

Clash of Civilizations

Background for *Samson and Delilah* by Michele Kidwell Gilbert

The background behind *Samson and Delilah* involves a Clash of Civilizations with Egypt, the dominant power in the region, playing a bridging role as the Israelites and Philistines encounter one another. This essay does not focus upon the Hebrew Bible but rather considers events from an archaeological, historical vantage point to help us comprehend more fully the Land of Canaan, which Samson and Delilah might have inhabited. Egypt, the Levant, and Crete — all will be treated in light of cultural exchange. Our narrative begins around 2000 BCE and resembles a richly woven tapestry.



Andrea Mantegna, *Samson and Delilah*, circa 1500, The National Gallery, London

The Israelites

The earliest description of the biblical Kingdom of Israel appears in *The Story of Sinuhe*. Arriving at a harbor located near Caesarea, this traveler of 4,000 years past delineates a pastoral countryside filled with honey, olives, wine, figs, and all manner of cattle - not too dissimilar to Israel's appellation "the land of milk and honey".

Adding further complexity, *Habiru* in hieroglyphs translated as outsiders was derisively applied to a coterie with inferior status variously described as bandits, bowmen, fugitives, migrant laborers, nomads, outlaws, raiders, rebels, robbers, servants, slaves, workers as well as some early Canaanites. Soon afterwards the Eastern Delta experienced an influx of settlers from the Levant. Wall paintings from this chronological period begin to depict Semitic traders with their chief labeled "Ruler of a Foreign Land" or "Shepherd King".

Gradually infiltrating Egypt in increasing numbers between 1700 and 1550 BCE, Semitic tribes termed *Hyksos* are thought to be descended from Western Semitic shepherds. They become Egypt's first foreign leaders, governing from their capital Avaris, located in Goshen, the terrain where the pre-Israelites dwelt prior to the Exodus. Over several generations, a multicultural combination of Egyptian and Near Eastern-Levantine traditions develop as the indigenous populace intermingle with these newcomers. This is the context for Abraham's and Sarah's sojourn in Egypt and that of Joseph, serving as vice-regent to a pharaoh. The unidentified rulers associated with these individuals belong to the Hyksos Dynasties rather than the normative generations of Egyptian royal families. Ushering in a period defined by raging, searing combat over the course of successive generations, the Hyksos are violently expelled. Remnants remaining in Egypt of the once proud and mighty Semites include the pre-Sinai Jews.

During Thutmose II's reign (circa 1492-1479 BCE), the word *Shosu* appears in texts denoting brave, turbulent, cattle rearing nomads of the Negev, whose numerous incursions were thwarted by Egyptian troops. Approximately 200 years later, this group had divided into clans with one bearing the label *Yahweh*.

Thutmose III (circa 1479-1425 BCE) asserted his greatest confrontations were fought on the rugged terrain of Canaan at the major Egyptian strongholds of Gezer, Bethshean, Jaffa, and Megiddo. This Napoleon of Egypt defeated a coalition of local kings, deeming this battle his supreme victory amongst his seventeen military campaigns. For a few hundred years, Canaan along with Lebanon and Syria will remain under Egyptian dominion through a system of vassal states.

The discovery of the chapel of Aper-El, vizier for Amenhotep III (circa 1390-1352 BCE) and his son Akhenaten (circa 1353-1336 BCE), further muddles the waters. Aper-El's name corresponds to an Egyptianized version of Hebrew signifying Servant of the God El. With his religious revolution, Akhenaten, husband of the beautiful Nefertiti, was the initial ruler to institute a form of monotheism represented by worship of the sun deity Aten. Curiously, the Pharaoh's *Great Hymn of the Beautiful Child of Aten* anticipates passages in *Psalms 104*. The associated Amarna Letters, composed in cuneiform on clay tablets and written to Amenhotep III and Akhenaten by neighboring Near Eastern monarchs, contain the earliest reference to Jerusalem. Soon thereafter, King Tut (circa 1336-1327 BCE) reestablished the primacy of Egypt's polytheistic religion.

In an inscription on a monument found at Bethshean, Ramesses II (circa 1279-1213 BCE) boasts that he erected his capital with Semitic slaves. This sovereign or one of his 48 to 50 sons is assumed to be the pharaoh connected with the Exodus, when the Israelites fled Egypt for the Promised Land. The cupbearer to his son Merneptah (circa 1213-1203 BCE) was the Semite Ben-Azen. Significantly, a Stele discovered in Merneptah's Theban funerary temple documents the first official use of "Israel".

"The princes have prostrated themselves, saying, Peace!

Among the Nine Bows, none raises his head.
Devastated is Tehenu,
Pacified is Hatti.
Plundered is Canaan with every woe,
Led away is Askelon,
Seized upon is Gezer,
Yano'am is brought to nought,
Israel is laid waste —his seed is not,
Widowed is Hurru before Egypt.
All the nations are reunited in peace.
Everyone who was restless has been bound.”



Anthony van Dyck, *Samson and Delilah*, circa 1618–20, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London

The Philistines

Although located distantly across the Mediterranean Sea, the Hellenic realm interacted with Egypt as well. An early volcanic eruption on Thera contributed to the quasi-demise of the Minoan civilization on Crete, called *Keftiu* by the Egyptians, only for it to be further overwhelmed around 1450 BCE when Mycenaean Greeks conquer the island which would gradually rebuild itself. Analysis of Thutmose III's tomb paintings reveal Minoan artistic techniques perhaps garnered through trade and gift exchange. Amenhotep III's Palace Complex at Malaka included scenes reminiscent of Cretan imagery. Archaeological finds attest that Mycenaeans served as mercenaries for Ramesses II although this activity may have actually commenced somewhat earlier.

It is at this juncture around 1200 BCE, that diverse sources relate conspiracies in nearby lands and migration from Aegean islands of the Sea Peoples, the contemporary term utilized for several maritime groups. Palpable dislocations throughout the Eastern Mediterranean engendered great societal upheavals in those territories the marauders invaded. An inscription found in the mortuary temple of Ramesses III (circa 1184-1153 BCE) at Medina Habu is the first documented reference to the *Peleset*, subsequently known as the Philistines, who arrived during the Pharaoh's supremacy:

"The countries in their islands were disturbed. Not one stood before their hands. They desolated people and land. They came with fire towards Egypt. Their main support was Peleset, Tjekker, Shekelesh, Denyen, and Weshesh united. They laid their hands upon the land as far as the Circle of the Earth. Their hearts were confident, full of plans."

The Philistines were of Cretan origin and, thus, purveyors of a significant Minoan cultural heritage. Proof for this identification derives from three major sources. Biblical tradition links the Philistines with *Caphtor*, the ancient Hebrew name for Crete, asserting further that upon entrance into Canaan these raiders annihilated the Avvim, who lived between Mount Hermon and the Sea of Galilee. Lending confirmation, recent DNA analysis of the earliest buried skeletal remains unearthed in a Philistine cemetery correlates positively with DNA of Minoans from a similar time period and is distinctively different from that of the typical Levantine inhabitants. An immigrant group which married out as they become assimilated, within 200 years their DNA becomes indistinguishable from that of other Canaanite communities. Additionally, pottery shards dated after the Philistines arrival are stylistically analogous with vessels discovered on Crete itself.

The Philistines resided primarily in five cities - Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza. With bellicose reach throughout Israel's tribal period in Canaan, they attacked many sites excepting fortified ones such as Jerusalem. With hostile intentions, they hoped to eradicate their adversaries' presence, if not oppress the original inhabitants of the land.

Somewhat perplexing is the issue of why these aggressive interlopers abandon their own deities. True, they needed to fight for survival and, thereby, eliminated the Avvim upon arrival, but they were heir to a profound tradition of high culture. According to mythology, Zeus was born in Crete and often took the form of a bull. There is no evidence for this animal being transported by ship to Canaan whereas pigs in large numbers were. By denying their rich albeit pagan Greek beliefs for that of the people they encountered, the Pelesets live up to our pejorative term Philistines, transforming themselves into some of history's most reviled villains associated with numerous infamous legends.

In the early 7th century BCE, Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II invaded Canaan and Syria. Following the fiery demise of various Philistine cities, their inhabitants were either killed or exiled to Mesopotamia, where they finally lost any distinct ethnic identity, concluding their presence in historical accounts. The fate of the Israelites differed. After the savage siege of Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar I destroyed its temple, initiating the Babylonian Captivity of the Jewish population. With Mesopotamia conquered in due course by the Persian Empire, its King Cyrus the Great allowed the Hebrews to return to Jerusalem in 538 BCE with their first temple ultimately replaced by a second.



Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Samson and Delilah*, circa 1629-1630
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

The Aftermath

In 450 BCE, the Greek historian Herodotus in *The Histories* wrote about a "district of Syria, called Palaistinê" located between Phoenicia and Egypt. This is the first reference denoting a wider region than that of the Bible.

Approximately 130, Emperor Hadrian altered the Roman province named Judaea to Syria-Palaestina. It is generally thought that this was undertaken because the Philistines, who were not Arabs, were the Jews' enemies and the Roman Emperor desired to humiliate the Israelites, whom he abhorred.

John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, written around 1650, contains the famous phrase "eyeles in Gaza at the mill with slaves". His dramatic poem furthermore includes the couplet,

"This evil on the Philistines is fall'n; From whom could else a general cry be heard?"

In his 1869 *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, Mathew Arnold applies the word philistine to denote the anti-intellectual, self-centered middle class which gave currency to its now accepted meaning.

In the 1730's, Voltaire pens a libretto entitled *Samson* for the composer Jean-Philippe Rameau. French censors prohibit the opera from being performed. However, a small selection from it was included in the procession when the great writer's remains were transported to the Panthéon during the French Revolution. A portion went:

"People, wake up, break your irons
Rise again to your former greatness
Liberty calls on you
You who were born for it."

For further background, enjoy two virtual lectures from the National Arts Club:

Jerusalem before King David with Peter Feinman: <https://youtu.be/pNzJ5rXWMGo>

Philistines at Ashkelon: New Insights from the Leon Levy Expedition in collaboration with the American Friends of The Israeli Antiquities Authority with Daniel

Master: <https://youtu.be/IGUmhLI2Axo>