

GENESIS

Lesson 39

Genesis 21 (Cont'd): The Biblical Critics and The Philistines

³² After the treaty had been made at Beersheba, Abimelek and Phicol the commander of his forces returned to the land of the Philistines. ³³ Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the Lord, the Eternal God. ³⁴ And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines for a long time.

Genesis 21:34-34 [NIV]

The Philistines and the Patriarchs — Why it matters

As we continue our study of Genesis, I wanted to insert a short lesson on the Philistines. The Philistines are referenced in Genesis eight times:

- Genesis 10:14
- Genesis 21:32
- Genesis 21:34
- Genesis 26:1
- Genesis 26:8
- Genesis 26:14
- Genesis 26:15
- Genesis 26:18

Why is this important? The critics of "inerrancy of the Bible" assertions cite the referenced presence of the Philistines during the time of Abraham and the Patriarchs as evidence that the narratives are not true or accurate. They cite the history of the Philistines, indicating they were not a power in the land of Canaan until well after the Patriarchs. Their position is that the Patriarchal narratives better fit the Middle and Late Bronze Ages—and yet the Philistines were not presumed to be present in the land of Canaan until the Iron Age (e.g. the time of David). If these critics are correct, then the question is: How could Abraham and the Patriarchs have interacted with Philistines this early in history?

For example, one well-known biblical critic, John Van Seters, points out that the Philistine migration to Canaan occurred in the early iron Age, circa 12th century B.C. This is an anachronism with Abraham's purported interaction with King Abimelech in Genesis Chapter 20, as well as with the narrative in Genesis 21:32. See "Abraham in History and Tradition", 1975, pp 53-54.

In his book, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, Kenneth Kitchen counters Seters' position and points out:

"The 'Philistines' of Genesis... are relatively peaceful and well Semitized, quite different in character from the alien Aegean warriors of the twelfth century BC; and we are entitled to ask whether the term 'Philistines'... is not in fact a term of the thirteenth/twelfth centuries BC here applied to some earlier Aegean immigrants into Palestine who, like the later Philistines (Amos 9:7; Jer. 74:4), had come from Caphtor (Crete and the Aegean Isles) ('Ancient Orient and Old Testament', 1966, p. 80.)"

Numerous scholars have examined the presence of the Philistines in the land of Canaan and concluded that they were living in the land well before their limited reign came into being. Not to be confused with the warring Philistines of David's time, these people arrived earlier as Aegean immigrants, coming from Caphtor (Crete and the Aegean Isles). Traveling by ship, perhaps as deck hands or merchants, and remaining in the land.

Aaron Burke echoes this position in his chapter (Chapter 27: "Introduction to the Levant during the Middle Bronze Age") in the book entitled "The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant c. 8000-332 BCE":

"These settlement patterns appear to have developed as the result of long-distance trade networks. The new ports along the coast of Israel reveal what was probably initially a need for freshwater and foodstuffs for ships from Byblos making their way to Egypt. However, eventually these ports were identified as kingdoms in their own right, probably as demand grew in Egypt for olive oil and wine that could be abundantly produced in the southern Levant (Stager 2001). The items and ceramics found at Avaris and at sites along the Levantine coast suggest that in the MB I Canaanite ships began to transport copper from Cyprus, timber and resins from Lebanon, and wine and oil from Canaan, along with trinkets, to Egypt. The Mari texts provide unequivocal evidence that Alashiya (Cyprus) provided most of the copper needed in the Levant and Mesopotamia in this period, although archaeology on Cyprus has provided little to substantiate this picture." (2014, p. 407)

Kitchen would concur with Burke's assessment, as he cites similar support for the Philistines of Abraham's time settling peacefully in the land of Canaan. Having arrived from the Aegean, they fit perfectly in the early second millennium as sailors and merchants who remained in the land. He also cites Mari texts indicating that trade between Canaan, Egypt, and the Aegean was not one-way, with Middle Minoan II pottery in the land, as well as Minoan art. Clearly, early in the Middle Bronze Age the Philistines were trading with, and living in, the land of Canaan (K.A. Kitchen, "On The Reliability of The Old Testament", 2003, pp. 339-341.)

I apologize for all of this academic material, however, I highly recommend Kitchen's book "On the Reliability of the Old Testament". It is, without exception, the best book on addressing the challenges to the Old Testament by the biblical critics. We will do something similar with the Hittites as we move deeper into the book of Genesis. While this history may sometimes be confusing, as students of God's Word, we need to be familiar with the strange names mentioned in Genesis and how they fit within the biblical narratives of Genesis.

In summary, the Philistines who were present during the days of Abraham and the Patriarchs were not the warring Philistines of David's era. However, they nevertheless did indeed exist in the land of Canaan during the time of Abraham and the Patriarchs.

Thanks for studying with us!

In Christ,

Wes