

“Palestine” in the Bible

Paul Sumner

The names "Palestine" and "Palestina" occur four times in the Old Testament portion of the King James Bible (1611), the most influential English translation in history.

What have ye to do with me, O Tyre, and Sidon,
and all the coasts of **Palestine**? (Joel 3:4a = 4:4a Heb)

The people shall hear, and be afraid;
sorrow shall take hold of the inhabitants of **Palestina**.
(Exod 15:14)

Rejoice not thou, whole **Palestina**... (Isa 14:29a)

Howl, O gate; cry, O city,
thou whole **Palestina**, art dissolved. (Isa 14:31a)

A few English versions since the KJV occasionally use "Palestine." But the majority use the term "Philistia" eight times: Exod 15:14; Isa 14:29,31; Joel 3:4; Ps 60:8; 83:7; 87:4; 108:9. [Note 1]

[A PDF version of this article is available. [Click Here.](#)]

"Palestine" does not occur in the New Testament.

Contrary to radical Islamic ideology, Yeshua was not "a Palestinian Jew" born in "Palestine." He was born in the "**city of David**" (Luke 2:11)—that is, "**in Bethlehem of Judah**" (Matt 2:1)—and raised "**in the Land of Israel**" (Matt 2:20), and performed miracles **in the Land of the Jews**" (Acts 10:39).

Some texts use the Latin term "Judea" for "Judah." Yeshua preached in "**the region of Judea beyond the Jordan** [River]" (Matt 19:1), where he oversaw the baptism of numerous **Jews** (Mark 1:5, John 4:1-3). In the village of Bethany outside Jerusalem, which was in "Judea," he raised his friend Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1,7).

Later, the apostle Paul preached the Gospel "throughout all the region of **Judea**" and ministered to "the churches of **Judea**" (Acts 26:20; Gal 1:22).

[Top]

Whence "Palestine"

The oldest known historical reference to "Palestine" is in the work of Greek historian **Herodotus** (ca. 484–425). He said **Palaistina** is "part of Syria" along the Mediterranean coast. [Note 2]

Παλαιστίνη—*Palaistinē*

Some 500 years later, Jewish historian **Josephus** (AD/CE 37-100) quoted Herodotus in referring to "Syria of **Palaistine**" and said "the Syrians that are in **Palaistine** are circumcised." Josephus quickly "corrects" Herodotus by noting that the only "inhabitants of **Palaistine** [who] are circumcised [are] **Jews**."

This is a key comment: Jews lived in Palaistine—in the late first century. [\[Note 3\]](#)

The 4th century church historian **Eusebius** (writing in Greek) twice mentions "**Palaistine**" in his *Ecclesiastical History* (2.2.6; 7.15.1). He notes that the Mediterranean coastal city Caesarea is in that region (today: central Israel, north of Tel Aviv).

[\[Top\]](#)

In the Hebrew Bible there is one word behind the various English renderings Palestine, Palestina, and Philistia. It is **Peleshet**.

פְּלִשְׁתִּים—Peleshet

Note the consonant link between Hebrew and Greek.

Peleshet [Hebrew]: P-L-SH-T

Palaistine [Greek]: P-L-S-T [there is no "sh" sound in Greek]

The geographical term **Peleshet** is used eight times in the Hebrew Bible (Exod 15:14; Isa 14:29, 31; Joel 4:4[=3:4 Eng], Pss 60:10[=v.8 Eng], 83:8[7], 87:4, 108:10[9]).

The inhabitants of Peleshet are **Pelishtim**, a plural noun that occurs 287x in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 10:14; 26:1; Exod 13:17, etc.), most often in Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 Chronicles. In English Bibles, these are the **Philistines**.

פְּלִשְׁתִּים—Pelishtim

[\[Top\]](#)

The Pelishtim

From the time the Israelites first entered Canaan, under Joshua's leadership, the **Philistines** were perennial enemies. Their center of power was the Pentapolis, a cluster of five cities along the coast of southern Canaan: Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza. [See map below.] Their influence, however, stretched farther north up the coast.

The warrior giant **Goliath** (from the city of Gath) taunted the timid Jewish battle lines with ethnic bluster: "I am **the** Philistine" [anokhi **ha**-Pelishti]" (1 Sam 17:8). Interestingly, the Greek Septuagint renders his boast as: "**I Am Foreigner**" [*ego eimi allophulos*].

פְּלִשְׁתִּי—Pelishti

Goliath's boast fires up teenager David's famous response: "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come against you in the name of Yahveh Tzeva'ot, the God of the ranks of Israel, whom you have defied" (1 Sam 17:45).

The three main gods in the Pelishtim pantheon were **Dagon** (Judg 16:23; 1 Sam 5:1-7), **Ashtoreth** (Judg 10:6; 1 Sam 31:10), and **Baal-Zebub** (2 Kgs 1:1-6, 16).

Some 250 years after David, **Isaiah** condemns his fellow Judeans for forsaking God's "light" and for being "full [of practices] from the East...[abounding] in customs of the aliens." These sins include "soothsaying like **the Philistines** [Pelishtim]" (Isa 2:5-6).

[Top]

Septuagint Translation

The Septuagint (LXX) only one time renders "Peleshet" as a reference to the people: **Phulistiim** (Philistines, Exod 15:14).

Everywhere else, the LXX translates "Peleshet" with the Greek **hoi Allophuloi**, "the Foreigners." This rendering is also reflected in Isaiah 2:5-6 which refers to "the land of the Allophuloi and many strange [allophuloi] children were born to them."

ΟΙ ΔΑΛΛΟΦΥΛΟΙ – Isa 14:29, 31; Joel 4:4 [3:4 Eng], Ps 59:10 [60:8 Eng], 82:8 [83:7 Eng], 86:4 [87:4 Eng], and 107:10 [108:9 Eng].

The Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, who translated the LXX considered the Pelishtim as **aliens and strangers**. Some might view this as an historical irony, since the Israelites arrived in Canaan after the Pelishtim. But the Biblical perspective is that the Land was an eternal gift from God to the Israelites, alone. Everyone else was a foreigner—in His land—no matter when any of them arrived.

[Top]

Whence the Pelishtim

Evidence from Egyptian inscriptions identifies the Pelishtim as "Sea Peoples."

Pottery from the cities of Ekron and Ashdod in Philistia (southwest coast of Israel) mirrors styles found on the island of Cyprus. The temple design at Tell Qasile (near Tel Aviv) is similar to ones in the Aegean Sea area and Cyprus. No inscriptions in a Philistine language have been found, suggesting they adopted the languages where they invaded.

Amos refers to "the Pelishtim from Caphtor" (Amos 9:7). Jeremiah forewarns that "the day is coming" when "YHVH will ravage the Pelishtim [who are] the remnant from the island of Caphtor" (Jer 47:4). Archeologists believe Caphtor is likely the island of Crete. Zephaniah says:

Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast,
The nation of the **Cherethites!** [Heb: KeReiTim; cf. CRETe]

The word of YHVH is against you,
O Canaan, land of the Philistines. (Zeph 2:5)

Ezekiel makes the Cherethite–Philistine connection fairly explicit:
"Thus said Lord YHVH: I will stretch out my hand against the
Philistines and cut off the **Cherethites** and wipe out the last
survivors of the seacoast" (Ezek 25:15-16).

Herodotus heard that the "Phoenicians" (Philistines) had "formerly
dwelt...by the Red Sea," but moved up north to "inhabit the seacoast of
Syria" (modern coast of Israel into Lebanon) (7.89.2).

[Top]

Conclusion

In the Hebrew Bible, the coastal land Peleshet (Philistia) is occupied
by the Pelishtim (Philistines) who originated from the Aegean Sea
area, including Cyprus and Caphtor-Ceret-Crete.

Recent archeological digs in the ruins of Ashkelon have confirmed the
origins of the Philistines. DNA analysis of bones from a cemetery
containing some 211 individuals pinpoints their Greek/Crete
identities.

[On the Ashkelon cemetery story: "[Discovery of Philistine Cemetery May Solve Biblical Mystery](#)" from National Geographic.

On the "Sea Peoples" and "Philistines": C.S. Ehrlich,
"Philistia and the Philistines," in *The World Around the Old Testament. The People and Places of the Ancient Near East*
(edited by B.T. Arnold & B.A. Strawn; Baker, 2016), pages
353-377).

[Top]

"Palestine" in Christian Bibles

Neither "Palestina" or "Philistia" occur in the Greek New Testament.

Nearly all Bible translations today use "Philistia" in their Old
Testament portions for the original Hebrew **Peleshet**. This designates
the geographical area along the coast of Israel and southern Lebanon
(including Tyre and Sidon). A few Christian versions have "Palestine"
in their biblical text or in marginal notes. They may do this to orient
readers to modern political boundaries.

The Roman Catholic **Douay-Rheims** (revised 1899) has "the people
of Palestine" at Jeremiah 47:1 and "the daughters of Palestine" at
Ezekiel 16:57. In both verses the Hebrew reads "Pelishtim"
(Philistines).

The conservative Protestant **Amplified Bible** (1965) includes
"Palestine" in their text in brackets:

Ezek 38:11, 12 – "I will fall upon those...who dwell at the center of the earth [Palestine]."

Dan 11:30a – "...he shall be grieved and discouraged and turn back [to Palestine] and carry out his rage and indignation against the holy covenant and God's people."

Dan 11:41a – "He shall enter into the glorious land [Palestine], and many shall be overthrown."

[Also: 1 Chron 13:5; Jer 8:16; 22:20; Ezek 33:24]

The conservative Protestant **New American Standard Bible (NASB)** (1973, 1995) has "Palestine" in the margins at Daniel 8:9 and 11:16 to explain the biblical words "Beautiful Land." But in their 2020 edition, they replaced "Palestine" with "Israel" to make clear that Israel and Jerusalem are the Beautiful Land.

In contrast to these versions, the conservative Protestant **Christian Standard Bible (CSB)** (2017) translates Daniel 8:9 and 11:16 without any reference to modern nomenclature. It renders the Hebrew literally as the "Beautiful Land" and puts "Israel" in the margin. Mentioning "Palestine" would be anachronistic. There was no such name in Daniel's time.

[\[Top\]](#)

The Message of "The Message"

Twice in his paraphrased version **The Message** (2002, 2007), Eugene H. Peterson interpolates "Palestine" into his main text of Daniel:

Daniel 8:9 — "[Another horn] started small, but then grew to an enormous size, facing south and east—toward **lovely Palestine** [*my emphasis*]."

Daniel 11:16 — "[The king of the north will] take over that **beautiful country, Palestine**, and make himself at home in it."

The Hebrew word **Peleshet** does not occur in either verse, so there's no linguistic reason to insert "Palestine." The Hebrew behind Peterson's phrase "lovely Palestine" is **HaTzevi**, literally "the Beautiful [Land]." In 11:16, behind his "beautiful country, Palestine" is **Eretz HaTzevi**, "the Beautiful Land."

In the Bible, **Israel** is called "the Glory [**tzevi**] of all lands" (Ezek 20:6, 15), "a pleasant land, the most Beautiful [**tzevi**] inheritance of the nations!" (Jer 3:19).

When Peterson substitutes "Palestine," in place of "the Beautiful [Land]," he interjects a volatile religious-political name.

He didn't publish his paraphrase before 1948 when "Palestine" became an official United Nations political entity. Rather, Peterson published his version (1973, 1995) when the so-called Arab Palestinian "cause" had become PC orthodoxy among liberal

intellectuals and when the State of Israel became an object of disdain in the United Nations.

We can also see the same hostility toward Israel growing among several liberal, Left-leaning, and even some evangelical branches of Christianity.

If Peterson wanted to provide geographical precision for his readers, the name "Israel" would do that. It would also be biblical.

Paradoxically, as a *Christian* leader, perhaps Peterson envisions that the occupants of "lovely Palestine" in the future will be non-Muslim Arab *Christians*. Or perhaps he sees a two-state reality:

Peleshet/Palestine for Christians and Muslims, while **Eretz Yisrael/Eretz HaTzevi** would be for Jews.

[\[Top\]](#)

It is disappointing that some Christian scholars will not allow the Bible to speak its own truth. They insert their personal biases and politicize it for modern (ignorant) readers. They attempt to rewrite prophecy and history—and distort Scripture. Peterson and others should heed God's ancient forewarning which is applicable in today's rhetorical and theological war:

Because the **Pelishtim**, in their ancient hatred, acted vengefully, and with utter scorn sought revenge and destruction—assuredly, thus said Lord YHVH: I will stretch out my hand against the **Pelishtim** and...wipe out the last survivors of the seacoast." (Ezekiel 25:15-16)

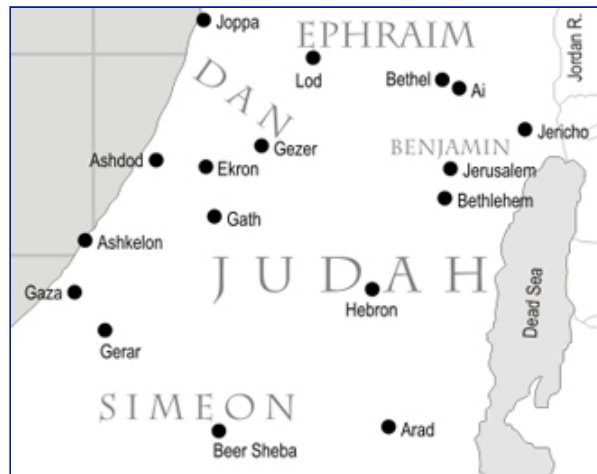
[Related biblical texts contain the Hebrew (and later, Arabic) word *hamas*: "[Hamás](#)" in the Hebrew Bible.]

At the same time, the warnings of judgment also includes an offer of **redemption for the Pelishtim** from the God of Israel, the owner of Eretz HaTzevi:

Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord YHVH, "rather than that he should turn from ways and live?... I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord YHVH. "Therefore, repent and live." (Ezekiel 18:23, 32)

• [Paul Sumner](#)

[\[Top\]](#)



The Coastal Cities of Philistia

From: www.bible.org/maps

NOTES

Note 1

"Philistia"

Linguists propose an etymology of *Philistinus* from Late Latin (3–6 centuries), hence into Old French *Philistin*, hence into Middle English. *Philistia* is not used in the Latin Vulgate (4th cent.) in the 8 places where the Hebrew has *Peleshet*. Instead, it follows the Septuagint translations (see above). [[return to text](#)]

Note 2

Herodotus [c. 484–c. 425]

Histories 1.105.1 — "From there they marched against Egypt: and when they were in the part of Syria called **Palestine**, Psalmetichus king of Egypt met them and persuaded them with gifts and prayers to come no further." [Eng. trans. A.D. Godley]

Histories 2.104.3 — "The Phoenicians and the Syrians of **Palestine** acknowledge that they learned the custom from the Egyptians, and the Syrians of the valleys of Thermodon and the Parthenius, as well as their neighbors the Macrones, say that they learned it from the Colchians. These are the only nations that circumcise, and it is seen that they do just as the Egyptians." [Eng. trans. A.D. Godley]

Histories 3.5.1 — "Now the only apparent way of entry into Egypt is this. The road runs from Phoenicia as far as the borders of the city of Cadytis, which belongs to the so-called Syrians of **Palestine**." [Eng. trans. A.D. Godley]

Histories 7.89.1-2 — "The number of the triremes was twelve hundred and seven, and they were furnished by the following: the Phoenicians with the Syrians of **Palestine** furnished three hundred . . . These Phoenicians formerly dwelt, as they themselves say, by the Red Sea; they crossed from there and now inhabit the seacoast of Syria. This part of Syria as far as Egypt is all called **Palestine**." [Eng. trans. A.D. Godley]

[[return to text](#)]

Note 3

Josephus [AD/CE 35–100]

Antiquities 8.10.3 [260] — "Now Herodotus of Halicarnassus mentions this expedition, having only mistaken the king's name; and [in saying

that] he made war upon many other nations also, and brought Syria of **Palestine** into subjection, and took the men that were therein prisoners without fighting." [Eng. trans. William Whiston]

Contra Apion 1.2 [169, 171] — "His [Herodotus'] words are these: 'The only people who were circumcised in their privy members originally were the Colchians, the Egyptians, and the Ethiopians; but the Phoenicians and those Syrians that are in Palestine confess that they learned it from the Egyptians.' ... This, therefore, is what Herodotus says, that the 'Syrians that are in **Palestine** are circumcised.' But there are no inhabitants of **Palestine** that are circumcised excepting the Jews; and therefore it must be his knowledge of them that enabled him to speak so much concerning them." [Eng. trans. William Whiston]

[\[return to text\]](#)

[\[Top\]](#)

[Directory](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Hebrew Bible Studies](#)
[Isa \(Jesus\) in the Qur'an](#)
["Hamas" in the Hebrew Bible](#)

hebrew-streams.org