

1 Samuel 5:1-12

The Ark Plagues the Philistines

The capture of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines brought them a world of trouble.

The Philistines mentioned the plagues on Egypt when they heard the shout of Israel when the Ark entered the camp. The rabbis say they decided that God had exhausted all his plagues on the Egyptians. But a plague is what they got after capturing the Ark.

This is also one of the most bizarre and hard to translate and interpret incidents in the Bible.

The Fate of Shiloh

The story here follows the Ark, but from other scriptures we know what happened to the town of Shiloh, where the Tabernacle had remained for 369 years, according to the Talmud (Zevachim 118b).

Archaeologists have been excavating in Shiloh, and discovered a series of storage rooms encircling a hill where they believe the Tabernacle had been set up, where first fruit offerings and tithed fruit and grain was kept. A deposit of animal bones consisting mainly of the right-hand portion was discovered - this was the portion dedicated to the priests and Levites in Leviticus 7.

After Israel is defeated in the battle by the Philistines, it suffered a terrible fate.

Jeremiah 400 years later gives a hint of what happened when he warns Jerusalem:

- **Jeremiah 7:11-12** - "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the LORD. But go ye now unto my place which was in Shiloh, where I set my name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. And now, because ye have done all these works, saith the LORD, and I spake unto you, rising up early and speaking, but ye heard not; and I called you, but ye answered not; Therefore will I do unto this house, which is called by my name, wherein ye trust, and unto the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I have cast out all your brethren, even the whole seed of Ephraim."

The people of Jerusalem didn't like what Jeremiah was insinuating. They responded:

- **Jeremiah 26:9** - "Why hast thou prophesied in the name of the LORD, saying, This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate without an inhabitant? And all the people were gathered against Jeremiah in the house of the LORD."

Apparently, the Philistines marched on Shiloh, either right after the battle or later, and

having captured it, put all they found there to the sword, and leveled the buildings to the ground. The destruction was so complete that no one survived to even leave a record of what happened. The date for this is around 1104 B.C.

The rabbis said this all occurred for several reasons:

1. Generally, because Israel's sins made them unworthy of the Ark.
2. The idolatry of Micah still remained among the Danites, and the other tribes allowed it. Judges 18:31 - "And they set them up Micah's graven image, which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh"
3. Hophni and Phinehas' own personal crimes defiled God's dwelling place.
4. Israel failed to ask counsel of the Lord before carrying the Ark into battle.
5. To demonstrate God's superiority over the false gods, on their own turf.

This story forces us to ask some questions:

Where was Samuel?

He is not mentioned. The scripture doesn't directly tell us what happened to Samuel during this time, or how he escaped the Philistines. Possibly he was already traveling around in his circuit as a judge (**1 Samuel 7:16**). After Eli's death, he (or someone) may have been able to save the sacred vessels and the Tabernacle tent itself somehow before the Philistines arrived at Shiloh.

What Happened to the Tabernacle?

According to Rabbi Hanina bar Papa: The original Tabernacle of Moses never fell into enemy hands. When the building of King Solomon's Temple was complete, the Tabernacle of Moses – no longer being needed – was disassembled and stowed away. (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 9a)

At Shiloh, there had been a stone wall 10 handbreadths high built around the walls of the Tabernacle, making it a semi-permanent structure (Jerusalem Talmud, Megillah 1:12). It is called a "temple" in **1 Samuel 1:9, 3:3**.

One theory is that the Tabernacle with its tent and boards was disassembled and removed from Shiloh and taken to Nob at this time.

See this article from the *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, at <https://jbnqnew.jewishbible.org/jbnq-past-issues/2016/441-january-march-2016/reconstructing-destruction-tabernacle-shiloh/>

The priesthood - already corrupted - was now largely killed off or scattered. Tabernacle worship had become impossible. It probably would also take a while to gather and train up a functioning priesthood and a course of Levites after this disaster at Shiloh.

The Ark went first to Beth-Shemesh but finally settled at Kiriath-jearim for 20 years, as we'll see in the next chapter, and would not be reunited with the other sacred items of the Tabernacle - the golden lampstand, the incense altar, table of showbread, etc. - until

the time of Solomon. Samuel later offers a burnt offering at Mizpah (1 Samuel 7:9-10) and builds an altar at Ramah (1 Samuel 7:17). In 1 Samuel 10:3, three men are "going up to God at Bethel," which may imply that the Tent of God was then possibly in Bethel. Worship and sacrifices would take place on various high places until the Temple was built.

(Spiritually, this means that our own inner "high places" which once were platforms for idolatry, can be transformed to serve a purpose, allowing us to "ride on our high places" and worship God until our own Temple is dedicated and filled with the Shekinah glory of God).

The Tabernacle finally reappears, mentioned in the time of Solomon:

- **2 Chronicles 1:3-4** - "Then Solomon, and all the assembly with him, went to the high place which was in Gibeon; for God's Tent of Meeting was there, which Moses, the servant of Jehovah, had made in the wilderness. However, David had brought up the Ark of God from Kiriath-jearim to the place he had prepared for it; for he had pitched a tent for it in Jerusalem."

[Later, knowing that Jerusalem would be destroyed, according to **2 Maccabees 2:4-5**, Jeremiah took the Tabernacle, the Ark and the altar of incense and hid them in a cave on or near Mt. Nebo, to "remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy."]

A thorough examination of all this can be found here:
http://kukis.org/Doctrines/Destruction_of_Shiloh.pdf

1 Samuel 5:1-2 - "And the Philistines took the ark of God, and brought it from Ebenezer unto Ashdod. When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon."

Another Question:

Why weren't these pagan Philistines struck dead as they touched the Ark, as Uzzah was in **2 Samuel 6:1-7** when he tried to steady the Ark?

God had said only the Kohathites were to carry the Ark (**Numbers 4:15**).

The instructions for moving the Ark were given to Israel. So Uzzah knew the law, whereas the Philistines were ignorant of it. Besides, God wanted them to capture the Ark and bring it to their temple in order to show His superiority over the false god Dagon, which would bring an even greater shame and disgrace on the Philistines. And in addition, God did strike many of them dead by bringing a deathly plague upon them.

The Toppling of Dagon

Dagon the god of Ashdod was the principal deity of the Philistines. The Semitic word "dagan" means "earth," and Dagon was a god of increase of grain and agricultural fertility. (See **Judges 16:23**, **1 Chronicles 10:10**) In Ebla and later in Ugaritic texts he appears as the father of Baal in the same way that in Greek mythology Kronos was the father of Zeus.

1 Samuel 5:3 - "And when they of Ashdod arose early on the morrow, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the earth before the ark of the LORD. And they took Dagon, and set him in his place again. And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold; only the stump of Dagon was left to him. Therefore neither the priests of Dagon, nor any that come into Dagon's house, tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day."

The Septuagint has "the soles of his feet" were cut off rather than his hands.

This incident displays perfectly how completely the revelation of Christ (the Ark) through the Spirit without any human intervention topples our self-serving ideas, and reveals our idols to be impotent, powerless and helpless.

Dagon - now fallen on his face as if worshipping before the Ark, with his head and hands broken off - depicts an idol without the ability to see, to hear, to speak or to act. But instead of losing confidence in the idol, his priests simply avoided being reminded of his impotence. None of them dared to tread on the threshold where Dagon's head had been smashed, out of reverence for the pieces of their god that had lain there, not wanting to defile them. It became a new superstition added on to Dagon's worship.

The human capacity for rationalization is limitless, and we will try to preserve our idols at all cost.

A memory of this incident is possibly preserved by the prophet Zephaniah:

- **Zephaniah 1:7-9** - "Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord GOD: for the day of the LORD is at hand: for the LORD hath prepared a sacrifice, he hath bid his guests. And it shall come to pass in the day of the LORD'S sacrifice, that I will punish the princes, and the king's children, and all such as are clothed with strange apparel. In the same day also will I punish all those that leap on the threshold, which fill their masters' houses with violence and deceit."

Or, as in the NIV translation - "I will punish all who avoid stepping on the threshold, who fill the temple of their gods with violence and deceit."

A Strange Plague

1 Samuel 5:6 - "But the hand of the LORD was heavy upon them of Ashdod, and he destroyed them, and smote them with emerods, even Ashdod and the coasts thereof."

So the city fathers of Ashdod sent the Ark on to their sister city of Gath.

1 Samuel 5:9 - "And it was so, that, after they had carried it about, the hand of the LORD was against the city with a very great destruction: and he smote the men of the city, both small and great, and they had emerods in their secret parts."

Then they sent the Ark on to Ekron, with similar results...

1 Samuel 5:11-12 - "So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines, and said, Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it go again to his own place, that it slay us not, and our people: for there was a deadly destruction throughout all the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. And the men that died not were smitten with the emerods: and the cry of the city went up to heaven."

What was this strange plague?

The King James version and the Jewish translation both translate this as emerods or "hemorrhoids in their private parts."

But a clue appears from the Septuagint Greek translators, who often seems to have had access to older and more accurate manuscripts.

In verse 6, the LXX adds the words, "and rats appeared in their land, and death and destruction were throughout the city," and in verse 9 of the same chapter the Septuagint versions adds, "He afflicted the people, both young and old with an outbreak of tumors in the groin."

Painful swelling of the lymph nodes in the groin and under the arms, called buboes, are a mark of the Bubonic Plague, spread by rats and fleas.

Hemorrhoids don't lead to widespread death, but the Plague does.

See:

<http://www.talmudology.com/jeremybrownmdgmailcom/2019/8/22/keritot-5b-hemorrhoids-plague-and-the-ark-of-god>

The rabbis say the severity of the plague increased from city to city the longer the Philistines did not return the Ark.

The rabbis also noticed that this whole incident is reminiscent of God's dealings with the Philistine king Abimelech in **Genesis 20**. Abimelech took Sarah, Abraham's wife, after Abraham claimed she was only his sister. Sarah equals the Ark in this story. The Philistines took something of immense value, God punished them by "closing up the wombs" of Abimelech's house, and then the Philistine king returned her.

A Warning to Believers

When an idol is brought into the Tabernacle or Temple, the glory or Shekinah presence of God departs, as we saw in **Ezekiel 9-11**. But when the Ark is brought into a pagan temple, the idols are destroyed and revealed as powerless, as happened with Dagon.

This is a picture for our inward temple. When we fall into idolatry, we become IChabod - "the glory has departed." But if we are idolators and Christ enters our idolatrous inner temple, he cleanses it and the idols are destroyed or are marred and become useless.

Jesus even quotes the words of Jeremiah 7 (above) associating the Temple with a "den of robbers."

- **Matthew 21:12-13** - "Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers."

Why "robbers?" There was literal skimming of profits, in the way of Hophni and Phinehas. "Will a man rob God?" (Malachi 3:8-18) But the main thing being "robbed" was God's glory, which he will not share with flesh or with an idol

- **Isaiah 42:8** - "I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images." (See also **1 Corinthians 1:29** - "no flesh can glory in his presence")

This incident of the capture of the Ark is also a premonition of what happened at the cross:

St. Augustine:

"The devil jumped for joy when Christ died; and by the very death of Christ the devil was overcome: he took, as it were, the bait in the mousetrap. He rejoiced at the death, thinking himself death's commander. But that which caused his joy dangled the bait before him. The Lord's cross was the devil's mousetrap: the bait which caught him was the death of the Lord." - Augustine, Sermon 263, On the Ascension

The capture of the Ark seemed like a victory for the Philistines, but it led to their large-scale destruction.

"When Christ, the true Ark of the covenant, really enters the heart of fallen man, which is indeed Satan's temple, all idols will fall, every endeavor to set them up again will be vain, sin will be forsaken, and unrighteous gain restored; the Lord will claim and possess the throne. But pride, self-love and worldly lusts, though dethroned and crucified, still remain within us, like the stump of Dagon."

- *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary*

The warning for us in this story is clarified in the Lord's word to the church at Ephesus:

- **Revelation 2:4-5** - "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy lampstand out of his place, except thou repent."

Don't Try to Steady the Ark

This isn't the only strange Ark story.

King David wanted the Ark brought to Jerusalem. As the ark was being transported, the oxen pulling the cart stumbled, and a man named Uzzah took hold of it to steady it. God's anger burned against Uzzah and He struck him down and he died (**2 Samuel 6:1-7 and 1 Chronicles 13:9-12**).

Why?

The Kohathites were to carry the Ark - with poles, not on an ox-cart (**Numbers 4:15**). But what was behind Uzzah's action, and why was God's judgment so harsh?

First, appearances can be deceiving.

The cart didn't fall and neither did the Ark, just as the boat carrying Jesus and the disciples rocked fiercely in the storm, though it wasn't necessarily in danger of sinking (**Matthew 8:24-27**). And yet, just as with the disciples who failed to put their faith in their Master, Uzzah, for a moment, felt it was his responsibility to save the integrity of God, and that our almighty God somehow needed Uzzah's assistance. He presumed that, without his intervention, God's presence would be dealt a blow.

In the same way, Moses lost his right to enter the promised land because he felt his intervention was needed when he struck the rock, instead of speaking to it as God had commanded (**Numbers 20:7-12**).

God is in charge. He will fulfill His plan. If we are overcome by the "tyranny of the urgent," we will be tempted to reach our hand out to steady the Ark. But He doesn't need a new plan or idea from us.

Is your life out of control? It's not your life anyway - you belong to God.

Is the whole world coming apart at the seams? You're only responsible to meet the needs that are within your reach.

Has someone offended you? Pray for that person.

Does our church or community seem like it's stagnating or has lost its way? It's up to each of us to repent and return to our first love. Not to deflect or point the finger.

Like the disciples, we cry "Lord, save us: we perish!" as the storm rages. But Jesus tells us, "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" Then He calms the storm.

We speak to the rock out of obedience, not strike it out of anger or frustration.

Even if it gets so bad that the Philistines capture the Ark, God transforms what appears to be a disaster, and recovers the Ark and brings it to rest again in Israel.

And He promises He will always do the same for us.