

Who Were The Philistines?

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To anyone other than a Bible student, the Philistines are merely a long-forgotten people, the subject of old, dusty volumes of equally dry and irrelevant history. Surprisingly, even the dictionary contains little useful information on them. *Webster's Dictionary* provides a typical definition: "a native or inhabitant of ancient Philistia," an explanation—if one can call it that—that violates a primary rule of thumb of lexicography, "Avoid defining a word by referencing itself." It is like defining a dog as "an animal with dog-like qualities"—essentially useless, especially if one has never seen a dog.

Subsequent definitions of *Philistine* prove equally futile: "a person who is guided by materialism and is usually disdainful of intellectual or artistic values" and "one uninformed in a special area of knowledge." Evidently, *Philistine* has acquired these meanings from association with its occasional biblical adjective "uncircumcised" (see I Samuel 17:26, 36). While David meant to suggest a man who had no relationship with God, a foreigner, generations of Bible readers have understood it to mean a brutish, unrefined person, as they imagine Goliath to have been.

So much for the helpfulness of dictionaries. They leave us still hungering for answers to the question, "Who were the Philistines?" This question, while not vital to our salvation, begs an answer, as the people called Philistines in Scripture had a great impact on biblical history. From the days of Abraham to the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel, the Philistines were at times friends, allies, deadly enemies, vassals, and rivals of God's people, but never a people their leaders could ignore.

For Bible students in the twenty-first century, knowing who the Philistines were is important in grasping the lessons in the stories of Abraham and Isaac, Samson, Samuel, Saul, and David, in which they sometimes played major roles. Though they were bit players in later history, their name arises in the writings of the prophets, some of them having end-time implications. With Jesus' admonition in mind to live by every word of God (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4), finding out about the Philistines becomes more crucial.

Aegean Origins

Unexpectedly, the Philistines first appear in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10:13-14: "Mizraim [a son of Ham] begot Ludim, Anamim, Lehabim, Naphtuhim, Pathrusim, and Casluhim (from whom came the Philistines [*Philistim*, KJV] and Caphtorim)."¹ *Mizraim* is the Hebrew word that is commonly translated as "Egypt," thus the Philistines are ethnically related to the Egyptians.

However, note that the Casluhim are divided into the Philistines and Caphtorim (in fact, the Philistines are frequently identified with Caphtor, the Hebrew name for at least the island of Crete and perhaps for the whole Aegean region; see Amos 9:7; Jeremiah 47:4). This indicates that their origins lie in the area of Crete, western Asia Minor, and the Aegean Sea, and modern archeology bears this out. For instance, Philistine pottery resembles that of the Minoan and Mycenaean (Homeric Greek) civilizations to the point that a material connection is beyond question. Other substantial links to the area include early Greek weapons, armor, dress, burial methods, military tactics, government, religion, etc.

How did these Aegean people end up settling in southwestern Canaan? The story is a long one, beginning in the days of Abraham. Being a restless, warlike, trading people, the Philistines frequently attempted to expand their influence, first through setting up trading colonies in distant lands and then by force of arms, if necessary. Genesis 21:34 records, "Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines many days," referring to the area around the town of Gerar, where Abimelech² was king (see Genesis 20). This means that by the early nineteenth century BC, at least a small colony of Philistines had already gained a foothold in the land of Canaan.

After Isaac's similar experience with them, they are next mentioned in passing in Exodus 13:17:

Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, "Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt."

The "way of the land of the Philistines" describes a small portion of the route later known as the Via Maris, "the Way of the Sea." This coastal road connected the Nile Delta region with Canaan, Syria, and beyond that to Mesopotamia. Although the naming of this portion of the road after the Philistines may be a slight anachronism (perhaps a later emendation), Philistines already lived along its southern course in Canaan.

However, more significant is the Philistines' connection with war. Evidently, the people who lived along that road were a hostile group, easily provoked into armed conflict, and at the time of the Exodus, on a war footing. The fledgling nation of Israel, God knew, was not yet prepared to fight any people as aggressive as the Philistines, no matter what their numbers were at the time.

Nevertheless, this passing mention in Exodus 13 alludes to the fact that the Philistine presence in southern Canaan had not remained static. From a trading outpost in Gerar, they had expanded in the intervening four centuries to control a large area. Perhaps they were not the most populous of the ethnic groups there, but they were certainly the dominant one. It is thought that their numbers were steadily increased by new colonists from their homeland in the Aegean. In addition, it seems to have been a conscious policy to assimilate to a large degree with the native population, which would include intermarriage³ and adoption of local deities. In this way a minority people could quickly rise to prominence.

Sea Peoples

Despite their early dominance, the bulk of the Philistine people did not migrate to coastal Canaan for another nearly two and a half centuries. What caused the main body of Sea Peoples⁴—as they are known to historians—to cross the Mediterranean is not entirely known. Perhaps the migration of Central European peoples into the Aegean region dislodged them, or maybe the early throes of Mycenaean decline played a part. Some have even suggested a terrible famine or a volcanic eruption as reasons for their relocation. Whatever the cause, the annals of the time record that the Sea Peoples were strong enough to overwhelm the Hittite Empire in Asia Minor, as well as other nations down the Mediterranean coast. Not content with these conquests, they set out to invade Egypt between the reigns of Pharaohs Merneptah (c. 1224-1216 BC) and Rameses III (c. 1174-1144 BC).

One massive sea battle in the Nile Delta region during the reign of Rameses III put an end to the Sea Peoples' advance. Though normally outmatched on water, Pharaoh won a decisive victory, capturing

large numbers of Sea Peoples. As new vassals of Egypt, they were placed in Egyptian fortified cities up the coast in southwestern Canaan where small Philistine colonies already existed, and many of them—particularly those of the Peleset tribe—settled permanently in the area. They formed a league of five major cities (a Pentapolis): Gaza,⁵ Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath, each of which was ruled by a "lord" (Hebrew *seren*, which is perhaps better rendered as "tyrant," a Greek concept).

Now being the majority people in the area, it did not take the Philistines long to ignore Egyptian overrule (Egypt had been weakened and exhausted by its conflict with the Sea Peoples) and to carve out their own nation between the desert buffer of Sinai and the weak, disunited, hill-country Israelite tribes. Their rise to power began in the early- to mid-twelfth century BC (for instance, the Philistines conquered Ashkelon in about 1175 BC), contemporaneous with the end of Deborah's judgeship and the length of Gideon's. By the days of Jephthah, Samson, and Samuel in the early eleventh century, the Philistines dominated most of the land of Canaan from Sinai to Galilee, especially in the areas closer to the coast.

A key to their dominance lay in their more advanced material culture. While the Israelites and Canaanites of the highlands still practiced Bronze Age skills, the Philistines had advanced to an Iron Age culture, making them nearly invincible on the battlefield. I Samuel 13:19-22 informs us:

Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, "Lest the Hebrews make swords or spears." But all the Israelites would go down to the Philistines to sharpen each man's plowshare, his mattock, his ax, and his sickle; and the charge for sharpening was a pim [two-thirds of a shekel, an exorbitant price] for the plowshares, the mattocks, the forks, and the axes, and to set the points of the goads. So it came about, on the day of battle, that there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people who were with Saul and Jonathan. But they were found with Saul and Jonathan his son.

Saul could muster only two swords among six hundred men (see verse 15)! Evidently, most of his soldiers fought with axes, mattocks, ox goads, sickles, or sharpened sticks. Recall that Samson never used a normal weapon either, resorting to the jawbone of a donkey or his bare hands. The Philistine army, however, was fully outfitted with the advanced weaponry of the day:

So the Lord was with Judah. And they drove out the inhabitants of the mountains, but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the lowland [the Philistines and Canaanites there], because they had chariots of iron. (Judges 1:19)

[Goliath] had a bronze helmet on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail. . . . And he had bronze greaves on his legs and a bronze javelin was between his shoulders. Now the staff of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his iron spearhead weighed six hundred shekels; and a shield-bearer went before him. (I Samuel 17:5-7)

Later, the account mentions that Goliath also carried a sword (verse 51). David, of course, having refused Saul's armor and sword because he was untrained in them, carried only "his staff in his hand; . . . five smooth stones from the brook, and . . . his sling" (verse 40). David's severe disadvantage in arms was typical for an Israelite before the might of the Philistines.

Philistine Culture

While a fair amount is known about the Philistines from textual sources, only recently have archeological finds begun to flesh out Philistine culture. For instance, relatively little is known about the original Philistine language except that, upon arriving in Canaan, it seems they quickly adopted the Semitic language of the area while retaining words from their original Indo-European tongue, including personal names. In November 2005, a small pottery shard bearing an inscription containing two names linguistically resembling "Goliath" was found in the ruins of Gath. There is no evidence that it refers to the biblical Goliath, but it confirms the general historicity of the story in I Samuel 17.

The artifacts being dug up from the ruins of Philistine cities reveal that Philistine culture was as advanced as their weaponry. Their art was refined, being heavily influenced by typically Mycenaean motifs with Egyptian and later Canaanite styles added to their repertoire. While its roof may not have been redundantly supported (see Judges 16:23-30), their Temple of Dagon in Gaza—similar in design to Cretan architecture—supported about three thousand people on its roof, making it an imposing edifice. The evidence found in the tells of the Pentapolis bears out that, for the time, the Philistines built large, planned cities complete with fortresses, palaces, temples, and markets, all of which were surrounded by thirteen-foot-thick walls.

Anciently, the Philistines were also renowned for both their production and consumption of alcoholic beverages. Numerous finds have exposed a well-managed spirits industry, from breweries and wineries to retail outlets that advertised beer, wine, and strong drink. Among the most numerous artifacts unearthed from Philistine ruins are beer mugs and wine craters (large drinking bowls). The story of Samson's wedding feast alludes to the Philistine practice of engaging in weeklong drinking parties, as the Hebrew word *misteh*, translated as "feast" in Judges 14:10, indicates a "drinking feast."

From the Old Testament, we find that the principal deity of the Philistines was Dagon (Judges 16:23; I Samuel 5:2-7). This deity, either a god of fish or of grain (the root *dg* can represent either idea, depending on the vowel used), was worshipped at least in the temples of Gaza, Ashdod, and Beth-shan. II Kings 1:1-6 records that at Ekron the god Baal-Zebub was venerated. There is thought to be some connection between these gods and similar ones worshipped by the Hittites, also a Hamitic people, who lived in Anatolia (Asia Minor). Over time, however, the Philistine deities began to resemble their Canaanite counterparts, though the Philistines retained a distinctive worship ritual.

Judges 16:23-24 contains snatches of a song sung in the Temple of Dagon at Gaza celebrating the successful capture of Samson. Cultic artifacts found at Ashdod suggest music played a prominent role in Philistine worship, both singing and instrumental music, particularly the use of the lyre. This same passage also shows a Philistine penchant for performance art and entertainment (verse 25), another interest attributed to the Greeks.

Unlike the common belief, the Philistines were not unsophisticated, uncultured brutes, but advanced, refined people. In fact, for several generations their culture was years ahead of Israel's, a disparity they maintained through their martial superiority. Nevertheless, their cosmopolitan sophistication could not hide their underlying uncircumcision in God's eyes; they were a foreign people in the land God had promised to Abraham's descendants. Eventually, through His intervention, the Israelites under David overcame the Philistine's might and advanced culture, making Israel the dominant force in the region.

Philistia in Prophecy

Prophetically, the Philistines are mentioned several times in both the Major and Minor Prophets. The sense of many of these passages is that, despite being put under tribute by David, the Philistines were not absorbed by Israel but remained a distinct people beyond the fall of both Israel and Judah. In fact, Assyrian records list the Philistines separately from Israel during the time of the latter's fall in the late eighth century BC. Further, these passages suggest that the Philistines are a distinct people at the time of the end.

For example, Isaiah 11:11-14 is a prophecy of the Day of the Lord and the regathering of Israel to the Promised Land, an event known as the Second Exodus. Isaiah prophesies that the reunited Israelites will overwhelm the end-time Philistines:

It shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people who are left, from Assyria and Egypt, . . . and the islands of the sea. He will set up a banner for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. . . . [T]hey shall fly down upon the shoulder of the Philistines toward the west. . . . (see also Isaiah 14:28-31)

Jeremiah (Jeremiah 47:1-7), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 25:15-17), Joel (Joel 3:4-5), Amos (Amos 1:6-8), Obadiah (Obadiah 19), Zephaniah (Zephaniah 2:4-7) and Zechariah (Zechariah 9:5-8) also make proclamations of destruction against the Philistine people. Ezekiel's is typical:

Thus says the Lord God: "Because the Philistines dealt vengefully and took vengeance with a spiteful heart, to destroy because of the old hatred," therefore thus says the Lord God: "I will stretch out My hand against the Philistines, and I will cut off the Cherethites and destroy the remnant of the seacoast. I will execute great vengeance on them with furious rebukes; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I lay My vengeance upon them."

All of these prophecies were anciently fulfilled, but end-time fulfillments cannot be ruled out. Isaiah's prophecy hints that ultimately, God will deploy Israel to punish the Philistines. These prophecies highlight the Philistines' treachery in taking Israelites captive and selling them to Edom as slaves, as well as their long-held, smoldering, spiteful hatred that caused them to take vengeance on Israel for old defeats. From evidence like this, the speculation that the modern inhabitants of the Gaza Strip descend from the ancient Philistines takes on greater credence.

Joel also mentions a further reason: "Because you have taken My silver and My gold, and have carried into your temples My prized possessions" (Joel 3:5). Evidently, the Philistines' capture of the ark in the time of Eli (I Samuel 4:10-11; 5:1-7:1), as well as other plunderings of Israel and Judah, rankled God, and He is determined to repay them for their sacrilege.

While modern humanity has essentially forgotten the real people of Philistia, God certainly has not, and neither should His people. Far from being uncultured rabble, the Philistines were refugees of the great Minoan/Mycenaean civilization, prepared by God to be a thorn in Israel's side for many generations. In the historic conflicts between these two very different peoples, we can unearth many lessons that we can apply on our Christian walk to the Kingdom of God.

Endnotes

1 The Hebrew masculine suffix —*im*, along with its feminine counterpart, *-oth*, turn a root word into a plural. These names, then, identify peoples rather than individuals, although most of them probably contain the name of a forefather. For instance, *Ludim* probably means "the people of Lud," the nation history calls "Lydians."

2 *Abimelech* is not, as is often supposed, a proper name but a title. It means "my father is king," implying the right of the bearer to rule through dynastic succession, or "father-king," suggesting that the ruler is father to his people. The Abimelech in Isaac's story (Genesis 26); the would-be king Abimelech, son of Gideon (Judges 9); and the Abimelech before whom David feigned madness (see Psalm 34:1; called Achish in I Samuel 21:10-15) are all different men from Abraham's acquaintance.

3 The native Canaanites were a related people (see Genesis 10:6-20).

4 Several tribes composed the Sea Peoples: the Peleset, Tjekker, Shekelesh, Denyen, and Weshesh, among others. The Egyptians called the Peleset *prst* (in Egyptian hieroglyphs, *r* is often interchanged with *l*), which is very similar to their Hebrew name, *pelishtim*. The Tjekker settled in and around the northern Canaanite city of Dor, while the Denyen may have eventually settled in Cyprus. The Shekelesh and the Weshesh were probably absorbed into Egypt, although some scholars believe some of the Shekelesh found their way to Sicily.

5 Interestingly, Gaza's original name was Minoah, very similar to that of the ancient Aegean civilization.