

1 Samuel 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] 1 Samuel chapter 5 When the Philistines captured the Ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then the Philistines took the Ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it up beside Dagon.

And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the Ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the Ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold.

Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day. The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumours, both Ashdod and its territory.

And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, The Ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our God. So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, What shall we do with the Ark of the God of Israel?

[1:11] They answered, Let the Ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath. So they brought the Ark of the God of Israel there. But after they had brought it around, the hand of the Lord was against the city, causing a very great panic.

And he afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumours broke out on them. So they sent the Ark of God to Ekron. But as soon as the Ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, They have brought around to us the Ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people. They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, Send away the Ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people. For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. The men who did not die were struck with tumours, and the cry of the city went up to heaven. In 1 Samuel chapter 5, after the battle of Aphek, the Ark leaves Israel to go into exile. This is not too dissimilar from what we see in Exodus chapter 33, verses 7 to 11, where the presence of the Lord leaves the camp after Israel's apostasy.

[2:19] The grace of the Lord is seen at this point, in that rather than sending Israel into exile, he went into exile for them. The previous chapter witnessed a complete breakdown of the order of life in Israel.

The death of the high priest, his two sons, a catastrophic loss in battle, and the birth of a son named Ichabod, whose name testified to the collapse that had just occurred in Israel.

However, to the tragic birth story of Ichabod, we have a response in the New Testament. Ichabod's birth is described as follows, And about the time of her death, the women attending her said to her, Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son.

But she did not answer or pay attention. 1 Samuel chapter 4, verse 20 In the New Testament, we encounter another woman who is told not to be afraid, that she will bear a son.

Luke chapter 1, verses 30 to 31 And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

[3:21] The woman, in 1 Samuel chapter 4, calls her child Ichabod, saying, The glory has departed from Israel, because the ark of God had been captured, and because of her father-in-law and her husband.

And she said, The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured. The birth of a new child, associated with the death of his grandfather, and the collapse of an old order, is answered in the New Testament with the birth of a child who heralds a new age, a child held in the arms of an old man, witnessed by a praying woman called Anna, and heralded with the words, Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace according to your word, For my eyes have seen your salvation, that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

If the story of Ichabod is the story of the glory departing from Israel, the story of Christ is the story of the glory of Israel returning. I was alerted to this particular connection by my friend Elliot Ball.

The ark is brought to Ashdod and is placed in the house of Dagon, the Philistine's god, beside the statue of Dagon. The lord is presented as a defeated vassal of Dagon, the supposedly greater god. Spoils and symbols of defeated enemies would often be placed in such temples as an expression of the superiority of the idol that was worshipped there. However, the next morning, the Philistines come to the temple of Dagon to find Dagon prostrate before the ark, as if bowing to the lord.

[4 : 54] The lord's throne has been set up in Dagon's temple, and far from Dagon seeming to be the victor. Dagon himself bows down to the lord. They restore Dagon to his upright position, but the next day they find that Dagon is prostrate before the ark again.

This time, however, the head of Dagon and the palms of his hands have been removed. The decapitated Dagon is like a defeated serpent whose head is crushed, and the removal of his hands signifies the removal of his strength.

In 1 Corinthians 10, verses 8-10, the Philistines bring the head of Saul to the temple of Dagon and fasten it there. If it was customary for the Philistines to display the decapitated heads of defeated enemies there, it adds an extra level of irony to the lord's decapitation of Dagon in his own temple. The falling of Dagon and his being broken at the neck also recalls the death of Eli in the previous chapter. Just as the judge of Israel is broken, so shall the guard of the Philistines be.

We are reminded in this chapter that God is the guard of the exodus, and there are a number of exodus motifs that we see in this story. God goes into exile for his people, but God is going to exodus his own ark and bring it back to the land.

[6 : 07] One of the great exodus themes is the defeat of false gods, or the humiliation of idols. As the lord humiliates Dagon, strips him of his power and triumphs over him in his own temple, decapitating him in the very place where the heads of his defeated enemies would be presented, we can see this theme re-emerge.

The lord is above all of the gods of the nations and can prove his supremacy in the very places of their presumed power. The hands of Dagon may have been cut off, but the hand of the lord was heavy on Ashdod and the surrounding region.

They are struck with a great plague. The people of Ashdod determined that the ark must be removed from their city for their own safety and for the well-being of their beleaguered deity Dagon. The men of Ashdod want the ark to depart from them, much as the Egyptian people desired the Israelites to leave them, as they were plagued by the lord. The ark is then brought to Ekron, where the same sorts of things happen.

The Ekronites insist that the ark be sent back to Israel because they feared complete destruction at the lord's hands. Peter Lighthouse has observed a number of Exodus solutions in the language of the text.

[7 : 15] He writes, 1 Samuel 5, verse 6 says that the hand of the lord was heavy on the Ashdodites and smites them with tumours. Similarly, in Exodus 9, verse 3, we read that the hand of the lord brought severe pestilence on Egypt.

When the plagues hit, the cry of the city went up to heaven. 1 Samuel 5, verse 12. Similarly, on the night of the Passover, there was a great cry throughout the land of Egypt.

Exodus chapter 12, verse 30. In 1 Samuel 5, verse 11, the people pledged with their leaders to get the ark out of Philistia. Similarly, in Exodus 10, verse 7, Pharaoh's servants advised Pharaoh to let Israel go before Egypt was completely destroyed.

Philistia's priests and diviners advised the rulers how to get the ark out of the land. In chapter 6, verse 2, just as the Egyptian magicians warned Pharaoh to remove Israel. In chapter 6, verse 6, we learn that the priests and diviners even know part of the Exodus story about Pharaoh hardening his heart, and they warned the Philistines not to do the same.

The effect of the whole series of events was that the Philistines came to know Yahweh. Chapter 6, verse 9. And this was also the issue throughout the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh. [8 : 31] There are also many verbal similarities. The word smite is used in both Exodus chapter 3, verse 20, and 1 Samuel chapter 5, verses 6 and 9. The phrase strike with plague occurs in both Exodus chapter 9, verse 14, and 1 Samuel chapter 6, verse 4.

And the phrase destruction of the land is repeated in Exodus chapter 8, verse 20, and 1 Samuel chapter 6, verse 5. When the Ark was brought out to the battle at Aphek, the Israelites were expecting a miraculous and mighty deliverance and the defeat of their enemies, seemingly powerless.

The great strength that they had associated with the Ark, which had been involved in the crossing of the Jordan and the defeat of Jericho, was not displayed, however. Instead, the Ark seemed to be characterized by a tremendous impotence.

It was powerless, and it did not even defend itself from capture. The Philistines then placed the Ark in the temple of their god, at the very power center of their civilization. And it is there, like a timed explosion, that the might of the Lord finally breaks forth.

The Philistines had unwittingly served in the Lord's plan, bringing the Ark to the very place where the Lord's victory over them and their god might be most dramatically displayed. A very similar disaster befell the Philistines, probably not many years after this.

[9 : 49] We should remember that the chronologies of Judges and 1 Samuel overlap. In Judges chapter 16, Samson is betrayed by one close to him, Delilah, much as Joseph was betrayed by his brothers.

Taken captive by the Philistines, his eyes are removed, and he becomes a slave, grinding in the prison. The lords of the Philistines gather together at the temple of Dagon to sacrifice and celebrate the defeat of their enemy, Samson.

They bring Samson out to perform in front of them, to make a mockery of him, and to gloat over him. Samson's strength returned to him at this point, and he took hold of the pillars of Dagon's temple and pushed against them, bringing down the entire building, crushing the heads of all the lords of the Philistines and the others within the building, giving up the spirit and dying with them. And there, again, we have the theme of deception, or outwitting the serpent. If the lords of the Philistines had known what Samson and the Ark would do, they never would have taken them to the temple of Dagon.

At the very climax of their apparent victory, the foe that they thought they had vanquished rose up and dealt them a deadly blow from which they could not easily recover. This god, one who seems to be utterly stripped of power, who is then taken to the very heart of the dragon lair, then rises up to crush the head of the beast.

[11 : 04] That is, of course, the God that we know in Jesus Christ. A question to consider. What further parallels between the story of the Ark of God in the land of Philistia and the story of Christ can you observe?

