

THE SEA PEOPLES AND THE ISRAELITES:
A STUDY OF THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE PHILISTINES

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By Phillip A. Gray

Who were the Philistines? Whence did they come? When did they arrive on the Levantine coast? One of the perennial problems in Biblical and Archaeological studies has been to identify with exactitude the provenance of the Sea Peoples as mentioned in certain Egyptian inscriptions of from the 14th to the 12th centuries and the relation of these peoples, if any, to the “Philistines” of the Old Testament. Fortunately, over the last century of archaeology, much has been learned about the Philistines of great value for shedding light on these problems. Yet, several perplexing questions remain unanswered.

The purpose of this inquiry is to set forth a generic summary of the current issues impinging on Philistine research, and to make tentative suggestions for the solutions to certain problems. It will begin with definitions for the important ethnographic terms involved, and then move to a preliminary consideration of the ultimate origins of the Philistines along with the possible time(s) of their arrival on the southwestern shores of Canaan. Extra-biblical references to the Philistines in particular, and the “Sea Peoples” in general, will be gleaned for their possible relevance to the solution of the problem areas. A terse summary will also be given of the Biblical passages about these peoples that have special interest for the archaeologist.

From these more or less “preliminary” findings, the research will turn more specifically to the major issues in archaeological research, including (but not limited to) possible archaeological “confirmations” of the historical records about the Philistines. This brief work will then end with a précis of the importance of the Philistines for Biblical studies as a whole.

DEFINITIONS

Who were the “Sea Peoples?” The term was apparently first used in history by Rameses III. Hoerth holds that “the Egyptians gave these people the name ‘Sea Peoples’”¹ This umbrella appellation covered a number of specific tribal or ethnic groups, including one known (in Egypt) as *prst*.² The identification of this people with the tribes later known in Hebrew as *pelisti* “is possible,” and appears to correspond to the Assyrians’ usage of *palastu* in cuneiform inscriptions.³ It is sometimes suggested⁴ that the name can be traced back to the *Pelasgians*, who in the *Odyssey* (XIX.175-77) were associated with Crete, and “who have been seen by many as related to the origin of the Philistines.”⁵

Greenfield argues that, “there is no acceptable Semitic etymology for this name, and it is quite probably of Indo-European origin.”⁶ The older but respected work by Macalister maintains that the name “Philistine” must have been given by these people themselves (and not from a Semitic root, as some have speculated), since we have three independent attestations of the name, from the Hebrews, from Rameses III, and from the record keepers of Assyria.⁷

Yet, there are contrary views. Drews, for instance, argues in one place (along with Lemche) that *pelisti* was a name adopted by certain “Canaanites” who had simply

¹ Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology & the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 233.

² In *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962 ed., s.v. “Philistines,” by J. C. Greenfield.

³ In *The New Bible Dictionary*, 1962, ed. s.v. “Philistines, Philistia,” by T. C. Mitchell.

⁴ For example, Finkelstein, while not necessarily endorsing the idea.

⁵ Israel Finkelstein, “The Philistines in the Bible: A Late-Monarchic Perspective,” in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (Dec 2002):150.

⁶ In *IDB*, s.v. “Philistines,” by Greenfield.

⁷ R. A. Stewart Macalister, *The Philistines: Their History and Civilization* (Chicago: Argonaut, Inc., 1965), 2.

grown disenchanted with the latter description (applied to them by others) after the loss of Egyptian hegemony in the region.¹ In the same paper, however, Drews draws the conclusion elsewhere that the word's rendition in the Greek version, *allophyloi* ('people of other stock'), points to the term's being originally Semitic, and with a similar meaning.²

Another older source asserts (re: *pelesheth*), "the word means 'migrants,' and they came from another country."³ However, no documentation is given for this particular identification.

The preponderance of the evidence suggests that indeed the *pelisti* constituted one subgroup of the larger "Sea Peoples" who seemed to have hailed from the Aegean in the LBA and to have wreaked havoc in Egypt, the coast of Canaan, and even in Anatolia. Eventually, "Philistine" became a kind of catch phrase loosely used for all the others.⁴

The territory they came to populate would be called "the land of the Philistines" (*eres pelistim*) or "Philistia" (*peleset*). "It is from these that the modern name 'Palestine'

¹ Robert Drews, "Canaanites and Philistines," in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (Dec 1998): 54.

² Ibid., 51. But, we must ask, which is it? If we are to believe that the local inhabitants had come to disdain the earlier "Canaanite" as an ethnographic reference and thus to reject it for themselves, why would they have then settled for an equally—if not more—loathsome term conveying the concept of "an outsider?" Drews' argument seems confused on the etymology of *pelesti*.

Moreover, Drews avers that on the reliefs at Medinet Habu, *pelisti* was just the Semitic name for the people of the Levantine coast who allegedly had launched their attack on Egypt from that location, their original homeland being in Canaan itself. Thus, he deduces, the *pelisti* were not among the warriors of the Aegean called collectively "Sea peoples," (ibid., 53-54).

But, we wonder, why the convoluted argument to avoid the obvious? There is no compelling reason here to multiply explanations beyond necessity, as will be seen under subsequent discussions of the material record of the Philistines.

³ In *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Philistines," by C. R. Condor.

⁴ Edward E. Hindson, *The Philistines and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 67. Contrary to this common position, however, (concerning the Sikila and the Sherdani especially), Finkelstein says that "the Deuteronomistic Historian (and for that matter, the authors of Genesis) was not familiar at all with these two groups" (in Finkelstein, "The Philistines in the Bible," 132). This is but an argument from silence. But, from this weak vantage Finkelstein will go on to argue that "the Philistines of Deuteronomistic History must reflect therefore later Philistine history" (ibid., 133). Apparently, *pelisti* was comprehensive enough for the Biblical writers to embrace each of the other groups which ended up in the Levant after a succession of invasions of Aegean migrant warriors.

derives.”¹ Yet, it remains to be seen at what period that geographic description would be historically correct for the region.²

ORIGIN OF THE PHILISTINES

This question is still controversial. In fact, “one of those aspects that has been vigorously debated was the origins of the Philistines.”³ And in the early 20th century, Macalister had recognized that there were some conflicting theories about the Philistines’ origins.⁴

Semitic Origins. Macalister mentioned how some suggest that the Philistines were Semitic. But, he responded that, since they were uncircumcised, they were probably not Semitic.⁵ On the other hand, Condor countered this argument with, “the fact that the Philis [*sic*] were uncircumcised does not prove that they were not a Sem [*sic*] people.”⁶ Despite Condor’s systematic effort to prove this thesis, the scholarly consensus is not in its favor.⁷

¹ In *NBD*, s.v. “Philistines, Philistia,” by Mitchell.

² Related terms include the “Cherethites” and “Pelethites.” “The expression ‘Cherethites and Pelethites’—found, for example, in 2 Samuel 15:18—would seem to refer to Cretans and Philistines,” writes Amihai Mazar in, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000—586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 306. Macalister mentions that the LXX renders “Cherethites” in Ezekiel 25:16 and Zephaniah 2:5 as Κρητες, “Cretans,” (in Macalister, *The Philistines*, 6). He adds that they are alluded to as part of the palace guards of early Heb kings (ibid). The term is often coupled with “Pelethites.” “This is probably merely a modification of פלתי the ordinary word for ‘Philistine’...” (ibid). Macalister, 5, “Cherethites” is also applied to the Philistines or to “a branch of them” (ibid., 5, cf. 1 Sam. 30:14; Eze. 25:16; Zeph. 2:5-6).

³ Peter Warnock, Book Review of “People of the Sea: The Search for the Philistines,” in *Biblical Archaeologist* (Mar 1995):58.

⁴ Macalister, 12-13.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ In *ISBE*, s.v. “Philistines,” by Condor. Condor contends that the Philistines were a Semitic people “who had already migrated to Philistia by the time of Abraham” (ibid.).

⁷ For Condor, the Aegean origin for the Philistines was problematic. Evidently in a desire to protect the integrity of the Biblical record, he felt compelled to adopt a view that runs counter to the prevailing theories of the day. After presenting a long list of “evidences” of Semitic characteristics associated with the places where the Philistines lived, Condor concludes triumphally, “When therefore scholars speak of the Philis [*sic*] as being non-Sem [*sic*]—and probably Aryan—invaders of the country, arriving about 1200 BC, they appear not only to contradict the Bible, but also to contradict the monumental evidence of the earlier existence of Sem [*sic*] Dagon-worshippers at Ashkelon” (ibid.).

Aegean Origins. It is generally conceded that the Philistines came from the Aegean area. In fact, Scripture affirms clearly that these people came from Caphtor (cf. Gen. 10:14; 1 Chron. 1:11-12; Deut. 2:23; Jer. 47:4; Amos 9:7). Greenfield says glibly that Caphtor is “the Hebrew name for Crete.”¹ Mazar more modestly maintains that the term is “probably referring to Crete.”² And Macalister concurs that it is probably Crete.³ So, there is some uncertainty, but a fairly strong consensus that Caphtor is Crete.⁴

K. A. Kitchen concludes that, “Caphtor is ancient Kaptara, well attested from the early second millennium, when the Mari archives actually mention a King of Hazor sending gifts to Kaptara (Caphtor).”⁵ Even while taking a contrarian position, Drews does review the evidence in support of Crete (as the Hebrew “Caphtor”) and the Egyptian *Kftw* in New Kingdom inscriptions. In fact, he cites an inscription from Amenhotep III

The issue of their religion will be tackled later in the present paper. But, here it is worth saying that Condor seems to have exacerbated the issue by suggesting that the Philistines were Semites. First, the Philistines were not the only inhabitants of the cities where they operated—maybe not even the majority. Second, they seemingly assimilated and adopted many Semitic names and customs soon after their arrival. Third, if the concern is not to contradict the Bible, Condor makes it worse, since the Bible does not represent them as Semitic either! They were descendents of Ham. A reasonable inference is that from Ham, Mizraim, and then Casluhim, a group may have migrated from Egypt into Crete to form the basic ethnic/culture group later known as Caphtorim or Philistines (cf. Gen. 10:14). No doubt, though originally Hamitic, there had been much racial and cultural cross pollination so that, while not necessarily Aryans (though some of the Sea Peoples might have been), the subgroup known as Philistines were ethnically Hamitic, even if not full-blooded.

¹ In *IDB*, s.v. “Philistines,” by Greenfield.

² Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 306.

³ Macalister, 10.

⁴ A note for Zephaniah 2:5 in the *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* adds, “There is evidence of ancient connection between Crete and Philistia (here and in Eze 25:16; the Septuagint render Kerethites ‘Cretans,’ indicating the belief that the Kerethites came from Crete), and the Philistines are called Kerethites. It is possible that Caphtor includes along with Crete the other islands in the vicinity, among them Caria and Lycia,” in *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, s.v. “Zephaniah, n. 2:5,” 1516. Hindson adds, “Most historians agree that they came from the eastern Mediterranean area but their original homeland and migration route are uncertain,” (in Hindson, *The Philistines and the Old Testament*, 14-15).

⁵ K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 340.

that lists three apparently Cretan cities, Knossos, Amnissos and Kydonia under the heading of *Kftw*.¹

But, is this not a Bible difficulty? The Philistines are often described as of Indo-European descent (or sometimes even “Aryan”). Hindson reminds us that Albright thought they were a pre-Greek people of the Pelasgians who had left Crete. Yet, neither Crete nor Cyprus was their first home.² Elsewhere, they are included genealogically as hailing from Ham.

May we not infer that originally, ethnically speaking, the Caphtorim were Hamitic, but that close associations with the Japhethite descendents of the Aegean had noticeably influenced their material culture and language?³ Also, one could suppose that there was much early racial mixing.⁴ There does not appear to be an insurmountable discrepancy, then, between the Philistines’ being both descendents of Ham and of an Aegean background.⁵

¹ Drews, “Canaanites and Philistines,” 40. However, Drews is highly condescending in arguing that the association of Philistines with Caphtor was only legendary (and that the Hebrews living in the interior would probably have never even seen the sea, much less had any real knowledge of the location of Crete). For them, it was just a way of saying “far away.” So, while Caphtorite origins happen to have archaeological confirmation, the Hebrews could not have really known that. Apparently, it was one lucky guess! At best, the Aegean provenance describes the real experiences of only a small minority, while the preponderance of those who lived in Philistia were local Canaanites who had simply adopted the name “Philistine” and the inherited traditions of the few.

² Hindson, 38.

³ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 211. Archer explains the reference in Genesis 10 thus: “It must be borne in mind, however, that language is not necessarily decisive for ethnic relationship, for Germanic Visigoths ended up speaking Spanish in Spain, the Ostrogoths Italian in Italy, the Germanic Franks adopted French in France...Correspondingly the Hamitic tribes which conquered Palestine in the third millennium B.C. may have succumbed to the influence of Semitic-speaking neighbors, regardless of what their original tongue may have been.”

⁴ Macalister, on the early inhabitants of Crete, says “there was some connexion between Crete and Egypt in the stone-age beginnings,” in Macalister, 16.

⁵ Another possibility is that, ethnically, they were Aegean, but had transmigrated through Egypt at some point in time, resulting in their being acculturated to the Mizraim peoples, and in that sense are “sons of Mizraim.” After observing that the Bible directly traces their origin from the isle of Caphtor, Callaway calls attention to how the Table of the Nations, “...has the ‘Pathrusim, and Casluhim (out of whom came the Philistines) and Caphtorim’ originating in Egypt. There is substance in both traditions, because Dothan points out that one of the Sea Peoples, the Sherden, is mentioned as a mercenary force in the army of

Thus, the Philistines were a Hamitic people who had come from Crete to the shores of the Levant among the successive waves of migrations of the Sea Peoples of the latter part of Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. Among the various groups of Sea Peoples were, *inter alia*, the Luka, Sherden, Danuna, Adawash, Tursha, Shekelesh, Weshes, Pelest, and the Tjekker.¹ We know that the Tjekker were among the subunits who actually came into Canaan, as they are mentioned as occupying Dor in the Wen-Amon story. Dor is even called “a town of the Tjeker, and Beder, its prince.”²

Such tribes as the Shekelsh, Denyen, Sherden and Weshwesh had been uprooted from their patrimonies in the great population upheavals and migrations of the last part of the second millennium in the Eastern Mediterranean and South Eastern Europe.³ By at least the time of the 14th to 13th centuries B.C., they had absorbed the major features of the Minoan-Mycenaean Aegean culture.⁴ These invaders posed a serious threat to Egypt and the Levant, and even to Ugarit and to the Hittite cities near the close of the second century.

A Chronology. But, when exactly did they arrive? The common wisdom is that the Philistines were one subunit of the “Sea Peoples” who came to Canaan as a part of the “second wave” of invasions.⁵ A note in *ANE* answers, “In Ramses III’s eighth year (about 1188 B.C.) the pharaoh met and checked their attempt to push into the rich lands of the Nile.”⁶ Another source suggests that, “the tribes arrived at the border of Egypt

Rameses II (ca. 1304-1237 B.C.)...”, in Joseph A. Callaway, Book Review of “*The Philistines and Their Material Culture*, by Trude Dothan,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (Dec 1984): 625-626.

¹ Hindson, 15.

² James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1958), 17.

³ In *IDB*, s.v. “Philistines,” by Greenfield.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East*, 185.

around 1177 B.C. but were repulsed by Rameses III.”¹ Hoerth holds that “a large settlement of Philistines arrived in Palestine about the time of Deborah....”²

The time frame poses another Bible difficulty. If one adopts the early date for the exodus³ and defends the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the question would be how the Philistines were already there. “When the Israelites left Egypt the Philistines were extensively settled along the coastal strip between Egypt and Gaza, and they were obliged to detour inland to avoid ‘the way of the land of the Philistines’ (Ex. xiii.17).”⁴ Moreover, Deuteronomy 2:23 says that the Caphtorim “who came from Caphtor” destroyed the Avvim, “who lived in villages as far as Gaza,” and “settled in their place even to this day.”⁵

Two explanations may be offered. One is that such Pentateuchal references to the Philistines are, at worst, careless anachronisms or, at best, scribal glosses to update the place names or ethnographic designations. The other is that indeed “Philistines” or “Philistine-type peoples” were already present in Canaan at the time of the exodus, or (with more difficulty) had even been present in the days of the Patriarchs.⁶

Territory and Settlement. The Philistines settled mainly on the coastal plain in southwestern Canaan.⁷ By the time of Joshua’s old age, they were ensconced in the five

¹ *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, s.v. “The Archaeology of Philistia,” 370.

² Hoerth, *Archaeology & the Old Testament*, 233.

³ c.1447 B.C., according to Hoerth, 58.

⁴ In *NBD*, s.v. “Philistines, Philistia,” by Mitchell.

⁵ *Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible*, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

⁶ More will be said later about this problem of an apparent anachronism.

⁷ For a lively debate about the manner of the Philistine occupation, see the exchange between Bryant Wood and Itamar Singer in *BAR*. Wood challenges the traditional notion that the defeated Philistines were placed by the Egyptians in Palestine as garrison troops, while Singer rebuts Wood’s view that they came in as a conquering army. See Bryant Wood, “The Philistines Enter Canaan: Were They Egyptian Lackeys or Invading Conquerors?” in *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Nov/Dec: 1991): 44-52, 89-92. See Itamar Singer, “How Did the Philistines Enter Canaan?” in *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Nov/Dec 1992): 44-46.

cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gath (Joshua 13:2-3).¹ Their territory lay in an important trade route.²

While we do not know with certainty the precise manner of their migration and settlement, “the process probably did not involve the obliteration of the local Canaanite population, but rather the replacement of Egyptian overlordship with that of Philistines throughout these regions.”³ It is important to notice how Mazar summarizes their occupation, not as supplanting the original population, but as a limited number of military and civil aristocrats who subjugated that population. From such “bilateral relations” arose an “eclectic culture archaeologically expressed by phenomena such as the Philistine bichrome pottery.”⁴

EXTRA-BIBLICAL REFERENCES TO THE PHILISTINES

Egyptian references. Mention has been made already of the Wen-Amon story (c. 1100 B.C.) and its’ describing Dor as a town of the Tjekker.⁵ The Philistines are “first mentioned by name (*prst*) in the annals of Rameses III for his 5th (1195 BC) and subsequent years, inscribed in his temple to Ammon at Medinet Habu near Thebes.”⁶ This inscription boasts of his repelling the Libyans and others called “Sea Peoples.”⁷ The *prst* were included in their numbers.⁸

¹ In *NBD*, s.v. “Philistines, Philistia,” by Mitchell. Incidentally, this source also says, “the five Philistine cities have not all been identified with certainty owing to continued occupation of many of the sites in the area....”

² Hindson, 22.

³ Mazar, 313.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 327-328.

⁵ Pritchard, 16. He adds that it represents “the situation in Hither Asia about 1100 B.C.”

⁶ In *NBD*, s.v. “Philistines, Philistia,” by Mitchell. However, other sources mention this as his 8th regnal year (c. 1180 or 1177), as Kitchen, 339, and also *ANE*, in Pritchard, 185.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

But, the “Sea Peoples” in general had already been mentioned in inscriptions from Merneptah, Rameses II, and even in the 14th century Amarna correspondence (Lukku, Serdanu, Danuna).¹ Macalister has published a list of fourteen different groups from among these peoples, whose names are collected from the documents of Tell Amarna (c. 1400 B.C.), Ramessu II (c. 1333 B.C.), and Ramessu III (c. 1198 B.C.).²

A Cretan reference? A pictographic sign on a clay disk from Phaistos in Crete depicts a man wearing a feathered head dress (like the ones on the walls at Medinet Habu representing the Sea Peoples). This is usually dated to the 17th century, but Schwartz had attempted to drive down the date to the late 15th century and argue that the place name *pi-ri-ta*, “Philistia,” appears on it.³ (But, the writer of this research wonders if this identification is not overly confident.)

Mesopotamian/Aramaen references. The Assyrian kings refer to the Philistines.⁴ The first known record of the Philistines in Assyria is from Adad-nirari III (810-782). They are mentioned as paying tribute alongside Israel and other nations nearby.⁵ In Letters between the rulers of Alashiya (Cyprus) and Ugarit, one of the two invasions by the Sea Peoples is mentioned.⁶ The existence of the Sea Peoples and the Philistines is well attested in outside sources.

BIBLICAL REFERENCES OF INTEREST TO ARCHAEOLOGY

Genesis. The patriarchal narratives are problematic with respect to the existence of Philistines so early in the land of Canaan. Abraham sojourned in Gerar and had

¹ Ibid.

² Macalister, 24.

³ In *NBD*, s.v. “Philistines, Philistia,” by Mitchell.

⁴ Macalister, 20.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Trude Dothan, *The Philistines and their Material Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 293.

dealings with Abimelech, king of Gerar, and Phicol, the commander of his army (Gen. 20:1-18; 21:32-34).¹ Later, Isaac also had dealings with an “Abimelech” and a “Phicol” (if not the very same, Gen. 26:1-33). In Genesis 26:1, the ruler is called “Abimelech king of the Philistines.” As noticed, Exodus 13:17 speaks of the “land of the Philistines” and Exodus 23:31 the “sea of the Philistines.” While these references could be understood as possibly standardized ways introduced as later emendations for referring to, respectively, the coastal route (heavily guarded by Egyptian garrisons) and the Mediterranean, the Patriarchal narratives clearly convey the idea that Philistines were present in early second century Canaan.²

Joshua. The only reference is in 13:2-3. The Philistines are not portrayed as very active during the time of the conquest. Hindson notices how the construction in Joshua 2:3 indicates that the five cities of the Philistines were still considered Canaanite at that time.³

Judges. This is the period of heightened Philistine activity and many conflicts with the sons of Israel. Shamgar stands out as a notable warrior/judge who resisted the early Philistine onslaughts (Judges 3:31; 5:6).⁴ Sisera, commander of King Jabin’s army, was from Harosheth-hagoyim (Judges 4:2). He may have been a descendent of the Sea

¹ Proposals among Evangelicals for the time of Abraham’s birth range from 2166 to 1952 B.C., in Hoerth, 57, 3.1. So, these would be Philistines antedating the Sea Peoples (including *prst*) who swept over the Eastern Mediterranean in the early Iron Age by at least eight centuries!

² More will be said about this under the subheading of alleged anachronisms.

³ Hindson, 105. His point is that, while at least proto-Philistines may have been present, at this time they were still under Canaanite control, unlike the period of the Judges later on.

⁴ Hindson wonders who exactly was Shamgar? He even proposes that he might have been an ally of Ramses against the Sea Peoples, in Hindson, 108-108. Macalister also takes up this question in Macalister, 41.

Peoples.¹ There is even evidence that, in Samuel/Saul's time, the Philistines were allied with the Ammonites to destroy Israel.²

Monarchial Period. Hindson thinks it odd that Israel wanted a King to defeat the Philistines who had no king (only rulers called *serens* in their several cities).³ But, of course, they felt that such consolidation of power was necessary for the present danger.

For the episode with David and Goliath, it has been thought that this Battle of Champions resembles Aegean analogues.⁴ Minimalists might scoff at such connection, as Finklestein, who argues, "Homeric influence on the biblical text is highly unlikely before the very late eight century. It makes perfect sense against the background of a seventh-century (or later) reality..."⁵ But this is the fallacy of *petitio principii*, since it also makes sense in a 10th century setting, if the Biblical narrative is right about an ultimately Aegean origin for these peoples!

Finklestein alleges that the account of the Cherethites and Perethites as mercenaries in David's army (1 cf., Chron. 18:17) is mythical and reflects the reality of later times.⁶ He alleges that the author just wanted to embellish David's accomplishments by giving him "Greek" mercenaries, just as the Egyptians had in the 7th Century (when the narrative was probably written).⁷

¹ Macalister was early to posit that Sisera may have been Philistine or of a related race, in Macalister, 44. In fact, he deemed it "highly probable" that Sisera belonged to the northern tribe of Sea Peoples known as the Zakkala (ibid., 69).

² Hindson, 148.

³ Ibid., 149.

⁴ Ibid., 23, 32.

⁵ Finklestein, "The Philistines in the Bible," 147,

⁶ Ibid., 149.

⁷ Ibid.

Later periods. It is true that “scholarly interest in the Philistines has tended to concentrate on their arrival and early settlement in Palestine.”¹ But, taking the Biblical record seriously, C. S. Ehrlich provides important information from Assyrian sources that dovetail with later texts. Jeremiah 47:4 confirms the Philistine origins in Caphtor. Zephaniah 2:5-6 mentions the Cerethites where the LXX calls them “Cretans.”² And Macalister states the last possible allusion is in Nehemiah 13:23-24 where the children spoke half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jew’s language. He thinks this was some sort of Aegean hold-over tongue or a *patois* of old Philistine and perhaps Aramaic.³

THE PHILISTINES AND CONTEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGY

Artifacts of Value. Pottery that is characteristic of Philistine occupation has become the focal point for contemporary debates. Certain “reevaluations” have been made for the Iron Age I period, and the focus for this has been, in particular, “the Philistine ceramic corpus.”⁴ In general, while there was some Egyptian and Canaanite influence, “Philistine decorative motifs were derived primarily from the Mycenaean repertoire.”⁵ Warnock avers that “pottery provides the strongest evidence for an Aegean connection....”⁶ Such pottery has been found “in abundance from the first decades of the

¹ H. G. M. Williamson, Book Review of “C. S. Ehrlich, *The Philistines in Transition: A History from c. 1000-730 B.C.E.*” Leiden: Brill, 1996, in *Vetus Testamentum* (51.2 2001): 277.

² In *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, s.v. “Zephaniah, n. 2:5,” 1516. A note adds that “Caphtor” may include nearby islands as well.

³ Macalister, 66.

⁴ Steven M. Ortiz, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing the United Monarchy: House of David or Tent of David (Current Trends in Iron Age Chronology),” in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions*, James K. Hoffmeier & Alan Millard, eds.: 121-147 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 123.

⁵ Dothan, *The Philistines and their Material Culture*, 198. Interestingly, she includes drawings of a bird motif found in Philistia, but also at Crete and even on the Greek mainland. But, finds from Cyprus are even closer to this motif. This “may indicate the last stop of this group of Sea Peoples on their way to Canaan” (ibid., 202-203).

⁶ Warnock, “People of the Sea,” 58.

twelfth century B.C. to the late eleventh century B.C. in the plains of Philistia itself, and in the adjacent sites of the Negeb....”¹

Yet, Philistine pottery styles noticeably evolved over time, so that by Iron Age III, the pottery and other artifacts are “the same as that found elsewhere in Palestine.”² Such ceramic evidence is crucial for chronology. Dothan and Zuckerman argue,

This combination of relative and absolute dates anchors the first phase of locally produced Mycenaean IIIC:1 pottery in Philistia to the early part of the reign of Ramses III (1184-1153 B.C.E., according to Kitchen 200:49; fig. 5). Therefore, it corroborates the traditional chronology of Philistine settlement, which establishes the date of the beginning of the Philistine settlement in Canaan around the eighth regnal year of Ramses III on the basis of the inscriptions on the walls of his mortuary temple at Medinet Habu....³

Mazar also explains the importance of this evidence. He contends that at the close of the 13th century, there were noticeable upheavals in the pottery styles of Greece. A new type, the Mycenaean IIIC, emerged. But, in Cyprus, a (monochrome) subgroup, the Mycenaean IIIC1b, came into being. “At the Philistine cities Ashdod and Ekron, pottery identical with that found in Cyprus was uncovered in the earliest settlement levels of the Sea Peoples (Ashdod Stratum XIII and Ekron Stratum VII).”⁴ When this datum is coupled with the fact of pictures unearthed in Cyprus related to the Philistines, it can be inferred that they may have transmigrated through this island and become somewhat acculturated there before moving on to Canaan.⁵

¹ In *NBD*, s.v. “Philistines, Philistia,” by Mitchell.

² *Ibid.*

³ Trude Dothan and Alexander Zuckerman, “A Preliminary Study of the Mycenaean IIIC:1 Pottery Assemblages from Tel Miquene-Ekron and Ashdod,” in *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* (Fall 2004): 43.

⁴ Mazar, 307.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 305. On the other hand, Warnock seems to want to complicate the issue by chiming in with, “The question is, can the makers of the Mycenaean IIIC1:b pottery be considered true Philistines who gradually evolve their own pottery style, or were the makers of Mycenaean IIIC:b pottery an as yet unidentified group of Sea Peoples who occupy Canaan, followed by a second immigration of the real

Coffins. Unique burial customs seemed to have prevailed in some areas under Philistine influence. Mazar describes “anthropoid coffin lids from Beth-Shean.”¹ In a style reminiscent of Egyptian burial practices, human faces have been formed into the lids of the coffins. On such faces, “the headgear resembles that of Sea People on the Medinet Habu relief.”² Such evidence is highly suggestive for identifying the Philistines with such Sea Peoples as depicted in the Egyptian inscriptions. Moreover, Hindson notes that at Beth-shan, coffins have been uncovered “containing corpses with gold mouthplates. This is an Aegean burial practice....”³

Weapons. According to Scripture, the Philistines had a monopoly on iron, and could even charge a pim for tools to be sharpened (1 Sam. 13:12).⁴ “Perhaps more than any other factor, iron weapons proved the decisive element in the Philistines’ early domination of Israel.”⁵ In support of this observation, “within Palestine, facilities of iron smelting have been discovered in the ancient Philistine settlements of Ekron...and Tell Qasile.”⁶

Some have commented on how the description of Goliath’s spear as a “weaver’s beam” (characteristically a rod with row of loops) calls to mind an Aegean spear with loops attached for better casting.⁷ Finklestein scoffs at this idea (of the spear being a

Philistines,” (in Warnock, 58). But we might ask, why would Ockam’s razor not be applicable to this question? There seems to be no real reason to multiply explanations beyond necessity here either.

¹ Mazar, 298.

² Ibid.

³ Hindson, 14.

⁴ See Hoerth, 251.

⁵ *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, s.v. “Technological Supremacy of the Philistines’ Iron Weapons,” 414. It is to be noted that “during the second half of the second millennium B.C., the Philistines defeated the Hittites and most likely took from them the technology or ironwork” (ibid.).

⁶ Ibid. Though Dothan thinks that the Philistines did not introduce iron into Canaan, they did seem to have a monopoly on it. Most of the iron tools and weapons found “come from sites that show signs of Philistine occupation or influence...very few iron objects have been found at Israelite or Canaanite sites” (in Dothan, *The Philistines and their Material Culture*, 91).

⁷ John H. Sailhamer, *Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House,

“leash javelin,” as Yadin had suggested). The description of Goliath’s weapons do not fit either the Warrior’s Vase from Mycenae nor the Medinet Habu reliefs.¹

However, it was doubtfully Yadin’s or Sailhamer’s purpose to equate every feature of the armor and weapons (in one-to-one correspondence) with typical depictions of Aegean warriors. Rather, the intent is simply to show the suggestive similarities to some descriptions of the Aegean panoply. This is one tiny thread of evidence that, when combined with many similar threads, forms a sturdy cord of support for an Aegean background for the Philistines.

Cultural Characteristics. Hoerth points out, “Scholars usually agree that the Philistines merged with the Canaanites and lost much of their cultural identity—but the speed with which this association took place is debated.”² And Mazar maintains that, though the Bible says Beth-Shemesh was Israelite in the time of the Judges (1 Sam. 6:9-15), “the material culture at the site is indistinguishable from that of the Philistine neighbor Timnah. The phenomenon exemplifies the difficulty of defining ethnicity on the basis of material culture.”³

Yet, there were some cultural traits apparently unique to the Philistines. In terms of habits, Hoerth cites Albright to the effect that they were “mighty carousers” with their “wine craters and beer jugs.”⁴

In terms of their physical appearance, scenes from the temple at Medinet Habu in Egypt depict them in a feathered helmet and chin straps.¹ Hindson sees such a depiction as “similar to early fourteenth century Achaean warriors.”²

1998), 68.

¹ Finklestein, “The Philistines in the Bible,” 142.

² Hoerth, 234.

³ Mazar, 312.

⁴ Hoerth, 234.

In terms of their original language, we know very little. It is widely held that it would have been Indo-European. But, in his day, Macalister contended that it was not yet possible to prove that their language was indeed Indo-European.³ The problem is, we have very little inscriptional evidence. Mazar mentions,

Short inscriptions appear on two of the seals from Ashdod. The letters are linear, recalling the still undeciphered Late Bronze Cypro-Minoan script known from Cyprus. Although only a few letter signs are known, they demonstrate the existence of a Philistine writing system, probably of Aegean inspiration.⁴

Dr. Abraham Silverstein chastises his colleagues (in the “Introduction” to Macalister in 1965) for not accepting the apparent parallel evidence we do have from Cypriote tablets discovered in Philistia, and the finds of tablets written in Linear B at Ugarit.⁵ However, so far the written evidence is meager.

In isolated names and words we get some glimpse of their linguistic antecedents. “Some Philistine personal names and terms recorded in the Bible are related to Luvian languages of western Anatolia, but the evidence is far from concrete.”⁶ We also know that the word *seren*, for the leaders of the Philistine pentapolis, is likely related to *turanos* (from which is “tyrant,” in our tongue) “of pre-Hellenic or Asianic origin.”⁷

¹ In *IDB*, s.v. “Philistines,” by Greenfield.

² Hindson, 42.

³ Macalister, 43.

⁴ Mazar, 326.

⁵ Abraham Silverstein, “Introduction,” in Macalister, vi-vii. He adds sardonically, “We are, of course, interested in demonstrating the historicity of the bible, but not to the point at which we will have to admit that the people who used Linear A and Linear B invaded and established themselves and their commerce by force on the Syrian and Palestinian shores” (ibid., vi.). The Phaistos disk from southern Crete was contemporary with Linear A, but was not the same (see “Paistos Disk” at <http://www.ancientscripts.com/phaistos.html> (as posted on 8/2/06).

⁶ Mazar, 306-307.

⁷ Ibid., 306. Finklestein admits this similarity to *tyrannos*, and says “*Tyrannos*, in turn, was probably a Lydian word which was introduced into Greek,” (in Finklestein, 136). He then makes comparisons of *tyrannos* to the Luwian *tarwanis*, “a title given to the Neo-Hittite (early first millennium BCE) governors,” (ibid., 137). Then, he alleges that this would best fit the 7th century. So, the word must have entered Philistia through Carian and Ionian mercenaries who served with Egypt at that period and “who most probably deployed them, among other places, in Philistia...” (ibid., 137).

Other terms are suggestive, as *quba* in Hebrew (“helmet”), possibly a Philistine loan word,¹ the proper name Goliath as similar to Alyattas, and Achish as it may relate to Ancheses.² A hieratic school tablet mentions “Akasou” as a name in Keftian (Egyptian variant for Caphtor). This corresponds with the Philistine town name of Achish.³ Hindson holds that the word “Jordan” could be from *Iardonos*, the Cretan word for “river,” indicating that the Philistines may have penetrated that far inland.⁴ But, the paucity of linguistic evidence to this point is challenging for Philistine studies.

Religion. Whatever may have been their ancient devotions, soon after entering Canaan they adopted some of the Semitic gods of the surrounding cultures. Among them are found Dagon, Ashtoreth, Baalzebub, and others.⁵ A temple of Dagon remained at Gaza down to the Maccabean revolt, at which time it was destroyed by Judas Maccabaeus.⁶

Hindson holds that the concept of sending animals (milk cows) to see where the Divinity would lead them (as the ark of the covenant) is an Aegean concept. We find parallels in those lands to such superstitions.⁷ Yet, Callaway concludes that the evidence “reflects a background of almost promiscuous cultural assimilation, and leaves the reader bewildered in any effort to understand Philistine religion.”⁸

But, why not see, in the chain of etymology, *tarwanis* possibly descending from *tyrannos*? Or less polemically, why not simply assume that *tarwanis*, though applied to Neo-Hittite governors in the 7th century, was nevertheless already in use in other contexts in earlier centuries at which time it had passed into the pre-Hellenic tongue of the Sea Peoples of the 12th century invasions? Finkelstein’s revisionism with this identification appears to this researcher as question begging, to say the least.

¹ Macalister, 80.

² In *IDB*, s.v. “Philistines,” by Greenfield.

³ Macalister, 26.

⁴ Hindson, 22, n. 43.

⁵ In *IDB*, s.v. “Philistines,” by Greenfield.

⁶ Macalister, 67. Hoerth helps us understand that the older pictorial portrayal of Dagon as having the tail of a fish is inaccurate, “but the true appearance of the Philistine god is uncertain” (in Hoerth, 235).

⁷ Hindson, 143.

⁸ Callaway, “The Philistines and Their Material Culture,” 626-627.

MATERIAL RECORD'S "CONFIRMATION" OF WRITTEN RECORD

Aegean origins. The Bible says the Philistines were from the Aegean (Caphtor). Drews draws the conclusion, "The material record thus allows us to say with some confidence that the 'Caphtorite' tradition articulated by Amos and Jeremiah had a factual basis...."¹ Nearly every indication points in the direction of supporting this historical identification.

Miscellaneous support. Several smaller lines of evidence line up. Hindson mentions excavations at Tell Qasile, for example, which support Samuel's eleventh century victory over the Philistines.² The destruction of Shiloh by the Philistines is attested to by the finds of field archaeology (cf. Psalm 78:60; Jer. 7:12-14; 26:6-9). Even the minimalist Finklestein admits that archaeology both demonstrates the importance of the site in Iron I and its destruction, ostensibly around 1050 B.C., or more likely (according to his idiosyncratic low chronology), "no later than the tenth century BCE."³ He even allows that the whole ark narrative may preserve an historical memory of those events.⁴

In a sense, the episode with Padi of Ekron provides confirmation of the Biblical narrative about the Philistines. The Prism of Sennacerib (704-681) relates how the

¹ Drews, 45. Yet, Drews does not think there was any "national migration" of Sea Peoples to the Levantine coast in the early Iron Age (ibid., 44). Nevertheless, he has conceded also that the finds from Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Tell Qasile "have left little doubt that there was a significant immigration to the southern Levantine coast from the Aegean—and more directly from Cyprus—in the twelfth century BCE" (ibid., 42).

² Hindson, 146.

³ Finklestein, 155.

⁴ Unfortunately, he attenuates this apparent support with the statement, "The biblical references to the Philistines do not contain any memory of early Iron I (twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE) events or cultural behavior" (ibid., 156).

Assyrian king released Padi from imprisonment by Hezekiah (cf. 2 Kings 18:7-8).¹

Excavations at Ekron in 1996 uncovered an inscription mentioning Padi by name as king.² Archaeological confirmation of the Biblical record is therefore not lacking, though not as complete as some might hope.³

PROBLEM AREAS

Some of the difficulties have already been alluded to. A number of unresolved issues yet remain.⁴ To my mind, the most critical problem concerns the question of “Philistine” anachronisms in the Pentateuch, as noticed previously.

One attempted solution is to find “Philistines” actually living in Canaan that far back in history.⁵ For example, Greenfield agrees that Genesis 21:26 “may ultimately be based on the presence of an Aegean colony in the Gerar area,” though the use of the word

¹ The text in *ANE* reads, “officials, the patricians and the (common) people of Ekron—who had thrown Padi, their king, into fetters (because he was) loyal to (his) solemn oath (sworn) by the god Ashur, and had handed him over to Hezekiah, the Jew...he Hezekiah held him in prison...I made Padi their king, come up from Jerusalem (*Ur-sa-li-im-mu*) and set him as their lord on the throne, imposing upon him the tribute (due) to me (as) overlord” (in Pritchard, 199-200).

² Hoerth, 344, n. 5.

³ Finklestein, however, challenges any support for an early time from material evidence. “If an Iron I memory of a league of five cities is preserved in the biblical text, how is it that there is no clue to other Iron I Philistine realities?” (in Finklestein, 141).

But, how can this not be a prime example of the logical fallacy of *petitio principii*? For in fact we have found other lines of support in favor of “other Iron I Philistine realities.”

⁴ For example, in reviewing Dothan’s work on the Philistines, Callaway raises the question of whether their entrance into the land was a “wholesale migration” or just the arrival of a “warrior aristocracy which imposed its rule upon the continuing local population?” (in Callaway, 627).

The archaeology of Crete and Cyprus should be of continued interest for students of the Sea Peoples. Potential finds could yield possible indicators about the chronology (see Hindson, 103, n. 30, and Mazar, 307).

Shamgar and his potential relationship with the Egypt shows promise for future studies (see Hindson, 107-108). The narrative about David and Goliath has presented thorny issues for some critics and interpreters, yet Hindson seems to resolve a number of the apparent exegetical problems over which Albright had fretted (see Hindson, 156-157). Macalister also takes upon such problems (in Macalister, 54).

⁵ For example, with respect to the Medinet Habu inscription of 1195 B.C., conservative critic Gleason Archer argues, “But the fact that Philistine raiders were driven back by Ramses III to the Palestinian littoral by no means constitutes proof that there could have been no Philistines there before that time.” Also, after mentioning various Sea Peoples who may have impinged on Palestine, “The probabilities are that these various groups came in successive waves of migration from the island of Crete. Even in the Minoan period, the inhabitants of Crete were enterprising traders well before Abraham’s time. As such they would have had every incentive to establish trading centers on the Palestinian coastline for the purposes of commerce” (in Archer, *Survey*, 278).

“Philistines” itself is anachronistic.¹ Mitchell insists that “there is evidence of a major expansion of Aegean trade in the Middle Minoan II period (c. 1900-1700 BC). . . .”² He explains that, since the Sea Peoples came in successive waves, it is possible that Philistines really had settled in Palestine as “early Aegean traders, not prominent enough to be noticed by the larger states.”³

Macalister thinks that it is possible that they were already occupying the coastal area of Canaan at the time they launched their attacks on Egypt under Ramses III.⁴ But, if so, would this tend to support the biblical usage of “Philistine” as a generic term for “Sea Peoples” in a much earlier period, even in the time of Abraham and Isaac?

Hindson holds it reasonable to believe that there really was an earlier influx of Sea Peoples in Patriarchal times.⁵ “Abimelech” was possibly just a Semitic title taken over by the Philistine ruler. “Phicol,” commander of his army, apparently retained a non-Semitic name, however.⁶ Moreover, he would place the burden of proof on the critics in saying, “since there is little evidence of the Aegean peoples anywhere (as contrasted with the Near Eastern peoples) it is an argument only from silence, based on critical presuppositions, to deny any validity to the Genesis reference to ‘Philistines’.”⁷

Again, Hindson warns that it is unfair to dismiss the Genesis references to the Philistines, given the abundant evidence for earlier migrations.⁸

¹ In *IDB*, s.v. “Philistines,” by Greenfield.

² In *NBD*, s.v. “Philistines, Philistia,” by Mitchell.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Macalister, 68-69.

⁵ Hindson, 16-17.

⁶ Macalister, 81. Finklestein concurs and says that it was an apparently Carian name (in Finklestein, 153).

⁷ Hindson, 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

The overall point of this line of argumentation suggests that at least some Peoples of the Sea may have occupied a portion of Patriarchal Canaan. Since later usage of the term “Philistine” was comprehensive enough to embrace other subgroups of the Sea Peoples (as the Tjekker or Shekelesh) who were more or less contemporaneous with Iron Age Biblical authors, the use of the term “Philistines” might have been appropriate in a similar fashion, at least retrospectively from the standpoint of a later redactor, if not in fact apropos for the early time period in which they then were living.

But, this admission opens the door for the other possible solution. Kitchen, for example, says: “Here we see a usage from the twelfth to tenth centuries (1180 and following) that replaced an earlier, obsolete term—just as we would say ‘the Dutch founded New York’ although they did so as New Amsterdam....”¹ He adds, “thus some earlier and obsolete term would have been replaced in such cases.”²

So, either proto-Philistines really lived in Canaan at the time of Abraham in the early 2nd millennium B.C., or some other tribes then lived for which the later, more familiar, “Philistine” would be adequate (for describing the kind of people they were or for alluding to the general vicinity of where the later Philistines would come to populate). Either way, while a Bible difficulty, the problem does not appear insurmountable.

CONCLUSION: IMPORTANCE OF THE PHILISTINES FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES AS A WHOLE

As mentioned, the dating of key events in Biblical history depends in part on getting it right about the Philistine monochrome pottery. Ortiz has set forth recently a number of answers to Finkelstein’s attempted lowering of the chronology based on his new proposal for the actual time of the arrival of the Philistines (a so-called “third

¹ Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 340.

² Ibid., 340-341.

wave”).¹ Kitchen had already tackled with glee Finklestein’s revisionism. His wry response makes for lively reading.² No doubt, the debate will continue because it has important ramifications for all Biblical chronology, especially for the period of the United Kingdom.

This paper has defined a few relevant terms. It has addressed the issue of the origins of the Sea Peoples and the Philistines. It has noticed extra-Biblical mentions of these groups, and then looked at important Biblical references, especially for archaeology. It has summarized some of the areas of archaeological support re: the Philistines in the Bible along with some pending problems.

The overall conclusion is that the Philistines were not peripheral to the narratives of Israel’s early beginnings, but constituted an essential part of that history. Silverstein castigates some of his contemporaries (in 1965) for seemingly minimizing the importance of the Philistines. “We must learn more about the Philistines rather than waging a campaign to prove that they were not important in the development of ancient Israel.”³

We close in part with a summary from Mazar: “The logical conclusion, therefore, is that the Philistines were a group of Mycenaean Greeks who immigrated to the east, clashed with the Egyptians in the eighth regnal year of Ramesses III, and later inhabited Philistia.”⁴ Yet, later they quit using the native monochrome pottery (though producing it locally) and developed a bichrome (called “Philistine”) style.⁵ We must add that evidently early in the 2nd millennium B.C., proto-Philistines or Aegean tribes of some

¹ Ortiz, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing the United Monarchy,” in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions*, 124 *passim*.

² Kitchen, 139-158.

³ Silverstein, “Introduction,” in Macalister, viii.

⁴ Mazar, 307-308.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

variety had found their way to the Levantine coast, fittingly called in the Biblical context, “Philistines.”

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