable designation for the Phoenicians?". Myers also objects to equating Phoinix with Fanhu.¹⁰

1. When we examine the name "Phoenicians" in the light of its transcriptions into Latin languages we may realise from whence it derives. In French the Phoenicians are called "Phéniciens", in English – "Phoenicians", in German "Phöenzien", in Latin "Phoenices", and in ancient Greek "Phoinix". The pronunciation of the name in Greek and Latin is Pho. Whereas in the other languages we mentioned, though the pronunciation is Phe the

6 See: Contenau, *ibid.* p. 288.

7 Berard, *ibid.* vol. II, p. 37.

8 Vandersleyen, *L'Étymologie de Phoinix, "phénicien"* pp. 19–22 in *Studia Phoenicia*, V. Leuven, 1983.

9 Speiser, *ibid.* p. 327

10 Ed. Myer, *Geschichte des Altertums*, 4th Auflage, Berlin, 1921, p. 210,

letter "O" still remains and therefore indicates that the name was originally pronounced Pho and not Phe. Let us therefore use this pronunciation of Pho in these languages. We get in French – Phoniciens, in English – Phoenicians etc. i. e. we get words for which the explanation in all these languages will be "Phoneticians", namely their derivation is from "Phonḗ (Φωνή)" which in Greek means Syllable – Voice. If we remember that the Phoenicians are considered as being the inventors of the phonetic script and its introduction to Europe. and that this writing constituted then a novelty for the Greeks and for the world in general, we will understand why the Phoenicians were so nicknamed.

We have already seen that the Israelites must have been the nation the Greeks surnamed Phoenicians. Therefore it results that the Israelites are those supposed to have invented the alphabetic writing.