

The Biblical History of Gaza: From Genesis to the Philistines

The city of Gaza is mentioned in scripture as early as Genesis 10, right after the flood. Although not central, it's mentioned a number of times throughout the Bible, and it has been ruled by an incredibly huge variety of ancient and modern kingdoms.

Ancient Egypt and modern Egypt; ancient Philistine and modern Palestine; ancient Israel and modern Israel; ancient Greece, and crusader kingdoms; ancient Rome and modern British Empire; ancient Ottoman Empire and involvement by modern Turkey; ancient Islamic caliphates and modern attempts at Islamic caliphates.

It has been sacked by Mongols and destroyed by plagues and wars; it was the site of the first suicide attack in history; and it was inhabited or visited by people as diverse as Samson and Delilah, St. Porphyrius, Rabbi Israel Najara, the false Messiah Shabtai Zvi, Napoleon Bonaparte; and it's the burial site of Muhammad's great-grandfather.

Just imagine what an amazing place it would be to visit if it weren't a constant war zone.

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No one really knows where the name "Gaza" comes from. Maybe it had a meaning in an ancient forgotten Anakite or Canaanite dialect. The initial sound is not really a "G"—it's a guttural "R"-sound common in Semitic languages, often transcribed as "Gh" in European languages. The European transcription "Gaza" was already used by the ancient Greeks.

In Modern Hebrew, this sound fell away, which is why Gaza is called "Azza" in Hebrew. There's a theory that the name comes from a Canaanite word for "strength," but since the ancient word for strength doesn't use that "gh" sound at all, it's probably not true.

We can read in Genesis 10:18b-19 about the descendants of Ham: "Later the Canaanite clans scattered and the borders of Canaan reached from Sidon toward Gerar as far as Gaza."

So, the definition of the coastline of the land of the descendants of Canaan is from Sidon, currently in Lebanon, all the way to Gaza, making Gaza the furthest southern coastal city – a border town before the Sinai Desert. The Canaanite city-states were subservient to the Egyptian pharaohs, and according to Egyptian sources, Gaza started as an Egyptian outpost in Canaan, first just a fortress, which slowly developed into a city. The earliest extra-biblical mention of Gaza is in the ancient Egyptian Amarna letters from the 14th century B.C.

The Israelites arrived at the time of Joshua and conquered it (Joshua 10:41, Judges 1:18), and it was allotted to the tribe of Judah (Joshua 15:47) but it seems the Israelites didn't manage to hold on to it. On the contrary, Gaza and four other cities around it became the center of a new and fierce people group – the Philistines.

The Philistines arrived from the sea and destroyed the Canaanites who lived there before. This is even mentioned by Moses in Deuteronomy: "And as for the Avvites who lived in villages as far as Gaza, the Caphtorites coming out from Caphtor destroyed them and settled in their place." (Deuteronomy 2:23)

Where did they come from? Moses just told us. The Philistines came from Caphtor.

Around 1200 B.C., there was a huge civilization collapse in the eastern Mediterranean, called the Late Bronze Age collapse. This happened about the same time as the exodus from Egypt and the Trojan War. This collapse was caused by, among other things, invasions of so-called "Sea Peoples" who invaded and destroyed many places and civilizations throughout the region. Most of these Sea People are unknown to history, with one exception – the Philistines. Not only Moses but also other Israelite prophets stated that the Philistines originally came from the island of Caphtor (Amos 9:7 and Jeremiah 47:4), which most scholars believe is Crete. They may be descendants of the ancient Minoan civilization, named Keftiu by the Egyptians. The name "Philistines" is of unknown origin, but it's weird how similar it is to the Hebrew word for "invader." Maybe it's connected. They conquered Gaza and four other cities in the area and ruled a land we could call Philistia. There's a debate on whether this is the origin of the name "Palestine" or not, but it could be. They were distinctly European, spoke an Indo-European (probably) language, and fiercely fought against the Israelites throughout the era of the Old Testament.

If this is the origin of the word "Palestine," it's pretty ironic how it's a name made up by European invaders...

Historical records say these Philistines arrived around 1175 B.C. Biblically, it's probably shortly before the Israelites made their way to Canaan, as Philistines are mentioned in Exodus 13:17 as the reason why God would not let them take the quickest route to Canaan, along the Mediterranean coast.

Wait a minute, you might ask. How, if so, did Abraham and Isaac meet with the Philistines if there weren't Philistines there yet? My theory is that they didn't. I think that when Moses writes about Abraham and Isaac's meetings with rulers in this area (Genesis 21 and 26), Moses refers to it as the land

of the Philistines, much like we would refer to Mesopotamia as “modern-day Iraq” to make it easier for the modern reader.

Genesis 21 and 26 never refer to the actual people there as Philistines, just the land. Another theory is that “Philistine” just meant invader or sea peoples and was used to describe any people who came from the sea and settled there, and this was a gradual process. So even if the bulk of the Minoans arrived from Caphtor much later, there might have been small settlements in the time of Abraham.

But then they arrived en masse around 1175 B.C., as we said, and the Israelites arrived from the desert from the other side, and even if Joshua and the Israelites initially conquered Gaza, the Philistines must have bounced back. They established a strong, independent kingdom that competed and even ruled over the Israelites at times.

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And then Samson came along and stole their city gates.

The five cities of the Philistines were Gaza, Ekron, Gath, Ashdod, and Ashkelon. Four of these cities are within Israel today, while only Gaza is in the Gaza Strip. As Gaza was the furthest away from Israel, and the closest to the Sinai Desert and Egypt, Gaza was really in the Philistine heartland. One of Samson’s success stories is how he stole their city gates and carried them all the way to Hebron (Judges 16:1-3). After the Philistines captured Samson through Delilah, they took him to Gaza and kept him in a dungeon (Judges 16:21-22). This is where Samson became the first-ever Israeli hostage in tunnels in Gaza, and also the first ‘suicide bomber’, killing more Philistines in his death than he ever did in his life. (Judges 16:23-30).

Later, during the reign of King David, the Philistines were

subdued after some wars, but probably stayed in their five cities and paid tribute to Israel. Once the kingdom was split between Israel and Judah after Solomon, they seem to have become relatively independent again. King Hezekiah defeated them "as far as Gaza" according to 2 Kings 18:8, but, in general, Gaza and the Philistines are no longer mentioned, so they probably didn't pose a threat to Israel during this time.

When the Assyrian Empire came along, Gaza went through the same turmoil as Israel and Judah and was under the same threat. Gaza went back and forth, being conquered by Assyria, then Egypt, and eventually Babylonia. Both Amos and Zephaniah pronounced prophecies against Gaza around this time (Amos 1:7, Zephaniah 2:4). Then, about 604 B.C., the Babylonians conquered Gaza and exiled its inhabitants to Babylon, where they kept their ethnic identity for about 150 years until they disappeared from the pages of history.

And what happened to Gaza after the Philistines disappeared? More about that in part 2.

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