Warfare in the Old Testament

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With line drawings by Josh Seevers

*To Karen, my companion and friend for
more than a quarter of a century, including
many years in the lands that witnessed the
events described herein*

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EAT OR BE EATEN: THE PHILISTINES KILL KING SAUL

"Eat or be eaten." Dagarat[1] the Philistine warrior muttered the words aloud as he tossed aside the last bone from the wild dog that he and the other soldiers in his unit had just finished eating. Like most Philistines, Dagarat liked eating dogs occasionally,[2] but he figured he savored them more than most. Dagarat also enjoyed observing dogs, and he appreciated their toughness and hunting instincts. They had to be tough to keep on the right side of the eat-or-be-eaten equation. Only the best stayed alive, and Dagarat admired that. He appreciated the way they tasted even more.

Eat or be eaten. It was the way of the dog. Whether working individually or in packs, stronger dogs killed and ate the weaker prey, including other dogs. Dagarat had witnessed the process play out again that day among the dogs that were following the army. He had often seen dogs moving along with the Philistine army, knowing that the soldiers would eventually provide them with a feast. Regardless of who won the battle, the dogs always enjoyed a good meal afterward (cf. 1 Kings 21:24; Jer. 15:3; 1 Sam. 17:44, 46). So they followed along, killing as needed while they waited for the big event. On this day, Dagarat had taken advantage of their preoccupation with their own hunt to get close enough to kill the biggest and strongest dog with his spear. Dogs were good hunters, but Dagarat was better. Sometimes even the best could get eaten.

Dagarat ran out of time for thoughtful reflection; it was time to finish setting up camp for the night. He knew the routine well from

Fig. 5.1 – Head of Philistine warrior from Egyptian relief

the dozens of military expeditions he had participated in over the last fifteen years. He was now an old man of thirty-five,[3] but he still had the strength to fight for his people and did his part proudly. He was getting old, however, and wondered if this would have to be his last campaign. He could tell he wasn't as quick as he had been—not a good thing in battle. He also grew tired more quickly and took longer to recover. Fortunately he wouldn't have to stand guard tonight, so he could get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow would be another long day of marching, probably the last before reaching the place of battle. Dagarat had long ago mastered the skill of shutting off his mind and resting,[4] and soon he fell fast asleep, renewing his energy for the next day's march.

The following morning the troops awoke early, broke camp, and resumed their march northward toward the Great Valley and the anticipated place of battle. Dagarat lived in the city of Ashdod near the coast, one of the five great Philistine cities. When the call came to assemble for war, the troops had gathered in each of those cities, marched the few miles north to the rendezvous point at Aphek (Map 5.1), and then continued north along the Great Coastal Road. He had often marched on this strategic route, as had many other armies before him. The Philistine forces were heading toward the Great Valley (which the Israelites called the Jezreel Valley) in north-central Canaan, hoping to draw King Saul and his weak Israelite army out of the hills into the open, where the stronger Philistine forces could destroy them. Dagarat and his fellow heavy infantrymen would probably play an important role in the battle, and he had plenty of time to ponder that and other thoughts as he marched through the day.

Once again, the refrain *eat or be eaten* filled his mind. It was the way of dogs; it was also the way of men. People had to help others, at least to some degree. But not all could thrive or even survive, so men also had to, in a sense, eat or be eaten. Men were stronger and smarter than animals, so men ate animals. Philistines were stronger and smarter than other men. They didn't eat other men, but they did kill others to take their land and possessions. Some may have thought this unjust, but Dagarat and his fellow Philistines simply used their strength to take what
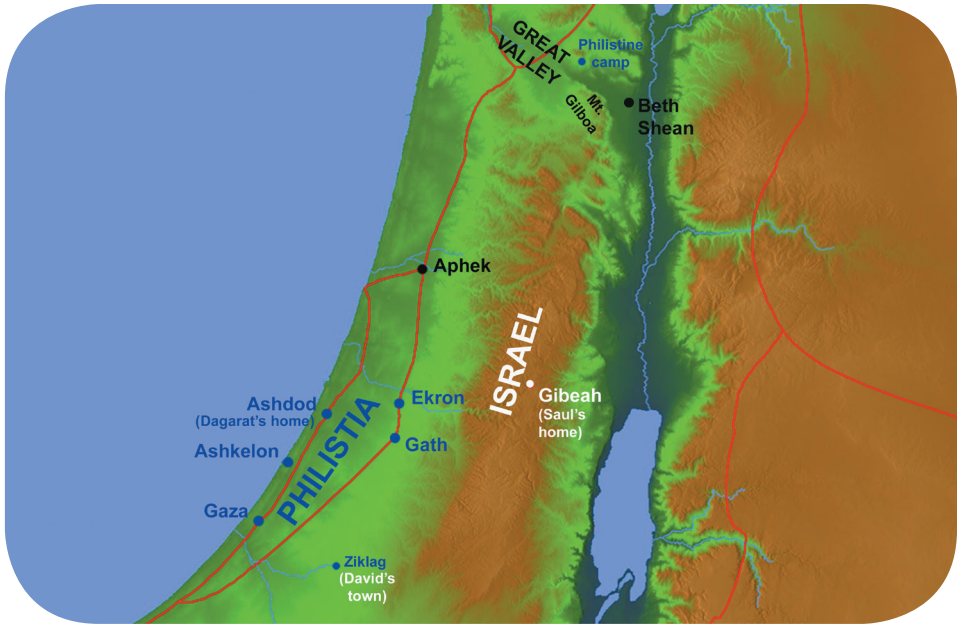
Map 5.1 – Philistine & Israelite approaches to Saul's final battle

they needed, whether that meant land or crops or goods. *Eat or be eaten.* The tough and strong usually did the eating, and the Philistines fit that description. They got to eat, and the others' things got eaten; that's just the way the world worked.

Dagarat was also thoughtful enough to realize that occasionally the weaker ended up eating the stronger—not often, but sometimes. He had observed weaker dogs gang up on a stronger dog and eat it. He had also seen weaker people occasionally overcome the stronger to kill them and take their things. Sometimes the weak used an advantage in tactics or terrain to kill the strong, and at times it seemed that the weak won without a clear human reason.

Did the gods will the weak to occasionally eat the strong? Perhaps. Perhaps that was the only way to explain victories by the weak. Dagarat considered himself as religious as most Philistines. They worshipped the gods Dagon, Ashtoreth, and Baal-zebub,[5] but Dagarat preferred Dagon because of his temple in Dagarat's city of Ashdod (1 Sam. 5:1–5). In all honesty, Dagarat wasn't always sure whether the Philistines flourished because their gods were stronger than other gods or because the Philistines themselves were stronger and better warriors.

Maybe both. Who knew? The gods could be fickle, as demonstrated by the way events in life and the fortunes of one's people sometimes played out in history.

Some of Dagarat's earliest memories came from historical tales that his grandfather passed on about the Great Migration. In the time of Dagarat's grandfather's grandfather, the Philistines and their cousins among the Sea Peoples—the Tjekker, Sheklesh, Denyen, and Weshesh—had been forced to leave their ancient homeland across the Great Sea.[6] Their combined peoples made the Great Migration around the eastern end of the Great Sea all the way to Egypt (Map 5.2), defeating all who resisted during their search for a new home. They had eventually tried to conquer the fat, green land of Egypt in one final battle, but they lost to the weaker Egyptians. The stories said that the Philistines and their fellow Sea Peoples had been stronger, but the Egyptians had learned of the approaching conquerors and prepared their naval and land forces well (see "Battle Tactics" in chap. 4). The Egyptians caught the invaders off guard and overwhelmed them. Many died, and many more were captured. Had the two sides fought on equal footing, the invaders would certainly have won. But the weaker

Map 5.2 – Migration of the Sea Peoples
(place of origin uncertain)

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had the victory, and the stronger couldn't recover quickly enough to try again. They were forced to settle along the coast of Canaan instead and make that region their new home.

In the years following the Great Migration, the Philistines had established themselves and dominated most of the nearby peoples in Canaan, taking their land and possessions as needed. Their victims included the people who lived in the hills to the east and called themselves Israelites. The Philistines had heard stories of the Israelites' history that included great acts by their one god in days gone by. *One god!*—Dagarat couldn't understand a people who worshipped only one god. No wonder they were so weak. Their god may have helped them earlier, but he didn't seem to do much in more recent days to protect and strengthen them. Occasionally the Israelites managed to defeat one of their neighbors, but more often the neighboring peoples proved stronger. This certainly included the Philistines, who had taken some of the Israelites' southern territory as well as much plunder (1 Sam. 4, 13). It was eat or be eaten, and the Philistines were doing most of the eating. Dagarat suspected that the upcoming battle with these Israelites would be no different.

Although the Philistines usually defeated the Israelites, Dagarat had also witnessed the weaker Israelites defeat the stronger in battle. He had been present in the border clash in the Elah Valley when the Philistine champion called Goliath had inexplicably lost to the Israelite pup named David (1 Sam. 17). Even after Goliath fell that day, Dagarat had wanted to stand and fight. But when the bulk of the army fled, he had little choice but to join them. That battle had shocked and humiliated the Philistines. Equally upsetting had been the earlier disaster up in the hills when the Israelite prince Jonathan had launched a victory that drove the advancing Philistines from the Israelite heartland (1 Sam 14). That loss had been particularly painful for Dagarat, as his oldest son had fallen in that defeat. Dagarat had tried to warn him that the gods frowned on those who grew too confident and proud, but his son hadn't listened. The gods had apparently chosen that day to punish the proud Philistines and give the victory to Israel.

Will something similar happen in the upcoming battle? Dagarat wondered. It was possible, even though the Philistines clearly had all the advantages. They had a superior army in every respect, especially when one considered the excellent Philistine chariots (Fig. 5.2). The Israelites had no chariots at all, as far as Dagarat knew. If one fought up in the hills,

the chariots were of little value. But out on open ground, the horse-drawn vehicles offered a tremendous advantage, and the Philistines were headed toward the Great Valley with plenty of open terrain. In addition to their advantage with chariots, the Philistine infantry was vastly better armed and trained than the Israelite troops. Only the gods could give Israel victory in this battle. But would they?

Dagarat thought that the presence of the Israelite David at the battle might actually cause the gods to give the victory to Israel. David had defied the odds and defeated Goliath, and David's god seemed to favor him often. David appeared to have a way of becoming stronger while avoiding danger. He had reportedly survived numerous attempts on his life by his own king, Saul (1 Sam. 18–26), and had gathered a private army of 400 men at the same time (1 Sam. 22:1–2).[7] The man was clearly a capable warrior and an effective leader. The threat from Saul had grown so great that David and his men had agreed to serve

Fig. 5.2 – Philistine chariots
Two chariots from relief of land battle with Egyptians under Ramesses III.
Parts of image have worn away or are obscured by omitted elements

Achish, the Philistine king at Gath, in exchange for protection from Saul (1 Sam. 27). The Philistines had been glad to take advantage of the strife between David and his king to further weaken Saul and Israel. For their service to Achish, David and his men received their own little town, Ziklag, south of Gath on the edge of the desert (Map 5.1)—not much of a prize in Dagarat's opinion. In exchange for the town and sanctuary in Philistine territory, David and his private army had promised to serve and protect their Philistine overlord. Apparently they had kept their promise, and David had reportedly even carried out raids against his own people (1 Sam. 27:8–12).[8]

Now that the Philistines were going to battle against the Israelites, David found himself obligated to fight with his overlord against his own people (1 Sam. 28:1–2). Dagarat thought this an interesting and troubling prospect. Would David actually fight against his own king and his nation's army? Dagarat had his doubts, as did a number of other Philistine warriors and officers. David and his men had started out toward the battlefield with the troops from Gath, but they went no farther than the Philistine rendezvous at Aphek. In the war council there, the other Philistine kings had convinced Achish to send David and his army back home (1 Sam 29). The Philistines gave up a fine leader and hundreds of proven troops, but they avoided a potential rebellion and perhaps lessened the chances of the gods working in Israel's favor.[9]

The Philistines had left their concerns for David behind them at Aphek, and now turned to face Saul and his army, weak as it was. The Philistines had chosen to push all the way to the Great Valley to try to force Saul out into the open. Although the Philistines had often defeated the weaker Israelites, so far they had been frustrated in their attempts to deliver the deathblow. Saul had wisely kept to the hills in the earlier engagements, taking advantage of the familiar, rougher terrain while neutralizing much of the Philistine military advantage.

The Philistines had now settled on the bold strategy of establishing themselves in the Great Valley. Taking the Valley would not only give them excellent farmland, it would also further weaken Israel by separating the majority of Israelites in the central hill country from their countrymen who lived in the hills of Galilee farther north. However, the Valley was a long way from the Philistine heartland, and they risked overextending themselves. They hoped to force Saul and his meager militia out of the hills to defend their holdings in the

Great Valley. The region's fertility made it highly prized, and the Israelites would be reluctant to surrender it. Saul would have to come out, wouldn't he?[10] If he did, the Philistines could destroy the army, kill the king, and cut Israel in two—at least that was their plan. Dagarat knew he would do his part, as he knew the gods would do theirs. But what part would they play? One could never be sure, even after giving all the requisite offerings and prayers.

Dagarat and the Philistines set up camp near a village at the base of a hill on the eastern end of the Great Valley. They positioned themselves opposite the central Israelite hills that ended at Mt. Gilboa (1 Sam. 28:4; see Map 5.1), the place from which Saul and his troops would probably emerge—if they were brave enough to fight. Undoubtedly, Israelite scouts had reported the Philistines' movements to Saul. The Philistine scouts had much greater difficulty learning the movements of the hill-dwelling Israelites and could only report that a number of them were making their way northward through the hills toward the Valley. So the Philistines waited and raided several Israelite villages in the Valley to take food and other supplies. Only a few offered resistance; it was the last thing they ever did.

While they waited, the Philistines held another war council to discuss strategy and pass along orders to all the troops. They first stressed the primary goal, which was not to decimate the enemy army or even to win. The primary goal was to kill King Saul[11] and any of his sons who might take part. If the Philistines could kill Israel's core leadership, these hill people might never recover enough to cause trouble for the Philistines again. Every Philistine had to target Saul and his sons above all else. The king should be easy enough to spot, with his crown and royal armband (2 Sam. 1:10). Identifying princes might prove more difficult.

Beyond deciding to target the royal family, the Philistines also settled on their battle plan. Each morning they would array in the usual formation with heavy infantry in a line in the center, light infantry behind them ready to fill gaps in the line or exploit breaks in the enemy line, archers and slingers in the rear, and chariots on the wings. First, some of the chariots would cross the narrow valley to probe and hopefully draw out the enemy. If and when the enemy came out from Gilboa and the forested hills, the chariots would return to the rest of the troops. The forces would hold their positions, giving the Israelite troops plenty of time to advance into the Valley.

Only when the Israelites got well out into the narrow valley would the Philistines move. On a signal from the Philistine commander, the chariots would advance and make a few passes in front of the enemy, firing several rounds with their bows. They were to look like they were attacking but do minimal damage, allowing the enemy to continue advancing. Then the Philistine commander would give a signal, and the chariots would head back toward their wings. By the time they returned, hopefully the Israelites would be about halfway across the Valley. Then the commander would signal again for the Philistine archers and slingers to begin firing and the infantry to charge, engaging and capturing the attention of the Israelites. Once the Israelites were occupied, the commander would signal yet again. The chariots would head back out, but this time, they would circle around the troops from both armies without engaging so they could get to the Israelite rear before attacking. If all went well, the Philistines would surround the Israelites and cut them to shreds. Dagarat thought the plan fit the situation well and had a reasonable chance of working, but as he knew from repeated experience, battles rarely went according to plan.

Surprisingly, this battle did. Although the Philistines knew that it could take many days or even weeks before the Israelites engaged (cf. 1 Sam. 17, esp. v. 16), they had to wait just a few days. Shortly after the Philistines drew up into battle formation one morning and the chariots made their initial sweeps, the charioteers signaled that they had spotted the enemy at the base of Mt. Gilboa. The horse-drawn vehicles returned as planned, and the Israelite forces emerged from the forested high ground as if on cue. The two armies had a clear view of one another. Dagarat scoffed at the enemy's small number and obvious lack of equipment and training, but he had to commend them for their bravery. The Israelites could see they were badly outmatched, but they continued their advance anyway. Were they brave or just stupid? Dagarat figured it was both, and thought that if the gods had not determined to help Israel, the enemy would have one fewer king and army by nightfall.

Dagarat was correct. The battle played out exactly according to the Philistine plan. When the Israelites got well into the valley, the Philistine commander signaled and the charioteers advanced to put down light fire with their bows. The commander signaled again, the horses returned, and the Philistines fired and charged. Their chariots then looped around as planned, enveloping the Israelites. Saul and his outmatched army

fought bravely but in vain. The Philistines slowly but gradually cut them down until less than half their number remained.

Eventually Saul signaled for a retreat, and a part of his force broke through and began to flee back toward Mt. Gilboa and the safety of the hills. Those Israelites thought the move would save their lives, but as soon as they separated from the main Philistine force, the Philistine archers could begin firing again. The archers had stayed just behind their own lines with little to do for most of the battle. With the two sides so close together, they had to refrain from shooting lest they hit their own men. Now they could fire in earnest once more, and had the unprotected backs of the fleeing Israelites for targets. Many fell with the first volley, and the archers continued their deadly work (1 Sam. 31:3; 1 Chron. 10:3). Those who survived continued fleeing to and then up the lower slopes of Mt. Gilboa, out of the range of the archers. The Philistine chariots then took over, chasing down and finishing off most of them (2 Sam. 1:6). Dagarat heard several victorious cries from his fellow warriors and wondered if they had just downed Saul or perhaps one or more of his sons. Dagarat was too far away to see, but he knew he would hear before long. Everyone could see clearly that the victory had been overwhelming. Only a few Israelites escaped.

The battle concluded as successfully as it had begun. Nearly all the Israelites lay dead. The Philistines knew they had accomplished their second goal, but they would have to wait until the following day when they combed the battlefield to determine how well they had done with their first. When he finally had the chance to stop and rest, Dagarat noted that Israel's god had not helped his people this day, and the strong had once more eaten the weak.

That evening, after the Philistines had tended to their wounded and taken care to guard the bodies of their dead, they feasted around their fires back at their camp. Dagarat enjoyed the meal of tasty Israelite lamb, courtesy of one of the nearby villages, and he thought about the dogs that were probably feasting as well on the Israelite dead out on the battlefield.

The next morning, the victors enjoyed more of the spoils. They watched the last few Israelite farmers and their families abandoning their properties in the Great Valley, and word soon arrived that more Israelites in the nearby regions across the Jordan River to the east were departing as well. They all knew that Philistine settlers would arrive shortly to take over those lands and homes (1 Sam. 31:7).

The victorious Philistines also combed the battlefield, stripping the dead Israelites of anything of value. They found and collected the corpses of Saul and three of his sons, including Jonathan, the crown prince (1 Sam. 31:2). They gathered around the bodies for a brief celebration of thanksgiving to their gods (cf. Josh. 10:22–27). Then they removed both Saul's armor and head as trophies of war and sent them back to the Philistine cities in the south with messengers carrying news of the victory. The Philistines also took the bodies of Saul and his sons and fastened them on the walls of Beth Shean, a city at the far eastern end of the Great Valley (Map 5.1). This gruesome display announced to all in the area that the Israelite king and nation had just been decapitated, and that the Philistines now commanded the region.[12]

Dagarat and his countrymen continued to celebrate their great victory over Israel and its royal house as they marched back home, but the thoughtful veteran considered again the Israelite David. The Philistines had probably just imposed on the Israelites their most destructive and humiliating defeat ever, which might even threaten Israel's very survival. Could the nation continue without a king or capable princes to take his place? And what would David do? David had avoided death numerous times in the past; could he now help his nation avoid complete disintegration? Dagarat didn't know, and thought he would leave that for the gods to determine. The Philistines' gods seemed quite capable of defeating the god of Israel, didn't they? What were the chances that David and his one god could resurrect the Israelite nation to again trouble the mighty Philistines? *Probably very little*, thought Dagarat.

But this time the thoughtful Philistine warrior was wrong. The Bible tells how in the next years David and his God would indeed do that—and more (2 Sam. 5, 8). David and his God would help the weak become strong and turn Israel into the eaters rather than those getting eaten.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND BIBLICAL CONNECTIONS

As the preceding story suggests, the Philistines established themselves along the southern coast of Canaan and dominated the Israelites and other nearby peoples for approximately 150 years before the reign of David. One finds colorful reports of their battles with the Israelites in the

biblical books of Judges and 1 Samuel, as well as in scattered references throughout the Old Testament. Who were these uncircumcised foes of Israel? From where had they come, and what happened to them after they faded from the biblical record?[13]

A number of the earliest biblical references to Philistines appear in the patriarchal stories of Genesis, describing events that perhaps occurred c. 2000 BC. Abraham and his son Isaac have dealings with "Philistines" in "the land of the Philistines" (Gen. 21, 26). Since the great migration of the Philistines and other Sea Peoples didn't take place until approximately 1200 BC, one might wonder why Philistines appear centuries earlier. Some simply call these early references anachronistic. Others allow that some Philistines or related peoples could have arrived earlier and settled in the same region that was later dominated by those who came in the great wave of immigration. If these earlier immigrants had come from among the Sea Peoples, later readers might naturally have associated them with the Philistines, and the name could have been updated for that audience, a practice found elsewhere in Genesis.[14]

Where did the Philistines originate at the outset of the "Great Migration" of Dagarat's ancestors? Apparently they came from the region of the Aegean Sea, perhaps from Crete or one or more of the other islands between Greece and Asia Minor (Map 5.2). Several of the Philistines' cultural characteristics such as their pottery and architecture, as well as Goliath's armor and weaponry (1 Sam. 17:5–7) have close parallels in Aegean culture. A number of textual references also seem to corroborate this connection. Egyptian records describe the Sea Peoples as invaders from islands in the north, and their list of places destroyed during the migration fits well with an origin in the Aegean.[15] Amos 9:7 and Jeremiah 47:4 state that the Philistines came from Caphtor (usually understood as Crete, though some[16] link it to the region of Cilicia in Asia Minor). In addition, Ezekiel 25:15–16 and Zephaniah 2:4–5 use the terms "Philistines" and "Kerethites" (Cretans) as poetic parallels, a pattern which typically denotes synonyms.

Until western scholars began studying Egyptian historical sources in the late 18th and 19th centuries, the biblical material represented nearly all of what the modern world knew about the Philistines. But beginning with Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in AD 1798–1803, French and other scholars began examining reliefs carved into the walls of ancient Egyptian temples and later deciphered the accompanying hieroglyphic texts and other materials. More recently, archaeology has uncovered Philistine

remains from sites known from the Bible (Ashkelon, Ashdod, etc.) as well as some that are not (e.g. Tel Qasile just north of Tel Aviv). These pictures, descriptions, and remains have added a great deal of information to what one reads about the Philistines in the Bible.

The still-incomplete picture that has emerged shows the Philistines as one of a number of related people groups including Denyen, Tjekker, Weshesh, and Sherden, which had migrated to the southeastern Mediterranean, apparently from the area of the Aegean Sea in the region that is today Greece and western Turkey. The Egyptians called these invaders "Sea Peoples" since they came by sea as well as by land. Something, perhaps a cataclysm like a famine or volcanic eruption, apparently forced them to leave their homeland around 1200 BC. They began making their way around the eastern Mediterranean basin, conquering those who lay in their path. They took advantage of the general weakness of the contemporary ancient Near Eastern civilizations, including the formerly great powers of Egypt and the Hittites in Asia Minor. The Sea Peoples attacked Asia Minor, Syria, Canaan, and finally Egypt, contributing to the destruction and general turmoil of the time.

Pharaoh Ramesses III recorded that he repulsed the invaders at the edge of Egypt in naval and land battles in the early 12th century BC and afterward settled them along the southern coast of Canaan. Ramesses' magnificent reliefs of the two battles give us much of our best information about the Philistines' appearance and dress, their weaponry and naval forces, and the equipment they utilized for moving on land.

The archaeological record generally supports the Philistines' Aegean origins. The Philistines would have been Indo-Europeans, and they brought to Canaan a culture reflecting Aegean customs in a number of ways. They did not circumcise their males (Judg. 14:3, etc.), unlike the Semitic peoples such as Israel. When they arrived in Canaan, they apparently wrote in a linear script related to Linear A and B from Crete, although they later adopted the alphabet used in Canaan. Their earlier pottery closely resembles pottery known from Mycenae in Greece (Fig. 5.3), though the Philistine pottery subsequently evolved independently. Their architecture included at least one temple with an open hearth, a feature of buildings back in the Aegean. As noted earlier, even Goliath's armor and weaponry (1 Sam. 17:5–7) reflect what was worn and used in the Aegean.

About the same time[17] that the Philistines settled along the southern coast of Canaan with their distinct culture, the Israelites were beginning to establish themselves in Canaan, mostly in the hills in the central and northern parts of the country. The emerging Philistines and Israelites battled for land and supremacy, with the Philistines dominating from about the mid-12th to the end of the 11th centuries, the period of the latter biblical judges through the reign of Israel's first king, Saul. The biblical texts clearly reflect the Philistines' superiority—"At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel. . . . Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us?" (Judg. 14:4; 15:11, ESV). The Philistines enjoyed a great technological advantage in metallurgy and thus weaponry, as reflected by both the biblical texts (1 Sam. 13:16–22) and by the numerous metal tools and furnaces—used for melting ore—uncovered at several Philistine sites.

One sees this Philistine dominance in the biblical texts describing the colorful and famous exploits of the judge Samson, who lived toward the end of the period of the judges (Judg. 13–16). Samson carried out what appear to be ultimately unsuccessful border skirmishes against Israel's more powerful neighbors to the west. Though Samson won a few battles, his greatest victory cost him his life, and after Samson's death the author of Judges can only say that he "had judged Israel twenty years" (Judg. 16:31, ESV) without establishing peace with the Philistines.

The Bible indicates that Philistine domination continued throughout the ministry of Samuel, Israel's last judge, and the reign of Saul, Israel's first king. Not surprisingly, the archaeological remains from Philistine sites during this time reflect prosperity and expansion. During the life of Samuel, the Philistines won a decisive battle at
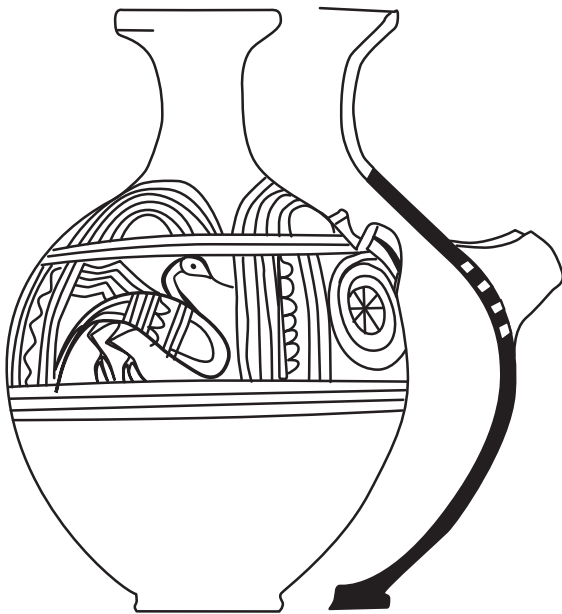
Fig. 5.3 – Philistine "beer strainer" jug
Note perforations inside spout in cross-section on right, apparently for straining grain husks when dispensing beer. Also note typical stylized bird in decoration.

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Ebenezer near Aphek on the coastal plain (Map 5.1) and captured the Ark of the Covenant, which led to the death of Eli the High Priest and his sons (1 Sam. 4). Although the Israelites subsequently got their Ark back, the best Samuel could manage against the Philistines was a single victory at Mizpah up in the heart of the Israelite hill country (1 Sam. 7; see Map 5.3).

The new king Saul had some military success against the neighboring Ammonites in the east (1 Sam. 11) and the Amalekites in the south (1 Sam. 15), but he could not decisively defeat the Philistines. At one point during Saul's reign, the Philistines penetrated and established themselves at Michmash, well past Saul's capital of Gibeah in the very heartland of his kingdom (Map 5.3), but it was Saul's son Jonathan, not Saul, who launched the victory that drove out the invaders. Saul squandered much of that victory's impact with his foolish vow during the battle that nearly cost crown prince Jonathan his life (1 Sam. 13–14). Likewise, when the Philistines moved to Azekah and Socoh to take Israelite land in the Elah Valley (Map 5.3), a shepherd named David famously led the victory rather than the king (1 Sam. 17). Conflict continued between the peoples throughout the rest of Saul's life (1 Sam. 18–23). Saul's largely
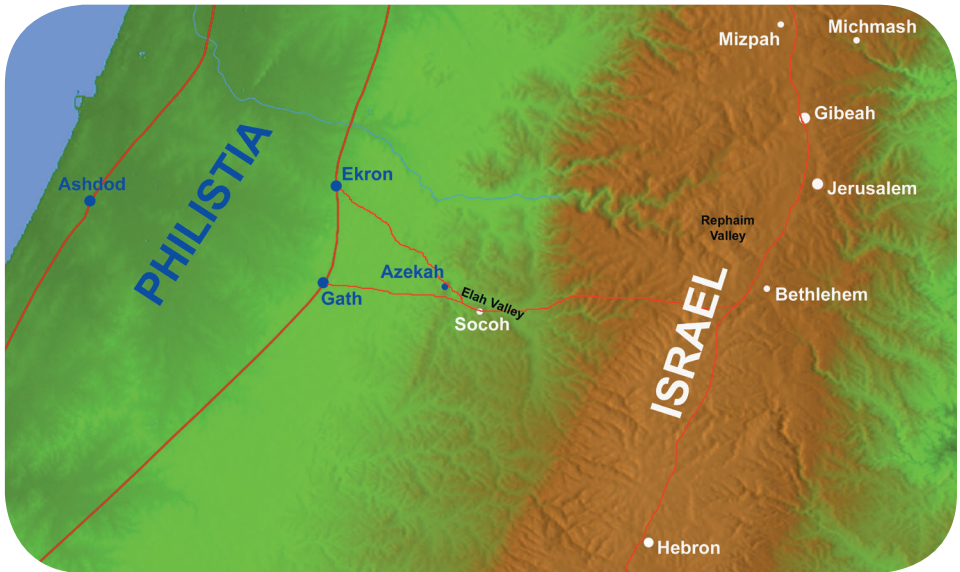
Map 5.3 – Locations of Israelite-Philistine battles
Israelite victory at Mizpah; Philistine advance to Michmash;
Battle in Elah Valley; David moves capital; Philistines attack via Rephaim Valley

ineffective reign ended when the Philistines killed him and most of his sons in battle, as told earlier in the story of the fictitious warrior Dagarat (1 Sam. 27–29, 31).

The death of Saul proved to be the high-water mark of Philistine power. In the following decades, David not only kept Israel alive but also made his nation into a force that dominated neighboring kingdoms including Philistia (2 Sam. 5, 8). Near the beginning of his reign, David moved his capital from the important but somewhat isolated Hebron in the southern hills to the more strategically located Jerusalem (Map 5.3). The Philistines apparently understood this as an effort to consolidate and expand, so they moved to weaken David. They made a surprise attack up a little-used route to reach a point in the Rephaim Valley south of Jerusalem. This cut off David in his new capital from his traditional bases of support in Bethlehem and Hebron farther south (Map 5.3).[18] David responded and defeated the Philistines rather decisively (2 Sam. 5). The only subsequent mention of battle with the Philistines during David's rise to greatness appears in summary form in 2 Samuel 8:1, which notes that David was by then conquering Philistine territory.[19] As one might expect, a number of Philistine sites show a layer of destruction from the early 10th century, evidently during the time of David's reign, perhaps done by David or even Egypt. The Egyptians seem to have taken advantage of this shifting power to conquer territory in southern Canaan as well (1 Kings 9:16). David appears to have finally given Israel superiority over these longtime foes.

Fighting would continue between the Israelites and the Philistines for some time (2 Sam. 21, 23; 1 Kings 15:27; 2 Kings 18:8; 1 Chron. 20:4–5; 2 Chron. 26:6–7), but only twice in the following centuries will the Bible note any Philistine advances into Israelite territory (2 Chron. 21:16–17; 28:18). The Philistines could never again threaten Israel's existence.

Following David's conquests, the Philistines gradually fade from the biblical record. Likewise, from the mid-10th century on, the Philistine archaeological sites reflect a decline in wealth and power, although the Philistine culture continued for some centuries after that. The Philistines continue to appear in the Bible and other historical records into the 6th century BC, after which they apparently lost their cultural identity and assimilated into the Canaanite population.

So, to return to our opening question—who were these uncircumcised Philistines, these longstanding enemies of Israel? They were part of a coalition of peoples who left their homeland in the Aegean, left a trail

of destruction as they migrated through the eastern Mediterranean, and nearly conquered Egypt before settling along the southern coast of Canaan. They became a military and cultural force that challenged and nearly extinguished the emerging nation of Israel, only to be overcome when David led Israel to a height of power. With this backdrop in mind, we turn to describe the organization, weaponry, and tactics of the Philistine military as best the limited sources from Egypt, the Bible, and archaeology will allow.

MILITARY ORGANIZATION

Like most armies of the time, the Philistines primarily utilized infantry and chariotry in their military. The Bible states that they also had archers, foreign troops, and possibly cavalry. As depicted in the reliefs of the naval battle between Ramesses III and the Sea Peoples, they also had some naval forces. The balance of this chapter will discuss each of these aspects along with other known elements of the Philistine military.

STRUCTURE

One finds surprisingly little information about the structure of the Philistine military in available sources, given the number of times it appears in the biblical texts and Egyptian reliefs. Clearly the Philistine military followed the general contemporary pattern of infantry complemented by chariotry, but most of the biblical references use terms too vague to describe the structures of these branches. The most complete description may be found in 1 Samuel 13:5, ESV—"And the Philistines mustered to fight with Israel, thirty thousand (number discussed below) chariots, and six thousand horsemen (identity discussed below), and troops like the sand on the seashore in multitude." The Bible clearly names the several branches, but supplies little detail about them. The reliefs offer some supplemental information but also raise matters of interpretation that lessen the reliefs' potential value.

For example, the effective Philistine military must have utilized an appropriate hierarchy of officers, but we know little about it. The Bible refers to their military leaders with the general term *śārîm* (שָׂרִים— "commanders" or "officers"—1 Sam. 29:3–4), but how many levels of organization they would have had or what units the officers would have commanded remain unclear. The Bible also uses the term *sĕrānîm*

(סְרָנִים—"lords" or "rulers"—Judg. 16:30) for the supreme leaders of the five allied city-states. The term *seren* (סֶרֶן—singular), a non-Hebrew loan word, apparently came from the Aegean.[20] These "lords" governed their five respective city-states, led the nation against Israel in battle, and apparently commanded the troops from their respective cities and regions.[21] For example, Achish the "lord" of Gath marched with the Philistine army to the Jezreel Valley for Saul's final battle and took part in command decisions during that campaign (1 Sam. 29).

1 Samuel 29:2 gives additional information about Philistine military units as well. It describes the Philistines as being organized in units of "hundreds" and "thousands," each of which presumably would have had officers. See the discussion under "Size of Army" in chapter 1 on the terms "hundreds" and "thousands"—which the Bible frequently uses to describe units in the Israelite military—for possible implications about the Philistine military.

Infantry   The Bible mentions the Philistine infantry (1 Sam. 13–14, 17, etc.) much more frequently than its officer corps, but it does little to describe

Fig. 5.4 – Typical Philistine infantryman
as portrayed in Egyptian reliefs

the infantry in any detail. Some biblical passages mention infantry units that were involved in tactical maneuvers. Other passages refer to Philistine infantry serving in garrisons stationed at strategic locations in conquered Israelite territory. For example, one finds Philistine infantry at Gibeah, apparently the home of Israel's newly anointed king Saul (1 Sam. 10:5), and at Michmash deep in the heart of the Israelite hill country (1 Sam. 13:23–14:46—see Map 5.3).

The Bible also notes that Israelites served with the Philistine military on at least two occasions. The first, brief passage in 1 Samuel notes that an unknown number of Hebrews were serving with the Philistines and even went up with them into the central Israelite heartland to challenge Saul's young army. When

Jonathan began the successful charge to drive out the Philistines, the Hebrews, possibly serving as mercenaries, defected to Israel (1 Sam. 14:21). Perhaps this experience helped lead to the Philistine concern and mistrust of the vassal David and his men potentially participating in the battle in the Jezreel Valley in which the Philistines killed Saul and his sons (see 1 Sam. 28:1–2 and 29:1–11, as well as the opening story of Dagarat, above).

Egyptian reliefs provide additional information about the Philistine infantry, offering details about their appearance, weaponry, and possibly their organization. The reliefs typically depict Philistine soldiers as beardless, wearing a distinctive "feathered" headdress (Figs. 5.1, 5.2, 5.4, etc.). The headdress had an ornamented band that encircled what appears to be a crown of what seem to be feathers, spiked hair, or possibly reeds. It also included a neck-guard to protect the back of the head, and often a chinstrap to hold it in place.[22]

The reliefs further show the Philistines and other Sea Peoples wearing a paneled kilt with broad borders, falling to a point in front and frequently ornamented with three tassels (Figs. 5.4, 5.6, 5.7). On their upper torso the infantrymen usually wear a type of ribbed corselet, often shown with strips resembling ribs. Though the kind of material is not clear, the corselets may have been made from leather, or more likely, metal.

Curiously, the Bible's only detailed description of a Philistine soldier (Goliath in 1 Sam. 17:5–7) differs meaningfully from this rather consistent Egyptian portrayal. However, the Egyptian reliefs date to the early 12th century, and David apparently fought Goliath in the late 11th century. The Bible describes Goliath as wearing a bronze helmet rather than a feathered headdress, and bronze greaves on his lower legs (vs. 5–6) instead of bare legs as pictured in the reliefs. Goliath's helmet and greaves better match the portrayal of Mycenaean warriors on the Warrior Vase (Fig. 5.5) dating from the 12th century in Greece. The Bible also describes Goliath as wearing a coat of scale armor, different from both the ribbed corselet with paneled kilt in the Egyptian reliefs and the long-sleeved corselet with fringed and dotted kilt on the Warrior Vase. The Warrior Vase and the reliefs of Ramesses III date from approximately the same time, but they offer rather different pictures of Aegean warriors. Thus the differences between the Bible's description of Goliath's armor and the Egyptian reliefs nearly two centuries earlier may not be surprising.

Ramesses' reliefs also show the Philistines in battle, giving us some idea of their organization and weaponry, though, as mentioned earlier, the reliefs do present interpretive problems. For example, in the very busy relief of the land battle, the Philistine foot soldiers sometimes appear in units of four, leading some to understand that they normally fought in units of that size A careful examination of the relief, however, clouds that picture. The number of Philistine infantrymen in their "units" ranges from two to eight (see Fig. 5.6 which shows five), with four being

Fig. 5.5 – Mycenaean warrior from Warriors Vase, 12th century
Note bronze helmet instead of feathered headdress and greaves on lower legs, similar to the biblical description of Goliath.

the most common. In addition, the Egyptians appear frequently in the relief in groups of four, but they apparently organized their infantry in units of ten (see discussion in chap. 3). This suggests that the artist(s) may have used these groups to give an impression of soldiers fighting in battle rather than to denote the actual unit size.

As for weaponry, the Egyptians show Philistine infantrymen usually carrying small, circular shields and one or two spears, which will be discussed below. Instead of spears, a number of Philistines use the straight, double-edged sword characteristic of the Sea Peoples. Curiously, none carry bows, even in the three Philistine chariots shown in the relief. Did the Philistines not use archers in this battle, even in their chariots?

Again, a careful examination suggests that the absence of bows may be stylistic rather than factual. One Philistine chariot does appear to have the typical quiver mounted on the outside, pointed to the rear, allowing for easy access to arrows during battle (Fig. 5.2). Was the quiver included by mistake, or did the artist have a reason to omit Philistine bows? None of the Egyptian foot soldiers in the relief carry bows either. In fact, one sees bows only with the Egyptian chariots, including the oversized Ramesses III, who shoots one from his chariot. But from these Egyptians bows, only the pharaoh's numerous giant arrows appear in the relief, naturally causing tremendous damage to the enemy. The artist apparently omitted the arrows from the Egyptian chariots, and most Egyptian depictions of Hittite chariots also omit bows. Why? Perhaps it was meant to avoid showing enemy troops using bows and arrows that could clearly threaten Egyptian troops or even the pharaoh. All of this leaves open the possibility that the Philistines may have had bows in the battle, even though one only sees spears and swords in the relief.

Fig. 5.6 – Group of five Philistine infantrymen
Two carry spears and three have straight swords.
One also carries the typical round shield.

Chariotry   As mentioned above, three Philistine chariots appear in the reliefs of Ra-
messes III, two of which appear in Fig. 5.2. All have wheels with six spokes
and are drawn by two horses, like the contemporary Egyptian chariots. The
axel appears attached at or near the rear of the Philistine chariot body, re-
flecting high-quality construction. As noted earlier, one Philistine chariot
appears to carry the typical quiver that one would use for arrows. This
quiver might hold the spears that most of the chariot riders are carrying,
though the relative size of the spears to the case and the angle of mounting
make this rather unlikely. Curiously, the Philistine chariots usually carry a
driver plus *two* warriors, unlike the driver plus a single warrior of the con-
temporary Egyptian chariots. One of the Philistine chariot-warriors bears
a round shield, typical of the Philistines, and three of the four carry pairs of
spears much like the infantrymen's. Did the chariots function as troop car-
riers to move foot soldiers into place, or did the artist choose not to portray
bows in the hands of the enemy, giving them the weapons of their infan-
trymen instead? One cannot be sure, but the latter may be more likely.[23]

The Bible adds just two references about Philistine chariots, and
both prove difficult to understand. The first states that the Philistines as-
sembled "thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen and troops
like the sand on the seashore in multitude" (1 Sam. 13:5, ESV), presenting
a *very* high number of chariots.[24] The alternate reading of three thousand
chariots (as in the NIV) better fits with the numbers of chariots known
at the time. In addition, given the hilly, rocky terrain around Michmash,
one wonders how even three thousand chariots could have maneuvered
there. The term "thousand" may better be translated "units" instead.[25] A
conjectured size of ten chariots per unit, as the Egyptians apparently had
(see discussion in chapter 2), would mean that the Philistines may have
taken approximately three hundred (or even just thirty) chariots into the
hill country to confront the Israelites—still a substantial force consid-
ering the terrain and the opponent.

Next, we turn to the "six thousand horse(men)" of 1 Samuel 13:5.
The term "horse" or "horsemen" (פָּרָשִׁים—*pārāšîm*) could mean chari-
oteers—those who drove or rode in the chariots—arguably the most
natural reading. If the Philistines were using two men per chariot by the
time of their wars against Saul, then six thousand charioteers in three
thousand chariots would fit nicely. The term could also mean simply
"horses," with six thousand horses pulling three thousand chariots,[26] or
the term might refer to men who rode horses, i.e. cavalry. If "cavalry" is

the correct interpretation, the text would refer to chariots, cavalry, and infantry, with the numbers of the two types of equestrian troops dependent on how one understands the numbers and interpretation of the term "thousand/unit" (אֶלֶף—'eleph). However one understands the numbers and the meaning of "horse(men)," 1 Samuel 13:5 is clearly saying that the Philistines mustered a vast and formidable force that the Israelites could not match, and therefore needed God's help to win.

In the second biblical reference to Philistine chariots (2 Sam. 1:6), a fugitive gives a false report to David about Saul's death, apparently in order to gain favor with David. The fugitive reports that he killed the Israelite king when Saul was already mortally wounded and the Philistine "chariots and their drivers (בַּעֲלֵי הַפָּרָשִׁים—ba'ălê happārāšîm—lit. "masters of the horses") in hot pursuit." Although the man lied about killing Saul, his description about the Philistine forces may well be factual. If so, he uses a unique expression[27] to describe the men associated with the horses. As before, this term could refer to charioteers or cavalry troops, thus again suggesting that the Philistines may have had cavalry by this time.

Little archaeological evidence currently exists for Philistine chariotry apart from a two-faced linchpin uncovered at Ekron that was probably used to secure a chariot wheel to its axel.[28] This means that the Egyptian relief portraying three Philistine chariots gives our best information by far about what Philistine chariots may have looked like.

Navy

We turn from the Philistines' land forces to their navy, assuming they had one. Even though the Bible includes many references to this particular group of Sea Peoples, it makes no mention of Philistine ships or navy. The Egyptian reliefs and archaeological finds in Israel show that, in general, the Sea Peoples must have been skilled sailors, which presumably would have included the Philistines as well. As discussed in chapter 3, both the Egyptians and Sea Peoples used warships in their naval battle in 1179 BC. The Sea Peoples' ships (Figs. 4.10, 5.7) had a single, loose-footed sail (furled at the top) on a single mast with a crow's nest on top. The ships' hulls have projections resembling birds' heads fore and aft, as well as platforms on each end where troops stood to fight. The relief depicts the Sea Peoples' ships with rudders but no oars, suggesting that they were powered by wind alone or may have been caught by surprise and did not have time to deploy their oars.[29]

Other sources suggest that the Philistines and the Sea Peoples in general may have brought about a number of advances in naval technology. The Egyptian ships portrayed in the naval battle against the Sea Peoples show a number of significant improvements over earlier Egyptian shipbuilding techniques, including the loose-footed sail and crow's nest. Since many of these improvements also appear on the ships of the Sea Peoples, the concepts may have originated in the Aegean. Archaeological finds also suggest that the Sea Peoples introduced other advances in naval technology, like the composite anchor (a stone anchor with holes for wooden staves to hold on to the mud on the bottom) and ashlar (square-cut stone) structures and quays.[30]
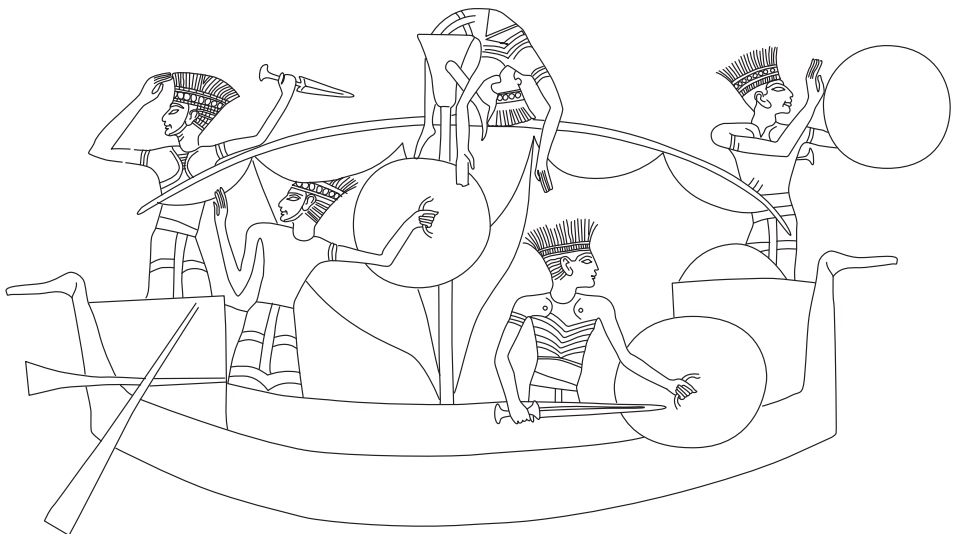
Fig. 5.7 – Philistine ship from sea battle 1179 B.C. Note single mast with sail furled at top, crow's nest, birds' heads(?) on bow and stern, and absence of oars

Role of the Gods

Although the evidence is somewhat sketchy, the Philistine gods appear to have played a meaningful role in the Philistines' military activities, much like in other nearby cultures of the time. The numerous statues of goddesses unearthed at Philistine sites suggest that the Philistines worshipped the Great Goddess, or Mother Goddess, of the Aegean world when they first came to Canaan.[31] By the time they emerged in the biblical record, however, the Philistines had apparently adopted Canaanite deities[32] and included these gods in their military activity. The

Philistines seem to have interpreted certain events in nature as acts of some god, as when thunder caused them to panic and lose a battle to an overmatched Israelite force (1 Sam. 7:10). The Philistines carried their idols to the battlefield (2 Sam. 5:21), and their war trophies often ended up in the temples of their gods.[33] Philistine priests appear only in 1 Samuel 5–6, giving advice about what to do with the captured Israelite Ark, but they may well have played a significant role in military activity as well. The Philistines also practiced divination (1 Sam. 6:2; Isa. 2:6), which presumably would have dealt with military activity for such a militaristic people. The Philistines seem to have involved their gods in battle rather like the other peoples of their day.

WEAPONS

Our sources of knowledge about Philistine weaponry, like those that mention its military organization, are somewhat uneven. The Egyptian reliefs provide much information, as do archaeological finds. The biblical accounts are less helpful, the description of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 notwithstanding.

The scriptural reference to the Philistines' monopoly on metalworking during the early Israelite monarchy has been understood to mean iron, but the text describes metalworking in general without mentioning either iron or bronze.[34] The Philistines apparently used their military superiority to prevent the Israelites from developing their own metalworking industry, gaining an economic advantage as well as preventing the Israelites from producing their own metal weapons. The archaeological record confirms that the Philistines indeed enjoyed a technological advantage during this time.[35]

SHORT-RANGE WEAPONS

The Philistines used their metalworking industry to produce swords, spears, and daggers for close fighting.

Sword

The Egyptian reliefs typically depict the Philistines and other Sea Peoples carrying long, tapering, two-edged swords with midrib (see Figs. 5.4, 5.6, 5.7). A sample of this type of sword (Fig. 5.8) from the 12th–11th

century was discovered near Joppa in Philistia.[36] This sword first appears in Egyptian reliefs[37] with the arrival of the Sea Peoples in the 13th century, and it became the dominant type of cut-and-thrust sword in the eastern Mediterranean.
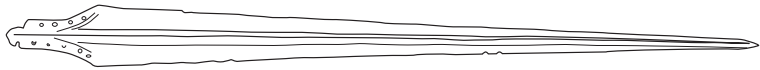
Fig. 5.8 – Long (3' 5") tapering sword
from Philistia, 12-11 cent.

Spear   In addition to swords, the Egyptian reliefs also show Philistine infantry, chariotry, and naval troops carrying one or two spears, each approximately five feet long (Figs. 5.2, 5.6, 5.9[38]). The Bible highlights two Philistine spears for their spearheads of enormous size (Goliath's iron spearhead, weighing 600 shekels (ca. sixteen pounds—1 Sam. 17:7) and Ishbi-benob's bronze spearhead, weighing 300 shekels (ca. eight pounds—2 Sam. 21:16)). Though perhaps not represented in the reliefs, daggers, the final type of short-range weapon, have surfaced in excavations at Ashdod; one was made entirely of bronze, the other with a bronze handle and an iron blade.[39]
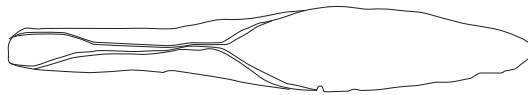
Fig. 5.9 – Spearhead
(4.7" long), hammered from bronze sheet metal

MEDIUM-RANGE WEAPONS

Javelin   The one example of a medium-range Philistine weapon comes from the description of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. The text says that along with his spear and sword, Goliath also carried a javelin, presumably for hurling a moderate distance.[40] Thus with his sword, spear, and javelin, Goliath had only short- and medium-range weapons when facing David, who carried only the long-range sling. David could and did effectively attack the Philistine from a greater distance, but he would have suffered a significant disadvantage had the two closed to close range.

Warfare in the Old Testament

LONG-RANGE WEAPONS

A limited amount of textual and archaeological evidence indicates that the *Bow*
Philistines used the long-range bow. Excavations have recovered Philistine
arrowheads (Fig. 5.10).[41] The Bible's parallel accounts of Saul's death state
that Philistine archers critically wounded him before he fell on his sword (1
Sam. 31:3; 1 Chron. 10:3). Finally, as discussed earlier, the Egyptian relief
with Philistine chariots shows one chariot with what appears to be a quiver,
though bows and arrows are noticeably absent from the relief, perhaps for
ideological reasons. Thus it appears that the Philistines utilized archers like
other contemporary armies, though the lack of conclusive proof that their
chariots carried archers casts some doubt on the issue.

Fig. 5.10 – Arrowhead (2.75"), bronze, with flat mid-rib

DEFENSIVE EQUIPMENT

Also like other contemporary armies, the Philistines protected their war-
riors with shields, head coverings, and different types of body armor,
often portrayed in the Egyptian reliefs. As discussed and pictured earlier
(Figs. 5.4, 5.6, 5.7), the Philistines carried round, convex shields varying
in size, with a handle in the center, and occasionally decorated with cir-
cles apparently representing metal knobs or bosses fastened to the leather
covering.[42] The Philistines' headdresses were apparently made from
leather and covered the backs of their necks, fastening with a chinstrap.
The encircling band that held the protruding "feathers" was decorated
in various patterns (Figs. 5.1, 5.2, 5.4, 5.7), perhaps representing rank or
tribe. As noted earlier, they wore ribbed corselets on the chest, appar-
ently made of overlapping bands of leather or metal, on top of a shirt.
The bands usually curved upward as they met in the middle, perhaps to
imitate human ribs, but occasionally they curved down (Figs. 5.4, 5.7).

As discussed above under "Infantry," the Bible's detailed descrip-
tion of Goliath's defensive equipment (1 Sam. 17:4–7) differs somewhat
from the typical Egyptian portrayals. He wore greaves and a bronze
helmet instead of a feathered headdress, plus scale armor instead of a
ribbed corselet. In addition, a shield-bearer went before him carrying

what must have been a large shield, rather than the small round shields that consistently appear in the Egyptian reliefs.

In summary, a few of the elements in the Philistines' military gear stand out from the other militaries of the day. Their distinctive headdress and long, tapering sword set them apart somewhat. All in all, though, the Philistines seem to have used offensive and defensive equipment consistent with other militaries in the region for that time period.

TACTICS

The final section of this chapter will describe the strategy and tactics that the Philistines used to conduct their military campaigns, given the limited information from the Bible and Egyptian reliefs. Although the Israelites and Egyptians both give us some information about the Philistines, they were also both enemies, and their descriptions are limited in scope.

LOGISTICS

The Egyptian relief portraying the land battle the Egyptians fought against the Sea Peoples includes some information about how the Philistines and

Fig. 5.11 – Oxcarts from relief of land battle
Philistine families shown under attack from Egyptian troops (omitted from drawing)

related peoples transported their people and belongings. The relief portrays several heavy carts made of crossed bars or perhaps woven reeds (Fig. 5.11). These carts roll on two solid wheels, pulled by four oxen. They carry women, children, and undoubtedly belongings as well, apparently as part of a civilian population moving along with or behind the army, intending to settle lands that their military conquered. Although some soldiers armed with sword and shield guard the carts in the reliefs, they become victims of a surprise Egyptian attack and must have suffered heavy casualties.

FORTIFICATIONS

After falling to the Egyptians in the land and sea battles of 1179 BC, the Philistines settled along the southern coastal plain of Canaan. Excavations at their sites reveal that the Philistines established well-planned and fortified major cities, often ringed with thick walls built of sun-dried mud-brick, sometimes strengthened by stone.[43] The cities' walls, up to sixteen feet thick, connected to city gates as large as 45 x 53 feet (Fig. 5.12). Certain Philistine sites also boasted a fortress inside the city wall and a mud-brick-lined glacis[44]—an artificial, solid, steep slope constructed below a city's walls to help keep attackers away. The Philistine fortifications resembled other strong fortifications of the time, but like most others, they eventually fell to stronger foes.

BATTLE TACTICS

As we have seen to this point, the Philistines boasted an effective military consisting of infantry, chariotry, archery, possibly cavalry, and some vassals or mercenaries. They were armed with effective weaponry for their time and protected their cities with strong fortifications. The numerous scriptural passages about the Israelites fighting the Philistines give some indication of Philistine military strategy.

One can detect what appear to be various overall approaches they used when attacking their Israelite neighbors in the hills to the east. First they engaged in border skirmishes, as reflected in the stories of Samson (Judg. 14–16). Toward the beginning of Samuel's ministry, they won a decisive border battle at Aphek (1 Sam. 4), and then tried an unsuccessful attack up into the Israelite hill country (1 Sam. 7). They continued attacking in the

Israelite heartland during Saul's early reign (1 Sam. 13–14), but were driven back in what must have proven to be a shocking loss. The Philistines then pulled back to the more familiar coastal regions and tried to take land in the Elah Valley along the Israelite border, but again they suffered a surprising loss (1 Sam. 17). Finally, they boldly moved north to take the Jezreel Valley, successfully drawing King Saul and his army out of the hills and dealing them a crushing blow (1 Sam. 28–29, 31). When David assumed the Israelite throne, they made one move into the hills to erode his increasing

11th century BC
10th century BC

0   16   32 ft
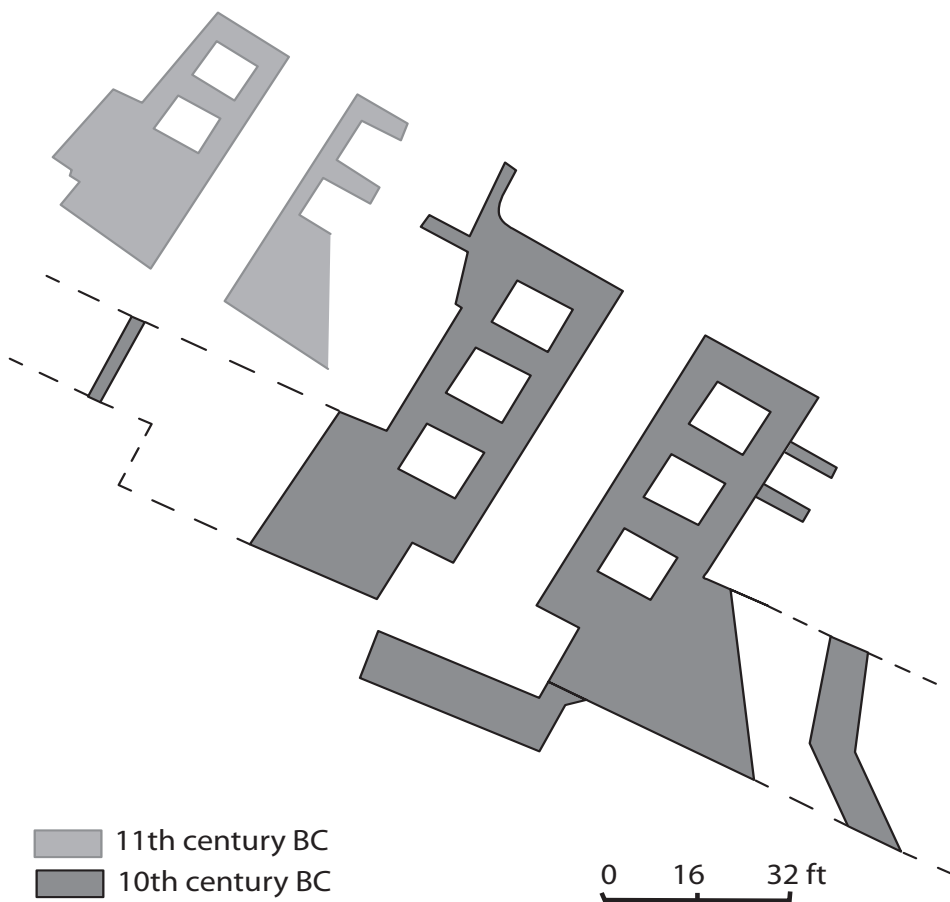
Fig. 5.12 – Ground plan of city gates from Philistine Ashdod
King David may have destroyed the smaller gate built in the 11th cent. & King Uzziah may have destroyed the larger, later gate & connected city wall (2 Chron. 26:6-7)

strength, but again they fled in defeat back to the safety of their homeland (2 Sam. 5). From this point on, David subdued the Philistines, but the Bible does little more than briefly summarize his conquest (2 Sam. 8:1).

Despite recording these battles, the Bible offers little help in understanding particular battle tactics. Most often the Bible describes the Philistine attacks with general terms like "deployed their forces to meet Israel" (1 Sam. 4:2), "gathered their forces for war" (1 Sam 17:1), and "(drew) up their lines" (1 Sam. 17:21), without describing specifically what those expressions meant or how they appeared. When arrayed for battle, the Philistines apparently relied primarily on their line of infantry assembled in close formation, with support from chariotry and archers (1 Sam 31:3; 2 Sam. 1:6).

One can better discern Philistine strategy regarding occupation and exploitation of conquered Israelite territory. Once they captured new land, the Philistines established garrisons or outposts at strategic locations (1 Sam. 10:5; 13:3, 23; 14:11; 2 Sam. 23:14). They sent out raiding parties from these garrisons (1 Sam. 13:17–18—in three companies), perhaps to take plunder, suppress rebellion, force payment of taxes, and/or enforce the prohibition against Israelite metalworking (1 Sam. 13:19–22).

The famous confrontation between David and Goliath (1 Sam. 17) offers an excellent example of the relatively uncommon practice of representative warfare. In representative warfare, two armies agreed to decide a battle by having single champions from each army meet to fight. In this way, the two sides thus avoided engaging their entire armies, sparing both sides the greater bloodshed of full-scale battle.[45] In the biblical story, the Philistine champion issued his challenge twice daily to the enemy army arrayed for battle, which sent out its champion only after considerable delay. The surprising victory by the lightly armed and unarmored Israelite sent the Philistines fleeing, pursued by an Israelite army energized by the surprising victory. The Philistines fled rather than honor the promise of servitude as stated in the terms of the conflict (v. 9), apparently not an uncommon response for the side that lost battles of this type.[46] If the defeated army typically did not honor the terms of engagement, this may explain why one does not see representative warfare used more often.

For information and illustrations of the sea and land battles between the Philistines and other Sea Peoples against the Egyptians in 1179 BC, see chapter 2.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the available textual and archaeological sources paint a less complete picture for Philistine military practices than they did for the Egyptians. Nonetheless, one can still gain a general understanding of Philistine organization, weaponry, and tactics. The Philistines stand out because of their Aegean origin and particular customs—such as their distinct headdress and tapering swords—but otherwise their military practices seem to fit with other contemporary armies in the region. For Israel, this uncircumcised enemy nation to the west gave them particular trouble as they sought to establish themselves in their highland home, but effective leadership coupled with divine blessing ultimately overcame the Philistines' natural advantages.

NOTES

[1] Excavations at the Philistine city of Ashdod recovered pottery inscribed with the name *d-g-r-t,* perhaps *Dagarat.* The find dates to the 8th century BC, approximately three centuries later than our story, but it apparently represents an authentic Philistine name. See Trude and Moshe Dothan, *People of the Sea,* 186–87.

[2] Excavations for the Philistine occupational levels at Ashkelon and Ekron recovered bones suggesting that the Philistines ate more pork than did the Canaanites, and sometimes dog as well. Twenty percent of the bones recovered were pork, an increase from five percent in the earlier Canaanite levels. The excavations also found dog bones that had marks from butchering, suggesting slaughter for food ("Love That Pork," *BAR,* May/June 2006: 14).

[3] Our fictitious warrior has served as a soldier since age twenty, a common age to begin serving as a soldier in the ancient Near East (cf. Num. 1, 26). Our text calls him old at thirty-five because the available evidence suggests that the life expectancy for common people during this time may have been less than forty. See Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Library of Ancient Israel, Douglas A. Knight, gen. ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 37.

[4] According to U.S. Marine Sgt. Joshua A. Draveling, the ability to fall asleep quickly "is a revered ability amongst Marines. Often with an evening of 4–6

hours, every minute is precious—particularly after marching 18–24 miles with 80–120 pounds of gear."

[5] The Philistines honored their chief god, Dagon, in part by keeping the following in his temples as trophies of war: Samson (Judg. 16:21–30, apparently in Gaza), the Ark of the Covenant (1 Sam. 5:1–5, in Ashdod), and Saul's head (1 Chron. 10:10, no location given). The Philistines also revered the Canaanite goddess Ashtoreth (also known as Ishtar/Astarte), the goddess of love and war; they took Saul's armor to Ashtoreth's temple after his death (1 Sam. 31:10). Finally, the Philistines worshipped Baal-zebub at Ekron (2 Kings 1:2–16), probably the same as Baal-zebul in the Greek of Matt. 10:25.

[6] The Sea Peoples seem to have originated in the area of Aegean Sea in what is today Greece and western Turkey, perhaps on the island of Crete.

[7] The number in David's army apparently grew to 600 by the time of 1 Sam. 27:2.

[8] Note in the cited passage that David was actually protecting the Judeans and then lying to his Philistine overlord about his actions.

[9] After reading this section of the story, U.S. Marine Sgt. Joshua A. Draveling commented, "Dagarat's internal dialogue reminds me of many of my own (thoughts) concerning our allies and their leadership in Iraq."

[10] See 1 Sam. 28:5–25 for the account of Saul's fear upon seeing the Philistine army, prompting his desperate, ill-advised visit to a witch. Saul apparently understood from the size of the Philistine force and from Samuel's message that fighting the Philistines meant death. He also seemed to think he had no choice, as he fought them anyway and perished with his sons.

[11] Note Ahithophel's advice (later rejected) for Absalom to likewise target David (2 Sam. 17:1–4), as well as the Arameans' similar strategy against Ahab (1 Kings 22:31). The Assyrians also targeted enemy leaders, using lightning attacks by the Assyrian king and his elite troops to kill, capture, or put to flight the enemy commander. See Grayson, "Assyrian Civilization," 220.

[12] See 1 Sam. 31 for the brief biblical account of the battle and its aftermath.

[13] For more complete overviews of Philistine history and culture, see H. J. Katzenstein, "Philistines: History" and Trude Dothan, "Philistines: Archaeology," *ABD* 5:326–33; and Bustenay Oded, "Israel's Neighbours: The Philistines," in *The Biblical World* (ed. John Barton; 2 vols.; London-New York: Routledge, 2002), 1:492–99.

[14] For example, Abraham pursued Lot's captors as far as "Dan" in northern Canaan (Gen. 14:14). The place was called Dan only after the tribe of Dan moved there during the period of the judges (Judg. 18), hundreds of years after Abraham.

[15] James B. Pritchard, "The War Against the Peoples of the Sea." *ANET,* 262–63.

[16] E.g. G. A. Wainwright, "Some Sea-Peoples," *JEA* 47 (1961): 77–79.

[17] As per the discussion in chapter 3, the biblical Exodus apparently took place in the 15th or 13th century. If the earlier date is correct, the Israelites preceded the Philistines to the region but struggled for nearly two centuries during the chaotic period of the judges and still were not well established when the Philistines came. If the Israelites left Egypt in the 13th century, they would have arrived about the same time as the Philistines.

[18] The present author wishes to acknowledge Steven P. Lancaster and James M. Monson for their insights into this and other geographical and political realities. See esp. *Regional Study Guide: Introductory Map Studies in the Land of the Bible* (Version 3.1; Rockford, IL: Biblical Backgrounds, 2009), 85–89.

[19] The parallel passages in 2 Sam. 8:1 and 1 Chron. 18:1 appear to name different places, but the point remains the same—David was now taking territory from Philistia.

[20] For discussion a of the term סֶרֶן, see Kenneth A. Kitchen, "The Philistines," in *Peoples of Old Testament Times.* (ed. D. J. Wiseman; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 67.; and N. K. Sandars, *Sea Peoples,* 166. A number of biblical texts, including 1 Sam. 21:10–12, refer to Achish, the סֶרֶן of Gath, as "king" (מֶלֶךְ), perhaps a synonym.

[21] In the Bible one finds that these "lords" pressed Delilah and then captured Samson (Judg. 16), took action when the captive Israelite Ark brought trouble to

Philistia (1 Sam. 5–6), led battles against Israel (1 Sam. 7 and 29), and overruled Achish regarding David's participation in Saul's final battle (1 Sam 29:4–11).

22 G. A. Wainwright ("Some Sea-Peoples," 74–75) and Trude Dothan (*The Philistines and their Material Culture,* 5) both note that the Egyptians also portrayed the related Tjekker and Denyen with the same distinctive headdress.

23 Some authors interpret the reliefs as accurate and assume that the Philistines did not use bows with their chariots. How might one use a chariot that carries spear-wielding infantry instead of archers? Perhaps the chariots charged to try to intimidate enemy forces, and then allowed the warriors to dismount quickly for hand-to-hand fighting (So argues T. Dothan in *The Philistines and their Material Culture,* 7). Such an understanding would mean that the quiver on the Philistine chariot probably appears in error. The present author, by contrast, thinks it more likely that the Philistines did fight with bows from their chariots, and that the artists omitted them for ideological reasons.

24 The 30,000 chariots, as per the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, would mean that the relatively small Philistine nation in the 11th century mustered roughly ten times more chariots than did the Hittites and possibly the Egyptians at their peak of power at the battle of Kadesh in 1275 BC. Did the number in 1 Sam. 13 get changed over time? Two versions of the Old Testament text (the Lucianic recension of the LXX (Greek Old Testament) and the Syriac translation of the OT) followed by the NIV support such an idea. These read only 3,000 chariots—still a large number, but one that would much better fit the numbers of chariots known from the armies of the time period.

25 See the discussion in chapter 2 under "Size of Army" for the possibility that the Hebrew word for "thousand" (אֶלֶף—*ʾeleph*) might also refer to a military unit of unknown size. Were this understanding correct, it would suggest that the small but emerging power of Philistia mustered thirty (or three) units of chariots plus six units of horse(men) plus infantry.

26 See, for example, *HALOT,* פרשׁ, which lists the three possibilities described here but opts for teams of horses pulling a chariot.

27 *HALOT,* פרשׁ, lists this as the only example for a category of meaning described as "Misc."

28 Trude and Moshe Dothan, *People of the Sea,* 250–51, pl. 28.

29 Note N. K. Sandars' reasonable argument that the ships must have had oars. *Sea Peoples,* 130.

30 Avner Raban and Robert R. Stieglitz, "The Sea Peoples and Their Contributions to Civilization," *BAR* 17, no. 6 (1991): 36–39.

31 Trude Dothan, *The Philistines and their Material Culture,* 234–49.

32 The Philistines worshipped Dagon (1 Chron. 10:10) as their chief god (Judg. 16:23). They had temples to Dagon at Gaza, Ashdod, and perhaps Beth Shean. A statue of Dagon stood in the temple in Ashdod (1 Sam. 5:2–4). They also had temples to Baal-zebub (Baal-zebul) in Ekron (2 Kings 1:2), and to Ashtoreth (apparently) in Beth Shean (1 Sam. 31:10).

33 See n. 5 above.

34 Bronze had been the most commonly used metal until ca. 1200 BC. Metalworkers had long relied on trade to procure the locally unavailable tin, which they mixed with the more common copper to make bronze. When the Late Bronze trade routes collapsed ca. 1200, the metalworkers had to use the more accessible iron. Iron, especially from meteors, had long been known and used as a precious metal.
   From the 12th to the 10th centuries, iron overtook bronze as the most commonly used metal in the region. 98% of the metal artifacts found in Palestine and the surrounding regions from the 12th century were bronze, with only 2% iron. In the 11th century, the percentage of iron grew to 14%, and in the 10th century, it comprised the majority with 54%. See Jane C. Waldbaum, *From Bronze to Iron: The Transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age in the Eastern Mediterranean.* (vol. 54 of Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology series. Göteborg, Sweden: Paul Aströms, 1978), 68–73.

35 In *From Bronze to Iron,* 27, J. Waldbaum states that "much, but not all, of the iron from the 12th and 11th centuries comes from sites occupied by the Philistines." Iron agricultural implements have been found in both Philistia and Israel in the 11th century, but all the iron weapons come from Philistine sites. See James D. Muhly, "How Iron Technology Changed the Ancient World and Gave the Philistines a Military Edge," *BAR* 8, no. 6 (1982): 52.

[36] See also Yadin, *Art of Warfare,* 344–45; as well as Dothan, *The Philistines and Their Material Culture,* 12, for caution that this sword might not be Philistine.

[37] For an analysis of the imagery in the in Egyptian reliefs, see Rodriquez, *Arsenal,* 43–46.

[38] The Philistine spearhead and arrowhead shown in Figs. 5.9 and 5.10 came from Tell Qasile in northern Philistia. For illustrations and descriptions, see Amihai Mazar, *Excavations at Tell Qasile, Part 2, The Philistine Sanctuary: Various Finds, the Pottery, Conclusions, Appendixes* (Qedem 20: Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1985), 4–5, Fig. 1.

[39] Trude Dothan, *The Philistines and their Material Culture,* pl. 2.2.

[40] For a thorough discussion of the translation of the words used for "javelin" and "spear" and the interpretation of Goliath's spear shaft as a "weaver's beam," see Boyd Seevers, "Practice of Ancient Near Eastern Warfare," pp. 269–71, esp. n. 737.

[41] The excavations at Tell Qasile unearthed four arrowheads. See A. Mazar, *Excavations at Tell Qasile, Part 2,* 4–5.

[42] Trude Dothan, *The Philistines and their Material Culture,* 11–12.

[43] Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000–586 B.C.E.* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 317.

[44] Among the strongest-known Philistine fortifications were those of Ashdod. See Moshe Dothan, "Ashdod," *NEAEHL* 1: 96–100.

[45] Representative warfare was better known as a Hellenistic or Arabic concept. See Roland de Vaux, "Single Combat in the Old Testament," in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East,* trans. Damian McHugh (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 128–29. Yigal Yadin (*AWBL,* 267) notes an example from Egypt's 12th Dynasty and suggests that the practice may have died out in the ancient Near East, then returned as an Aegean practice via the Philistines.

[46] For a parallel event involving the Hittite military, see Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., "A Hittite Analogue to the David and Goliath Contest of Champions?" (*CBQ* 30

(1968) 220–25). Hoffner points out that a contest of champions must not only involve single combatants, the encounter must take the place of a general engagement by two larger forces. This distinguishes it from a simple duel between individuals. In the Hittite example, Hattusilis, a general who later became king, engaged the "one who marches in front" (cf. Hebrew אִישׁ הַבֵּנַיִם *'îš habbēnayim* —"man between two (armies)"—1 Sam 17:4), representing the enemy force. Then, when Hattusilis killed their champion, "the rest of the enemy fled," as did the Philistines in 1 Samuel 17:51. One finds a final parallel after the battle when Hattusilis took the weapon he used and devoted it to the goddess Ishtar in her sanctuary, as David dedicated the sword he used to kill Goliath in the sanctuary of Yahweh (1 Sam. 21:8–9).