

Valley of Elah

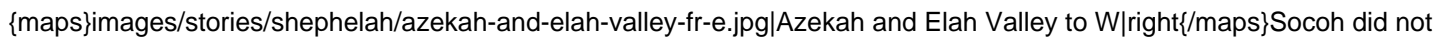
Contributed by Stephen Langfur

The Bible gives the setting for David's encounter with Goliath in unusual detail:

Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle; and they were gathered at Socoh, which belongs to Judah, and encamped between Socoh and Azekah, in Ephesdammim. Saul and the men of Israel were gathered, and encamped in the valley of Elah, and set their battle line in array against the Philistines. The Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side: and there was a valley between them (1 Samuel 17: 1-3).
More...

Socoh and Azekah have been identified, so we might think it easy to work out the geography of this battle. Socoh is a hill containing much pottery from the Israelite period (as well as Roman and Byzantine). A derivative of its name was preserved in a ruin 500 meters east of the hill called Shuweikeh in Arabic. Near the hill's western foot, amid the brambles, diligent searchers can find an old well, whose stonework is reminiscent of Abraham's Well in Beersheba. This is probably "Samson's well at Socoh," mentioned by Jerome (a.k.a. Hieronymus) (ca. 347 – 420 AD), the learned Church father (and favorite saint of Christian painters after the Holy Family), spent the last 34 years of his life in Bethlehem, where he translated both the Hebrew First Testament and the Greek Second Testament into Latin, the so-called "Vulgate." It remained the authoritative version of the Bible for Western Christendom for a thousand years. He took part in the great theological controversies of his day, and his influence was tremendous. From what remains of his vast correspondence, he appears to have kept his faith at the cost of struggle with his own impulses; his bitter, combative disposition (perhaps a result of that struggle) often seems far from the teachings of tolerance found in Jesus, Paul and Origen. Jerome (Epistle 108, 14, noted in Othmar Keel, Max Kuechler and Christoph Uehlinger, *Orte und Landschaften der Bibel*, Koeln: Benziger and Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984. Volumes II. [pp. 844-845]). Here, according to Judges 15: 14-19, Samson slew a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass.

This satellite photo shows the positions of Socoh, Azekah and the Valley of Elah (the Valley of the Terebinth, namely the pistachio tree).

Azekah and Elah Valley to the right. Socoh did not exist long enough to accumulate layers, and it is not a tell. In general, before the Roman period, a city needed a hill for defense, with a spring nearby. Certain proportions had to be right: the hill had to be small enough so that the population supplied by the spring would suffice to produce enough soldiers to defend a wall surrounding the hill. You needed enough good agricultural land to feed that population. (You also needed peasants in nearby villages to work the land – about ten for every aristocrat in the city.) If you wanted to engage in commerce, you had to be near a decent road. Only certain hills fulfilled these requirements, and therefore people kept building on them. That is why we find layer after layer on some few hills, called tells, while others remained unsettled. Azekah is. It presides over the Elah Valley, looking west toward Gath and east toward the Judean range, at the point where the valley wiggles and narrows. Because of this strategic position, it was occupied in the third and second millennia BC, as well as in the time of the Philistines and Israelites. Among the letters written on sherds that were found at Lachish, from the time of the Babylonian invasion in 587 BC, one reads: "And [my lord] should know that we are waiting for the signals from Lachish, as we are following all the instructions given by my lord. For we can no longer see [the signals from] Azekah." A derivative of Azekah's name was preserved in that of the nearby Arab village Zakariyyah, whose mosque can still be seen today, although it is now an Israeli Jewish town.

Given these identifications, then, the geography of the battle should be easy to figure out. Yet there are two possibilities, because the Valley of Elah makes a 90 degree turn from east to south.

Possibility 1

When we look at the stretch of the Elah Valley between Socoh and Azekah, everything seems to fit. It's easy to imagine the armies facing each other with the brook between them. The Israelites are close enough to hear Goliath's frightening challenge. The Philistines are stretched between Socoh and Azekah, just as the Bible says. Here is a photo taken from the slope of Socoh, followed by a satellite image:

The only problem is this: what would Saul and his army have been defending? Their task would have been to protect the heartland of Judah, which lay to the east on the mountain. A route leads up from the Elah Valley on an unbroken ridge to Bethlehem. Saul would have wanted to prevent the Philistines from making this ascent.

Here is the route to Bethlehem. It is also the way the young David would have taken when bringing supplies to his brothers:

This logic leads to:

Possibility 2

The Philistines were massed at Socoh, with their camp in the valley between Socoh and Azekah (at Ephes Dammim, meaning "boundary of blood."). The Israelites had taken their stand at the foot of Mount Judah to the east, where the passage to Bethlehem begins. Here, again, are a photograph and a satellite image:

This is the possibility espoused by [George Adam Smith](#), *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, Jerusalem, Ariel, 1974 (30th edition) [George Adam Smith](#) (p. 161):

It is the very battlefield for those ancient foes: Israel in one of the gateways to her mountain-land; the Philistines on the low hills they often overran; and between them the valley that divides Judah from the Shephelah. … Socoh is a strong position isolated from the rest of the ridge, and keeps open the line of retreat down the valley. Saul's army was probably not exactly opposite, but a little way up on the slopes of the incoming Wadi el-Jindy [today Nahal ha-Nativ], and so placed that the Philistines, in attacking it, must cross not only the level and the main stream, but one of the two other streams as well, and must also climb the slopes for some distance. Both positions were thus strong, and this perhaps explains the long hesitation of the armies in face of each other…

When we consider this second possibility, though, we see that the armies would have been more than a mile apart. Such a distance might make sense to a 19th-century British major, but it hardly fits the Biblical account! Goliath was over nine feet tall and probably had a great voice, but could his aspect or shout have seemed so ferocious at a full mile's distance that the Israelites shrank back, "dismayed and greatly afraid"?

We return to the first possibility. On closer inspection, there is a strategic point here. The Valley of Elah broadens out to the east and west, but between Azekah and Socoh it narrows into a long bottleneck. Hills mass on either side, blocking any chance of alternative access from Philistine territory to the ridge that climbs to Bethlehem. If Saul could stop the Philistines in the bottleneck, that would secure this access.

We can enact the story at the foot of Socoh, although the traffic is distracting. If we have an hour and a half, we can escape it by climbing to the top. The best way is to take the dirt road around to the south of the hill, from which a marked trail leads up. Above there are cisterns (don't fall into one!) and remains of stone walls.

Once on top, we can cross to the northern edge for Possibility 1, or to the eastern for Possibility 2. The return descent is very steep, and people should hold hands or form human chains (a bonding experience!). In February, by the way, Socoh's slopes are full of lupines.

Hebrew versus Greek

There is a curious point about the account in 1 Samuel 17. Nowhere in the Bible are we so close to Homer's *Iliad*. We

have the detailed description of Goliath and his armor, the military standoff resolved by one-to-one combat, and even the great shout with the same rhetoric of challenge. It is as if the poetic formulae that we find in Homer have been transplanted. But the Philistines themselves were a kind of transplant! They were one of five Sea Peoples who had come from Greece and the Aegean. Their pottery has been linked to that of the Achaeans, which the Iliad names as the besiegers of Troy. Among the Achaeans were figures like Achilles, Agamemnon and Ajax, heroes of the Mycenaean civilization that crumbled in the great upheaval.

What is more, when we look at the theology implicit in Homer, and more generally in Greek literature, we find a kind of harmony between the Natural and the Divine. The Greeks found the Divine in Nature, which is why their gods and goddesses are so often associated with everyday natural phenomena such as lightning (Zeus), the sky (Uranos), the earth (Gaia), the sea (Poseidon), forests (Artemis), rivers (in Homer each river is a god) and grain (Demeter). The extra spurt of energy in a race, the extra prowess on the battlefield, even falling asleep amid great cares, were understood as divine interventions. The enormous variety of Nature went hand in hand with polytheism, a variety of gods.

When we move toward belief in only one God, however, Nature in its variety gets de-sacralized and He is above it. This is a new and different experience of the Divine, and it comes to expression in the account of David and Goliath. In the Homeric/Greek mode of experience, the Divine accompanied and intensified natural phenomena, but it never contradicted them! It couldn't, because the Greeks experienced the Divine through these phenomena. David's response to Goliath, therefore, runs contrary to anything in Homer:

When the Philistine looked about, and saw David, he disdained him; for he was but a youth, and ruddy, and withal of a fair face. The Philistine said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?” The Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, “Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the sky, and to the animals of the field.”

Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a javelin: but I come to you in the name of Yahweh of Armies, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. Today, Yahweh will deliver you into my hand. I will strike you, and take your head from off you. I will give the dead bodies of the army of the Philistines this day to the birds of the sky, and to the wild animals of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that Yahweh doesn't save with sword and spear: for the battle is Yahweh's, and he will give you into our hand.” (1 Samuel 17: 42 - 47)

It is no wonder, then, that the Philistines were filled with panic on seeing Goliath fall. Something uncanny had occurred. They had glimpsed the workings of a Divinity different from any they had known.

No passage pits the Hebraic way against the Greek so strikingly as 1 Samuel 17. For more on this contrast, see {tips}Thorlief Boman, Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960)|Boman.{/tips}