

THE SOREK VALLEY

Introduction

The Sorek Valley is one of three east-west valleys in the Shephelah, a region that begins in Ajalon (13 miles northwest of Jerusalem) to Gaza (50 miles southwest of Jerusalem). The valley begins about 13 miles southwest of Jerusalem and runs in a northwesterly direction for about 20 miles through Philistia and toward the Mediterranean Sea. Philistine cities had an advantage over the Jews because they were able to make iron utensils and weapons. The valley was the boundary between Judah and the tribe of Dan (Joshua 15:10).



Modern trains follow Sorek River toward ancient cities of Philistia

Beth-Shemesh

Beth-Shemesh is 13 miles southwest of Jerusalem. The name means “house of the sun” where a shrine to the sun-god was located in pre-Israelite times. The area was assigned to the tribe of Dan (Joshua 19:40-48) but the Amorites pushed the Danites back into the hills and were unable to occupy the region (Judges 1:33-35).

The tribe of Dan sought another plot of land and was assigned an area at the northern end of Israel which includes Mount Hermon. They chose to get away from the Sorek Valley because they had not driven the Philistines from the land (Judges 1:34). Their new territory was beautiful but it was always the first region to be attacked as nations headed south to attack other nations. Charles Dyer notes, *By looking for something more appealing than the land given to them by God, the tribe avoided their immediate problem, only to encounter greater difficulties later.*



Looking north from Beth-Shemesh toward Samson’s hometown

Beth-Shemesh was allotted to the Levites (Joshua 21:16). Just north of Beth-Shemesh was Mahanneh-dan, the hometown of Samson (Judges 13:25). Samson was raised up by God to deliver Israel from the Philistines (Judges 13:5). He became distracted by his interest in a Philistine woman from Timnah whose name was Delilah. Timnah was west of Beth-Shemesh and separated from Ekron by a ridge. The story of his decline is in Judges 14-16.

The nation of Israel lost the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines. The Ark had been taken by the Philistines during the defeat of Israel and the death of Saul and his

sons (1 Samuel 6:9, 12-15). It was kept at Ashdod, then at Gath and finally at Ekron. The Philistines were in great distress due to an outbreak of tumors and the death of many people.



Ruins of Beth-Shemesh looking toward Timnah and Ekron

It was determined that it should be returned to Israel. The leaders prepared a guilt offering of 5 golden tumors and 5 mice which were placed on a new cart with two milk cows that had never been yoked. Also, they sent away the cows' calves. The cart was sent off and they watched to see if it headed up to Beth-Shemesh or straight ahead. The priests stated:

1 Samuel 6:9, ... *If it goes up on the way to its own land, to Beth-Shemesh, then it is he who had done us this great harm, but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that struck us; it happened to us by coincidence.*

Upon its return, there was joy then sorrow when many were killed for looking into the ark (1 Samuel 6:19-21). The men who looked into the Ark were Levites who should have known better since they were given specific instructions concerning care of the Ark:

Numbers 4:15, *And when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, as the camp sets out, after that the sons of Kohath shall come to carry these, but they must not touch the holy things, lest they die. These are the things of the tent of meeting that the sons of Kohath are to carry.*

It was later transferred to Kiriath Jearim which was another foolish decision:

1 Samuel 6:21, *So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and take it up to you."*

Kiriath Jearim was a Canaanite town that had tricked Joshua into making peace with them. They became woodcutters and water carriers for the congregation and the altar of the Lord.

Charles Dyer, *The Levites, who were responsible for taking care of the articles of furniture in the tabernacle, handed over the ark of the covenant to Gentile servants for safekeeping. And they asked these Gentiles to carry the ark home, even though God had specifically commanded the levites to carry it. Because of their spiritual blindness, the ark stayed among the Gentiles for another twenty years.*



Looking east toward Jerusalem

A battle between Ahaz king of Judah and Jehoash king of Israel took place at Ben-Shemesh which resulted in the defeat and capture of Ahaz (2 Kings 14:8-14; 2 Chronicles 25:17-24). Raids were made by the Philistines against Beth-Shemesh and other cities in the region and Beth-Shemesh was captured and not mentioned in the Bible again (2 Chronicles 28:18).

Beth-Shemesh is the fastest growing city in Israel and has the 4th largest number of Ultra Orthodox Jews. Idols were unearthed in the ruins of Beth-Shemesh. In Timnah, they found a carcass of a lion. Could that have been the lion torn in two by Samson?



Beth-Shemeh - old and new