

The "Via Maris"

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

"Via Maris" was not a Roman term denoting a road somewhere. It is the Latin translation of Isaiah 9:1 (in the Hebrew Bible, 8:23) – "the way of the sea." The prophet was probably referring to the road from Dan to the sea at Tyre, which marked the northern border of Israel at the time of the Assyrian conquest. See Anson Rainey, "Toponomic Problems (cont.)" in *Tel Aviv* 8 (1981).

For seventy years or so, scholars and guides have applied the term Via Maris to the Great Trunk Road that ran from Damascus via Hazor and Megiddo down the coast to Egypt. It is hard to undo this habit. Therefore, we shall summarize Rainey's argument.

The entire verse and its sequel go as follows:

But there shall be no more gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time, he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali; but in the latter time he has made it glorious, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in the land of the shadow of death, on them the light has shined.

Matthew quotes this verse in 4:15-16, in connection with Jesus' move to Capernaum. In the Middle Ages, therefore, scholars assumed that the "way of the sea" was a road from Damascus through the lower Galilee to the (then important) harbor of Acco. "It was a logical extension," writes Rainey, to apply the term Via Maris to the entire route from Damascus to Egypt. On the assumption that Isaiah's geographical terms referred to the Assyrian provinces of his time, the "way of the sea" was then taken to denote a province headed by the city of Dor. Yet Assyria had placed Dor into the province of Tyre. Dor did not become a provincial capital until 659 BC: after the time of Isaiah.

In sum: there is no reason to connect the Via Maris of Isaiah with the Great Trunk Road from Damascus through Megiddo down the coast to Egypt.

What then did Isaiah mean when he said, "the way of the sea"? When we look at the biblical account of the first Assyrian conquest, we find this (2 Kings 15:29):

In the days of Pekah king of Israel came Tiglath Pileser king of Assyria, and took Ijon, and Abel Beth Maacah, and Janoah, and Kedesh, and Hazor, and Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried them captive to Assyria.

Of these cities, only the identification of Janoah is uncertain. Rainey identifies it with Yanuh, 10 kilometers east of Tyre.

Others have thought that Yanuh is too far from the area that could have belonged to Israel at the time of the first Assyrian

conquest (735 BC). Rainey points out, however, that Jeroboam II had recently expanded Israel's borders to include this stretch (He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the sea of the Arabah...[2 Kings 14:25]). The logic of the Assyrian campaign would have been to secure the Upper Galilee (including Ijon, Dan, Abellath-maacah, Janoah and Kedesh) before moving south to concentrate on the major Israelite fortress at Hazor.

Isaiah, in 9:1, was indeed denoting the territories that Israel had lost to Tiglath Pileser III in that first Assyrian campaign: the Upper Galilee ("the way of the sea" and the rest of Naphtali), Gilead ("on the other side of Jordan") and the lower Galilee ("Galilee of the Gentiles," including Zebulun). In the following verse, he offers the Israelites of these regions hope for restoration.