

1 Samuel 6:1-21

The Ark is Sent Back

1 Samuel 6:1-3 - "And the ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months. And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, What shall we do to the ark of the LORD? tell us wherewith we shall send it to his place. And they said, If ye send away the ark of the God of Israel, send it not empty; but in any wise return him a trespass offering: then ye shall be healed, and it shall be known to you why his hand is not removed from you."

The rabbis associate these seven months that the Ark was in Philistine hands with the seven ewe lambs Abraham gave to the Philistine king Abimelech (**Genesis 21:30**) in what they saw as an unwarranted covenant of self-protection rather than faith. The sojourn of the Ark for seven months served as retribution, measure for measure (Genesis Rabbah 54:4)

Why do the Philistines include a trespass offering?

The trespass offering is the most basic level of apprehension anyone can have of the Levitical system of sacrifice and offering, which we know points to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. God has allowed all religions and societies to retain a form of the trespass offering as a hint of what Christ has fulfilled.

The Philistines could readily see the consequences of their actions - the humiliation of their god Dagon and a terrible plague brought them to that realization. In other words, they knew they had transgressed, trespassed or "crossed a line" somehow against the God of the Hebrews by taking the Ark, the throne and dwelling place of this strange, invisible God.

The Philistine priests and diviners knew of only one kind of sacrifice or offering - a trespass offering, which they no doubt offered frequently to their own gods whenever they somehow offended them. But this was not accompanied by any repentance or even feelings of guilt. The world's idea of trespass is simply based on outward behavior, what you do. **It's transactional.** I mess up somehow or break a taboo, I suffer a loss because of it, I offer a gift to the spirits or to an idol, and he stops bothering me.

There is no understanding of deeper truth - of the Sin Offering as covering who I am, let alone the sweet savor Meal Offerings indicating acceptance, or the Peace Offering pointing to our sharing sustenance with God, or the Burnt Offering indicating complete submission and surrender. There is no apprehension of the wonderful truth of how even our inward parts are covered and cleansed, or how our uncleanness is washed and restored.

"Apprehension" means to "lay hold of" - to understand the extent of what Christ's sacrifice accomplished in us.

- **Philippians 3:12** - "...I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I was apprehended (by) Christ Jesus."

- **Ephesians 3:18-19** - That we "May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God."

The deepest understanding is that we become a **new creation** in Him.

The Mishnah on repentance agrees:

"...Among the ways of repentance are to continue to cry out in tearful supplication before the Name, to bestow alms according to his means, and to distance himself exceedingly from the thing wherein he sinned, to **have his identity changed, as if to say, 'I am now another person, and not that person who perpetrated those misdeed.'**"

- Mishneh Torah on Repentance, Rosh-ha-Shanah, 16b. C.

The Philistines could not see any of this. They just wanted the proper transaction for God to be pacified toward them as they rid themselves of the Ark.

Sadly, even some Christians never break out of this loop - constantly feeling guilt, confessing their sinful actions, but never realizing **they are sin through and through**, and coming to the end of themselves, going to the cross and apprehending the complete propitiation/atonement of the blood on the mercy seat, leading to acceptance, peace and a life of thanksgiving and praise.

That's why we study the Torah and Leviticus especially in the Three-Year Cycle - to apprehend the whole gospel of God.

- **Matthew 5:17-18** - "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled."

1 Samuel 6:4-5 - "Then said they, What shall be the trespass offering which we shall return to him? They answered, Five golden emerods, and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines: for one plague was on you all, and on your lords. Wherefore ye shall make images of your emerods, and images of your mice that mar the land; and ye shall give glory unto the God of Israel: peradventure he will lighten his hand from off you, and from off your gods, and from off your land."

There were five Philistine cities, and five lords or leaders of the Philistines. The surrounding villages sent their own golden emerods and mice, in case the original five proved inadequate (**1 Samuel 6:18**).

Having the offerings in the form of the "swellings" and the "mice" is a method of sympathetic magic. Making the objects in the form of the thing that was plaguing them,

they hoped these would be removed from each of the five cities along with the Ark and the surrounding villages. It would also acknowledge it was God's hand that brought the plague.

1 Samuel 6:6 - "Wherefore then do ye harden your hearts, as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? when he had wrought wonderfully among them, did they not let the people go, and they departed?"

The diviners were telling the five lords of the Philistines that they should have realized immediately what was causing the plague and returned the Ark. Instead they passed it around. But as with Pharaoh, God had been "squeezing" or hardening their hearts so their evil could be clearly seen and His superiority over their gods would be known. (see **Romans 9**)

The Philistines take a new cart pulled by two milk cows, place the Ark on it along with their offerings in a small coffer by its side, and "send it away." In other words, they let the cows determine its path.

1 Samuel 6:9 - "And see, if it goeth up by the way of his own coast to Bethshemesh, then he hath done us this great evil: but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that smote us: it was a chance that happened to us."

If the cart ended up in Israelite territory, it proves it was God who had brought the plague. If not, then "it was a chance that happened to us."

By "chance" they didn't mean a random accident, but probably that it was determined by the stars or some other divine influence they could not determine. For ancient people, even chance was a divine spirit or god.

The diviners felt quite sure that the cows, left to their own instincts, would, unless driven by some divine power, come back to their young ones in the stall.

This was a common kind of divination. At his speech in Athens, Paul quotes the poet Epimenides in Acts 17:22-18:17 regarding the "altar to an unknown god."

In the 6th century B.C., when the poet Epimenides lived, there was a plague which went throughout all Greece. The Greeks thought that they must have offended one of their gods, so they began offering sacrifices on altars to all their various gods. When nothing worked, they figured there must be a God who they didn't know about whom they must somehow appease. So Epimenides came up with a plan. He released hungry sheep into the countryside and instructed men to follow the sheep to see where they would lie down. He believed that since hungry sheep would not naturally lie down but continue to graze, if the sheep were to lie down it would be a sign from God that this place was sacred. At each spot, where the sheep tired and layed down, the Athenians built an altar and sacrificed the sheep on it. Afterward it is believed the plague stopped, which they attributed to this unknown God accepting the sacrifice.

1 Samuel 6:12 - "And the kine took the straight way to the way of Bethshemesh, and went along the highway, lowing as they went, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left; and the lords of the Philistines went after them unto the border of Bethshemesh."

God was guiding this strange caravan. It was a miracle because the cows ignored their natural instinct toward their calves. Also cows usually resist a burden when they are nursing their young, and they pulled the cart *up* the road toward Beth Shemesh instead of taking the easier downward path.

The cows were following the divine impulse. Compare this with Paul on the road to Damascus. There, God confronts him and asks, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks" (Acts 26:14). A prick was a cattle goad.

God was "goading" these cows in the right direction. God had been goading Saul/Paul in the same way, but he was resisting. Our natural instinct is not to follow God's direction, so whenever we do, it is always miracle.

One midrash sees a similarity between the Hebrew word for "took the straight way" in **verse 12** and the Hebrew word for "song." Thus, they say the cows sang praises to the Lord as they brought the Ark back to Israel. And if we are obeying the divine impulse, so will we.

Beth-Shemesh is 12 miles from Ekron. It was a Levite city and the place Joshua was buried.

1 Samuel 6:13 - "And they of Bethshemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley: and they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it. And the cart came into the field of Joshua, a Bethshemite, and stood there, where there was a great stone: and they clave the wood of the cart, and offered the kine a burnt offering unto the LORD. And the Levites took down the ark of the LORD, and the coffer that was with it, wherein the jewels of gold were, and put them on the great stone: and the men of Bethshemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices the same day unto the LORD."

The wheat harvest began at Pentecost. Although this was not an approved place for sacrifice, the presence of the Ark sanctified it. Cows were never offered in sacrifice (except for the red heifer). But the cows had been used by God and were therefore also sanctified. The Levites who took down the Ark were most likely priests of the tribe of Levi. Bethshemesh had been given to the Kohathite Levites, whose business it was to carry the ark on their shoulders (**Joshua 21:10**) so this was the perfect destination.

The great stone where the sacrifice was offered was called the Stone of Abel (or *'ābal* meaning weeping, mourning) because they were punished for looking into the Ark.

1 Samuel 6:19 - "And he smote the men of Bethshemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD, even he smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore

and ten men: and the people lamented, because the LORD had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter."

They were smitten by Him with a thunderbolt, according to Josephus (Antiqu. I. 6. c. 1. sect. 4.).

The commandment against their action is clear:

- **Numbers 4:20** - The Levites "shall not go in to see when the holy things are covered, lest they die."

They probably had good intentions, to see if anything was missing - like Aaron's rod or the bowl of manna. But the Ark was usually kept out of sight in the Tabernacle, seen once a year only by the High Priest. No doubt some curiosity and presumption was involved, too .

But again, like Uzzah later, WE DON'T HAVE TO STEADY THE ARK. God had managed to return the Ark to its home without Israel having to re-capture it in battle or redeem it with a ransom. In the same way, it was God's responsibility to take care of what was inside the Ark.

2 Corinthians 13:4-5 - "For though He was crucified in (*ex* - from out of a state of) weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you. Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?"

We must always continue in our own weakness, and let the strength come from Him. We don't get stronger. We don't get better. We diminish and He increases.

The inner workings of this miracle of "Christ in us" are beyond our understanding, and out of our control. It's God's business. All you need to know is that "Jesus Christ is in you."

i.e. we can "lift up our eyes and see the Ark" coming home as the people of Beth Shemesh did, but we must not look *into* the Ark. The first induces us to humility and joy. The second is based on presumption. It's "rising above the cloud" into things too high for us, and assumes a level of control and abilities and responsibilities we don't have. The Ark doesn't belong to us. We belong to it.

Abarbanel and Josephus say only 70 men of Bethshemesh died - "with the men of Bethshemesh he smote--even he smote of the people seventy"; that is, of the men of Bethshemesh; 50,000, that is, of the Philistines, and so this gives the sum of all that died on account of the ark, both while it was in the hands of the Philistines, and when returned to Bethshemesh.

There is a similar story about the fall of Troy, that when Troy was taken an “ark” was found, in which was the image of the god Bacchus; which being opened by Eurypylus, he was struck with madness as soon as he saw the image. (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I. 7. p. 435)

1 Samuel 6:20-21 - "And the men of Bethshemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? and to whom shall he go up from us? And they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjathjearim, saying, The Philistines have brought again the ark of the LORD; come ye down, and fetch it up to you."

The Targum has, "who is able to stand before the ark of this holy Lord God."

Who is able to stand? *No one is able to stand!*

- **Psalm 76:7-9** - "Thou, even thou, art to be feared: and who may stand in thy sight when once thou art angry? Thou didst cause judgment to be heard from heaven; the earth feared, and was still, when God arose to judgment, to save all the meek of the earth. Selah."

- **Psalm 89:7** - "God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him."

- **Proverbs 9:10** - "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding."

The Beth Shemesh survivors were suddenly painfully aware of their sin, imperfection, impurity and guilt. Only on account of the mercy seat over the ark, through Christ, his blood, righteousness and sacrifice, does *anyone* survive, and even that is **as a new creature**, after leaving yourself behind.

"to whom shall he go up from us" - The Beth Shemites knew they were unworthy to have the Ark in their town, but could not know where it should go or how it would get there.

Faced with the mystery of the Ark, the atoning blood on the mercy seat and the dwelling place of God between the cherubim, we can only fall down as dead men.

That's when God responds, and the fear of God is transformed into a “Fear not!”:

- **Revelation 1:17** - "And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last:"

Addendum:

The Talmud states that from then on, the box sent by the Philistines remained next to the Ark, with the Torah scroll on top of it (although some say it was empty of the golden

emeralds and mice). Even when the Ark was returned to the Holy of Holies in the Temple, the Philistine box remained, declaring as it did God's superiority over the Philistine deities.

There are several stories about what became of the Tabernacle and the Ark after that. One tradition is that Solomon had tunnels under the Temple built in case the Ark eventually had to be hidden. (See Radak on II Chronicles 35:3 and Maimonides Mishne Torah Beit HaBechira 4:1. Talmud Sotah 9a says that the entire Tabernacle of Moses was likewise hidden in the tunnels beneath the Temple Mount).

One tradition says that later, good King Josiah, knowing that the Temple would shortly be destroyed, had the Ark hidden away.

According to another Talmud story, a priest was once in one of the side chambers of the Temple, designated for the storage of wood. He noticed a stone which had clearly been tampered with (and wasn't aligned with the others). He suspected that the Ark had been hidden there. He ran over to tell his fellow, but died suddenly before he could complete his account. (Thus, it became known roughly where the Ark was hidden but not precisely, and the people understood that its whereabouts was intended to remain secret.)

Finally in the Book of Maccabees II 2:4-10, it states that the Prophet Jeremiah, knowing the Babylonians would soon invade, took the Ark and several other sacred items out of the Temple and hid them in a cave on Mount Nebo.

See <https://www.aish.com/atr/Where-is-the-Ark-of-the-Covenant-Today.html>