

AEGEAN MERCENARIES IN LIGHT OF THE BIBLE

CLASH OF CULTURES IN THE STORY OF DAVID AND GOLIATH

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In memory of Gershon Argov, a teacher and educator

Contents

List of Figures	iii
Introduction	1
1. Aegean mercenaries and their role in the Near East and in Egypt since the 8th century BCE	4
2. Aegean mercenaries in the Bible	9
A. Research approaches to the story of the duel between David and Goliath and the figure of Goliath	12
A.1. The story of the duel has no historical basis.....	13
A.2. The story was created and edited after David's period (8th century BCE till the Second Temple period).....	13
A.3. The story was written around the time of David	21
B. Who were the opponents in the duel and when did the event take place?	27
C. The defensive armament of Goliath and conclusions about his identity and name	29
C.1. The ethos of military arms and shields in Greece and Israel.....	29
C.2. The development of hoplite armor	31
C.3. Comparison between the armor of Goliath and the hoplite armor	40
C.3.1. The armor of Goliath and its heavy weight.....	40
C.3.2. The shield bearer of Goliath.....	40
C.3.3. The helmet of Goliath	41
C.4. Diversionary tactics	42
C.5. How did 'γναλαθώραξ' turn into 'Goliath'	47
D. The name is the message: four proofs	50
D.1. Parallel instances of a military equipment item turning into a personal name or epithet.....	50
D.2. The Philistine warrior was nameless	52
D.3. There are multiple 'Goliaths'.....	53
D.4. Names of additional biblical foreign warriors which derive from military terms	54
E. Who was the enemy represented by Goliath? The Saites and their Aegean mercenaries	61
F. Saite-Aegean myths in a distorted mirror	73
F.1. The armor and helmet that saved the nation and its king	73
F.2. Deliverance of the army by a hero in a duel with an armed giant.....	79

G. The story of the duel in light of the biblical attitude to the Babylonian exiles and the Egyptian diaspora	82
Conclusion	98
Bibliography	103
A. Literary sources and commentaries	103
B. Modern studies	105
Abbreviations	112

List of Figures

Fig. 1. The Aegean basin.	iv
Fig. 2. Land of Israel in the Late Monarchic Period.	2
Fig. 3. Ancient Egypt in the Late Period.	3
Fig. 4. Bronze 'bell corselet' and high-crest helmet.	33
Fig. 5. Centauromachia.	34
Fig. 6. Achilles killing the Amazon Queen Penthesilea.	35
Fig. 7. Combat of hoplites.	36
Fig. 8. Bronze plate cuirass.	37
Fig. 9. Menelaos pursuing Helen.	38
Fig. 10. Bronze Corinthian helmet and pair of greaves.	39
Fig. 11. Hoplite.	43
Fig. 12. Archer and combat of Hoplites.	44
Fig. 13. Bust of Pericles.	45
Fig. 14. Silver Phoenician bowl.	66
Fig. 15. Assyrian soldier with hoplite gear.	67
Fig. 16. Aegean hoplite on an Ionic amphora from Daphnae.	75
Fig. 17. Aegean hoplite engraved on a relief from Naukratis.	76
Fig. 18. Carian skyphos from Naukratis.	77
Fig. 19. Carian stela from Saqqara.	94
Fig. 20. Ionic amphora from Thebes.	95



FIG. 1. THE AEGEAN BASIN.
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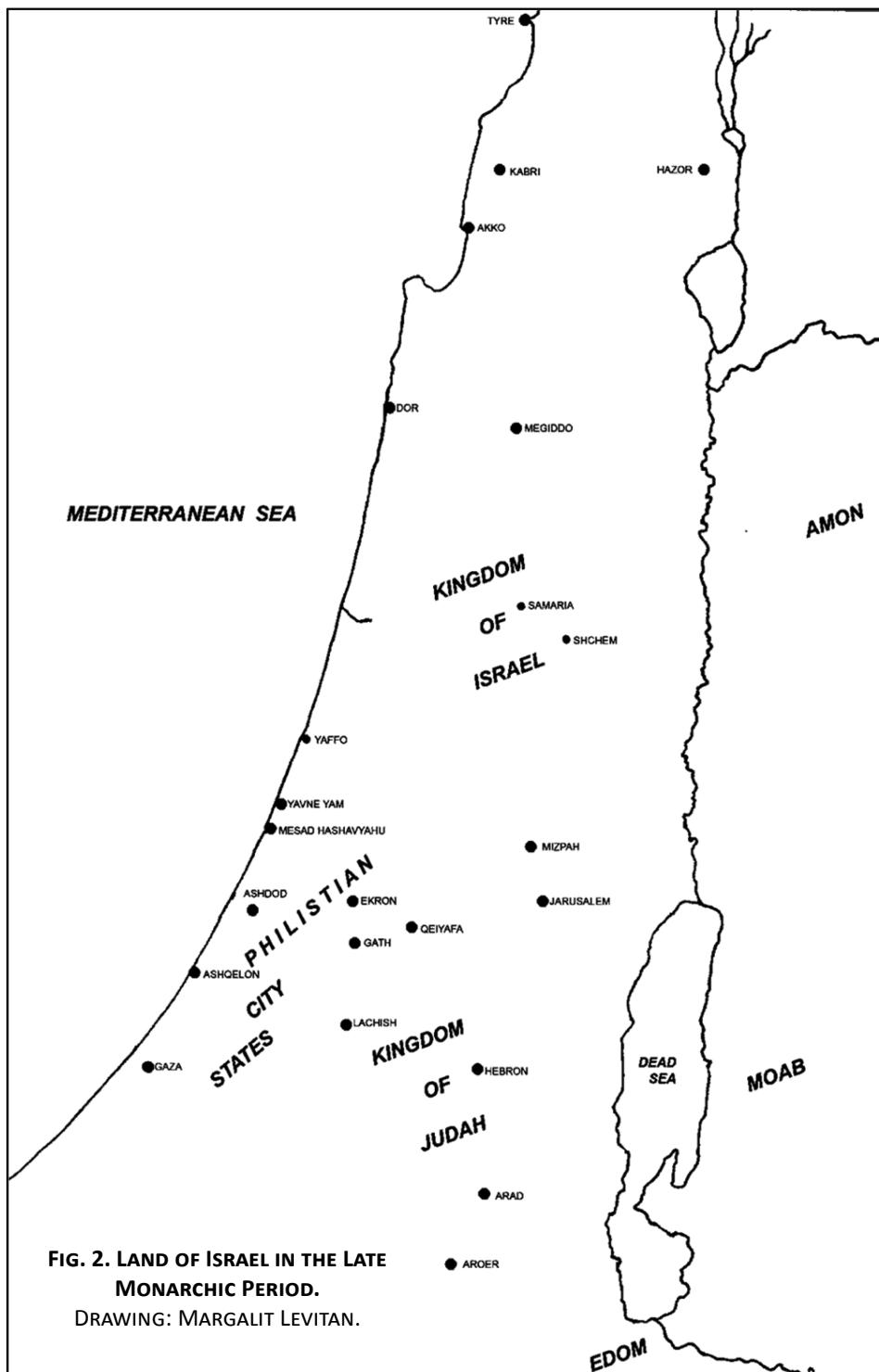
Introduction

Herodotus relates that during the reign of Psammeticus I, ruler of a district of the Delta in Egypt, Ionian and Carian sea pirates came ashore and began pillaging. They were armed with bronze weapons and armor that the Egyptians had never seen before. Psammeticus understood that they were the realization of the oracle he had received that that brazen men would come from the sea and make him become the sole rulers of Egypt, and he hired their services (Herodotus II.152-154). The story has a legendary color, but it finds support in the inscription of Ashurbanipal, King of Assyria, dated to 643/2 BCE which reports that Gyges, King of Lydia, sent mercenaries to help Psammeticus who had rebelled against him (Prism A, in: Tadmor & Cogan 1977: 79). The Greek mercenaries gradually became the decisive factor in the wars that were waged in the Near East and in the Greek world during the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic periods. Although they were few in number, temporary residents, and cultural inferiors in the countries in which they served, they were considered as having the power to determine the fates of armies and peoples, to elevate and to overthrow rulers and kingdoms. This was due to their technological advantages – heavy weapons and metal armor – and to their skills in warfare. In Greek these foot soldiers with heavy weapons were called ‘hoplites’ from the word ὅπλα (arms, weapons).

The mercenaries participated in the wars between the great powers of the Near East which were also fateful for the Kingdom of Judah. Pharaoh Necho II who led his mercenaries into battle against Assyria and Babylon in 609 BCE, killed Josiah, King of Judah during the course of his campaign and crowned Jehoiakim as his loyal client king. After the battle, Babylon gained hegemony over the Near East, but the kings of Judah, under the influence of Egypt that promised them military assistance, rebelled repeatedly against Babylon. Pharaoh Hophra (Greek: Apries) had tens of thousands of mercenaries (Herodotus II.163). He was an ally of Zedekiah, King of Judah, and came to his aid during the siege that Nebuchadnezzar II imposed on Jerusalem. But he failed and retreated (Jeremiah, 37-39). In 586 the city was conquered and destroyed, and the Jews were exiled to Babylon.

Many of those who remained behind in Judah migrated to Egypt, and this was the beginning of the great Jewish diaspora there. They settled in the cities where the mercenaries dwelt such as Tahpanhes (Tell Daphnae), Noph (Memphis), Migdol (Tell el-Heir) and Syene/ Swene (today Aswan). The Jews also served as mercenaries in Egypt. Already in the days of Psammeticus I, mercenaries were sent from Judah to help him in his wars against the Nubians. A settlement of Jewish mercenaries was stationed in Yeb (Elephantine) on the Nubian border until the 4th century BCE (see below).

In 532 BCE the Jewish exiles in Babylon received permission from Cyrus, King of Persia, to return to their homeland. They set up their temple and reinstated the fundamental elements of their faith. The later prophets were active during this period and a large part of the Bible was composed at that time. This was a historiographic composition with strong political and cultural positions towards every factor and event in the international arena.



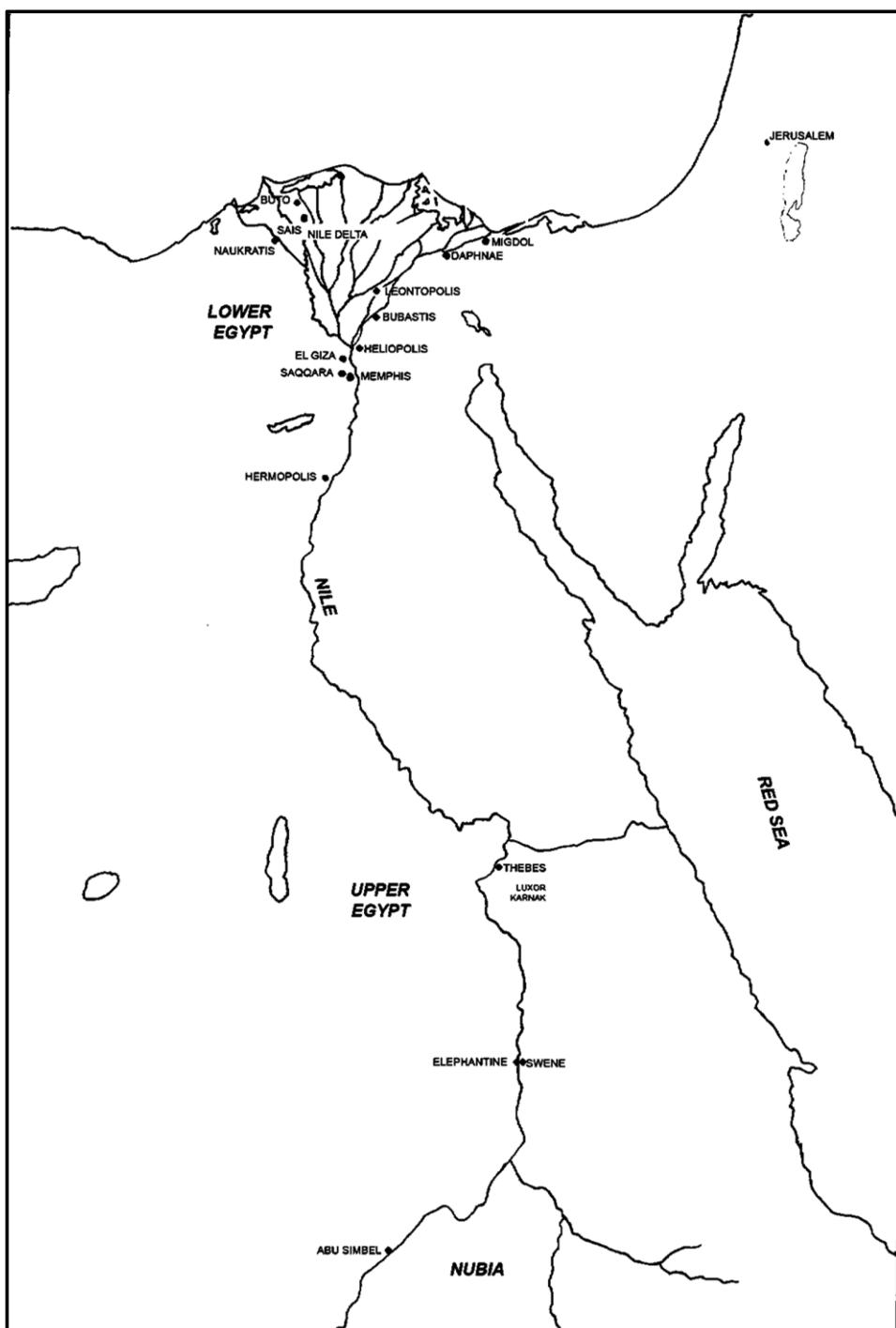


FIG. 3. ANCIENT EGYPT IN THE LATE PERIOD.

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