

Did Captured Ark Afflict Philistines with E.D.?

By Aren M. Maeir

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I've always been troubled by the Philistine hemorrhoids. The Hebrew word is *'opalim* (*My/pe*). That was supposedly their affliction when they captured the Ark of the Covenant and placed it before a statue of their god Dagon.



The story is told about the Ark (sometimes called the Ark of God) when it was resting at Shiloh, cared for by Eli the priest, before it was ultimately brought to Jerusalem by King David. The Israelites had engaged their enemies the Philistines in battle at Ebenezer.^a The battle went badly for the Israelites, and Eli's sons allowed the Ark to be brought from Shiloh to the battlefield at Ebenezer as a paladin in the hope that this would turn the tide of battle. Instead, the Philistines captured the Ark (1 Samuel 5–6).

The Philistines took the Ark to Ashdod and placed it before a statue of Dagon in the Philistine temple. The next day, the Philistines found Dagon toppled, lying on the ground. They set him back up, but the same thing happened the next day. The text goes on to tell us that "the hand of the Lord was heavy on the Ashdodites." The Lord afflicted them with "hemorrhoids" (*'opalim*).

The Philistines then took the Ark to Gath, another city of the Philistine pentapolis. This time the men of Gath were afflicted with "hemorrhoids."

Finally, the Philistines decided to send the Ark back to the Israelites. To mollify the Israelite God, the Philistines included five golden "hemorrhoids" (one for each city of the Philistine pentapolis) and five golden mice. (The text tells us that 047 "hemorrhoids" and mice had been ravaging the land of the Philistines.)

These *'opalim* have caused scholars lots of problems. The root of the word is *'pl* (*/pe*, or Ophel, as in the acropolis [upper city] of ancient Jerusalem), which means "high" or "rise," hence a swelling.

But there is something strange, even a bit peculiar about *'opalim*. Is it a vulgarity? Is it simply too intimate for use in a holy text? Or does it perhaps mean something entirely different?

The King James translation calls them "emerods." Modern translations, apparently a little embarrassed at hemorrhoids, often translate *'opalim* as "tumors." To some scholars this suggests that the word isn't048really referring to blood-rich rectal swellings, but to another kind of swelling, perhaps bubonic plague. Admittedly, in either event it is difficult to imagine what the golden hemorrhoids or tumors that the Philistines sent back with the Ark looked like.

The history of the Hebrew text also suggests that *'opalim* is in some ways a strange or at least unusual word. Until about the tenth century C.E., Hebrew was written essentially without vowels (in modern Israel it still is). At that time a group of Hebrew textual scholars called Masoretes gathered in Tiberias and developed a series of superscripts and subscripts, called pointing, to indicate the proper vowels in the Hebrew text. Hence, the authoritative Hebrew text is referred to as the Masoretic Text, or simply MT. The Masoretes also included elaborate notes on the text, called the Masorah.



In these notes, the Masoretes indicated that some words *written* in the text were to be *read aloud* entirely differently. In their terms, they distinguished between the *ketib* (what is written) and the *qere* (what is read aloud). What is written is one thing, but what is read aloud in the synagogue may be entirely different.

Biblical passages containing the word *'opalim* are still read aloud in synagogues on Sabbath in the annual cycle of Bible readings.¹ But *'opalim* is one of those words that is not pronounced. The Hebrew word *tehorim* (*Myrwjif*) is substituted instead. That is the modern word for hemorrhoids; it appears nowhere in the Bible. It is the word for hemorrhoids used in polite society.

There is, however, another possibility. Based on recently recovered archaeological evidence, I believe that *'opalim* refers not to hemorrhoids or tumors or 049the bubonic plague, but to the male sexual organ. The Philistines were afflicted in their *membra virile*.

In 604 B.C.E. the Babylonian monarch Nebuchadnezzar, who would soon destroy Jerusalem and the Israelite Temple, destroyed the Philistine city of Ashkelon. In this destruction level, archaeologist Lawrence Stager of Harvard University recovered seven small vial-shaped vessels called *situlae*. Based on comparative archaeological evidence, Stager

concluded that these vessels were meant to represent uncircumcised, non-erect phalluses.^b I agree with him.

The *situlae* were found in what was apparently a “cultic corner,” along with other cult objects and a votive offering table. The *situlae* were apparently votives, much like the arms or legs that are often found in Egyptian and Greek (Aegean) cultic contexts.

The most prominent depiction on the Ashkelon *situlae* is of the Egyptian god Min, closely associated with male sexual potency. He is depicted on the *situlae* with an erect penis, which probably reflects the cure that the depositors of the votive *situlae* were seeking. Stager suggests that these *situlae* may have been filled with semen, milk or water symbolizing the life-giving force that the votive was intended to induce.

Stager’s interpretation has been strengthened and, I believe, can now be elaborated based on the recent finds from Tell es-Safi/Gath.^c

In the 2004 excavation season at Tell es-Safi/Gath, we found two clay *situlae* in the shape of phalluses in a destruction level from the late ninth or early eighth century B.C.E. (This destruction was apparently the work of Hazael, king of Aram Damascus, as mentioned in *2 Kings 12:17*.) Each of the *situlae* is hollow. Each is cylindrical with a bulbous-like thickening at the closed end. The identification of these vessels as *ithyphallii* (erect penises) has been confirmed by several urologists. Like the *situlae* from Ashkelon, they, too, were found in what appears to be a cult-related context.

In our 2007 excavation season at Tell es-Safi/Gath, we discovered an additional cultic context, also from the destruction level attributed to Hazael: an apparent cultic corner in a largely domestic building. In the “corner” we discovered a group of clearly cult-related objects, including a complete *kernos** (and fragments of other ritual libation vessels), a zoomorphic vessel, various platters and seven additional phallic-shaped vessels. Interestingly, most of the vessels had holes that would have enabled them to be hung—apparently an ancient cultic mobile!



These phallic-shaped objects from Ashkelon and Gath are clear indications of the symbolic importance of the phallus in Philistine culture. While such depictions are relatively common in Egyptian and Greek (Aegean) religious iconography, they are very rare in Semitic religious iconography. The Philistines are, of course, widely believed to have originated in the Aegean area and arrived in Canaan via Egypt, and the phallus is known to be an attribute of various ancient Greek, Anatolian and Cypriot goddesses.



With this background, I suggest that the *‘opalim* with which the Philistines were afflicted after they captured the Ark of the Covenant and placed it in the temple of Dagon involved penises rather than hemorrhoids. It is unclear precisely what the nature of the affliction of the Philistine *membra virile* was. Perhaps it was the failure to attain erection, the condition referred to today as E.D., or erectile dysfunction. Or perhaps it was some malady causing penile pain.



The root of *‘opalim*, which means “a rise,” suits the penile context as well as it does a hemorrhoid swelling. But it is far easier to visualize the Philistine offering, apparently to placate the Israelite God, as golden penises than golden hemorrhoids. Although we have much Philistine cultic material, nothing in it suggests the possibility of a visual reproduction of a hemorrhoid. Understanding *‘opalim* as penises, on the other hand, has excellent parallels in the archaeological record.

The word *‘opalim* is still very much a dirty word, inappropriate for use in the synagogue. But it would be quite appropriate (for reading), given the fact that the Biblical text is clearly making fun of the Philistines and their penile malady.



This coming summer we will be in the field again. Why don’t you join us? Who knows—perhaps we will find some more *‘opalim*.³

For additional details see Aren M. Maeir, “A New Interpretation of the Term *‘opalim* (*Mylpe*) in the Light of Recent Archaeological Finds from Philistia,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32, no. 1 (2007), p. 23.

Footnotes:

- a. See Israel Finkelstein, “Shiloh Yields Some, but Not All, of Its Secrets.” **BAR**, January/February 1986; Moshe Kochavi, with Aaron Demsky, “An Israelite Village from the Days of the Judges.” **BAR**, September/October 1978.



- b. For **BAR** articles on Ashkelon, see Patricia Smith and Lawrence E. Stager, "DNA Analysis Sheds New Light on Oldest Profession at Ashkelon," **BAR**, July/August 1997; Lawrence E. Stager, "The Fury of Babylon: Ashkelon and the Archaeology of Destruction." **BAR**, January/February 1996; Lawrence E. Stager, "Eroticism and Infanticide at Ashkelon," **BAR**, July/August 1991; Lawrence E. Stager, "Why Were Hundreds of Dogs Buried at Ashkelon?" **BAR**, May/June 1991; Lawrence E. Stager, "When Canaanites and Philistines Ruled Ashkelon," **BAR**, March/April 1991.
- c. See Carl S. Ehrlich and Aren M. Maeir, "Excavating Philistine Gath: Have We Found Goliath's Hometown?" **BAR**, November/December 2001.

Endnotes:

1. In addition to the passages in the so-called Ark Narrative referred to above, the word also appears in *Deuteronomy 28:27*, but, again, is read aloud differently.
2. A. M. Maeir, "The Historical Background and Dating of Amos VI 2: An Archaeological Perspective from Tell es-Safi/Gath." *Vetus Testamentum* 54/3 (2004), pp. 319–34.
3. For more information about digging at Tell es-Safi/Gath, see "Digs 2008." **BAR**, January/February 2008, or visit www.findadig.com and www.dig-gath.org.



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RETURN TO SENDER. The captured Ark ended up causing the Philistines far more harm than good. The Ark toppled the statue of the Philistine god Dagon, before whom it was set, and plagued the Philistines with mice and a mysterious affliction known as '**opalim**, traditionally taken to be a vulgarity for hemorrhoids or tumors. The Philistines finally rid themselves of the menace by returning the Ark to the Israelites along with five golden mice and five golden '**opalim** (1 Samuel 6). A third-century C.E. fresco from the Dura Europos synagogue in Syria shows the Ark being carried back to the Israelites by a team of oxen.

It is difficult to imagine a golden hemorrhoid. What were these '**opalim** that crippled the Philistines, which were then offered in gold to placate the Israelite God?



AT THE BATTLE of Ebenezer, the Philistines initially routed their Israelite neighbors. Hoping to turn the tide of battle, the Israelites summoned their powerful sacred paladin, the Ark of the Covenant, to lead them in battle. As depicted in this 17th-century painting by Gerrit Claesz Bleker, the Philistines captured the Ark and killed the chest's priestly guardians, Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of the priest Eli (1 Samuel 4–5). Philistine victory was seemingly complete—but was it?



Courtesy of Aren Maeir, The Tell es-Safi/Gath Archaeological Project

*Vessels recovered from Philistine Gath (Tell es-Safi) may provide new insight into the meaning of the Biblical **opalim**. Our author argues that this new evidence suggests that the Philistines were laid low not by hemorrhoids or tumors, but rather by a direct assault on their manhood. These and other Philistine **situlae** (small vial-shaped vessels) may give us a good idea of what the golden '**opalim**' of 1 Samuel 6 looked like.*



Ilan Sztulman/Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon

VIRILE VESSELS. At the coastal site of Ashkelon, one of the five cities of the Philistine pentapolis, several bronze phallus-shaped **situlae** were unearthed in a cultic area dating to the late seventh century B.C.E. The vessels were decorated with depictions of the well-endowed Egyptian god Min, a fertility deity closely associated with male sexual potency (seen with an erect phallus on the **situla**). Ashkelon excavator Lawrence Stager suggests that the **situlae**—likely intended as votive offerings to Philistine gods—were filled with semen, milk or water, all symbols of male virility and life-giving power.

Phallic imagery is rarely found in the religious iconography of ancient Israel and Canaan. It was common, however, in Philistia, the Aegean and Egypt. The Philistines originated in the Aegean, arriving in Canaan, perhaps via Egypt, at the end of the Late Bronze Age.



Ilan Sztulman/Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon



Photo courtesy of Aren Maeir, The Tell es-Safi/Gath Archaeological Project

CULT OF THE PHALLUS? Amid the remains of what appears to be a small Philistine cultic area archaeologist Aren Maeir discovered seven additional phallic-shaped ceramic **situlae** during the 2007 excavation season at Tell es-Safi, one of which is shown . A number of the new **situlae** have small holes punched through their tops, suggesting they may have originally been strung together and hung to create an ancient cultic mobile. Clustered around the phalluses was an array of Iron Age cultic wares, including offering plates, zoomorphic and pomegranate-shaped juglets, and fragments of circular ritual libation vessels known as **kerno**i. These two pictures of very recent finds are receiving their first publication here. **BAR** is grateful to Professor Maeir for making them available to our readers.



Photo courtesy of Aren Maeir, The Tell es-Safi/Gath Archaeological Project

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