

*Part Two*  
The Enemies

## CHAPTER 13

# The Philistines

WHAT was it that brought about the downfall of the dynasty of David? The obvious answer is that it was the might of Babylon; it was Nebuchadrezzar, Chaldaean king of Babylon, who exiled Jehoiachin and imprisoned a blinded Zedekiah, far from the ruins of their former capital on Mount Zion. It is beyond doubt, then, that the Judaeen monarchy died through the pressures of an external foe; but it is equally true that the same monarchy was born of the pressures of an external foe — for who can doubt that Saul's rise to power in Israel was due to the menace posed by the Philistines? And yet another enemy, Assyria, brought about the collapse of the Northern Kingdom, a century and a half before Jerusalem fell.

From the purely political aspect, then, the course of Israel's history in these centuries was dictated as much by the activities and demands of other nations as it was by the internal policies and aspirations of the Hebrew kings. It is high time for us to pay more detailed and systematic attention to these nations, whose relationships with Israel and Judah had such far-reaching effects.

The first major enemy encountered by the Israelite nation were the Philistines. The main wave of Philistines had found their "promised land" only a short while after the Israelites had done so. The Israelite exodus from Egypt is usually dated in the thirteenth century B.C., perhaps as early as 1275, in the reign of the Egyptian king Ramesses II. A little after 1200 B.C., Pharaoh Ramesses III had to confront an invasion from the sea; the invaders, repulsed, settled instead on the coast of Palestine, and made their own an area which it is convenient to call "Philistia". For convenience, again, we may call these people "Philistines" — for this we have good Old

Testament precedent — although the term “Sea Peoples” is more accurate. The total picture is somewhat blurred; there were several different ethnic groups involved, and some of them had arrived on the Levant coasts at least a century before 1200 B.C. They were to be found further north in Palestine, too. Where they originated from is a matter of uncertainty and debate,<sup>1</sup> but the general Aegean area seems likely enough. A small but perhaps significant link with the Aegean may be seen in the Philistine designation for their kings, *seranim* (the singular would be *seren*), which appears to be the equivalent of the Greek term *tyrannoi*, “tyrants”. The dominant ethnic group, before long, was the Peleset, from which we derive, via Hebrew, the familiar word “Philistine”. This group came from Caphtor, according to Jeremiah 47:4 and Amos 9:7; and Caphtor was the name for Crete. (The parallel term Kerethites (Cherethites) seems to link up more directly with our word “Crete”; cf. Ezekiel 25:16.)

At first these “Sea Peoples” mastered much of the Levant coast, and dominated the older population (the civilization familiar to us as the “Amorites” or “Canaanites” in the Old Testament books); but it was the strictly Philistine area, from Joppa southwards, where they settled most strongly and permanently, and which was most intimately concerned with the history of Israel. In this area there were five major cities, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Gaza on or very near the coast, and Ekron and Gath further inland. The rulers of these cities were independent of each other, but yet they co-operated well; we see in 1 Samuel 29:3-7 how the king of Gath was overruled by his fellow-rulers and was content to abide by their decision. There were other cities in Philistia (Joppa, for one), but evidently they were controlled by the pentapolis listed above.

In the two centuries prior to 1200 B.C., the whole of Palestine and Syria had been overrun by a variety of “outsiders”, Aramaeans, Israelites, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites, in addition to the sea-invaders. The Canaanites, the earlier inhabitants, were by no means wiped out; they retained a considerable number of cities, and in the north west section of the land they were presently able to reassert their ascendancy, in the region we term Phoenicia (roughly equivalent to the modern Lebanon). The north east section became Aramaean territory; and the southern half of the country, west of the Jordan, was shared between Philistines, on the coastal plain, and the rather loosely-knit confederation of Israelite tribes inland. It was therefore almost inevitable that there should ultimately be a measure of conflict between the Philistines and the Israelites; but it took time for the hostilities to develop. Both peoples were fully occupied in consolidating their new territorial possessions, till 1100 B.C. at least.

1. See T. C. Mitchell in *AOTS*, pp. 410f., for details.

In the struggle with Israel, we see the Philistines endeavouring to expand eastwards, up into the hill country; but there can be no doubt that they sought expansion westwards too, in maritime trade.

An interesting tale relating to the early eleventh century comes from Egypt, but throws some light on the Philistines at this period. It is the story of Wen-Amun,<sup>2</sup> an Egyptian priest who was entrusted with the task of sailing to Byblos (the Old Testament Gebal) on the Phoenician coast to purchase timber. He put in first at Dor, a few miles south of the modern Haifa; Dor lay on a stretch of the coast which had been occupied by the Tjekker, a group of the Sea Peoples who had arrived in Palestine at the same time as the Philistines. While the ship was in harbour, a seaman absconded with Wen-Amun's money. Wen-Amun reported the theft to the king of Dor, expecting him to enforce law and order, and take steps to apprehend the thief; but the treatment he received was so casual and unconcerned that at last, in exasperation, he sailed further north and seized and looted a boat belonging to the Tjekker. In consequence, the Tjekker sent eleven ships to pursue him. Evidently Wen-Amun escaped, but the text breaks off, and we do not know the details.

This story confirms the extent of "Philistine" domination at this time, and shows how contemptuous they could be of other people's interests and rights. It also demonstrates something of their maritime prowess. Clearly the Philistines and their associates were unchallenged on the coastal plains; and the story of Saul reveals how easily they could move into the Plain of Jezreel, too. By now they were encircling much of Israel, for they had also expanded to the south east of Philistia, into the Negeb (as is clear from the Philistine pottery found abundantly in the Negeb).

Their monopoly of iron weapons and their thorough acquaintance with military techniques permitted them to make the attempt to conquer the hill-country, that is to say, the tribal areas of west Manasseh, Ephraim, Dan, Benjamin, Judah and Simeon. Dan was a major victim; the Samson narratives illustrate the pressures to which the Danites were subjected. West Judah also suffered from their inroads. After the disastrous battle of Aphek, the Israelites found themselves subject to the Philistines, who placed garrisons at strategic points in the hill-country. The Philistine successes were due to their advantages in the way of military weapons and skills, not to their numerical superiority. On the contrary, in their own area many of the indigenous Canaanite population had survived, though they were subservient to their rule. The fact that David and his men could serve as mercenaries for Achish of Gath in itself illustrates the relative lack of Philistine man-power.

2. Cf. *ANET*, pp. 25-29.

Saul's victories over the Philistines were partial and inconclusive, and his reign ended with the inglorious débâcle at Gilboa; nevertheless, Saul's achievements were sufficient to prove to the Israelites that, if united and given adequate generalship, they could defeat the Philistines. It was David who provided both; and in a generation the Philistines were crushed, never to prove a major power in the area again. According to 1 Chronicles 18:1 he even took the city of Gath; but if so,<sup>3</sup> he must soon have restored the city to the Philistines, since Achish was still king there early in Solomon's reign (cf. 1 Kings 2:39), though perhaps with merely vassal status. David respected the Philistines' fighting abilities sufficiently to take his personal bodyguard from their numbers; Gittites (i.e. men of Gath) are mentioned among his personal troops in 2 Samuel 15:18. David's success meant that the Philistines were from now on confined to Philistia proper; and even there they were tributary to him.

But in a sense, the Philistines were conquered by the Canaanites as much as by the soldiers of Israel. It may well be that the true Philistine element in Philistia was decimated in the heavy military defeats they suffered, with the result that the Canaanites there once again rose to the surface. However, even before David's victories the process had begun. As early as Samson's time, the chief god worshipped by the Philistines in Gaza was Dagon (Judges 16:23); in Samuel's time, the same god was revered at Ashdod (1 Samuel 5:1f.); but Dagon is the name of an ancient Canaanite deity. True, the Philistines may have recognised that the indigenous Dagon had the same character and attributes as some deity of their own, and so equated the two deities, thus enabling their Canaanite subjects to worship at the same shrines as themselves. The fact remains, however, that we do not know the name of a single Philistine deity; Ashtoreth at Beth-shan (1 Samuel 31:10) and Baal-zebub of Ekron (2 Kings 1:2) were also Canaanite deities.

In other respects too, the Philistines adapted themselves rapidly to Canaanite ways. Their own language gave way to Canaanite;<sup>4</sup> their own distinctive culture and distinctive artifacts (such as pottery) gradually disappeared; and politically they fell into the independent city-state pattern so typical of the Canaanites. In future their five cities did not show the cohesion and common policies which had made the Philistines such a force to be reckoned with. It is not without good reason that in the Bible the distinctive term *seranim*

3. The parallel passage in 2 Samuel 8:1 does not mention Gath, a fact which raises textual and historical problems. See J. Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel* (NCB, London, 1971), *ad loc.* One possibility is that the reference is to a different Gath.

4. The statement in Nehemiah 13:23f. about "the language of Ashdod" as late as the fifth century must refer to a local Canaanite dialect, as would certainly be the case with Ammon and Moab.

(“lords”) gives way to the ordinary Canaanite word *melakim* (“kings”).

The rest of Philistine history, therefore, can only be told in terms of the individual cities and their fluctuating fortunes, or of general political influences over the area. Israel’s dominating influence began to ebb towards the end of Solomon’s reign, to be replaced by Egyptian interest. The campaign of Shishak in Rehoboam’s fifth year was able to use Gaza, the most southerly Philistine city, as its starting-point. But the Egyptians soon lost their interest in Palestine. Border fighting, sometimes on a fairly big scale, occupied Philistine and Israelite (i.e. the Northern Kingdom) troops for half a century (cf. 1 Kings 15:27; 16:15ff.). Jehoshaphat of Judah (873-848) was then able to reimpose Judaeen suzerainty over the Philistines, and take tribute from them (2 Chronicles 17:11). In the reign of Jehoram of Judah, it was Judah’s turn to suffer; but the most the Philistines could achieve consisted of plundering incursions (2 Chronicles 21:16f.). The major power in the Palestinian area at the end of this ninth century was the Aramaean kingdom of Damascus, which dominated the affairs of both Israel and Judah during this period; Philistia was at a greater distance from Damascus and suffered less, but at one point the Syrian king Hazael did seize the city of Gath (2 Kings 12:17).

By now, however, the Assyrians were poised for the control of Palestine, and before the ninth century ended Assyrian records were making their first mention of Philistia. Adad-nirari III relates that in his fifth year (c. 806) he “gave the word for the vast army of Assyria to march to the land of Philistia”.<sup>5</sup> The great king was satisfied with tribute however.

In the first half of the eighth century, a quiescent Assyria allowed the twin Hebrew kingdoms to recover lost ground and to enjoy almost a second golden age. King Uzziah of Judah profited by this situation to attack Philistia yet again; the cities of Gath and Ashdod were among those he sacked (2 Chronicles 26:6). No doubt the Judaeen settlements Uzziah planted in the neighbourhood of Ashdod did not long survive, once Judah’s power declined again. A new Philistine town seems to have sprung up at Gath, but Gath was in fact doomed; at the end of the century the Assyrian king Sargon II attacked it again (715 B.C.). Even before that, the prophet Amos could ignore its very existence, when he pronounced doom on the other four leading cities of Philistia (Amos 1:6ff.).

These other four cities survived, but now that the day of the big empires’ control of Palestine had arrived, they had no chance of independence. They fought against the inevitable, none the less, in common with other states round about. We can see how divided

5. *DOTT*, p. 51. In Akkadian, the name Philistia appears as “Palashtu”.

among themselves the Philistines were by this date, in the complex of events culminating in Sennacherib's invasion in 701 B.C. Of their five major cities, Ashdod refused to act against Assyria — Sennacherib's predecessor, Sargon, had taken Ashdod by storm eleven years earlier (cf. Isaiah 20:1), and she had learned her lesson. The king of Ekron, who was called Padi, also remained loyal to Assyria, but his leading citizens had other ideas, and placing Padi in the custody of Judah's king Hezekiah, they committed their city to the revolt. Gaza, it seems, also declined to join the revolt, and suffered invasion by Hezekiah in consequence (2 Kings 18:8). But the fourth city, Ashkelon, under its king Sidqa, wholeheartedly supported Hezekiah's rebellion. The Assyrian king crushed the revolt, punished the rebels, and rewarded those who had remained loyal: Padi not only recovered the throne of Ekron, but a slice of Judaeen territory as a bonus; Ashdod, too, had its territory enlarged at the expense of Judah.

As the seventh century proceeded, the Philistine cities meekly accepted Assyrian domination; they could do little else, in view of the powerful Assyrian presence, occasioned by the invasions of Egypt by Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. But as Assyrian power declined, other pressures exerted themselves on the area. One particular disaster of uncertain date (perhaps about 610 B.C.) suffered by Ashkelon is related by the Greek historian Herodotus.<sup>6</sup> One of the causes of the Assyrian decline was the inroads of nomad horsemen from the Russian steppes, notably the Scythians, who on occasion swept fiercely down the Palestine coast, only to be repulsed on the Egyptian frontier; as they returned northwards, they plundered the temple of Astarte in Ashkelon.<sup>7</sup>

For a few years, Egypt was the dominating force in Philistia, as her armies marched through it year after year to support Assyria in its death-throes and to defy Babylon. Gaza apparently tried to withstand Pharaoh Necho at about the same time that Josiah tried to do the same at Megiddo (609 B.C.); Jeremiah 47:1 mentions "Pharaoh's harrying of Gaza". Nevertheless, in the next few years the Philistine cities resisted the Babylonian armies to the best of their ability, aided and abetted by the Egyptians. A letter of the time (discovered in Egypt in 1942) from a Palestinian king, urgently requesting Egyptian military assistance against Babylon, is often thought to have come from Ashkelon.<sup>8</sup>

It was Nebuchadrezzar who virtually wiped out Philistia as a distinct political entity. For many years the Philistines had become

6. Herodotus i. 105.

7. It is not certain, however, how accurate Herodotus' information was. The Scythians appear in the Old Testament as "Ashkenaz" (e.g. Genesis 10:3; Jeremiah 51:27).

8. *DOTT*, pp. 251-255.

more and more indistinguishable from their Phoenician neighbours to the north, and Nebuchadrezzar's deportation policy, put into effect after his devastating conquest of Philistia in 604 B.C., put paid to the last vestiges of anything distinctively Philistine. The cities themselves remained, of course; Gaza and Azotus (= Ashdod) are mentioned in the New Testament, and some of the ancient names, especially Gaza, are still functioning today.

What legacy did these folk leave to posterity? Archaeologists have unearthed some of their material remains; but their distinctive pottery and their intriguing "anthropoid" coffins<sup>9</sup> (see plate 10 facing p. 177), they themselves abandoned after their heyday. A few Philistine words have survived, through the medium of the Hebrew Bible. Three Hebrew words are commonly credited to the Philistine language, namely *seren* ("lord" or "tyrant"), *kobha'* or *qobha'* ("helmet"), and *argaz* ("box"). All three survive in modern Hebrew, although the first two have changed meaning — *seren* now denotes an army captain, and today *kobha'* is the ordinary word for a hat.

Their most notable linguistic legacy is the name "Palestine", which is still a very convenient term, even though it no longer describes a political entity. The ancient Greeks in due course made the name *Palaistine*, i.e. "Philistine", do service for the whole country, in much the same way that in Britain we often call the Netherlands "Holland", a term which strictly should apply only to two coastal provinces of the country. The Greek term was given fresh currency by the Romans after the second Jewish revolt (A.D. 132-5), when they decided to abolish the term *Judaea* once and for all. The seventh century Muslim conquest later brought the term into ordinary Arabic usage.

Their most significant legacy, however, was their effect upon Israel. By the very fact of the challenge they threw out, they transformed the structure of Israel from a loose tribal federation to a unified kingdom. A less powerful enemy could have been dealt with by a single Israelite tribe, or possibly by a temporary alliance of two or three tribes, as happened often enough during the period of the Judges. On the other hand, a more powerful enemy, like the Assyrians two or three centuries later, would have steam-rolled over the Israelites, and a political unification of Israel could never have taken place.

The Philistine challenge, then, made Israel what it became under Saul, and more particularly under David, who may be said to have learned a great deal from the Philistines. They showed that there was a power vacuum in the area; it was David who proved the man

9. See illustration in *ANEP*, fig. 641.



to fill it, using military tactics learned from the Philistines. Thus in a sense they made David what he was, and thus they stand behind the Davidic dynasty, and the Messianic ideal, with all its consequences for Judaism and Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

10. For further information about the Philistines, see K. A. Kitchen in *POTT*, chapter 3.