

Lesson 3: The Rise of the Philistines

Text: First Samuel Chapters 3-4

There is something idyllic about the stories in the opening chapters of Samuel. We read of the worries that beset a family, the joy of a barren woman who gives birth to her first son, the bickerings of two women, the worship and sacrifice at the temple, the feasting of merry pilgrims, the head of a family handing out gifts to his wives and children, the mother who makes a little robe for her son (2, 19). These stories make it appear as if the Israelite people of the time were leading a calm and worriless life. But chapter 4 of the book makes it clear that the conditions of the time were anything but peaceful.

In this chapter we leave the Elkanah household and the precincts of the temple, and plunge into the harsh political realities. The curtain rises upon a scene that resembles the period of the judges. The history of the book of Samuel begins where the book of Judges concluded: the ascendancy of the Philistines (4, 1-2):

And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.
Now Israel went out against the Philistines
to battle, and pitched beside Ebenezer;
and the Philistines pitched in Aphek.
And the Philistines put themselves in array
against Israel and when the battle was spread,
Israel was smitten before the Philistines;
and they slew of the army in the field
about four thousand men.

וַיְהִי דְבַר־שְׁמוּאֵל לְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל
וַיֵּצֵא יִשְׂרָאֵל לְקִרְיַת פְּלִשְׁתִּים
לְמַלְחָמָה וַיַּחֲנוּ עַל־הַאֲבֹן הַלְעֹזֶר
וּפְלִשְׁתִּים חָנוּ בְּאַפְקִי:
וַיַּעֲרְכוּ פְּלִשְׁתִּים
לְקִרְיַת יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתִּטָּשׁ הַמִּלְחָמָה
וַיִּגְגַּר יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵי פְּלִשְׁתִּים
וַיָּכּוּ בַּמַּעֲרָכָה בַּשָּׂדֶה
כְּאַרְבַּעַת אֲלָפִים אִישׁ:

What was the cause of this war? Who attacked? What did the attacker want to achieve? The Bible leaves these questions unanswered. Yet, we can find the answers by studying the history of the Philistine wars Israel and looking at the place of Aphek on the map.

The first Philistine attacks upon Israelite settlements were made at the time of Shamgar the son of Anath (Judges 3, 31). These were apparently bands of marauders who were intent upon loot and adventure. Later the Philistines invaded Israelite territory with organized and highly equipped armies, and they succeeded in subjecting some Israelite tribes. "Surely thou knowest that the Philistines are rulers over us", said the men of the tribe of Judah to Samson. This could equally have been said by the tribe of Dan, who settled in the area of Beit Shemesh, Zorah and Eshtaol. And once the southern tribes came under Philistine rule, the other tribes too came to be threatened by the Philistines who tried to conquer the tribes of Benjamin, Ephraim

and Manasseh, who were settled in the hills of Ephraim. Thus we read in chapter 4 that “the Philistines pitched in Aphek”. This is the site of the modern Rosh Ha’ayin, east of Petah Tikvah, an important strategic point opposite the foot hills of Ephraim. Not far from Aphek there is the wadi Nahal Shiloh, an important tributary of the river Yarkon. This stream begins its course far away in the heart of the hills of Ephraim close to Shiloh. Starting in Aphek one could follow the course of Nahal Shiloh and reach Shiloh.

It is therefore clear that the attack is carried out by the Philistines. Their aim is to conquer the tribes of Benjamin, Ephraim and Manasseh. They are encamped at Aphek, facing the Israelite settlements in the hills of Ephraim and threatening in particular the national sanctuary in Shiloh. The Philistine military plan is to invade the hills of Ephraim through the tributaries of the Yarkon.

The Israelite army fights the Philistines in an attempt to stem the Philistine advance. In the first battle Israel is “smitten before the Philistines” (4, 2). Then the Israelites take the ark of the covenant out of Shiloh and carry it into battle. But in the second battle the Israelites suffer an even heavier defeat-“and there was a very great slaughter” (4, 10)-, the ark is captured by the Philistines, the sons of Eli are killed, and Eli dies when he is told of the calamity.

The student of history is bound to ask here some pertinent questions: Was this all that happened? Did the Philistines retreat after their victory? If so, why? Why did they not press on with the conquest of the hills of Ephraim?

In the following chapters of the book of Samuel we are given some hints that shed light on these problems. At the end of chapter 6 we read that when the Ark is returned to the Israelites it is not restored to Shiloh but set up in Beth Shemesh and then transferred to Kiriat Jearim until it is finally brought to Jerusalem by King David. Why is the Ark not restored to Shiloh? Our sages explained that Shiloh had been destroyed. “The destruction of Shiloh” is often mentioned by our sages as a well-known historical fact. But when and by whom was Shiloh destroyed?

Another hint is found in chapter 13 when the Bible relates that Jonathan the son of King Saul defeats the Philistine governor (נְצִיר פְּלִשְׁתִּים) in Geba. Since Geba is situated in the hills of Benjamin, in the middle of the way between Bethel and Jerusalem, the question arises how the Philistines came to appoint a governor in the midst of Israelite territory.

Is it reasonable to assume that the Philistine conquest at Aphek had some far reaching results. The Philistines invaded Israelite territory, destroyed Shiloh, established their rule over the hills of Ephraim and appointed a governor in the conquered territory.

The battle of Aphek had undoubtedly great importance in Ancient Israelite history. Why, then, does the Bible not provide this information clearly and explicitly? Why does the Bible ignore the historical consequences of Aphek? Why does it give us instead the detailed story of the death of Eli and his sons?

The Biblical method of narrating the history of the battle of Aphek points to the guiding principle of all biblical writing of history. The Book of Samuel, like all prophetic books, is not really a history book. What is vitally important to the historian is irrelevant to the prophet. In the book of Samuel the Bible wants to teach the story of the prophet Samuel. In the story of Eli and his sons, and the fate that befalls the priestly house, we learn the ways of divine justice. All the other great and important events have their rightful place in the historical records, but they are not narrated in the biblical books of history. The Bible interprets and teaches history in the light of prophecy.