

Old Testament Backgrounds: Sea Peoples

Author: Dr. Donald Fowler

Session 14

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Sea Peoples, Drought, Philistines, Mycenae, Hittites, Bronze Age Collapse, United Monarchy, Ramses III, Anatolia, Anachronism

Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler examines the Sea Peoples Movement (c. 1250–1150 BCE), a massive migration across the Mediterranean basin that destabilized and destroyed major ancient Near Eastern superpowers, including the Hittite Empire and Mycenae. Fowler evaluates various historical theories regarding the root causes of this disruption, presenting scientific sediment analysis and dendrochronology as compelling evidence for a catastrophic, century-long regional drought. He highlights how the resulting geopolitical power vacuum uniquely allowed Israel to flourish during the United Monarchy under David and Solomon before subsequent empire re-emergence. Finally, the lecture addresses the historical puzzle of the Philistines, exploring scribal anachronisms and chronological difficulties regarding their presence in the Book of Genesis.

Outline

I. Introduction and Foodstuffs of the Ancient Near East

- A. Visual aids overview of ancient dietary staples: barley, wheat, grapes, pomegranates, figs, dates, olives, and sycamore figs
- B. Historical significance: The Sea Peoples Movement ranks second only to the Exodus in impact on the Israelite monarchy

II. Scope and Geographic Extent of the Sea Peoples Movement (1250–1150 BCE)

- A. Unprecedented Century-Long Transfer of Populations
 - 1. Mass migration spanning the eastern to central Mediterranean basin
 - 2. Widespread geopolitical upheaval and loss of historical documentation
- B. Collapse of Ancient Regional Superpowers
 - 1. Mycenaean civilization in Greece and Minoan civilization in Crete
 - 2. Anatolian vassal states in western Turkey and the imperial Hittite Empire
 - 3. Permanent diminishment of Egyptian geopolitical dominance

III. Identification of Historical Tribes from Egyptian Inscriptions

A. Tribes Mentioned in the Merneptah Inscriptions (c. 1220 BCE)

1. Shardana: Dislodged group associated with Sardinia
2. Shekelesh: Tribal group associated with Sicily
3. Teresh / Tursha: Western Anatolian group connected to the Etruscans of Upper Italy
4. Luka: Southwestern Anatolian mercenaries and fierce pirates
5. Ekweh: Aegean group etymologically linked with the Achaeans of Greece

B. Tribes Mentioned in the Ramses III Inscriptions (c. 1190 BCE)

1. Danuna: Mysterious tribe of unknown origin
2. Tjeker: Group from the Troad (Troy) settled at Dor along the Palestinian coast
3. Weshesh: Unidentified tribal group
4. Peleset: Aegean tribe settled along the southern coastal plain; historical origin of the Philistines and the name Palestine

IV. Evaluating Theories on the Root Causes of the Movement

A. The Catastrophic View

1. Proposes natural disasters such as massive earthquakes or tsunamis (e.g., Atlantis hypothesis)
2. Evaluation: Lacks supporting geological or archaeological evidence

B. The Migratory View

1. Proposes chain-reaction displacements initiated by Balkan/Illyrian movements
2. Evaluation: Multi-directional migrations fail to explain why this specific event triggered complete civilizational collapse

C. The Climatic View (Preferred Scientific Theory)

1. Textual evidence: Epigraphical records of urgent grain shipments from Egypt and Ugarit to the Hittites
2. Scientific empirical evidence:
 - a. Sediment core analysis straight from the Sea of Galilee proving severe regional drought
 - b. Dendrochronology (tree-ring analysis) of Anatolian bristlecone pines showing century-long stunted growth
3. Anthropogenic and ecological contributing factors:
 - a. Human population growth causing massive deforestation across Israel, Lebanon, and Anatolia
 - b. Shift from sheep to goats, leading to soil destruction via complete root uprooting
4. Strategic migration target: Southward move toward Egypt, whose flood-based Nile agriculture was immune to rain drought

V. Geopolitical and Biblical Consequences of the Collapse

- A. Total restructuring of the ancient Mediterranean political map
- B. Emergence of a unique power vacuum around 1150 BCE following the collapse of surrounding superpowers
- C. The Golden Era of the United Monarchy (Saul, David, Solomon):
 - 1. Temporary freedom from imperial expansion enabled Israelite empire expansion
 - 2. Fulfilling a unique window of divine opportunity and blessing
- D. Re-awakening of regional superpowers (Assyria post-930 BCE) leading to Israel's political decline

VI. The Scholarly Problem of the Philistines in Genesis

- A. The Chronological Anachronism:
 - 1. Historical record: Philistines settled in Canaan post-1150 BCE
 - 2. Biblical text: Philistines appear in Genesis 21 & 26 (c. 2100 BCE) and Deuteronomy 2
- B. Evaluation of Proposed Explanations:
 - 1. Hypothesis 1: Settlers adopted a pre-existing land name PLST (Lacks historical/textual evidence)
 - 2. Hypothesis 2: Scribal update or anachronistic gloss during manuscript transmission (Plausible, but unverified in extant manuscripts)
 - 3. Hypothesis 3: Early pre-1200 BCE Aegean merchant migration (Unlikely: Philistines were at desert Beersheba, had Semitic king Abimelech, were peaceful, and earliest Aegean presence is 1370 BCE)
- C. Scholarly Conclusion: Current evidence is insufficient, leaving the Genesis references as an open historical mystery