

# THE PHILISTINES: BITTER ENEMY OF ISRAEL

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From the era of the Judges to that of the Assyrian empire, the Philistines were the arch enemy of Israel. During the reign of Ahaz (740 BCE), the Philistines seized control of Beth-shemesh and the Aijalon district (II Chron. 28:18). Even though both King David (1040 BCE) and King Hezekiah (725 BCE) had subjugated the Philistines, they were still a threat to the Judean kingdom even at the time of the prophet Ezekiel (585 BCE) some 140 years later. Ezekiel writes:

*Thus said the Lord God: Because the Philistines have dealt by revenge, and have taken vengeance with disdain of soul to destroy, for the old hatred; therefore thus said the Lord God: Behold, I will stretch out My hand upon the Philistines, and I will cut off the Cherethites, and destroy the remnant of the sea-coast. And I will execute great vengeance upon them with furious rebukes; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I shall lay My vengeance upon them (Ezek. 25:15-17).*

## WHO WERE THE PHILISTINES?

The Bible identifies Abimelech as king of the Philistines in the days of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 20:32; 26:8). This has aroused controversy, since extra-biblical sources indicate that the Philistines were a "Sea People" from the region of Crete who invaded the Levant toward the end of the Late Bronze/Iron I Ages, a time generally identified with the Exodus and conquest of Canaan.<sup>1</sup> Also, while there is some tension with Abimelech over water rights (Genesis 26) and wife/sister deception (Genesis 20 and 26), these matters are all resolved, and there is no hint of the enmity that would characterize later Israelite-Philistine relations.<sup>2</sup> Rather than view the mention of Philistines in the Patriarchal era as an anachronism, we can say that these Philistines were part of an earlier, minor wave of Aegean invaders who set up a small city-state in Gerar ruled by Abimelech.<sup>3</sup>

According to the biblical account, there were two separate immigrations or invasions by Philistines in the Land of Canaan. The first took place in the era of the Patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac. There was friction, but no violence,

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between the Patriarchs and Abimelech, who actually made a compact in Beer-sheba (Gen. 6:28-31). The second, much larger invasion came centuries later (around 1200 BCE) and led to the Philistines being entrenched in five major cities, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron, ruled over by *seranim* (lords).<sup>4</sup> From this point onward they displayed bitter enmity toward Israel, engaging in a 600-year conflict up to the post-exilic era. They had lost their identity by the fifth century BCE, leaving no inscriptions or literature.

Archaeologists are still not clear as to where the Philistines originated, but it is thought that they most probably came from the Aegean region. The Bible states that their place of origin was Caphtor: *Mizraim begot the Ludim, the Anamim, the Lehabim, the Naphtuhim, the Pathrusim, the Casluhim, and the Caphtorim, whence the Philistines came forth* (Gen, 10:13-14). Amos states: *Have I not brought Israel up from the Land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor?* (Amos 9:7). Most scholars identify Caphtor with Crete,<sup>5</sup> so that the origin of the Philistines, as stated in the Bible, concurs with the findings of current scholarship based on extra-biblical historical data.

The Philistines at the time of the Exodus occupied the southeastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, apparently extending almost to the tip of the eastern Egyptian delta.<sup>6</sup> This coastal area is the "way of the Philistines" noted in Exodus 13:17: *Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, 'The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt'* (Ex. 13:17). This is distinct from the land of the Philistines in the days of the Patriarchs, which was located in the Negev, its chief city being Gerar.<sup>7</sup>

A major Sea Peoples' attack on Egypt, led by the Philistines, occurred in 1175 BCE. They were repulsed by Egypt's Pharaoh Rameses III and (as mentioned above) eventually built five city-states headed by *seranim*.<sup>8</sup> Though independent, these cities established a confederation. Having brought in iron weapons, they were a formidable military force, threatening the integrity of the Land of Israel. By the time of Joshua, they were firmly established: *Joshua was now old, advanced in years. The Lord said to him, 'You have grown old, you are advanced in years, and very much of the land still remains to be occupied. This is the territory that remains: all the districts of the Philistines and all [those of] the Geshurites, from the Shihor, which is close to Egypt, to the territory of Ekron on the north, are accounted Ca-*

*naanite, namely, those of the five lords of the Philistines – the Gazites, the Ashdodites, the Ashkelonites, the Gittites, and the Ekronites . . .* (Josh. 13:1-4).

#### THE EARLY CONFLICTS

The Book of Judges informs us of Israel being delivered into the hands of the Philistines for 40 years (Judg. 13:1), and of the skirmishes and private vendettas of Shamgar and Samson. Neither of these two leaders even aimed at a confederation of Israelite tribes to stem the tide of Philistine expansion. They were unlike the judges of the North, where Deborah inspired Barak to form an alliance of the tribes of Naphtali, Zebulun, Ephraim, Benjamin, and Issachar and win a brilliant victory over Sisera's mighty chariot army. In the southern area dominated by the Philistines, there was no outstanding warrior like Gideon who, with a small force of 300 men using the cover of night, psychological warfare, and a surprise attack, annihilated the marauding Midianites.

The tribes of Dan and Judah were the first victims of Philistine expansion. Dan, enclosed to the northeast by the tribes of Ephraim and Benjamin and by Judah to the south, was denied access to the Mediterranean Sea by the Philistines. The Danites were thus compelled to find new territory and moved north, occupying Leshem (Josh. 19:47).<sup>9</sup> From the story told of Samson, we learn of the shameful incident when 3,000 Judeans came to Samson *to take you prisoner and hand you over to the Philistines* (Judg. 15:12), because *'You knew that the Philistines rule over us'* (Judg. 15:11).

Although the power of the Philistines lay in their five city-states, there was no clear border separating them from the territory of Dan. The Bible thus indicates that a degree of peaceful interaction developed between them, as in the case of Samson choosing a Philistine wife from Timnah (Judg. 14:1). Although his parents were dismayed by this choice (Judg. 14:3), they eventually accepted his decision (Judg. 14:5). Later, Samson was offered her younger sister as a wife (Judg. 15:2). While these relationships ended badly, the fact that they were considered at all possible indicates a dynamic that allowed for peaceful interaction between the groups, something found in comparative colonial studies.<sup>10</sup>

## THE DEFEAT AT APHEK

The first national effort to combat the Philistines occurred while Eli was High Priest and judge at Shiloh. Shiloh had been established by Joshua as a religious and national site (Josh. 18:1) containing the Sanctuary (*mishkan*) and the Ark of the Covenant (*aron berit Ha-Elohim*). Shiloh's importance was later enhanced by the presence of Samuel: *All of Israel, from Dan to Beer-sheba, knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord* (I Sam. 3:20).

The Philistines were encamped at Aphek (see map), posing a deadly threat to Shiloh, a short distance away: *Israel marched out to engage the Philistines in battle; they encamped near Eben-ezer while the Philistines encamped at Aphek* (I Sam. 4:1). Israel suffered a crushing defeat: Shiloh was destroyed,<sup>11</sup> and the Ark was captured, an unprecedented disaster. This calamitous defeat may have awakened the tribal leaders to their need of a warrior-king who would block the Philistines' onward march.

## SAUL AND JONATHAN'S BATTLES AGAINST THE PHILISTINES

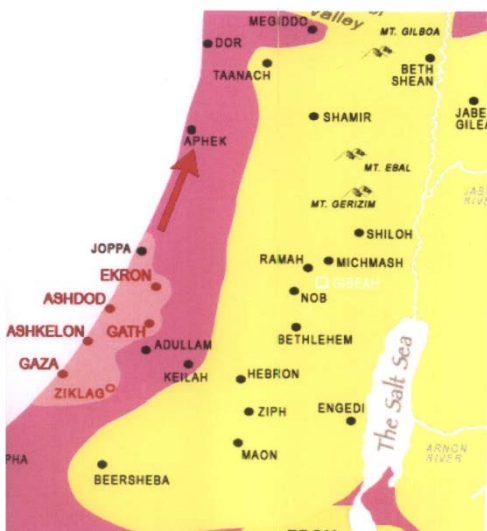
The pragmatic wisdom of the people overruled the noble objection of Samuel to an Israelite monarch. Encouraged by the Lord, Samuel anointed Saul, a tall and imposing figure, as Israel's warrior-king. Saul did indeed wage successful campaigns against Moab, Ammon, Edom, and Amalek. However, Philistine oppression severely hampered the Israelite troops, as the Philistines succeeded in placing them at a disadvantage: *No smith was to be found in all the land of Israel, for the Philistines were afraid that the Hebrews would make swords or spears* (I Sam. 13:19). *Thus on the day of the battle, no sword or spear was to be found in the possession of any of the troops with Saul and Jonathan; only Saul and Jonathan had them* (I Sam. 13:22). Despite this severe disadvantage, the Book of Samuel records military engagements against the Philistines that resulted in Israelite victories. Jonathan's courage in attacking an outpost of the Philistines caused them to panic and Saul's troops *found the Philistines in very great confusion* (I Sam. 14:20) and retreat. Saul's army pursued the Philistines and that could have been a decisive rout, but *Saul had laid an oath on the troops: 'Cursed be the man who eats any food before night falls and I take revenge on my enemies'* (I Sam. 14:24). As a result, the soldiers were faint with hunger (I Sam. 14:28); *Saul broke off*

his pursuit of the Philistines, and the Philistines returned to their homes (I Sam. 14:46).

We do not know what later prompted the battle of Gilboa, which ended in a disastrous defeat for Saul, leading to his suicide and to the death of Jonathan and his brothers. David famously lamented: *Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights; How have the mighty fallen! Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult* (II Sam 1:19-20). The sadistic Philistines had *cut off his [Saul's] head and stripped him of his armor, and they sent them throughout the land of the Philistines, to spread the news in the temples of their idols and among the people. They placed his armor in the temple of Ashtaroth, and they impaled his body on the wall of Beth-shean* (I Sam. 31:9-10). This battle marked the nadir of Israel and the zenith of the Philistines, who penetrated all the way north to Beth-shean. Israel was in effect now divided by the Philistines into two parts: the North and the South.

THE TIDE IS TURNED: DAVID AND HEZEKIAH

David's meteoric rise from shepherd to king was largely due to his courage and military skill, as demonstrated by his fight to the death with Goliath and his charismatic leadership, inducing 600 warriors to join his small army. When his life was threatened by the jealous King Saul, he and his men took refuge with Achish, the Philistine king of Gath (I Sam. 27:1-3). David spent 16 months in Ziklag, the town Achish apportioned to him, and



THIS MAP SHOWS EXPANSION OF PHILISTINE TERRITORIES AFTER VICTORY OVER THE ISRAELITES AT APHEK. AFTER THE CRUSHING DEFEAT OF ISRAEL AT GILBOA, PHILISTINE EXPANSION REACHED BETH-SHEAN.

during that time he observed the Philistine art of warfare. An unusual verse, preceding his lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan at the battle of Gilboa, reads: *To teach the sons of Judah the [song of the] bow* (II Sam. 1:18). This alludes to the importance of archery, the lack of bowmen having evidently contributed to Israel's shattering defeat. We are told that *the battle [on Mount Gilboa] raged around Saul, the archers overtook him, and he was mortally wounded [by their arrows]* (I Sam. 31:3).

It seems that Achish was in some ways independent of his Philistine allies. He is called *melekh*, "king" (I Sam. 21:11; 27:2), not *seren*, "lord," and finds himself in opposition to the other Philistine rulers (I Sam. 29:3-7). These and other clues indicate that the Philistines had internal divisions and differing attitudes,<sup>12</sup> a fact exploited by David when he chose to seek refuge with Achish in Gath.

Later, when David was proclaimed king over all of Israel and conquered Jerusalem, the Philistines became alarmed and *spread out over the Valley of Rephaim* (II Sam. 5:18) to wage war on Israel, but David vanquished them. In revenge, the Philistines prepared a new campaign. Avoiding a frontal encounter, David attacked from the rear and won a decisive victory over the Philistines *from Geba all the way to Gezer* (II Sam. 5:25), driving them back to their five cities. From that time onward the Philistines were no longer a serious threat to Israel. The Book of Kings records one more open clash between the two sides: *He [Hezekiah] smote the Philistines as far as Gaza [the most southern of the five cities] and its border areas* (II Kgs. 18:8).

#### THE PHILISTINES IN THE ERA OF THE PROPHETS

Although the Philistines had ceased to menace Israel, their confederation of five city-states remained a force to be reckoned with. Their policies vis-à-vis the major threat to the region, emanating in turn from the empires of Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt, conflicted with the policies of Israel. Furthermore, beyond their practical ability to harm the Israelites, the Philistines in the biblical imagination came to symbolize the "Other", Israel's cruel, uncircumcised enemy.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the Philistines constantly arouse the anger of prophets from Isaiah (late eighth century BCE) to Ezekiel (593-571 BCE), who envisage the destruction of the Philistines for a variety of sins that are not fully clear to us.

Isaiah (c. 740-700 BCE) foretold a day of retribution: *They shall fly down upon the shoulder of the Philistines on the west; together they shall spoil the children of the east; they shall put forth their hand upon Edom and Moab; and the children of Ammon shall obey them* (Isa. 11:14). *Howl, O gate; cry out, O city; melt away, all Philistia! For a smoke is coming from the north, and there is no straggler in his ranks* (Isa. 14:31).

Amos (c. 750 BCE) similarly prophesied against the Philistines:

*Thus said the Lord: For three transgressions of Gaza, yea, for four, I will not revoke it, because they exiled a whole population, which they delivered to Edom. I will send down a fire on the wall of Gaza that will devour its palaces. I will cut off the inhabitants of Ashdod and the sceptered ruler of Ashkelon; I will turn My hand against Ekron, and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish, said the Lord God* (Amos 1:6-8).

Jeremiah (626-582 BCE) also foretold the destruction of the Philistines: *All the mixed peoples; all the kings of the land of Uz; and all the kings of the land of the Philistines, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and the remnant of Ashdod* (Jer. 25:20).

Around the same time, Zephaniah the prophet declared:

*For Gaza shall be forsaken and Ashkelon a desolation; the people of Ashdod shall be expelled at noonday, and Ekron shall be uprooted. Woe unto the Cherethite nation that inhabits the sea-coast! The word of the Lord is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines: I will utterly destroy you, leaving no inhabitants* (Zeph. 2:4-5).

#### WHAT BECAME OF THE PHILISTINES?

In the Bible, the land of the Philistines is called *Peleshet* and is mentioned a number of times by that name.<sup>14</sup> It referred primarily to the five city-states and the extended Philistine dominion in part of the Negev. Their power declined after defeats by David and Hezekiah, and they were eventually subjugated by the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires. Philistine culture reached its final stage at the end of the seventh century BCE,<sup>15</sup> and by the late fifth century BCE they no longer existed as a distinct ethnic group.<sup>16</sup>

How and when the designation “Palestine” (i.e., Philistia) came to be used for the Land of Israel is a vexed question. The historian Cecil Roth main-

tained that the Philistine confederation of five city-states commanding the high road between Africa and Asia cast a long shadow: "Such was the impression which they made upon the ancient world that ultimately their name was given to the whole country".<sup>17</sup> This opinion is debatable for there is nothing of value that they left behind. A more credible suggestion, by Salo Baron, is that the change to *Palaestina* was introduced by Roman Emperor Hadrian in the aftermath of the Bar Kochba revolt, at about the time he renamed Jerusalem, a position widely accepted today.<sup>18</sup> This arbitrary renaming of the land shows that the Romans were well aware of the Philistines, symbolic power as arch enemy of the Jewish People, long after they had ceased to exist.

## NOTES

1. Peter Machinist, "Biblical Traditions: The Philistines and Israelite History", in Eliezer Oren, ed., *The Sea Peoples and Their World: A Reassessment* (Philadelphia: University Museum Publications, 2000) p. 54. On the invading Sea Peoples, see also Gabriel A. Sivan, "Sisera and Harosheth-Goim," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41:2 (April-June 2013) pp. 95-103.
2. Machinist, op. cit., p. 54.
3. Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 390. On these early Philistines and the Patriarchs, see Yehuda Elitzur and Yehuda Kiel, *Atlas Da'at Mikra* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1998), pp. 68-69 and 76-77.
4. Sarna, op. cit., *ibid.* Note that Abimelech is always identified as a king, *melekh*, never as a *seren*: K. A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2005) p. 41; *Atlas Da'at Mikra*, loc. cit..
5. Machinist, op. cit., p. 70, note 3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
7. See Edward Hull, "On the Relations of Land and Sea in the Isthmus of Suez at the Time of the Exodus," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 16 (2) (April 1884) p. 138.
8. See Israel Finkelstein, "The Philistine Settlements: When, Where and How Many?," in Eliezer Oren, ed., *The Sea Peoples and Their World: A Reassessment* (Philadelphia: University Museum Publications, 2000) p. 165.
9. Pekka Pitkanen, *Joshua* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010) p. 331.
10. Pekka Pitkanen, "Philistine Influence on Israelite Ethnic Identity." Paper presented at the annual ASOR meeting (Chicago: 2012) p. 3.
11. Remnants of the destroyed Sanctuary have been found in archaeological digs.
12. Machinist, op. cit., p. 58.
13. See the discussion by Trude Dothan and Robert L. Cohn, "The Philistine as Other: Biblical Rhetoric and Archaeological Reality," in Laurence Jay Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn, eds., *The Other in Jewish Thought and History* (New York: New York University, 1994) pp. 61-73.
14. Genesis 21:32, 34; Exodus 13:17; I Samuel 27:1 and chap. 29; I Kings 5:1; II Kings 8:2-3; Jeremiah 25:20.



15. Aren Meir, "Philistia Transforming: Fresh Evidence from Tell es-Safi/Gath on the Transformational Trajectory of the Philistine Culture," in Ann Killebrew and Gunnar Lehmann, eds., *The Philistines and other "Sea Peoples" in Text and Archaeology* (Atlanta, GA: Society for Biblical Literature, 2013) p. 195.
16. Eric Myers, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 313.
17. Cecil Roth, *Short History of the Jewish People* (London: East and West Library, 1959) pp. 13-14.
18. Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. II (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1952) p. 380.



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