

1 Samuel 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Samuel chapter 6 The Ark of the Lord was in the country of the Philistines seven months. And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, What shall we do with the Ark of the Lord?

Tell us with what we shall send it to its place. They said, If you send away the Ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering.

Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand does not turn away from you. And they said, What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him? They answered, Five golden tumors and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for the same plague was on all of you and on your lords.

So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravaged the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land.

Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had dealt severely with them, did they not send the people away, and they departed? Now then, take and prepare a new cart and two milk cows, on which there has never come a yoke, and yoke the cows to the cart.

[1 : 0 9] But take their calves home, away from them. And take the Ark of the Lord and place it on the cart, and put in a box at its side the figures of gold, which you are returning to him as a guilt offering.

Then send it off and let it go its way, and watch. If it goes up on the way to its own land, to Beth Shemesh, then it is he who has 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. The men did so, and took two milk cows and yoked them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home. And they put the Ark of the Lord on the cart, and the box with the golden mice and the images of their tumors.

And the cows went straight in the direction of Beth Shemesh, along one highway, lowing as they went. They turned neither to the right nor to the left. And the lords of the Philistines went after them as far as the border of Beth Shemesh.

Now the people of Beth Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the Ark, they rejoiced to see it. The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and stopped there.

[2 : 1 4] A great stone was there, and they split up the wood of the cart, and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. And the Levites took down the Ark of the Lord, and the box that was beside it, in which were the golden figures, and set them upon the great stone.

And the men of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the Lord. And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron. These are the golden tumors that the Philistines returned as a guilt offering to the Lord.

One for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron. And the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines, belonging to the five lords.

Both fortified cities and unwalled villages. The great stone beside which they set down the Ark of the Lord is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh.

And he struck some of the men of Beth Shemesh, because they looked upon the Ark of the Lord. He struck seventy men of them, and the people mourned, because the Lord had struck the people with a great blow.

[3 : 19] Then the men of Beth Shemesh said, Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us? So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-Jerim, saying, The Philistines have returned the Ark of the Lord.

Come down and take it up to you. In 1 Samuel chapter 6, we learn that the Ark was in Philistia for seven months, finally returning at the time of the wheat harvest, around the second month of the year.

All of the five cities of Philistia appear to suffer the plague. We encounter five cities in a number of key connections in scripture. As usual, James Jordan has some interesting observations on this front.

He recognises that in Genesis chapter 14 verse 2, we see that there were five cities of the plain, Sodom, Gomorrah, Adma, Zeboim, and Zoar. All of these, save for Zoar, were destroyed by the Lord.

And the Philistines are also associated with five cities, Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron. Jordan observes that there is an association drawn between both of these sets of five cities, and Egypt, which is also associated with five cities, in Isaiah chapter 19 verses 18 to 19.

[4 : 30] The five cities of the Philistines should remind us of the five cities of the plain in Genesis. They are both Egypt-like civilisations that Abraham and his children had to relate to while in the land, and both sets of cities that were judged by the Lord.

The Philistines had sent the Ark from city to city, perhaps suspecting that the God of the Israelites would be weaker in certain conditions. Perhaps there's something about the terrain of Ashdod that makes the Lord more powerful there.

Move him to another location and he'll be weaker. But it turns out that is not the case. The Lord is powerful in all of their cities. The lords of the Philistines, the priests and their diviners, consult about their best course of action.

They determine that the Ark must be returned, but it must be accompanied by a trespass offering, offering restitution for their sacrilege. In the discussion of the Philistines, the Ark is, as it were, personified, spoken of as a slave to be released.

The statement, if you send away the Ark of the God of Israel, in chapter 6 verse 3, is a significant one. The freed slave was not to be released empty-handed, but was to be sent away with many gifts.

[5 : 39] We see this in Deuteronomy chapter 15 verses 12 to 14. The Ark is treated as a slave that must be allowed to go free, and treated according to the law for released slaves.

And once again, Exodus parallels are underlined here. The Philistine lords decide to send five golden tumors and five golden rats with the Ark. The golden tumors represent the five cities of the Philistines, and the golden rats, their surrounding villages.

The tumors also represent the afflictions with which the Lord struck them. Once again, the Philistines seem prepared to learn from the lessons of the Egyptians. They do not want to harden their hearts as Pharaoh did, and court the level of destruction that he faced.

The sending of the Ark with gifts also relates to the plundering of the Egyptians in the Exodus. Wanting to rule out the slightest possibility that the plagues that had befallen them and Dagon were purely chance occurrences, unrelated to their taking of the Ark, the Philistines set a test.

They hitched two milk cows that had never previously been yoked, separated them from their calves, and saw whether they would bring the Ark back to the land of Israel. They did, and they brought the cart bearing the Ark up towards Beth Shemesh, a Levitical city.

[6 : 56] As Peter Lighthouse points out, the people of Beth Shemesh sin in a number of respects. They offer a false sacrifice. They offer the milk cows instead of the bulls required by the law, in Leviticus chapter 1 verse 3.

They placed the Ark on a stone, and looked within it, or at it. It should have been kept covered and never touched, even by the Kohathites, who were charged with carrying it around. In Numbers chapter 4 verse 5 we read, When the camp is to set out, Aaron and his son shall go in and take down the veil of the screen, and cover the Ark of the Testimony with it.

So Aaron and the priests would cover it. Then the Kohathites could take it, but they would not see it. The people of Beth Shemesh were struck with a dreadful plague as a result. They suffered the same sort of judgment as the Philistines had.

The men of Beth Shemesh, fearful of the Lord's judgment, wished to be free of the Ark, much as the Philistines sought to be. The men of Kiriath-Jerim bring the Ark there, and leave it at the house of Abinadab, who consecrates his son to keep it.

The city of Kiriath-Jerim was one of the cities of the Gibeonites, we find in Joshua chapter 9 verse 17, which means that its population was primarily Gentile, while under the rule of Israel.

[8 : 10] And the Ark's resting in a Gibeonite city, and not being restored to the tabernacle, is a sort of wilderness period. It's after release, but prior to settlement and restoration. It would almost be a century before the Ark was brought up to Jerusalem, in 2 Samuel chapter 6, and even longer before the pieces of the torn house of the Lord were brought back together in the new Solomonite temple.

When it is returned, as Lighthouse has observed, there is an exact reversal of the pattern of events that occurred when it was first taken. So the Ark is first taken in 1 Samuel chapter 4, and that's the time when the house of Eli is destroyed.

That's taken in the battle of Aphek, and then it's exiled in Philistia. And in chapter 5 to the middle of chapter 6, it's in Philistia. At that point, in chapter 6, which we have just read, the Ark is returned on a cart, and there is a sin concerning the Ark at that point, a sin that delays the Ark arriving at its destination.

The Ark is then left with Abinadab, and that happens in the next chapter, in the first two verses. The Ark remains in the house of Abinadab for a great many years, and does not actually return until 2 Samuel chapter 6, where we see the same sort of pattern playing out again, in reverse.

The Ark is returned upon a cart. There's a sin concerning the Ark, this time by Uzzah. And then the Ark is housed with the Philistines. In 2 Samuel chapter 6, verses 10 to 11, the Ark is left in the house of Obed-Edom, the Gittite.

[9 : 45] A Gittite was someone who came from the city of Gath, one of the Philistine cities. And so, there is a reversal of the pattern here. And then the Ark is finally restored at the time of the removal of the house of Saul, in chapter 6 of 2 Samuel verses 12 to 19, where Michael, Saul's daughter, is judged.

Recognising the prominence of this pattern might help us to be more alert to the importance of the theme of the Ark of the Covenant, and what it represents regarding God's presence to his people, and the sanctuary at the heart of the people.

The story of 1 and 2 Samuel is in large part a story of the movement towards the final resting place of the Ark of God, the movement from the old corrupt order that we see at the beginning in Eli and his sons, to the new temple that will be formed by David's greater son.

A question to consider. One of the primary things that the Exodus accomplished was a revelation of the Lord's glory, name, power, and character to the nations. How do you think that the Philistines' knowledge of the Lord changed between 1 Samuel chapter 4 and the end of 1 Samuel chapter 6?

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