

Lessons in Arkeology (1 Samuel 5:1-7:1)

Introduction:-

The story of the Ark's journeys into Philistine territory and its return to Israel provides fascinating reading, full of mystery and humour, and all of the literary features that we would normally associate with good story telling. But the story of the Ark, and its plague-like effects upon each community that it touches, not only reminds us of the Lord's plagues upon Egypt, which it clearly echoes, but it also reminds us of the truth about the Lord's sovereignty, freedom, and power, as this also relates to laws about His holiness, which both Israel and the nations should respect and understand. And so the label "Ark Narrative" is not entirely appropriate as this relates to these verses, rather the narrative as a whole, emphasizes Yahweh's glory and holiness, emphasized "through" the Ark. What then, can we learn through this fascinating story today?

1. First we discover that Two Gods cannot exist side-by-side (1 Samuel 5:1-5)

When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer (meaning rock of help - when really there was no help for Israel from the Lord their Rock), to their Temple at Ashdod, possibly for that reason the chief city of the five city state of the Philistines, and set it beside Dagon, who was possibly an agricultural or grain deity of some kind. In placing the ark "beside" Dagon, the Philistines may have thought that the addition of a new God may have given them extra benefits to that of their existing grain deity, or to symbolize that this new deity or defeated god now submits to the Philistine deity. This may have been in mind as we come to verses 3-5 of this section, for when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day - what were they expecting? - there was Dagon, fallen on his face before the ark of the Lord! They then took Dagon, and put him back in his place. Can Dagon then qualify as God if this action is needed? But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord! His head and hands were broken off, making ineffectual his ability to rule. Clearly, Dagon was not in control, even of his own statue!! Further, these were lying on the threshold to the Temple, and only his torso remained. As one scholar has remarked, Dagon has been turned into Humpty-Dumpty before the Ark. But how would the Philistine's interpret this total situation? They cannot know if Dagon is worshipping the Lord, or has been killed by him. Possibly the careful repetitions in verse 4 provide an answer. The imagery of the severed head and hands lying before the threshold speak of complete defeat. Thus total defeat rather than submission appears to be the best interpretation of this passage, although submission may have led to final defeat. The passage then concludes with a superstition that remained at Ashdod thereafter, in connection with the threshold of Dagon's Temple, and his defeat. Ironically and remarkably, to take the trouble to continue to step over this threshold when entering Dagon's Temple, by both the priesthood and whoever entered, surely would have vividly reminded everyone of Dagon's non-existent status as a god. Could you imagine having to step over the threshold of your own church sanctuary, every time you entered the building, because at some point in the past, your God had lost his head and hands at that point!! And yet, apparently Dagon worship continued to flourish, even though the original Dagon needed to be replaced by another replica of his image!! And yet, although the Philistines brought the true God into their Temple, they did not put Dagon out! And this problem is often repeated today by many who want God to help them get their own way in life, but are still content to hold on to their own idols. But when God entered the Temple of Dagon, he has a habit of knocking our idols down!

But as with the Philistines, we then have a habit of putting our idols back up again, only to find that God will finally show us what our most precious idols really mean, firstly without a head (indicating they cannot rule), and without hands (indicating that they cannot do anything, when we need them most). The God of Israel is not simply another god to be put alongside others. He is not simply someone that we can take into our lives to be helpful to us when we need Him. He is the mighty living God who will knock all our idols down, simply because He is truly God, and there is no other to equal or compare with Him (Deuteronomy 4:35, 39; Isaiah 45:22). Finally, the Philistines failed to learn this lesson fully, because from this point on, they added the superstition of "hopping" over the threshold of the Temple to Dagon at Ashdod (verse 5). Apparently this practice even continued in Judah down to the seventh century BC as indicated by the prophet Zephaniah, where idolatry was also involved within the Temple (Zephaniah 1:4-9).

2. Secondly, we discover that the Ark may have fallen into the hands of the Philistines, but the Philistines had now fallen into the hands of the Lord (1 Samuel 5:6 - 6:12).

Within this middle section, we learn something of the Ark's journeys, taking us from the territory of the Philistines, finally to a place called Beth Shemesh (meaning "house of the sun god"), a town near the Philistine border, belonging to Judah (Joshua 15:10). From the beginning of this section, we discover that the Lord's exodus hand was "heavy" on the people of Ashdod and its vicinity, afflicting them with tumors. Yahweh was assaulting the Philistines, possibly with bubonic plague, or some other means. This was no tame God that the Philistines had "conquered!!" Finally the people of Ashdod confess that neither they nor Dagon could stand up to Yahweh (verse 7). The verb for "heavy" (Kabad) in 5:6, 11 is cognate to the noun "Kabod" (glory) in 1 Samuel 4:21-22. And so, although the "Kabod" or "glory" had departed from Israel, it was certainly "Kabeding" the Philistines, or coming with weight upon them!! What then should they do? The short term answer of the rulers provided no real relief, but only made life worse for the other Philistine cities of Gath and Ekron, where death, "panic", and tumors greatly afflicted the people. Then after the ark had been in Philistine territory for seven months (were the Philistines reluctant to give up the Ark, and believe that the Lord was really responsible for all that was taking place?), the Philistines then took a different approach, by calling for the priests and diviners, with the question, "How should we send it back to its place?" Their detailed reply gives an interesting picture of religious ideas of the time. First, a guilt or restitution offering was required, as a confession that wrong had been done. This offering specifically treats a sin in which the holy things of the Lord have been misused (Leviticus 5:14-16), and atones for sins against the sanctuary and the objects within it. Secondly, a compensation must be paid (in gold). Thirdly, the transport provided for the Ark of a "new cart" and "unyoked" cows must not be driven or guided in any particular direction, but left for the gods to overrule - This would help to determine whether the power of the Lord was involved in all their troubles. Another aspect of Philistine thought can be seen in the fact that they made "models" of the things they wanted to get rid of (1 Samuel 6:4-5; cf. Numbers 21:4-9). the five gold rats and five gold tumors would represent the totality of the five rulers and their people within their five-fold city state or Pentapolis. This practice is known to scholars as sympathetic magic. It was believed that when the models were removed, their troubles would go with them as well! Nobody in the ancient world knew that rats were instrumental in causing plagues, and so it looks as if the rats were attacking food stores. Finally, after all these things were done, the Philistines were to give glory to Israel's god, for perhaps he might lift his hand from you, and your gods, and your

land. Then the specific connection is made with the exodus of old in 1 Samuel 6:6, where both the Egyptians and the Philistines are guilty of hardening their hearts, but after dealing harshly with the Egyptians, did they not send the Israelites out, so that they could go on the way. This would now provide the encouragement that the Philistines needed, in sending back the ark on a "new cart", led by two cows that had never been yoked. Further, in taking away the calves of these cows, only a miracle of the Lord himself would cause the ark to return to the Israelite town of Beth Shemesh. As it turned out, the answer was vivid and clear, witnessed by the five rulers of the Philistines. The Lord was responsible for all that had taken place, and He was in control of all things. The Philistines were right in thinking that something needed to be done about their past offensiveness to God. But they invented their own sacrifice, not knowing that God would eventually provide a sacrifice of His own, which would even supersede the requirements of the Mosaic Law, when Jesus shed his blood on Calvary's Cross for our sins, thus offering the perfect atonement for our sins.

3. Thirdly, we discover that the Philistine's problem also becomes Israel's problem, if laws of holiness are not obeyed (1 Samuel 6:13 - 7:1)

In this last section, the people were harvesting their wheat in the valley, when the Ark of the Lord finally arrived at Beth Shemesh to much rejoicing, thus providing a frame to the Ark's arrival and deposit in the Temple at Ashdod alongside Dagon the grain god. Also, the peoples' first actions toward the Ark were right and proper. And so verse 19 strikes a very unexpected note. The "heavy" blow suffered by the seventy at Beth Shemesh showed that the Ark was just as dangerous to Israelites as it was to the Philistines. With regard to the Ark, God had boundaries that had to be treated with proper reverence and respect, even for the priests (Numbers 4:20). The chief reason for mentioning this unhappy incident is that it finally explains why the Ark finished its journey not in Beth Shemesh in an open field, but in a house in a nearby town, called Kiriath Jearim, about 16 Kilometres east of Beth Shemesh. Finally, this move is determined by the question put by the people at Beth Shemesh at 1 Samuel 6:20:- "Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? To whom will the Ark go up from here?" As we have seen, these sets of questions have determined the movement of the narrative from the beginning of the Ark's presence amongst the Philistines, until now. The spiritual equivalent of the ark in the life of the church is the spiritual enjoyment of the presence of God, and God's acceptance of us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. This is made especially real to us through the communion of the Lord's table, as the chief demonstration of God's love to us in Christ.

Conclusion:-

When Israel and the nations ignore the Lord's holiness, the Ark's presence is a matter of grave danger. The key to all of this is finally found in the question posed by the people of Beth Shemesh at 1 Samuel 6:20: "Who is able to stand before Yahweh, this holy God?" Previously, the Philistines had discovered the same truth at 1 Samuel 5:8-10, as Israel did at 1 Samuel 4:3, when Israel had asked the first question, "Why did the Lord bring defeat upon us today, before the Philistines?" What we have to remember is that this initial question was posed before the Ark was fetched from Shiloh, as a possible solution to Israel's problem. And so, the Lord was always in control of Israel's situation, from beginning to end, and it took the enemy again, in the form of the Philistines, to fully recognize this truth, and respond to it in a manner that was worthy of a holy God. This leaves us with the question. How might we know that God is in control of our lives today, and how might we stand in God's presence

without any form of condemnation? Psalm 24:3-4 puts the question - "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord, and who may stand in his holy place - He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false." Finally, 1 Peter 2:9 tells us that as God's chosen people, we are made a royal priesthood and a holy nation by the blood of Jesus Christ, and only in this way can we draw near to a holy God, as well as proclaim the marvellous deeds of Him who has called us out of darkness into His most marvellous light. Let us rejoice in this marvellous truth today. Amen.