

“The Philistines” for Biblical Illustrator (Lifeway Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention), 2009.

To refer to another person as a “Philistine” isn’t nice. A modern-day “Philistine” refers to someone narrow in his/her views, one lacking culture and aesthetic values. The term derives from the Philistines of the Old Testament world. Is this a fair assessment of the Philistines?¹ Where did the Philistines interact with the Israelites? From where did they originate? Why were they such a threat to the Israelites? What ultimately happened to this once powerful civilization?

From the time of the Judges to the time of King David the Philistines played an integral part in the history of Israel. Shamgar, Samson, Samuel, Saul, and David had to contend with them. Shamgar defeated six hundred Philistines with an ox goad (Judges 3:31). Samson sparred with them on more than one occasion. The Philistines entrapped the strong-man, blinded him, and forced him to work like an animal in a prison (Judges 13-16). Samuel led the Israelite army against the Philistines only to be defeated even losing the beloved Ark of the Covenant (1 Sam. 4). David became the pride and joy of the Israelite army after decapitating the Philistine giant Goliath (1 Sam. 17). Saul fought the Philistines in a famous battle on Mount Gilboa. Saul took his own life rather than surrender to them (1 Sam. 31). The Philistine threat forced the tribe of Dan out of their originally assigned territory to other land (Judges 31:1; 14:4; 15:11; 18:29).

History does not reveal the origins of the Philistines with any clarity. Marauders came by both land and sea to the Middle East. The ancients referred to these raiders as the “Sea People.” Apparently originating from the Aegean,² scholars believe that the Philistines comprised one of these groups of intruders.³ Apparently their movements came in waves rather than a single migration. Genesis 10:13-14 records the earliest Biblical reference to the Philistines where we find one wave of them settling in Egypt. Another wave settled in the southwest corner of Canaan before Abraham’s time (Gen. 21:32, 34).⁴ Egyptian records of the twelfth century BC mentions another wave. After being repulsed by the Egyptians this wave settled in Canaan.⁵ During the Exodus the Philistines were already entrenched along the coastal strip between Egypt and Gaza.⁶ This explains God’s instructions for the Israelites to detour inland in order to avoid the “way of the land of the Philistines” (Ex. 13:17). While Jeremiah 47:4 and Amos 9:7 trace the Philistines to “Caphtor,” i.e. Crete, it does not appear that the Philistines originated in Crete. Crete and other islands (Cyprus) and places (Greece) appear to have been the bridges for the Philistines between the Aegean basin and Canaan (and Egypt).

While history does not reveal the exact origins of the Philistines the Bible clearly reveals the threat of the Philistines to Israel. Located on the western flank of Israel the Philistines threatened Israel’s very existence. After the Israelite conquest almost immediately the Philistines began to move eastward. This eastward thrust set up inevitable clashes with the Israelites. The Philistines were so powerful that no one tribe of Israel was strong enough to defeat them. This Philistine threat led some of the Israelites to the conclusion that a king would be their only hope of survival. Thus the request for a king (1 Sam. 4-8, especially 8:4-5) emerged because of the Philistine crisis.

History, archaeology,⁷ and the Bible reveal much about the Philistines and their methods in war. The Philistine army consisted of highly trained,⁸ one might conclude, professional soldiers.⁹ The Israelites were little more than farmers and shepherds.¹⁰ The well-organized army of the Philistines stood in stark contrast to

the loosely-knitted Israelite tribal system. The Philistines possessed both a skill and a monopoly in the processing of metals (metallurgy). First Samuel 13 records that during the Philistine domination not a “blacksmith could be found in the whole land of Israel, because the Philistines had said, ‘Otherwise the Hebrews will make swords or spears’” (verse 19). The extent of this monopoly can be seen in that the Israelites had to take their plows and axes to the Philistines in order to have them sharpened (1 Sam. 13:20). We learn of one particular battle between the Philistines and the Israelites where no one except King Saul and his son Jonathan possessed either a metal sword or shield (1 Sam. 13:22). This iron monopoly may explain why Shamgar fought the Philistines with an ox goad (Judges 3:31) and Samson with the jawbone of a donkey (Judges 15:15).

The sight of the Philistine army frightened the Israelites. A portion of the Philistines army fought in chariots drawn by two horses with a driver and two warriors.¹¹ The infantry fought in formations of four men armed with a long straight swords and spears. All four soldiers were equipped with round shields.¹² Philistine archers used powerful bows with metal arrows rather than stone or wood.

1 Samuel 17 provides an excellent description of the battle-ready Philistine soldier.¹³ Goliath wore a bronze helmet, a coat of mail, and leg protectors.¹⁴ Goliath’s spear was large and heavy. The shaft of the spear being compared to a “weaver’s beam” (verse 7) has been suggested as a reference to a “loop javelin.”¹⁵ Goliath could insert his fingers into the woven loop and could throw the spear a greater distance. The implement as recorded in verse six is difficult to identify. Some translations (NIV, NAS) identify it as a “javelin.” The Holman Christian Standard Bible identifies it as a “sword.” Some speculate it as a scimitar.¹⁶ A scimitar was a sword with a short, curved, one-edged blade. The first weapon (a “dagger” in the HCSB) mentioned in 1 Samuel 17:45 was the double edged pointed sword used for thrusting. The “sword” (HCSB) may have been a scimitar. Scimitars were used for slashing. The Philistines were well-acquainted with the psychological side of warfare. Philistine warriors wore a plumed or feathered headdress which added height to their physical appearance. All of these put the Israelites at a distinct disadvantage. The professional soldier of the Philistine army, armed with the latest military implements of the day, was no match for the poorly armed and poorly trained Israelites.

The effectiveness of the Philistine military coerced the Israelites to a guerrilla type of warfare (ck. 2 Sam. 5:23). The Philistine army was large (ck. 1 Sam. 13:5). By comparison, David kept his army small. The Philistine army used heavy armor. Without heavy armor the Israelites moved quickly in a “slash and dash” strategy. The Philistines preferred fighting in the plains where their chariots were most effective. The Israelites preferred to fight in the hills rendering the chariot useless.¹⁷

It took the extraordinary military skills of King David to defeat the Philistines (2 Sam. 5:17-25). After David’s victory Philistine history became that of individual cities rather than that of a people working in concert. Where did David develop such unusual military skill? Maybe from the Philistines themselves! Fleeing from Saul’s attempts on his life David spend fourteen months living with the Philistines (1 Sam. 27:7). Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar ravaged the Philistines in 604 B.C. and destroyed any hope for revitalization of a once mighty people.

From the time of the Greek historian Herodotus (mid-fifth century BC) the term “Palestine” designated the western tip of the Fertile Crescent, including land that is modern-day Israel. It is ironic that the designation “Palestine” derives from Greek and Latin names given to the descendants of the Philistines.

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- ¹ Modern evidence reveals that the Philistines lack neither culture nor refinement.
- ² Gerald L. Mattingly, "Philistines," *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary* (New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 846.
- ³ Edward E. Hindson, *The Philistines and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1971), 15.
- ⁴ One of the five major Philistines cites was Gaza, giving this area the modern name "Gaza Strip."
- ⁵ Neal Bierling, *Giving Goliath His Due: New Archaeological Light on the Philistines* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992), 51.
- ⁶ T. C. Mitchell, "Philistines," *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd Ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 921.
- ⁷ At one time little archaeological evidence existed regarding the Philistines. This has now changed. Cf. W. S. Lasor, "Philistines," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 844.
- ⁸ LaMoine DeVries, "Philistines," *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 1108.
- ⁹ Richard A. Gabriel, *The Military History of Ancient Israel* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 25.
- ¹⁰ V. Gilbert Beers, *The Victor Handbook of Bible Knowledge* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1981), 138.
- ¹¹ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 844.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Cf. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd Ed. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1981), 185: "Goliath's armor (1 Sam. 17:5-7) was probably unusual only for its bulk." As for Goliath's sword, David said, "there's none like it" (1 Sam. 21:9).
- ¹⁴ Cf. Hindson, 154, for: Goliath looked like "a typical Aegean warrior."
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Bierling, 148. In addition to "javelin," Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Lafayette, Indiana: Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc., 1981), 475, offers "dart."
- ¹⁷ Beers, 139.