The Relationship between the Philistines and the Israelites in the Ark Narrative

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The Philistines in the Hebrew Bible

In the Hebrew Bible, the Philistines appear as the "aliens" par excellence. This is especially the case in the stories about Saul and David in the books of Samuel, where the Philistines are called the "the uncircumcised" (ערלים; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20; see also Judg 14:3; 15:18). And, indeed, according to a passage from the book of Jeremiah it appears that most of the inhabitants of the Levant practiced circumcision:[1] "See, days are coming, says YHWH, when I will attend to all those who are circumcised in the foreskin [מול בערלה]: Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and all those with shaven temples who live in the desert" (Jer 9:24–25a; ET 9:25–26a). Included among these inhabitants are also the Phoenicians, since the oracle of judgments in Ezek 28 threatens the king of Tyre that he will die the

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In several publications Saul M. Olyan has investigated social and societal issues of the Hebrew Bible. See Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Olyan, "The Ascription of Physical Disability as a Stigmatizing Strategy in Biblical Iconic Polemics," *JHS* 9 (2009): 1–15; Olyan, *Social Inequality in the World of the Text: The Significance of Ritual and Social Distinctions in the Hebrew Bible*, JAJSup 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011); Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). In the following I would like to enter into a conversation with Saul about the construction of the Other. See Olyan, "Stigmatizing Associations: The Alien, Things Alien, and Practices Associated with Aliens in Biblical Classification Schemas," in *The Foreigner and the Law: Perspectives from the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Reinhard Achenbach, Rainer Albertz, and Jakob Wöhrle (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011). It is a pleasure and an honor to offer these ideas to a highly esteemed colleague and a very good friend.

1. Translations follow the NRSV and are modified when necessary.

death of the uncircumcised: "You shall die the death of the uncircumcised by the hand of foreigners" (Ezek 28:10). This passage also shows that there is a sense of superiority with circumcised people compared to uncircumcised people.[2] The Philistines or the so-called Sea People/s, coming from different parts of the Aegean islands and Anatolia,[3] have quite quickly assimilated to the culture of the southern Levant, but without adopting the practice of circumcision, as also shown by representation of uncircumcised phalli (ex-voto objects?) in Gath.[4] According to the Bible, King Saul urges David, who wants to marry his daughter, to bring him the foreskins of the Philistines whom he shall kill in battle.[5] Ralph Klein considers this biblical episode to reflect an "ethnic humor" of sorts.[6] However, the topic may reflect a custom of bringing a portable part of each killed enemy, as shown by a relief from the mortuary temple of Ramesses III in Medinet Habu, which represents the counting of penises cut off of Lybian soldiers.[7]

In the stories about Samson in Judg 13–16 and in the stories about Saul and David and the rise of the monarchy, the Philistines are clearly depicted as the Others and Israel's worst enemies. A similar picture also appears in other prophetic texts: Jer 47 (MT) and Ezek 25:15–17 feature the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel receiving oracles of judgment and destruction against the Philistines; and Amos 1:6–8 and Zeph 2:4–7 announce the divine wrath against the Philistine cities of Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Ekron, which are depicted as invaders and slave traders.[8]

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2. Saul M. Olyan, *Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000), 64–68.

3. Assaf Yasur-Landau, *The Philistines and Aegean Migration at the End of the Late Bronze Age* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Shirly Ben Dor Evian, "Ramesses III and the 'Sea-Peoples': Towards a New Philistine Paradigm," *OJA* 36 (2017): 267–85.

4. Aren Maeir, "A New Interpretation of the Term 'opalim (עפלים) in the Light of Recent Archaeological Finds from Philistia," *JSOT* 32 (2007): 23–40.

5. 1 Sam 18:20-27 (MT) mentions two hundred foreskins; LXX has one hundred, which probably reflects the older text.

6. Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, WBC 10 (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 190.

7. José das Candeias Sales, "The Smiting of the Enemies Scenes in the Mortuary Temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu," *OS* 1 (2012): 85–116. For a comparison with 1 Sam 18, see William J. Webb and Gordon K. Oeste, *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric? Wrestling with Troubling War Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 275–76.

8. Samuel Amsler, "Amos," in *Osée, Joël, Amos, Abdias, Jonas*, ed. Edmond Jacob, Carl-Albert Keller, and Samuel Amsler, CAT XIa (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1992), 173. That Gath is not mentioned any more may indicate that these texts were written at a

Although the Philistines are often depicted as hostile aliens, they are also Israel's and Judah's neighbors.[9] For this reason, the negative picture of the Philistines is likely counterbalanced by the stories in the patriarchal narratives, according to which Abraham and Isaac sojourn in the territory of Abimelech, who is depicted as the king of the Philistines (Gen 26:1). This king offers hospitality to the patriarchs, invites Abraham to stay in his country (20:15),[10] and recognizes Isaac as the blessed of YHWH (26:28). In Gen 20:3, God appears to Abimelech in a dream, and the Philistine king acts in a perfectly adequate way to the divine message. He is even depicted as the image of the God-fearing *goy* (20:4); and although a conflict arises between the patriarchs and the Philistine herders over the use of wells in a shared territory, a peaceful solution is found, which results in both Abraham and Isaac founding the site of Beersheba, which is claimed by the authors of Gen 20 and 26 as Judean.[11] The quite positive picture of the Philistines in the patriarchal narratives may be explained by the ideology of these stories that try to promote a cohabitation of all the different people in the Levant, in which conflicts should be resolved by negotiation (see also Gen 13; 31).[12]

In any case, the pictures of the Philistines in the Abraham and Isaac stories differ considerably from their presentation in the stories of the

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time when this city was no longer important, after its destruction by Hazael at the end of the ninth century BCE or after the earthquake and the Assyrian conquest in 701 BCE. See Aren Maeir, "Gath," *EBR* 9:1022–23. For a possible Judean occupation of Gath under Hezekiah, see Hermann M. Niemann, "Nachbarn und Gegner, Konkurrenten und Verwandte Judas: Die Philister zwischen Geographie und Ökonomie, Geschichte und Theologie," in *Kein Land für sich allein: Studien zum Kulturkontakt in Kanaan, Israel/Palästina und Ebirnâri für Manfred Weippert zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Ulrich Hübner and Ernst A. Knauf, OBO 186 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 2002), 76–77.

9. Niemann, "Nachbarn und Gegner."

10. Abraham is depicted as a *gēr* in Gen 21:34.

11. Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, WMANT 57 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984), 418. Blum locates these texts in the Hellenistic period; Matthias Köckert places them in the Persian period. See Köckert, *Abraham: Ahnvater–Vorbild–Kultstifter*, BG 31 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 190. But territorial conflicts between the Philistines and the Judahites can refer to an earlier context. In any case, it is quite clear that the original story about the territorial conflict with the Philistines can be found in Gen 26 (see Köckert, *Abraham*, 189–90).

12. Jacques Pons, "Confrontation et dialogue en Genèse 12–36," *ETR* 65 (1990): 15–26.

origins of the Israelite and Judahite monarchy. In these stories one finds, however, another narrative in which the Philistines appear in a more nuanced light. This is the so-called ark narrative, to which we now turn.

The Original Ark Narrative

The idea that 1 Sam 4:1–7:1 and 2 Sam 6 constitute an independent ark narrative comes from Leonhard Rost.[13] In his book about the succession narrative, he argued against earlier research affirming that the chapters, which narrate how the ark was captured by the Philistines and then returned to Kiriath-Jearim before David brought it to Jerusalem, were originally an independent story, written by one of the priests of the ark during the reign of David or Solomon.

According to Rost, this story is characterized as having the same vocabulary, style (many speeches and many questions), and theology. YHWH is presented as a god who strikes his enemies and (eventually) brings help and salvation to his people. This hypothesis was accepted by many scholars, including Martin Noth, who assumed that the Deuteronomistic History had integrated these older traditions in its history about Samuel and the origins of the monarchy.[14] There were voices, however, quite critical of Rost's theory, especially in regard to the idea that the original ark narrative ended in 2 Sam 6. One of the first problems observed was that the story about David's transfer of the ark to Jerusalem in 2 Sam 6 is now separated from the former narrative. Both parts are quite different and do not really belong together:

1. If 2 Sam 6 directly followed 1 Sam 7:1, David would appear without any introduction.
2. The names of persons and location differ.[15]

13. Leonhard Rost, *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids*, BWNT 42 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1926). According to Rost, this story consisted of 1 Sam 4:1b–18a, 19–21; 5:1–11b1, 12; 6:1–3b1, 4:10–16; 4:19–7:1; 2 Sam 6:1–15, 17–20a.

14. Martin Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien: Die sammelnden und bearbeitenden Geschichtswerke im Alten Testament (1943)* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967), 54; English translation, *The Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 15 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 77.

15. 1 Sam 7:1 mentions Eleazar as Abinadab's son; 2 Sam 6 speaks of Uzza and Ahio; 2 Sam 7:1 has Kiriath-Jearim; 2 Sam 6 speaks of Baale Yehuda (MT) or Baalah (according to 2 SamQ).

3. The style and the vocabulary between 1 Sam 4:1–7:1 and 2 Sam 6 are also different. Both units only share four of the fifty-four words and expressions that Rost considered to be typical for the so-called ark narrative.[16]
4. Jerusalem as the final destination of the ark is not hinted at in 1 Sam 4:1–7:1, which would be expected if, from the beginning, the ark narrative was the *hieros logos* of an ark shrine in Jerusalem.

For these reasons, several scholars have challenged the idea that 2 Sam 6 was the end of an independent ark narrative,[17] so with them I separate 1 Sam 4–7:1 from 2 Sam 6.

The question remains, however, whether one can consider 1 Sam 4:1b–7:1 as an independent story. According to Nadav Na'aman, "The ark narrative is inseparable from both the story of Eli and Samuel in chaps. 1–3 and from the episode of Samuel's victory over the Philistines in chap. 7; it was never an independent entity."[18] But here one needs to recognize that Samuel never shows up in the ark narrative. The only link between Samuel and the ark is made in 1 Sam 3:3, which reads: "Samuel was lying down in the temple of YHWH, where the ark of God was." All commentators agree that this statement is a gloss or a redactional insertion in order to create a link between Samuel and the ark,[19] which originally did not exist.

There is also a difference in the presentation of Eli and his sons in 1 Sam 2–3 and 1 Sam 4. In 1 Sam 2:22–25 and 2:27–34, Eli's sons are heavily condemned, and a prophet announces the end of the house of Eli. But in the story of 1 Sam 4, where we learn about the death of Eli's sons and of Eli himself, there is no negative remark made about them. Also, a Deu-

16. Christa Schäfer-Lichtenberger, "Beobachtungen zur Landegeschichte und zur Komposition der Samuelbücher," in *Freiheit und Recht: Festschrift F. Crüsemann*, ed. Christof Hardmeier, Rainer Kessler, and Andreas Ruwe (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1995), 328.

17. Franz Schicklberger, *Die Ladeerzählungen des ersten Samuel-Buches: Eine literaturwissenschaftliche und theologiegeschichtliche Untersuchung*, FB 7 (Würzburg: Echter, 1973); Patrick D. Miller and Jimmy J. M. Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord: A Reassessment of the "Ark Narrative" of 1 Samuel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Peter Porzig, *Die Lade Jahwes im Alten Testament und in den Texten vom Toten Meer*, BZAW 397 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009).

18. Nadav Na'aman, "The Pre-Deuteronomistic Story of King Saul and Its Historical Significance," *CBQ* 54 (1992): 654.

19. Walter Dietrich, *1 Samuel 1–12*, BKAT 8 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2010), 177.

teronomistic note explaining that their death happened according to what YHWH had previously announced through his prophet is lacking in 1 Sam 4, which means that the comments about Eli and his sons in 1 Sam 2–3 are later additions.[20]

The only link between 1 Sam 2 and 1 Sam 4 is the mention of the birth of Ichabod in 1 Sam 4:19–22, which creates a link with the prophetic announcement of 2:33: "The only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared to weep out his eyes and grieve his heart; all the members of your household shall die by the sword." But here again, scholars would agree that the episode of Ichabod's birth does not belong to the original story of 1 Sam 4 but was added later in order to create a link with the foregoing oracle.[21] In 1 Sam 4, Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas are represented as guardians of the ark, and their death is not described in a negative way.

The independence of the ark narrative is further confirmed by the fact that—with exception of the gloss in 1 Sam 3:3—there is no explanation of how the ark arrived in Shiloh. At the end of the book of Judges the ark appears in the sanctuary of Bethel (Judg 20:27). In all other texts in the book of Joshua that mention the ark, there is no explanation about its installation in Shiloh. This is another indication for the original independence of the ark story and of its original *Sitz im Leben* at the sanctuary of Shiloh.[22]

According to Na'aman, "the narrative cannot abruptly start in 4:1b."[23] But if we follow the Greek version we have a perfect introduction: "In those days the Philistines mustered for war against Israel, and Israel went out to battle against them; they encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek" (1 Sam 4:1b LXX). Interestingly, the Greek text does not mention Samuel at all, which is another indication that the MT's version of 1 Sam 4:1 ("And the word of Samuel came to all Israel") is a later revision. In contrast to the Greek version,[24] the MT attributes the initia-

20. Dietrich, *1 Samuel 1–12*, 246.

21. Porzig, *Die Lade Jahwes*, 140–41.

22. Shiloh is mentioned in Josh 18–22 in late Priestly post-Dtr texts, together with the tent of meeting; Judg 18:31 mentions the "house of God" in Shiloh; Judg 21 also speaks of Shiloh, but none of these texts ever mention the ark.

23. Na'aman, "Pre-Deuteronomistic Story," 654.

24. The Greek introduction "In those days" is the equivalent of ויהי בימים ההם, which introduces new stories in Exod 2:11; Judg 19:1; and 1 Sam 28:1, and is therefore an appropriate beginning of an independent narrative.

tive of the battle to the Israelites. This may be understood as a theological modification in order to explain that the Israelites lost the war and the ark because they had not consulted YHWH before waging war. The Philistines play different roles here, according to the (likely) older Greek version, as they initiated war against the Israelites, whereas in the MT, as we will see now, the Philistines, in 1 Sam 4, appear as YHWH's tool.

The Philistines as YHWH's Agents and Godfearers in 1 Samuel 4 and 6

First Samuel 4:1–18 speaks of two catastrophes that are related: the capture of the ark by the Philistines and the death of the priest of Shiloh, Eli, preceded by the death of his two sons. The two passages are related because they show that the sanctuary of Shiloh is no longer considered legitimate. It does not host the ark anymore, and its priestly dynasty has disappeared. The addressees of the narrative understand that the Israelites have been defeated and that the ark has been captured by the Philistines. However, a closer look at the story shows that they are never mentioned directly as being the agent of Israel's defeat and the loss of the ark. All the comments about this topic are put into a passive voice. According to the narrator, "Israel was defeated, … and the ark of God was captured" (1 Sam 4:10–11). When the messenger informs Eli about the loss of the ark, he similarly states, "The ark of God has been captured" (1 Sam 4:17). Also in the later addition (see above) about the birth of Ichabod, the wife of Phinehas explains his name as follows, "The glory has departed from Israel, because the ark of God had been captured" (1 Sam 4:21, repeated in v. 22). These formulations clearly suggest a divine passive and the idea that the Philistines did not take the ark by their own strength; rather, they were YHWH's tool. That means that Israel's defeat and the loss of the ark should be understood as the will of YHWH.[25]

Because of this particularity in 1 Sam 4 (1 Sam 5:1 mentions the Philistines as having captured the ark), some scholars imagine that the original ark narrative was limited to a *Katastrophengeschichte* in 1 Sam 4:1–2, 10–18, a story recounting how the ark was lost in a war with the Philistines.[26] According to these authors, 1 Sam 5:1–7:1 would have been added much later, to transform the defeat into a glorious victory.

25. Walter Brueggemann, *Ichabod toward Home: The Journey of God's Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 32.

26. Schicklberger, *Ladeerzählungen*, 25–73; Porzig, *Die Lade Jahwes*, 141–42.

However, it is difficult to imagine such an independent story that leaves so many unresolved questions and ends with a defeat. It seems more logical to imagine that the original story spoke about the loss of the ark and its sojourn in Philistine territory before reaching a new home in Kiriath-Jearim. That the divine passive is not used anymore in 1 Sam 5:1 does not indicate a different author, because the reader or listener of the story can now surmise that YHWH is behind the travels of the ark. Thus 1 Sam 5 demonstrates the superiority of the God of the ark in a distinctive way.

As for 1 Sam 4, the Philistines are not only presented as God's tool; they are also presented in a later addition as knowing about the exodus narrative. When the Israelites bring the ark to the camp, the Philistines become afraid and deliver a long speech:

> When the ark of YHWH (LXX)[27] came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. When the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, "What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" When they learned that the ark of YHWH had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid; they said, "A god has come into the camp." They said, "*Woe to us!* For nothing like this has happened before. *Woe to us!* Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness.[28] Take courage, *and be men*, O Philistines, in order not to become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; *be men* and fight." So the Philistines fought; Israel was defeated, and they fled, everyone to his home. (1 Sam 4:5–10)

There are several indications that the allusions to the exodus tradition in verses 8–9 are later additions. Whereas verse 7 speaks about one god, verse 8 uses the plural in order to transform the Philistines into polytheists (which contradicts 1 Sam 5, where the Philistines speak about the ark of the god of Israel). The idea that the Hebrews are slaves of the Philistines is not at all presupposed by the original narrative. There is a

27. There are importance differences between the Greek and the Hebrew version in the ark narrative. The original story spoke about the ark of YHWH or the ark of God; the titles "ark of the covenant" and "ark of YHWH who is enthroned on the cherubim" are later Dtr and post-Dtr revisions (Dietrich, *1 Samuel 1–12*, 211 and n. 81).

28. The location of the plagues in the wilderness is somewhat astonishing. It could be that this is an allusion to the miracle at the Sea of Reeds, which was located in the wilderness where the whole Egyptian army perished (Exod 13:18).

Wiederaufnahme in the beginning of verse 8 ("Woe to us!") and also at the end of verse 9 ("be men").[29] One may also observe a tension between verse 6aβb and verse 7: verse 6aßb implies that the Philistines already learned that YHWH had come to the rescue of the Hebrews, but this is not so in verse 7, where there is only mention of "a god." Moreover, these passages are also doublets. Therefore verse 6αβb is probably an insertion that was added after verses 8–9a in order to correct the plural in verse 8.[30] The original passage only contained verses 5–6aα, 7, 9b, 10–11.

In the addition the Philistines appear, according to Walter Dietrich, as "Jhwh-fürchtige Kenner der Heilsgeschichte Israels."[31] This is partly right. The Philistines never use the Tetragrammaton when they speak of the god of Israel. Yet the intention of the redactors was also to depict the Philistines as knowing about the exodus tradition, suggesting parallels between the exodus and plague traditions and to present them in a better light than the Egyptians.

This is also the case in another addition. After the ark brought plagues in Philistine cities, the rulers consulted their religious specialists in order to know what to do with the ark:

> And they said, "What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?" They answered, "Five gold tumors and five gold mice,[32] according to the number of the lords of the Philistines; it is the same plague for all of you and your lords. You must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel; perhaps he will lighten his hand on you and your gods and your land. Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? He acted wantonly with them, so that they released them, and they went away? Now then, get ready a new cart and two milch cows

29. The imperative "be courageous" reminds one of the (Dtr) divine speeches in the book of Joshua; see Josh 1:1–9, etc.

30. There is no allusion in the ark narrative to the Israelite being slaves of the Philistines. This statement can also be understood as an attempt to present the Philistines as Egyptians. Note that 4:6, 9 are the only texts in the whole ark narrative that use the term *Hebrews*.

31. Dietrich, *1 Samuel 1–12*, 212.

32. There is some confusion over whether the plagues that the ark brought to the Philistines were "tumors" (the Masoretes interpreted them to be hemorrhoids) or rats/mice. The latter play a more prominent role in LXX. It is possible that there were two (oral?) variants of the plagues that were combined differently in the Masoretic and Greek manuscripts.

> that have never borne a yoke, and yoke the cows to the cart, but take their calves home, away from them." (1 Sam 6: 4–7)

It is quite clear that verse 4b and verse 5a are doublets. Verse 4b mentions a Philistine Pentapolis, which does not concord with the presence of just three cities (Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath) mentioned in the narrative. Verse 5b introduces the topic of the superiority of the god of Israel and probably belongs together with verse 6. That means that the original story contained 1 Sam 6:4a, 5a, and 7. Verse 5b, a passage that can be compared to Exod 12:12, can be understood as a redactional technique used to prepare the reader for the motif of the hardening of the heart in verse 6, which is typical of the (J, or better Dtr) exodus tradition. The Philistine priests and diviners advise their compatriots not to act as stubbornly as did the Egyptians; so the Philistines follow their advice and prepare for the "exodus" of the ark of YHWH. That means that the Philistines acknowledge the power of the god of Israel, in contradistinction to Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

The Philistines Experience the Superiority of the Ark over Their God Dagon (1 Sam 5)

The power of YHWH, the god of the ark, manifests itself after the ark has been deported to Ashdod. The practice of the deportation of the ark can be compared to the deportation of divine statues, a practice that is attested in cuneiform sources since the Old Babylonian period until the time of the Neo-Babylonians.[33] The capture of the deities of enemies was meant to demonstrate the superiority of the victor's deities. In the Annals of the Assyrian king Sennacherib one finds the following statement: "Sidqa, king of Ashkelon, who had not submitted to my yoke, the gods of his father-house, himself, his wife, his sons, his daughters, his brothers, … I tore away and brought to Assyria" (2.60–64).[34] An inscription of Sargon II, the Nimrud prism, which was redacted in 706 BCE and refers to the destruction of Samaria, mentions "the gods in which they had put their trust" among the booty. This inscription should be juxtaposed with two Neo-Assyrian bas-reliefs on which one can see soldiers of Sargon and

33. Mathias Delcor, "Jahweh et Dagon (ou le Jahwisme face à la religion des Philistins, d'après 1 Sam. V)," *VT* 14 (1964): 136–54.

34. Daniel D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924), 30.

of Sennacherib respectively, transporting statues of gods among their war loot. Interestingly, in both of these reliefs there is one deity, smaller than the others, who appears to stand on a box, quite similar to the biblical *ʾarôn*.[35]

Sargon's statement stresses the weakness of the enemies' gods. And this disparagement of the gods of the enemies can even lead to the denial of their divinity via the destruction of the divine statues. Assurbanipal records that he put into pieces the Elamite deities: "I smashed their gods and thereby soothed the heart of the lord of the lords."[36] The author of the ark story knows about these practices and takes them up, sometimes in order to construct a counterhistory. In 1 Sam 5, when the ark is placed in the sanctuary of Dagon, the statue of Dagon is smashed through YHWH's power:

> The Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and placed it beside Dagon. The people of Ashdod rose early the next day (and went to the house of Dagon):[37] there was Dagon, fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of YHWH. So, they took Dagon and put him back in his place. And they rose early on the next morning: Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of YHWH, and the head of Dagon and the two soles of his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. (1 Sam 5:2–4)

On the first night Dagon falls down before YHWH as if he would worship him. Rather than YHWH paying homage before the Philistine deity, it is Dagon who prostrates himself before YHWH. On the second night, however, the statue of Dagon is dismembered in a way that reminds one of the destruction of divine statues at the hands of the Assyrians.[38]

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35. Christoph Uehlinger, "' … und wo sind die Götter von Samarien?' Die Wegführung syrisch-palästinischer Kultstatuen auf einem Relief Sargons II. in Horsabat/Dur-Sharrukin," in *"Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf …": Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient; Festschrift O. Loretz*, ed. Manfred Dietrich, Ingo Kottsieper, and Oswald Loretz, AOAT 250 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998), 739–77; Uehlinger, "Hanun von Gaza und seine Gottheiten auf Orthostatenreliefs Tiglatpilesers III," in Hübner and Knauf, *Kein Land für sich allein*, 92–125.

36. Maximilian Streck, *Assurbanipal und die letzten assyrischen Könige bis zum Untergange Niniveh's*, VAB 7 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1916), 50, lines 119–20.

37. Missing in the MT; only present in LXX.

38. This contradicts Zwickel's assertion that this practice of amputation is not attested during the Iron Age. See Wolfgang Zwickel, "Dagons abgeschlagener Kopf (1 Samuel V 3–4)," *VT* 44 (1994): 246. For the relief from Sargon II's palace in Dur-

What happens in 1 Sam 5 to Dagon can be compared to a strategy that Saul Olyan has labeled the "ascription of physical disability as a stigmatizing strategy in biblical iconic polemics."[39] The falling down and dismembering of Dagon is used to stress his loss of any power in the presence of the ark of YHWH. One may understand this episode as a counterhistory,[40] which uses practices of deportation and smashing of divine statues in order to demonstrate that the deported ark did not show allegiance toward the deity in the temple to which it had been deported. On the contrary, the ark was so powerful that it caused the fall of the deity to whom it was supposed to show allegiance. Interestingly, the Philistines seem to accept this divine judgment.

The Philistines Recognize YHWH's Power and Accept the Limitations of Their Territory (1 Sam 5 and 6)

After the incident in Dagon's temple, the Philistines recognize that YHWH's "hand" or strength is "heavy" on them and their god Dagon (1 Sam 5:7). That means that they accept that the god of Israel is more powerful than the god of Ashdod.[41] They also understand that YHWH's ark is so powerful that they all risk their lives by keeping it in their territories (1 Sam 5:11).

In the episode about the ark's travel throughout Philistine cities and the Philistines' decision to send it back, the expression "hand of YHWH" is a key phrase that appears seven times (1 Sam 5:6, 7, 9, 11; 6:3, 5, 9), which may allude to the exodus tradition (see Exod 9:3; see also 6:1; 13:3, 6; 14:31), as is sometimes argued.[42] One should not forget, however, that the "hand of YHWH" is a very common topic and occurs frequently also

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Sharrukin (Khorsabad), see Paul-Emile Botta and Eugène Flandin, *Architecture et sculpture*, vol. 1 of *Monuments de Ninive*, ed. Paul-Emile Botta (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1849), pl. 140.

39. Olyan, "Ascription of Physical Disability," 1.

40. For the concept see Amos Funkenstein, "History, Counter-history and Memory," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 66–81.

41. The narrative does not speak about the gods worshiped in Gath and Ekron. An inscription attests to the worship of a goddess in Ekron. See Alexander Fantalkin, "Toward the Identification of the Goddess of Ekron," *JANER* 17 (2017): 97–115.

42. Fritz Stolz, *Das erste und zweite Buch Samuel*, ZBAT 9 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1981), 47; Dietrich, *1 Samuel 1–12*, 267.

in other contexts, as it does, for instance, in Isa 40–66. In any case, it is noteworthy that the Philistines (and not only the narrator) acknowledge the strength of YHWH's hand.

There is, however, one clear allusion to the exodus narrative in 5:12, which refers to the cry of a city, namely, Ekron. This phrase has a close parallel in Exod 2:23 (P):[43]

Exod 2:23 ותעל שועתם אל־האלהים

1 Sam 5:12 ותעל שועת העיר השמים

Apparently 1 Sam 5:12 belongs to a quite late insertion (5:12–6:1) that interrupts the discussion about sending the ark back to the Israelites. The redactor knows the Priestly exodus story and quotes from it. However, he replaces the word *God* with *heaven*, perhaps in order to remain somewhat vague about the receiver of the cry of the Ekronites. In any case, by quoting Exod 2:23 the redactor shows a parallel between the Philistines and the oppressed Israelites, suggesting that all the events that happened since the capture of the ark are under the control of the god of Israel. The redactor wanted to promote the same theology as the Priestly writer of the exodus narrative. The allusions to the exodus tradition continue in the insertion of 1 Sam 6:5b–6 (see above), where the Philistines again appear in a better light than the Egyptians. In the original story of the return of the ark to Beth-Shemesh, the Philistine lords also behave in the right way. They accompany the ark to the border of Beth-Shemesh (1 Sam 6:12) and then return after the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh have taken the chest with the ark (1 Sam 6:15).

The political background of this episode is the claim that Beth-Shemesh does not (any longer) belong to the Philistines but to Judah or Israel.[44] According to the narrative, the Philistines accept that it is now an Israelite

43. These are the only texts that combine the rare word שועה with the verb עלה.

44. Beth-Shemesh is located on a border and was sometimes under Philistine control (see also 2 Chr 28:18); but apparently in the eight century it was under Israelite sovereignty (see 2 Kgs 14:12–14). See Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman, *Tel Beth-Shemesh: A Border Community in Judah: Renewed Excavations 1990–2000; The Iron Age*, MSSMNIA 34 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

city, although it will turn out that Beth-Shemesh is not the appropriate place for hosting the ark, but that is another matter.[45]

Conclusion

In many texts of the Hebrew Bible the Philistines are depicted in a very negative way as hostile others; the narratives about Abraham and Isaac sojourning among the Philistines present another picture, according to which friendly contacts are possible. In the ark narrative that ended originally in 1 Sam 7:1, the Philistines are still Israel's enemies, but they are also presented in some positive ways. In the original account, they appear as YHWH's tool, since the story of the Philistines' capture of the ark suggests that the real agent of this event was the God of Israel.

The later revisions of the narrative strengthen the parallels between the plagues caused by the ark and the plagues of Egypt according to the Priestly and non-Priestly exodus narrative in Exod 1–15. The Philistines and their leaders behave in a much better way than Pharaoh and the Egyptians: they understand that YHWH has manifested his power through the plagues and thus send back the ark to its territory, contrary to the king of Egypt, who refused to let the Hebrews go. The Philistines remain the "others," but they are aliens who can understand the power of the god of their neighbors.

45. According to the MT, YHWH strikes the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh because they have looked at the ark. This remark perhaps reflects the idea that they opened the ark and saw what was inside it (which brings us back to the question of the content of the ark). The narrator of 1 Sam 6 wants to demonstrate that Beth-Shemesh is not the appropriate place for the ark. The competition between Beth-Shemesh and Kiriath-Jearim may reflect the political situation of the eighth century BCE, when the ark was brought to Kiriath-Jearim under Jeroboam II. For more details see Thomas Römer, Christophe Nicolle, and Israel Finkelstein, "Les fouilles archéologiques à Qiryath Yéarim et le récit de l'Arche d'Alliance," *CRAI* 2 (2018): 983–1000.