

# **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*



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**FIG. 1. THE AEGEAN BASIN.**  
DRAWING: MARGALIT LEVITAN.

## 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.

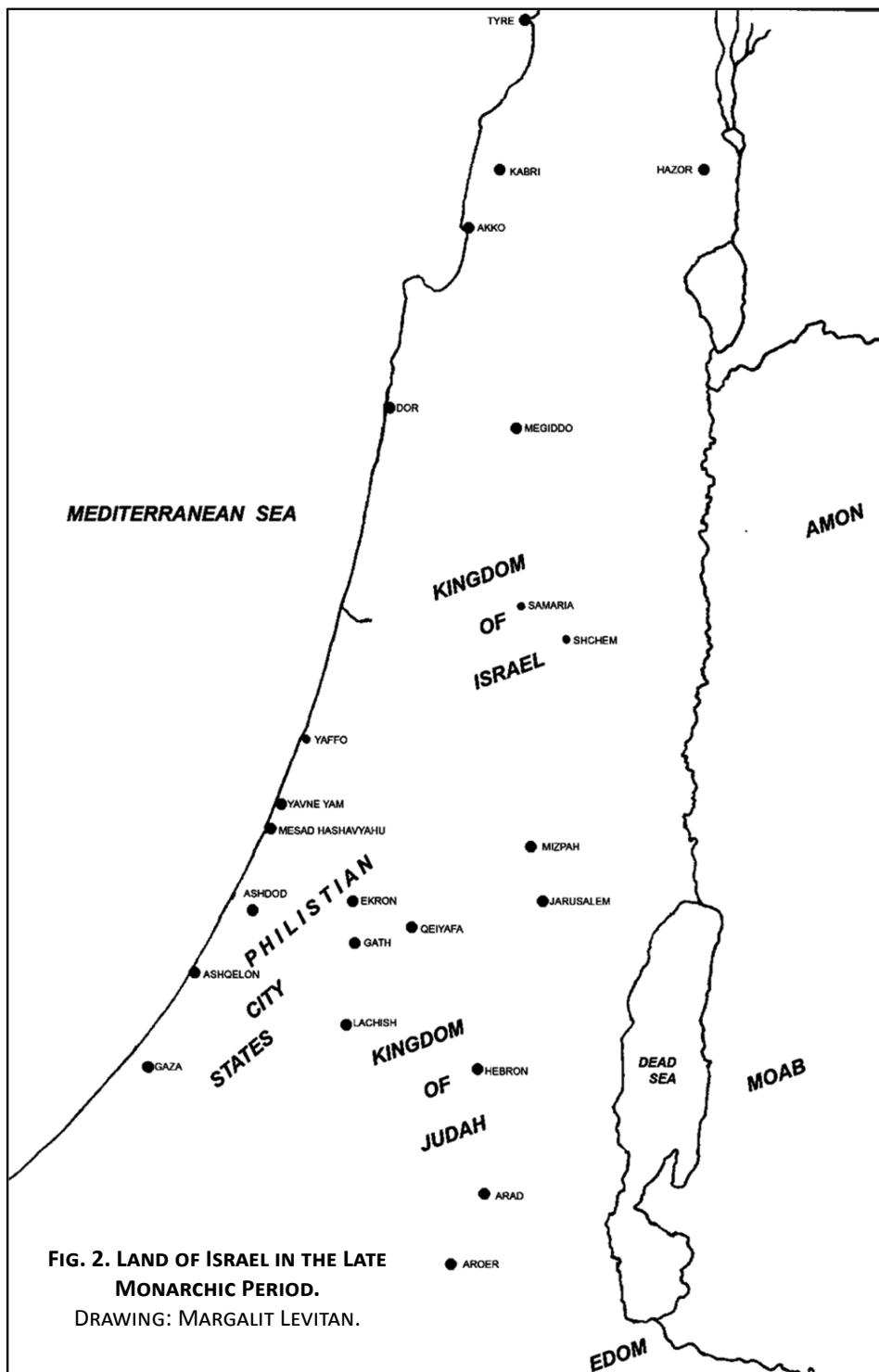


FIG. 2. LAND OF ISRAEL IN THE LATE MONARCHIC PERIOD.

DRAWING: MARGALIT LEVITAN.

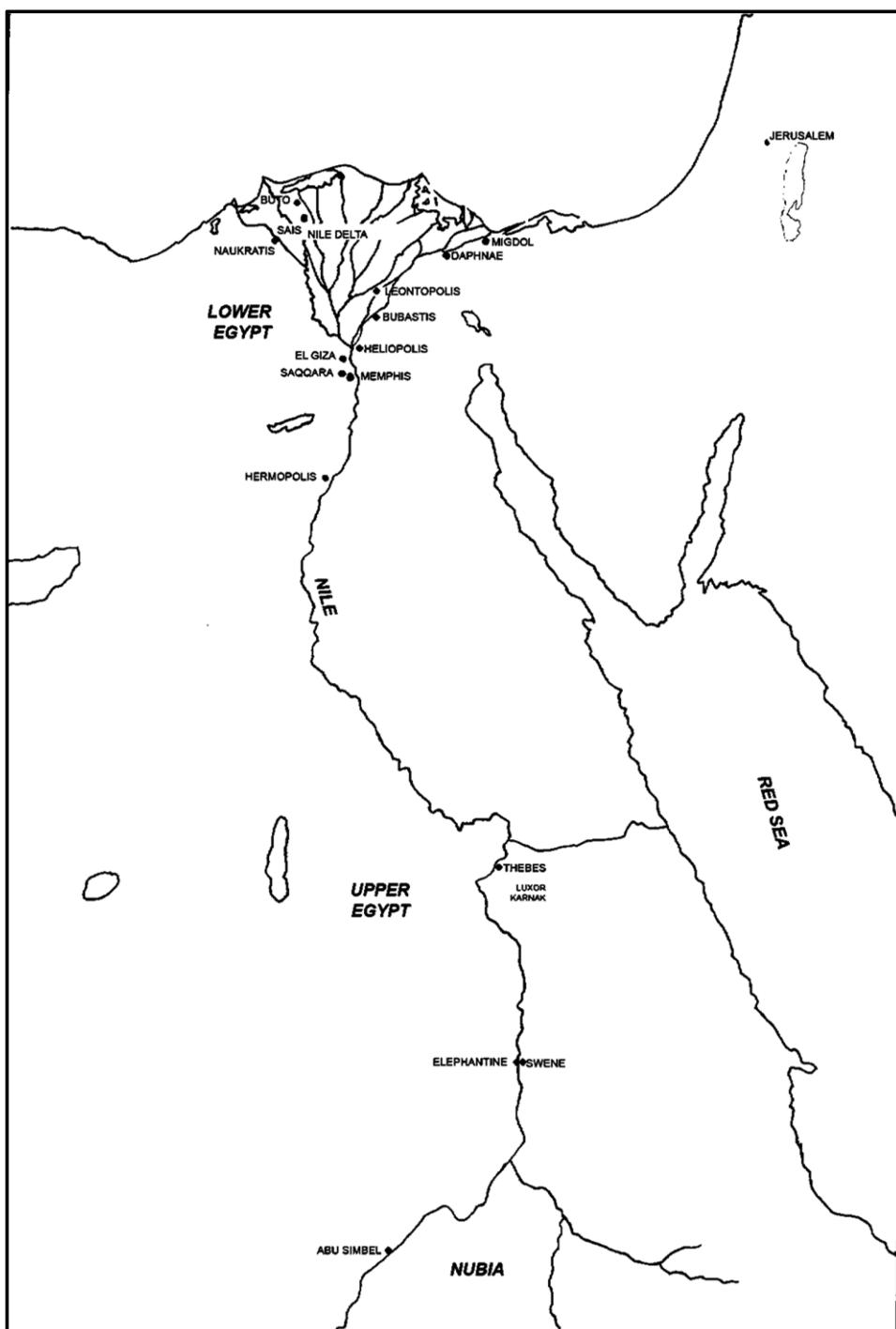


FIG. 3. ANCIENT EGYPT IN THE LATE PERIOD.

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