

Are Palestinians Genetically Linked Mostly to the Philistines?

First drafted by Kermit Zarley on 8/6/2016

I have been a student of Bible prophecy all of my adult life and more. In the preface of my book, *Palestine Is Coming: The Revival of Ancient Philistia* (1990), I relate, "From my study of biblical prophecy in 1981, I discovered that ancient Philistia would someday be revived. It appeared to me that a revival of Philistia could be the solution to the present Palestinian problem."

I began thinking this one day when I was reading Isaiah 11 in the Bible. Both Jews and Christians agree that this entire text is messianic. A "shoot" and "branch" in v. 1 are metaphors referring to the Messiah, and "Jesse" refers to King David's father. All of this indicates the Messiah will be a descendant of David. Isaiah also says of this Messiah, "He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked" (v. 4 NIV). Isaiah further reveals that during this conflagration, Jews "will swoop down on the slopes of the Philistines on the west" (v. 14 NASB). This scenario requires that today's West Bank will then be part of the State of Israel, and the coastal plain between the Mediterranean Sea and these slopes, also called "the Shephelah," will be a part of the nation of Philistia from which the word Palestine derives. Of course, both Christians and Jews do not believe any of this has happened yet but that it will at the end of days. Christians specifically believe it will occur at the second coming of Christ.

I then scoured the entire Jewish Bible (OT) to learn everything it says about ancient Philistia and its Philistine people. The word "Philistine" occurs therein 283 times, and the word "Philistia" appears 8 times. I decided the Hebrew prophets have at least ten eschatological texts which foretell about a Gentile people or nation existing between the Mediterranean Sea and Israel during what the Bible also calls "the latter days."¹ Some of these texts mention "Philistines."

I then became perplexed because I knew that historians claim Philistines have not existed for over 2,000 years. Historians regard the Philistine era in the Levant to have occurred from about 1,200 to 604 BCE, and then Neo-Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II sacked Ashkelon and other Philistine cities. Plus, I soon learned that most Bible scholars interpret such endtimes Bible texts about "Philistia" and "Philistines" figuratively as general references to the enemies of Israel or the church. But these scholars usually do so arbitrarily, thus without supplying any reasons. I concluded this is incorrect and that these words should be understood literally. People often err by interpreting biblical prophecies non-literally without any hermeneutical justification. An example has been the supersessionism of both the Catholic and Protestant churches in which they expunged Israel from many endtimes Bible prophecies by interpreting it as the church.

¹Besides Isaiah 11.14, these texts are Zechariah 9.5-8; Zephaniah 2.4-7; Isaiah 26.15; 54.3; Micah 7.11; Psalm 60.8; 108.9; Obadiah 19; Joel 3.4.

In my book I begin Chapter 2, entitled “Land of the Philistines,” with this paragraph, “The present Palestinian-Israeli conflict is basically a dispute over land. The Jews’ primary argument for their claim to Mandate Palestine is one of historical precedent. They wish to reclaim the land their forefathers first possessed nearly 3,500 years ago, an occupancy which lasted for about 1,500 years. Contrary to some Israeli and Christian claims and assumptions, the ancient Israelites never possessed the entire Plain of Philistia, and what part they did occupy was for only very brief periods. Certain passages in some English translations of the Bible seem to indicate otherwise. It is therefore necessary to examine these passages, as well as the overall history of the possession of Palestine. A related question will be addressed: Do the present Palestinians have any ethnic connection to the ancient Philistines?”

Occasionally throughout my book, I speculate about the modern Palestinians having a genetic connection to the ancient Philistines. I provide some history of Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines overtaking Philistia which resulted in some intermarriage between them and Philistines. But does that history require that Philistines just up and disappeared? I doubt that such foreign invaders altered the genetic mix of the land’s former residents so much that its resulting populations were no longer predominantly Philistine. For example, during the Roman era perhaps no people called themselves Philistines any more in Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Gaza. But could not their ancestry still have been linked mostly to the Philistines? For centuries, Rome allowed a large Ashkelon district to remain independent of its empire.

I also show in my book that a similar ethnic mixture happened to the Israelites throughout their history, although probably not as much as it did to the Philistines. Thus I conclude (p. 170), “the Palestinians do not originate solely from the ancient Philistines. However, it cannot be denied that there is **some** genetic link between today’s Palestinians and the ancient Philistines.”

The main question, of course, is this: How much genetic link is there? After examining the ten Bible texts cited above, I conclude (p. 221), “a people called the Philistines must again become a recognizable people dwelling in their ancient homeland.” I end the book by conjecturing (p. 230), “The Palestinians may be viewed as Philistines partially because of some genetic link, but mostly because their name derives from the Philistines.” As the years transpired after this book was published, I grew more convinced of this genetic link. I often asserted, “today’s Palestinians have a stronger genetic link to the ancient Philistines than to any other people group. That’s why the Bible predicts ‘Philistines’ will exist in the latter days. They must be the Palestinians.”

Consequently, for many years I have been anxiously waiting for archaeologists to dig up some Philistine bones from which they can derive uncorrupted DNA and compare it to DNA of some modern Palestinians, especially those whose families lived in recent centuries where Philistines used to live. In past years, some archaeologists have dug up ancient human remains here or there in this land, but there was uncertainty whether or not they were Philistine bones, or the bones were so damaged that uncorrupted DNA could not be obtained from them.

On July 10, 2016, the Leon Levy Exhibition at Ashkelon—directed by Old Testament professor and archaeologist Lawrence E. Stager of Harvard University—finished its thirty-year dig in the ruins of ancient Ashkelon and announced it had discovered a 3,000-year old, undisturbed (not reused or looted), Philistine cemetery located ten feet underground that contained over 200 Philistine skeletons of mostly adults and some children. The Israel Antiquities Authority had permitted the Exhibition team to make the dig because Ashkelon, though formerly a Philistine city, is located in modern Israel. I became interested in this project in 2011.

Ancient Ashkelon dates back to about 3,500 BCE. Its ruins are located along the Mediterranean shoreline between Tel Aviv and the Gaza Strip. They are to be distinguished from the modern city of Ashkelon, which is located a little northeast of the still visible wall surrounding the ruins of ancient Ashkelon. Israel established this modern city of Ashkelon in 1953, and it now has nearly 100,000 citizens. Visitors come there because of the nearby beach. Some also view the walled, 150-acre ancient Ashkelon that is now a national park.

The Leon Levy Exhibition's discovery of a Philistine cemetery with over 200 skeletons at ancient Ashkelon has been declared one of the greatest finds ever in the Levant. From these skeletons the team has extracted uncorrupted DNA. They have selected a separate, international team that is examining and testing this DNA and doing radiocarbon testing on the bones.

The archaeological team's main purpose for doing this testing of skeletal remains is to learn with certainty the geo-ethnic origin of the Philistines. This is because, despite constant mention of the Philistines in the historical books of the Bible as being the arch enemy of the Israelites for several centuries, there has remained many unanswered questions, and thus considerable mystery, about the Philistine people. For example, the first evidence of their writing was only recently discovered, yet it consists of only a few words that still have not been deciphered. Nonetheless, most academics and archaeologists think the Philistines migrated to the Levant, and they think pottery artifacts there indicate that these people very likely came from the region of the Aegean Sea which is bounded by Greece and present Turkey.

But I think this Philistine DNA should be compared to DNA from today's Palestinians, especially those whose families have lived for centuries in this region called during antiquity "the land of the Philistines." If this was done and it resulted in a reasonable match, I think that would be very exciting news to the world that could lead to a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. How so? Palestinians could then legitimately declare themselves the descendants mostly of ancient Philistines and thereby claim their ancestral land just as Jews did in 1948. If Palestinians did this, they would be calling for the conflict to be settled on the basis of historical precedent, which is what I propose in my book.

Some critics have chided my proposal to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of historical precedence. But they have been ignorant that Israel exists on the sole basis of its argument for historical precedence in its 1948 Proclamation of Independence. This two-page document begins, "The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people." It recounts Jews exiled from their land and claims, "Jews strove throughout the centuries to go back to the land of their fathers and regain their statehood." It correctly informs, "This right was acknowledged by the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, and re-affirmed by the mandate of the League of Nations, which gave explicit international recognition to the historic connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and their right to reconstitute their National Home."

So, Israel's Proclamation specifically claims the right of the Jewish people to "Eretz-Yisrael." It then adds that Jews "have not ceased to urge their right to a life of dignity, freedom and honest toil in their ancestral land," thereby indirectly identifying "the land of Israel" as Jews' "ancestral land." In my book, I examine the history of the possession of this land to show that the ancient Israelites never really possessed "the land of the Philistines" as Israel does today. So, I assert that Israeli citizens need to have a public discussion about what constitutes "the land of Israel." Some of Israel's politicians purposely have avoided such a conversation, and others have mis-identified Eretz Yisrael. I then suggest that Israel should agree to a land swap, in accordance with its claim to historical precedence, as the way to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Accordingly, Israel would forfeit its coastal plain south of Tel Aviv and some of the Negev in exchange for receiving all of the West Bank, which Israeli Jews refer to by the ancient names of Judea and Samaria, which was the very heartland of ancient Israel. The resulting Palestinian state would include all of the region of the five major city-states of ancient Philistia: Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gaza, Ekron, and Gath. So, this Palestinian state would be a very expanded Gaza Strip extending eastward to the Shephelah. I think its southeastern border should bulge eastward to the western environs of Beersheba and Kadesh Barnea. And an arrangement might be explored in which Egypt would forfeit to the Palestinians the Northern Sinai between Gaza and the Wadi el Arish wherein Islamic terrorists have been creating much turmoil recently. In fact, the Wadi el Arish usually was the border between ancient Egypt and Philistia. Since the Nahal Sorek was usually Philistia's northern border, that should be the northern border of the State of Palestine. I think all of this former "land of the Philistines" belongs to the present Palestinians if they are genetically linked mostly to the ancient Philistines.