

Who were the Philistines?

The Philistines were an aggressive, warmongering people who occupied territory southwest of Israel between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. The name “Philistine” comes from the Hebrew word *Philistia*, and the Greek rendering of the name, *palaistinei*, gives us the modern name “Palestine.” The Philistines are first recorded in Scripture in the Table of Nations, a list of the patriarchal founders of seventy nations descended from Noah (Genesis 10:14). It is thought that the Philistines originated in Caphtor, the Hebrew name for the island of Crete and the whole Aegean region (Amos 9:7; Jeremiah 47:4). For unknown reasons, they migrated from that region to the Mediterranean coast near Gaza. Because of their maritime history, the Philistines are often associated with the “Sea Peoples.” The Bible records that the Philistines had contact with both Abraham and Isaac as early as 2000 B.C. (Genesis 21:32, 34; 26:1, 8).

After Isaac’s involvement with the Philistines (Genesis 26:18), they are next mentioned in passing in the book of Exodus shortly after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea: “When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, ‘If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt’” (Exodus 13:17).

The “road through the Philistine country” refers to a route later known as the *Via Maris* or “the Way of the Sea,” one of three major trade routes in ancient Israel. This coastal road connected the Nile Delta with Canaan and Syria and beyond, into the Mesopotamian region of southwest Asia.

The Old Testament indicates that around the 13th century B.C., during the days of Samuel and Samson, the Philistines moved inland from the coast of Canaan. There, they built

their civilization primarily in five cities: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron (Joshua 13:3). These cities were each governed by a “king” or “lord” (from the Hebrew word *seren*, also rendered as “tyrant”). These kings apparently formed a coalition of equals. Each king retained autonomous control of his city, such as when Achish, king of Gath, dealt with David (1 Samuel 27:5-7), but they worked in concert in times of national emergency (Judges 16:5).

From the very beginning, the Philistines were either allies or deadly enemies of God’s people. They played a pivotal role in the lives of Samson (Judges 13:1; 14:1), Samuel (1 Samuel 4:1), Saul (1 Samuel 13:4), and David (1 Samuel 17:23).

The Philistines were known for their innovative use of iron, which was superior to the bronze used by the Israelites for weapons and implements. Even as late as the time of Saul (1050 - 1010 B.C), the Israelites were forced to rely on the Philistines to sharpen or repair their iron tools (1 Samuel 13:19-21). With their more advanced armaments and aggressive military policy, the Philistines continually thwarted Israel’s development as a nation. For nearly 200 years, the Philistines harassed and oppressed the Israelites, often invading Israel’s territory. The children of Israel simply could not deal with the Philistines’ overwhelming military might. This only came to an end when Samuel and then David, through the guidance of God, were able to defeat the Philistines (1 Samuel 7:12-14; 2 Samuel 5:22-25).

The Old Testament indicates that the Philistines worshiped three gods: Ashtoreth, Dagon, and Baal-Zebub—each of which had shrines in various cities (Judges 16:23; 1 Samuel 31:10; 2 Kings 1:2). Archaeological findings show that Philistine soldiers carried images of their gods into battle (2 Samuel 5:21). Apparently, they were also a

superstitious people who respected the power of Israel's ark of the covenant (1 Samuel 5:1-12).

The Philistines were infamous for their production and consumption of alcoholic beverages, especially beer. Ancient Philistine ruins contain numerous breweries and wineries, as well as countless beer mugs and other drinking vessels. Samson's wedding feast, recorded in the book of Judges, illustrates the Philistine practice of holding week-long drinking parties; the Hebrew word *misteh*, translated "feast" in Judges 14:10, means "drinking feast."

The Israelites frequently referred to the Philistines as "uncircumcised" (Judges 15:18; 1 Samuel 14:6; 2 Samuel 1:20), meaning, at that time, those who had no relationship with God. They were not God's chosen people and were to be strictly avoided as a contaminating evil.

Today, the word philistine is used as an epithet to refer to an unrefined, dull person. In truth, the Philistines of history were not unsophisticated or uncultured. They were an advanced seafaring people who, for several generations, were years ahead of Israel.

With the exception of Jeremiah chapter 47, there are very few prophetic references to the Philistines. In the end, the Philistines were assimilated into Canaanite culture. They eventually disappeared from the biblical record and from history altogether, leaving behind the name "Palestine" as a testimony of their existence.