



Statue of the Greek Goddess of Good Luck Found in Ascalon.

Digging Up "The Streets of Ascalon"

Palestine Exploration Society Excavating the Wicked Old Bible City to Find Out What Were the Wanton Iniquities That Made the Lord Warn, Threaten and Finally Punish Those Ancient Voluptuaries

Ascalon in the Scriptures.

Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ascalon; lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.—II. Samuel, I, 20.

Then took I the cup at the Lord's hand, and made all the nations to drink, unto whom the Lord had sent me: And all the mingled people, and all the kings of the land of the Philistines, and Ascalon.—Jeremiah, xxv., 17-20.

Baldness is come upon Gaza; Ascalon is cut off with the remnant of their valley.—Jeremiah, xlvii., 5.

How can it be quiet, seeing the Lord hath given it a charge against Ascalon, and against the sea shore?—Jeremiah, xlvii., 7.

And I will cut off the inhabitant from Ashbod, and him that holdeth the sceptre from Ascalon, and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish, saith the Lord.—Amos, I, 8.

For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ascalon a desolation.—Zephaniah, ii., 4.

Ascalon shall see it, and fear; Gaza also shall see it and be very sorrowful, and Ekron; for her expectation shall be ashamed; and the king shall perish from Gaza, and Ascalon shall not be inhabited.—Zechariah, ix., 5.

And when Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called for the lords of the Philistines, saying, come up this once, for he hath shewed me all his heart. Then the lords of the Philistines came up unto her, and brought money in their hand.

And she made him sleep upon her knees; and she called for a man, and she caused him to shave off the seven locks of his head; and she began to afflict him, and his strength went from him.—Judges, xvi., 18-19.

THE long lost city of Ascalon, buried for centuries on the shore of the Mediterranean, is rapidly being restored to the world. When the last of the tons of dirt and debris which cover its ruins have been removed we shall have the most interesting possible evidence of the luxury, the splendor and the wild gaiety which lured the mighty Samson, the beautiful Delilah, and so many other people of Old Testament days to the streets of Ascalon, and which made the city, in the eyes of the pious leaders of Israel, the symbol of all that was wickedest.

Of all the ancient cities whose memory has come down to us from Biblical times, the name of none is more familiar than that of Ascalon. It was, we know, one of the chief cities of Philistia, and it is frequently mentioned in the story of the long struggle between Israel and the Philistines, which fills the pages of the Old Testament. One of the best known of the references to it is that which King David made in his memorable lamentation over the death of Saul and Jonathan: "Tell it not in Gath," sang the King, "publish it not in the streets of Ascalon; lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice."

Since King David's day many other poets have sung to us about Ascalon. The city's fame has formed a theme for Robert W. Chambers and other well known novelists. And yet, although for nearly thirty centuries the name has been almost a household word, we have known surprisingly little of what Ascalon was really like, and why it was that God threatened and finally punished it.

What manner of city was Ascalon? What were the streets like through which David feared to have the news of Israel's sorrow spread? What sort of temples and theatres, stores, palaces and humble homes lined its stately avenues? Just what was it that made Ascalon a place so remarkable that its fame has lasted for more than thirty centuries? Did it deserve its reputation for wickedness or were Israel's leaders tempted by their jealousy of Philistia's power to spread false reports about the city's lack of morals, and about the disgraceful orgies that were said to mark its worship of the fish goddess, Derceto?

Very soon now we shall doubtless be able to answer these questions and many others which have arisen in the minds of every Bible student concerning this historic place. The ruins of Ascalon are being uncovered and the work of exploring them has been begun by the Palestine Exploration Fund, under the leadership of Professor John Garstang, director of excavation. Already the pillars of the famous Temple of Fortune have been revealed, together with many other interesting relics of the high development of Grecian art to which the people of Ascalon had attained.

As the patient excavators dig deeper and deeper into the ruins it is expected that they will lay bare the real secret of the wonderful Philistine civilization and



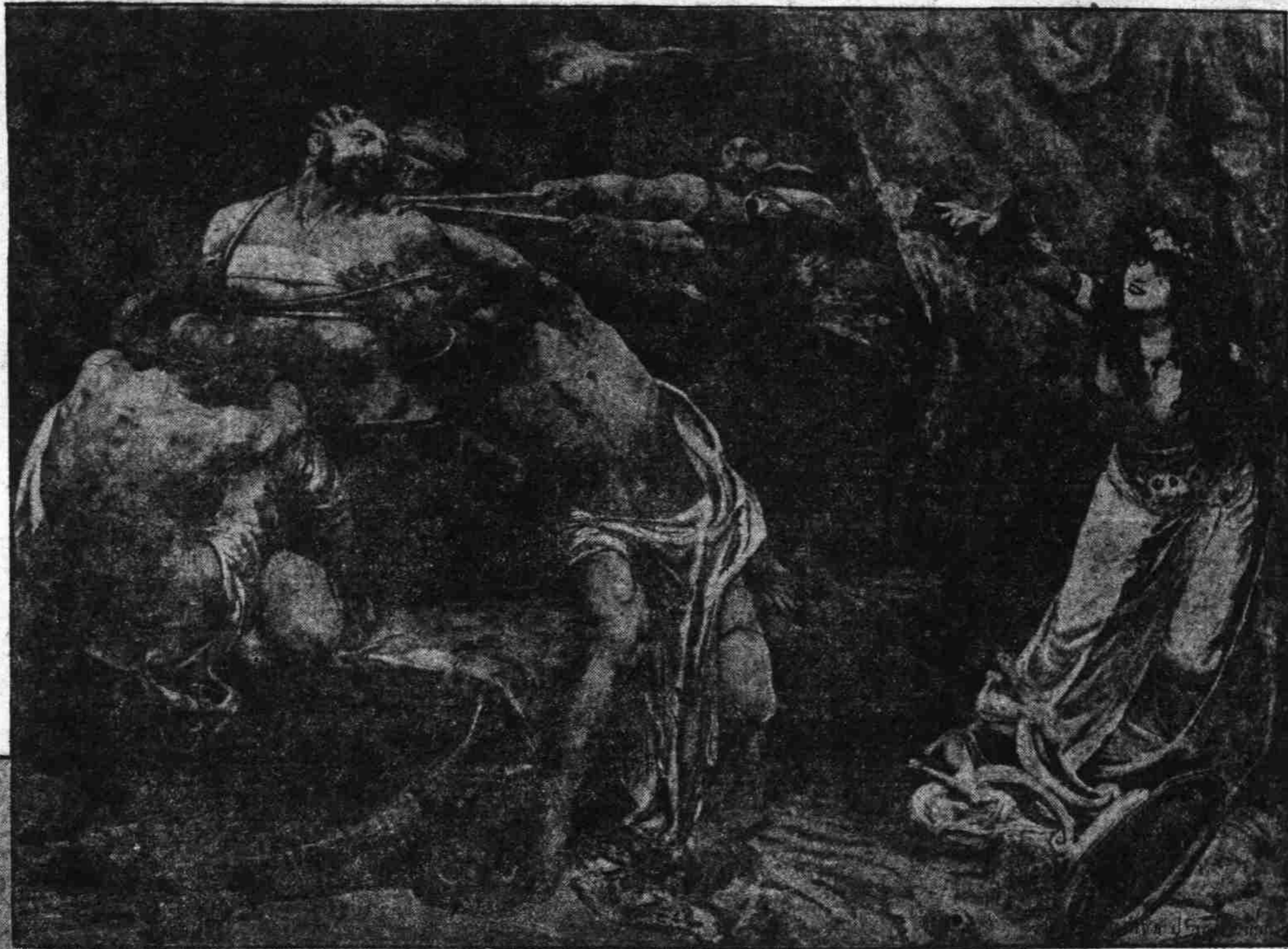
Remains of the Crusaders' Church at Ascalon.

show us why this strange people were able to struggle so successfully with Israel for supremacy. Within a few months now we shall know more than we ever did before concerning the city of Ascalon and as to why it was so interesting to Samson, Delilah and the many other Old Testament characters who so frequently trod its streets.

Samson seems to have been especially fond of Philistine women, and it may very probably have been in the pleasure-loving city of Ascalon that he met some of those who charmed him. In spite of his first unfortunate experience with a Philistine wife, he soon married another native of the same country, the alluring Delilah. She proved even more seductively lacking in the qualities a good wife should have than his first partner and, as the Bible tells us, she lost no time in betraying him to the Philistines.

The Old Testament states that Delilah was from the "Valley of Sorek." It was in Gaza that she stole away Samson's strength after learning that the secret of it lay in his hair, and it was there that Samson was placed in prison. Gaza was only twelve miles south of Ascalon—what would be called in our day, "easy commuting distance." In Samson's time means of communication between the two cities was far from difficult, and their inhabitants were constantly visiting back and forth. It is probable that Samson was a familiar figure on the streets of Ascalon and that Delilah also went there with him to join in the great festivals for which the Philistines were famous.

This is why students of Old Testament history are watching with such keen interest the excavation of the ruins of Ascalon. The excavators are hot upon the trail of Samson and with any stroke of their spades they may bring to light new facts concerning this extraordinary man—facts perhaps even more surprising than his pulling down of the temple pillars on the heads of his tormentors.



Samson, Betrayed into the Hands of the Phillistines by His Leering Sweetheart Delilah, From the Painting by Solomon in the Walker Gallery, Liverpool.



Pillars of the Temple of Fortune. These Are Similar to the Very Granite Columns of the Temple Which Samson Tore Down in His Rage.



Ancient Roman Bastion Excavated in Ascalon. The Old Mortar Still Retains Its Immense Strength.

It was to Ascalon that Samson went after he had propounded his famous riddle and allowed his bride to wheedle out of him the answer to it. "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness"—that, as every Sunday school pupil should recall, was the riddle. Samson's wife promptly confided the answer to her Philistine friends, and thus enabled them to win the bet which he made that his conundrum could not be answered.

Samson was angry, and when he reached Ascalon the great fighter promptly killed thirty men and took their clothing to compensate him for the loss of his bet. This is the only case on record where the expense of a wager fell on its winners.

The cities of Gath and Ascalon, mentioned by King David in his lamentation, were the chief centres of Philistine civilization. He spoke of them as he did because he knew that their inhabitants would be filled with rejoicing if they heard of the misfortune that had befallen Israel in the death of Saul and his son Jonathan. The Philistines would think that now they would be able to overrun Israel and reduce

the inhabitants to subjection, as they had been able to do under Goliath.

This cruel domination of Israel by the Philistines had been brought to an end when a brave shepherd faced Goliath single-handed and killed him with a blow from his sling. The shepherd lad who laid the redoubtable giant low was the same David who later cried a warning against the wicked "streets of Ascalon."

Philistia was for many generations a serious thorn in the side of Israel. And what the people of Israel dreaded most of all from this constant threat of domination by their neighbors was the degrading influence of Philistine women upon their men. Just as the young men of to-day are warned to beware the vampires of the

"Great White Way," so the youths of Israel were continually urged to avoid the alluring creatures who made the "streets of Ascalon" gay.

One of the things most hoped for from the excavation of the ruins of Ascalon is the finding of evidence that will show just how well founded was this belief of the leaders of Israel in the city's corrupting influence.

A chief reason for the hatred which Israel had for the Philistines lay in their worship of strange gods. The Philistines were closely related to the Phoenicians—like them they were a seafaring people and chose fish gods and goddesses as being the sort of deities most likely to protect them from the perils of the sea.

Nothing that will be brought to light in the ruins of Ascalon will be more interesting than the temple and sacred lake of Derceto, the fish goddess, which are known to have existed there. The worship of Derceto was attended by the most lascivious practices, much like those of the Greeks in the temples and groves of Aphrodite and of the Romans in their homage to Venus.

Philistia was long a great power in the ancient world. The Philistines gave battle not only to Israel, but to mighty Egypt, as the Tel Amarna tablets and other records testify. The name Palestine, still given to the country where they lived, is only a derivation from their own name.

From the time when the Israelites took possession of the Promised Land under Joshua they were in constant dread of their neighbors, the Philistines. The prophets, from Samuel to Zechariah, were always inveighing against the corrupting influence of Ascalon and urging their people to have nothing to do with its beautiful sirens or with the heathen gods whom they worshipped in such shocking manner. It was freely prophesied that the Lord would punish the Philistines for their sins by desolating their cities and that these prophecies finally did come true the ruins now being excavated are a pathetic witness.

It is not certain just where the Philistines came from to Palestine. Some scholars claim they came from the island of Crete; others believe that they emigrated from the region around the ancient city of Troy. Wherever the place of their origin, it is certain that they established in Ascalon and the other cities which they built on the Mediterranean coast a civilization that was rich and wonderful, even though

Nike: Bas-Relief of Victory With Her Feet Resting on the Earth, Which Is Supported by Atlas—Fourteen Feet High.

it was, as the prophets of Israel claimed, abominably wicked. A great statue of Victory, splendid Corinthian columns and other relics which have already been found in the ruins of Ascalon show that before its downfall the city had attained a degree of artistic magnificence almost rivaling that of Athens and Rome.

The excavators have brought to light a splendid architectural statue of Fortune which, like the imposing figure of Victory standing on the Earth, already mentioned, is known to have existed in Turkish times. In digging out these two works of art they also found a small statue in white marble of a kneeling girl whose existence was not suspected. This is a piece of sculpture of such high quality that it has excited general admiration and given extraordinary enthusiasm to further search of these historic ruins.

The great wealth which the Philistines gathered through their commerce and their wars, and the fact that Ascalon was a seaport, where were gathered men and women of all nations, combined to make its streets a byword for all that was wicked and worldly and wanton. Undoubtedly dissipation ran riot there and furnished abundant opportunity for the young men of Israel to sow their wild oats.

The city of Ascalon is believed to be more than 3,000 years old. Already the preliminary explorations of its ruins have disclosed both Christian and Jewish emblems, as well as some early Mohammedan remains. Under the Arab rule in the tenth century its opulence increased, and it was famous all over the world for the splendor of its mosques and great markets. During the Crusades it was a place of great strategic importance, and it was this fact that led to its final ruin. Rather than let the city fall into the hands of Richard the Lion Hearted, Saladin hastened to Ascalon and himself supervised the work of destroying the city. It is doubtful if much if any of it was ever rebuilt.

A few months after the arrival of the English army a treaty was made with Saladin and the fortifications of the city were once more, by mutual consent and even co-operation, destroyed. In the year 1240 Richard of Cornwall tried once again to wall this important base, but Ascalon was dying and thirty years later the Sultan Bibars issued the last decree of fate upon the town. Since that day the city has remained in the silence and desolation from which the spades of the excavators are now trying to reclaim it.

Thus, by the hand of a Mohammedan warrior was fulfilled the prophecy made by Zephaniah centuries before, when he said, "For Gaza shall be forsaken and Ascalon a desolation." The excavations now in progress are expected to reveal some of the facts which may have justified the Israelite prophets in praying so earnestly to their God to wreak a terrible vengeance on Ascalon and its people.