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THE PHILISTINES AND THE EARLY KINGDOM OF ISRAEL

ROBERT W. BENTON

The early history of the nation Israel contains repeated reference to the group of people known as the Philistines. As the transition is made from the period of the judges to the inauguration of the new king, Saul, and the reigns of Saul and David that follow, the Philistines occupied an important place in that segment of history. The resultant situations and frameworks that Solomon would face received definite influence from this people situated on the coastal regions of Canaan.

The common enemies of Israel such as the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Edomites had certain relationships to the people of Israel through genetics and former encounters. As the Israelites invaded the land of Canaan, they were brought into contact with people that were alien to their culture and heritage--especially, the Philistines.

THE CONFRONTATION OF ISRAEL AND THE PHILISTINES

The Testing of Israel

Early in the book of Judges indication is given why the Philistines were such formidable enemies.

And the anger of Jehovah was kindled against Israel; and he said, Because this nation have transgressed my covenant which I commanded their fathers, and have not hearkened unto my voice; I also will not henceforth drive out any from before them of the nations that Joshua left when he died; that by them I may prove Israel, whether they will keep the way of Jehovah to walk therein, as their fathers did keep it, or not. So Jehovah left those nations, without driving them out hastily; neither delivered he them into the hand of Joshua.

Now these are the nations which Jehovah left, to prove Israel by them, even as many of Israel as had not known all the wars of Canaan; only that the generations of the children of Israel might know, to teach them war, at the

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least such as beforetime knew nothing thereof: namely, the five lords of the Philistines, and all Canaanites, and the Sidonians, and the Hivites that dwelt in mount Lebanon. . .(2:20-3:3, ASV).

Thus, the priority of the Philistines is to be noticed in the effort of God to strengthen the spiritual and moral fiber of a people that had grieved the heart of God with their rebellion. They became "the hereditary enemies of Israel."¹ They were "the most powerful of the resident people. . .they exerted a dominant influence in all Canaanite affairs through several centuries."² Amos 9:7 indicates that a sovereign God brought (causative stem in the Hebrew) the Philistines from Caphtor.

At two points, for example, is it seen how the influence of the Philistines proved or tested the Israelites. The tribe of Dan was apparently pushed from its location by the sea to a northeastern locality.³

In the oldest monument of Hebrew speech, the Song of Deborah, the tribe of Dan is referred to as a maritime people who "remained in ships" while their brethren bore the brunt of the invasion of Sisera. Towards the end of the book of Judges, we find that certain of the tribe of Dan are compelled to seek a home elsewhere, and choose the fertile, well-watered, but hot and fever-haunted Laish, a place remote from everywhere, and where the people were "quiet."⁴

Also, the religious system of Israel suffered a distinct blow at the hands of the Philistines. In I Samuel 5:1 the record declares the ark was captured and in control of the Philistines. Danish excavations of the city of Shiloh have given evidence that the Philistines probably destroyed the city after the capture of the ark and the death of Eli. "Most interesting is the fact that no remains have been discovered belonging to the period between the tenth and sixth centuries, when according to Biblical statements, Shiloh lay in ruins."⁵ The land and the religion of Israel became focal points of the Philistine encounter.

The Roles of Certain Leaders

Four national leaders served as instrumental figures in the deliverance from Philistine power. The parts that Samson, Samuel, and Saul played in the conflict with this people are to be clearly understood in the careful study of the historical record. Samson, according to Judges 13:5, was given the task of instigating the deliverance from the Philistines: "He shall begin to save Israel out of the hand of the Philistines." The Hebrew word for begin comes from a root word which in its major meaning signifies "to pollute, defile, profane," but in the Hiphil stem it is widely used to mean "begin."⁶ The word for save in this verse is also a Hiphil form. Thus, the importance of Samson is to be seen as a contributing factor in the conflict with the enemy. Often Samson was seen as a failure, but in the perfect plan of God he accomplished that which he was destined to do--he did begin to bring deliverance. Samuel, the vital link between the period of the judges and the monarchy, continued the offensive. In a courageous spiritual and military stand Samuel effected, by the gracious intervention of God, a significant victory over the Philistines (I Sam. 7:3-14). "Samuel, the last of the Judges, witnessed the

last of the oppressions, delivering Israel temporarily from the yoke of the Philistines. But it was an unfinished task which Samuel committed to the new leader."⁷ The new king was chosen and specifically given the task of completing the work of Samson and Samuel. Jehovah said: "He shall save my people out of the hand of the Philistines" (I Sam. 9:16). "Philistines, however, continued to hold fortresses in Israel throughout the reign of Saul."⁸ The tragic end of Saul, however, is seen in the completion of the narrative of I Samuel as falling at the hands of enemies whom he was supposed to defeat (I Sam. 28:19). The reign of Saul, at this particular point, was a complete failure as was the very life of the man whom the people wanted to be their king. It would fall upon David to complete what Saul should have done.

The specific purpose of the Philistines in relation to Israel and the key men of Israel who were to lead the people in attaining deliverance become basic features of the study of the Philistines.

THE ORIGIN AND BACKGROUND OF THE PHILISTINES

Relation with Crete and Asia Minor

The Biblical record indicates the Philistines came from a place called Caphtor (Jer. 47:4; Amos 9:7). Egyptian records apparently identify the name Caphtor with the island of Crete.⁹ Archaeological contributions would warrant, however, a broader background than only that of a Cretan nature.

As to their origin the Egyptian monuments again give valuable evidence. It is clear that they were not identical with the Cretans. The name for Cretans on the Egyptian monuments is Keftiu (perhaps the same as Caphtor in the Bible), and the Keftiu can now be identified from the Cretan and Egyptian wall-paintings and vases as unquestionably Minoans. But the dress and arms of the Peoples of the Sea are quite different. They are to be identified rather with the Lycians and Corians of south-west Asia Minor.¹⁰

Albright has suggested that Philistine vase decorations have a definite relation with the culture of Cyprus and Rhodes but not directly with that of Crete or Greece.¹¹

The Aegeans who eventually settled in Phoenicia brought with them their pottery-making techniques, . . . We thus find in Phoenicia alone, and for a short time in Philistia, a continuation of the Mycenaean ceramic industry under new conditions.¹²

In Rameses III's temple at Medinet Habu certain reliefs depict the Philistines "as a tall, Hellenic-looking people."¹³

There is general agreement that the Minoan culture suffered a great disruption around 1200 B.C., probably as the result of the Dorian Invasion of Greece.¹⁴ This would explain why

large numbers of the Philistines came into the plain of Philistia.¹⁵ The Septuagint inserted the word "Cappadocia" for the word "Caphtor."¹⁶ The evidence seems to indicate that the Philistines then had a definite relation not only to the isle of Crete but to the area of Asia Minor as well. "Possibly the Keftiu occupied not only the island of Crete but also surrounding islands and coastlands."¹⁷ The contribution of Archer needs to be considered:

Biblical references show that they were a heterogeneous people including several distinct groups such as the Kaphthorim, the Keftim, the Cherithites, and the Pelethites. The probabilities are that these various groups came in successive waves of migration from the island of Crete.¹⁸

Relation with Egypt

Knowledge concerning the Philistines in large measure is attributed to the Egyptian encounters with them. Apparently, the people who would be known as the Philistines were pushed from original homes, migrated to the south, but were halted by the power of the Egyptians. Various records confirm the conflicts of the Egyptians and the Philistines.

Archaeological evidence of the power of the Philistines is seen in the monuments of Rameses III, king of Egypt (1198 B.C. ff.), which depict his battles with the Philistines who tried to land in the Delta of Egypt. When repulsed from Egypt, the Philistines settled in Palestine.¹⁹

An inscription from Rameses III found at Medinet Habu describes a naval battle with the Philistines in 1195 B.C.²⁰

About the end of the century they landed in Egypt and fought several desperate battles by land and sea with the army of Pharaoh Rameses III. Although unable to defeat the Egyptians, they showed themselves such doughty fighters that the Pharaoh was only too glad to allow them to establish themselves on the southwestern coast of Palestine, . . . They may at first have served as mercenaries of Egypt, but, if so, they became independent with the decline of the Nineteenth Dynasty.²¹

Thus, a "sea people" with definite association with the Minoan culture settled in large numbers along the Mediterranean to build a strong alliance which would threaten the stability of the struggling Israelite nation.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THE STRENGTH OF THE PHILISTINES

The hardships and military experiences contributed greatly to instill determination and perseverance within a people in a new land. With these things as background, the Philistines built a new kingdom which was strengthened by important factors.

Political Organization

The city-state type of organization was molded into a larger unit by the federation of five major cities in the Philistine community. From this point the Bible speaks of the "five lords of the Philistines" (cf. Josh. 13:3; Judg. 3:3). "Conspicuous among their strongholds in Canaan were Gaza, Askelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron. Each of these centers represented a cultural development whose beginning can be assigned to approximately 1800 B.C."²² An obstacle to effective excavation of these cities is the fact of continual occupation of the sites in successive ages.²³ Recently, M. Dothan has conducted excavation at the site of ancient Ashdod. He states the establishment of that city "as a large walled city can be traced back to the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, about 1550 B.C."²⁴ The description of the site by Dothan is enlightening:

It lies 4km. inland from the coast, on the edge of the sand dunes which border the sea in this area, and comprises an acropolis of about 70 dunam (17 acres) and a lower city covering a much larger area. The summit of the mound is 52 m. above sea level and rises about 22 m. above the surrounding area.²⁵

A strong sense of unity appears from the Biblical records in regard to these Philistine cities. When the ark of Israel was captured, it was placed in the house of Dagon in Ashdod (I Sam. 5:1, 2). Following evil effects upon the idol and the people of Ashdod (I Sam. 5:3-7), the "lords of the Philistines" were called together for consultation (I Sam. 5:8). Perhaps, the political organization gave decided impetus to the desire of the Israelites for a king of their own.²⁶

These cities which must have been well-established and occupying strategic places were then knit together by a common government. "Their power and threat to Israel was due to a large extent to their political organization."²⁷

Geographical Location

"The political importance of these five cities was doubtless heightened by the strategic position at the entrance into Canaan."²⁸ The contributions of Denis Baly give some indication of the important positions of the cities of Philistia:

Askelon stands where a line of low cliffs creates a break in the sand dunes, . . . Ashdod (the modern 'Ishdud), holds a position where the three wadis from Libnah, Moreshah and Lachish gather behind the sand dunes before cutting through them together rather farther north. . . Ekron and Gath guard the landward frontier. Gath can be placed with some certainty at 'Iraq el-Manshivah at the point where the Quibeiba wadi leaves the Shephelah. It stands face to face with Moreshah and Lachish, and was the scene of constant fighting, being a frontier town from which attacks on the highlands of Judah were made. . . Ekron is mentioned several times as being one of the border towns.²⁹

Adams, writing concerning the Shephelah or the lowlands between Philistia and the highlands of Judah, underscores the important position enjoyed by the Philistines in occupying access routes into the heart of the nation of Israel.³⁰

The important trade routes also crossed the territory of Philistia. This gave distinct advantage "as regards contacts with the outside peoples, and mastery of all trade-routes through the plains."³¹ The access to the sea was a factor in terms of commerce and contact with other nations, though this can be over-evaluated in actual importance.³²

Economic Conditions

Closely related to the geographical location, the agricultural potential was extremely helpful to the economy of the Philistines. Albright comments: "They possessed the richest tract of land in Palestine."³³ Possibly their agricultural advancement is apparent in their religion. "The Ras Shamra tablets. . . mention Dagon, the grain-god, whose son was Baal."³⁴ This idol was apparently a chief one in the religion of the community. In the account of I Samuel 5 the ark is placed in the house of Dagon. Petrie discovered grain sickles in the area which would indicate agriculture did have a part in the economy.³⁵

Further evidence of the versatility of the Philistines is to be seen in their sea trade. It is clear from Egyptian records that some of the Philistine towns were engaged in a lively mercantile industry, exploiting the sea lanes between Egypt and Phoenicia.³⁶

In the documents discovered at Ugarit the importance of Ashdod in commercial relations with Ugarit in the textile industry has been established.³⁷ Pottery discoveries indicate that Ashdod also conducted considerable trade with the Mycenaean area and Cyprus.³⁸ Unger gives some information concerning the importance of the Philistine cities in the caravan trade:

The famous Philistine pentapolis was composed of (1) Gaza, strategically located a few miles from the Mediterranean and controlling the Maritime Plain and caravan routes to Egypt and Arabia. (2) Ekron. This was a very wealthy market in the valley of Sorek, close to Danite territory. (3) Ashdod was on the main road to Joppa and lay E. of Lydda. (4) Askelon was a strong fort on the coast, controlling principal caravan routes. (5) Gath was N. E. of Gaza and bordered on the Shephelah.³⁹

Adams gives a good conclusive statement concerning the advantage enjoyed by the Philistines in economic affairs:

Apart from the great triangular territory at the foothills of southern Galilee, there was no portion of Canaan which offered such promising acres as the Plain of Philistia, or which was characterized by such natural advantages. It was inevitable that the people who held this section securely would also exercise a dominant influence over their neighbors.⁴⁰

Military Advancements

The monopoly of iron.--The account of I Samuel indicates a distinct advantage held by the Philistines in the iron industry (13:19-22). Albright indicates the Philistines first used iron in the twelfth and eleventh centuries according to evidence found in the Tell-el-Far'ah tombs.⁴¹ The distinctive aspect of their control of the iron industry was their knowledge of the carbonization of the metal.⁴² "During their sojourn on the coasts of Asia Minor they seem to have learned from the Hittites the secret of making iron weapons."⁴³ Smelting furnaces have been discovered at a number of sites,⁴⁴ and Petrie has found at ancient Gerar evidence of weapon factories and pottery depicting iron-rimmed chariots.⁴⁵ "Philistine militarism, which was a continual threat to Israel, was explainable by their early control of the iron monopoly."⁴⁶

The superiority in weapons.--This great advantage stems from the control of the iron monopoly as well as technology gleaned from previous history.

Some 150 years separated their battles against Rameses and their warfare with Saul. In that time, the wandering Philistine tribes had become a settled people, dwelling in cities, and this change in the pattern of their lives also brought with it a change in their military organization. Their force was based on the chariot, . . . and on the infantry who were equipped with weapons of a high standard.⁴⁷

In I Samuel 13:5 the record is given of the amassed army of the Philistines:

And the Philistines assembled themselves together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude: and they came up, and encamped in Michmash, eastward of Bethaven.

This great company struck terror within the hearts of Saul and his army. Desertion and disobedience followed (cf. 13:7, 9).

The Philistine chariot, as depicted in the reliefs, is not very different from the chariots of the Asian countries or Egypt. It is harnessed to two horses and has two six-spoke wheels. But the interesting feature is that it has a crew of three, like the chariot crews of the Hittites and their allies in the Battle of Kadesh. And, like the Hittites, the Philistine charioteers are armed with the spear and not the bow, even though the bow is part of the chariot equipment.⁴⁸

The members of the chariot crews were armed with two long spears which were used in "hand-to-hand fighting after the enemy had been stunned by the charge."⁴⁹

The infantry was a major part of the fighting force. These men were highly armed and protected with superior armor. Their weapons were "a round shield, two spears, and a straight sword."⁵⁰ The bow was not common equipment. "For medium ranges they used some-

thing like a hurling javelin."⁵¹

The Philistine warrior was protected, in addition to helmet and shield, by a special coat of armor which covered the upper part of his body. . . . It consists of numerous strips laid at an angle to each other, with the angle sometimes at the bottom, like the letter V, and sometimes at the top, like an inverted V, according to tribe. One cannot tell whether the strips were of metal or of leather.⁵²

The appearance of the Philistine warrior has been preserved by the "Egyptian representations found at Medinet Habu and from the man-shaped clay coffins discovered at Bethsan."⁵³

Just before the Philistines invaded Palestine the Canaanites had begun to adopt the Egyptian practice of burying the dead in anthropoid clay coffins, on the upper part of which were moulded human features and occasionally some other details.⁵⁴

A distinctive feature of the warrior was the feather-topped helmet according to the evidence discovered.

The familiar story of the conflict of David and Goliath (I Samuel 17) has held the imagination of the masses for generations. An interesting feature found by archaeology is information concerning the size of his spear which the scripture indicates to be "like a weaver's beam" (17:7). In Yadin's fascinating work, The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands, pictures reveal the size of the weaver's beam (pp. 354-55).

What was meant by "weaver's beam" is the leash rod of a loom. This is a block of wood which separates the threads of the warp to offer passage for the threads of the weft. Its characteristic feature was the loops or leashes of cord tied to it.⁵⁵

Familiarity with the techniques of war. --It was an experienced force that challenged the Israelites. The illustration of David and Goliath mentioned above has its background in military devices of other people.

Then in the manner of the Homeric Greeks. . .the Philistines issued a challenge to single combat between the champions of the warring sides. Such single combat usually preceded and sometimes even decided the battle.⁵⁶

"Goliath's javelin, bronze helmet, coat of mail, and bronze greaves to protect the legs, were typical of the Aegean warriors."⁵⁷ The hurling javelin, a distinctive of the Philistines, was typically Aegean with "a loop and a cord wound round the shaft so that the weapon could be hurled a greater distance with greater stability by virtue of the resultant spin."⁵⁸ A corner of a fortress was uncovered by the work of Dothan in Ashdod bearing witness to the sense of preparedness of the Philistines.⁵⁹

In the final encounter of the Philistines with Saul, the king of Israel and his sons were slain.

Their bodies were impaled on the walls of Bethshan, a barbarous custom widely practiced by the Assyrians, as is shown by the reliefs on the palace gate of Shalmaneser III, found at Balawat, depicting what this monarch did to the conquered inhabitants of the city of Kulisi in the Upper Tigris in 852 B.C.⁶⁰

In every detail, the Philistines tempered through past encounters and adept in the techniques of warfare, proved to be a serious threat to the kingdoms of Saul and David.

CONCLUSION

The Philistine federation proved superior to the forces of Saul. The deciding factor, though, was the weakness of Saul spiritually. There is full reason to believe that if Saul had been obedient to the Lord deliverance would have been given to the Israelites though the enemy was strong. The efforts of David were significant, but it seems even then the Philistines were not fully subjugated though defeated by the efforts of David's armies. They did not trouble the united monarchy after the advances made by David, but following the division of the kingdom their influence was again felt. With disobedience and rebellion, the Philistines were either brought on the scene or no success could be had in removing them from the scene. In time these staunch enemies of Israel passed from the place of strength and importance, but while in their place of prominence they were truly an effective force for testing the Israelites.

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