

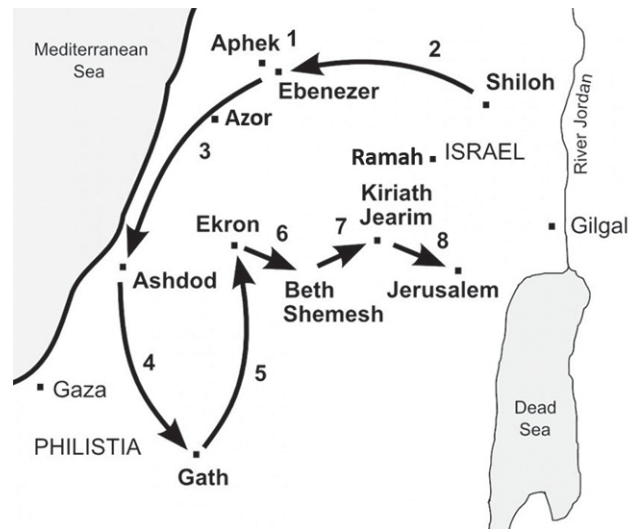
EXPLORATION: BIBLE

Important Archaeological Finds of the Bible #4—The Ebenezer Ostrakon

In 1 Samuel chapters 4-6 the Philistines had an interesting encounter with Yahweh, the God of Israel. To get the full context of this story you should read these chapters in your Bible. Following is a summary.

In chapter 4, the Philistines gathered their armies to attack Israel at the Aphek fortress. The Israelites in turn gathered their army to a nearby city called Ebenezer (see map).

In the first conflict Israel was defeated in battle. Therefore, to sway the odds in their favor, the elders of Israel decided to bring the Ark of Yahweh to the battle as a “good luck charm.” So, the elders sent messengers to the priests who served Yahweh at the Tabernacle in Shiloh (see map). The two sons of Eli the High Priest, Hophni and Phinehas, then accompanied the Ark to the battlefield. This was a VERY BAD IDEA – Yahweh, God of Israel, is not a talisman, to ward off evil. Yahweh God is to be honored and worshipped, not trifled with.



[Map is from thebiblejourney.org, by Chris and Jenifer Taylor, 2022, under the fair use act]

In chapter 5, the Philistines once again defeated Israel and both of Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were killed in battle. As a spoil of war, the Philistines captured the Ark of Yahweh. First, they took the Ark to the Philistine city of Ashdod (see map). They put Yahweh's Ark in the Temple of Dagon, chief God of the Philistines. In the morning, the image of Dagon had fallen face down before the Ark of Yahweh. So, the keepers of the Philistine temple set Dagon back up. The next morning, the image of Dagon

was found, once again, face down before the Ark of Yahweh, but this time his head and both hands were broken off.



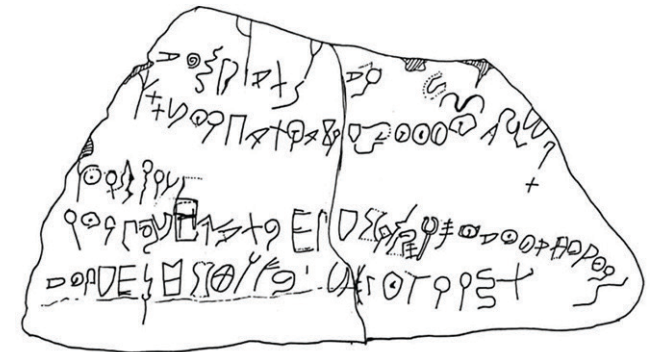
Two ancient stone reliefs of Dagon, the sea god. [1st photo: courtesy Kay Kohlmeyer, 2nd photo: <http://public-domain.zorger.com>]

Then, the men of Ashdod became ill with tumors that made them infertile. So, they sent the Ark of Yahweh to Gath, but the men of Gath were also plagued with these horrible tumors. So, they tried to send the Ark to Ekron, and this is what the Ekronites said, “They have brought the ark of the God of Israel to us, to kill us and our people!” – DON'T BRING IT HERE!!! So finally, after seven months of plague and death, the Philistines leaders decided to return the Ark to Israel.

Chapter 6 tells us how they sent the Ark back. They put the Ark of Yahweh on a new cart with a “trespass offering of gold” in a chest next to it. Then they hitched two young cows to the cart that had never been yoked and took their calves away from them. Then they watched to see what the cows would do. The text tells us, “Then the cows headed straight for the road to Beth Shemesh, and went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right hand or the left.” This of course was NOT natural, this was supernatural. The hand of Yahweh was directing these cows to the nearest Israelite city, Beth Shemesh. The Philistines had met the God of Israel and had discovered, firsthand, that Yahweh is not a God to trifle with.

The men of Beth Shemesh gladly received the Ark of Yahweh. They dismantled the cart and sacrificed the cows on a large stone altar in the valley near Beth Shemesh (that stone altar is still there to this day). But the men of Beth Shemesh also dishonored God because they looked into the Ark of Yahweh. Immediately a plague broke forth on them and many died. The men of Beth Shemesh said, “Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? ...So, they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjath Jearim, saying, “The Philistines have brought back the ark of Yahweh; come down and take it.” The men of Israel also learned, the hard way, that the God of Israel is not to be trifled with.

Interestingly, in the archeological excavations at Ebenezer, an ostrakon (a clay tablet with writing) was found. This inscription is famous today because it contains the basic elements of this amazing story.



The Ebenezer Ostrakon is written in the ancient proto-Hebrew script from about the 12th century B.C. [Photo by Permission: BAS Library – <https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/28/3/6>]

The Ebenezer Ostrakon reads like this...

1. Unto the field [the battlefield] we came, (unto) Aphek from Shiloh.
2. The Kittim [Sea People/Philistines] took it [the Ark] and came to Azor, (to) Dagon lord of Ashdod, (and to) Gath.
3. (It returned to) Kiriath- Jearim [a city of Israelite priests who then watched over the Ark of Yahweh]
4. The companion of the footsoldiers, came to tell the elders, “a horse has come (and) upon (it was) the brothers [Eli's sons, Hophni & Phinehas] for us to bury.”

Here we have an archeological discovery, from the time of this event, which authenticates the biblical story. The lesson from this story is for all people everywhere: **THE GOD OF ISRAEL IS NOT TO BE TRIFLED WITH. ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE SHOULD HONOR AND WORSHIP YAHWEH AS THE TRUE AND LIVING GOD.**