

BIBLE SERIES: **"EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"**

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1 SAMUEL 5-8 THE ARK RETURNED; ISRAEL WANTS A KING



In the last study, we ended with Israel having been defeated and the ark of God being taken by the Philistines. Then Eli the high priest and judge hears the terrible news, and he falls backwards, breaking his neck. It was one of the lowest points of Israelite history. All seems lost, yet the God of Israel is still on His throne, allowing this to happen due the wickedness and corruption of Eli, his sons and many Israelites. It was time for God to clean things up.

First, the Philistines would be punished for taking and desecrating the ark of the covenant. The Bible says, "When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod arose early in the morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the earth before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and set it in its place again. And when they arose early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the ground before the ark of the Lord. The head of Dagon and both the palms of its hands were broken off on the threshold; only Dagon's torso was left on it" (1 Sam. 5:2-4).

The Bible Knowledge Commentary mentions, "Bearing the ark like a trophy of conquest, they took it first to the temple of Dagon at Ashdod, some 50 miles southwest of Shiloh. There they laid it at Dagon's feet (or tail) as though to say that Dagon was the victor and the LORD his prisoner. But the next morning Dagon lay prostrate before the ark. Restored to his pedestal once again, Dagon, on the following day, again lay in submission before the LORD, this time shattered and broken...So embarrassed were the Philistines...that they forever after refused to set foot on the scene of his calamity."

This Dagon is an interesting Philistine deity. *Nelson's Bible Dictionary* says, "In Canaanite mythological texts Baal is sometimes called the son of Dagon. Dagon was the chief god of the ancient Philistines, a grain and fertility god whose most famous temples were at Gaza and Ashdod. Dagon continued to be worshiped by the Canaanites up to the time of Christ."

Some encyclopedias link Dagon to the Babylonian fish-god. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* says, "It is commonly admitted that the name *Dagon* is a diminutive form, hence a term of endearment, derived from the Semitic root *dag*, and means, accordingly, 'little fish.' The name, therefore,

indicates a fish-shaped god--he had face and hands and a portion of his body resembled that of a fish, in accordance with the most probable interpretation of 'the stump of Dagon' (verse 5). To him they attributed their success in war and thanked him with great sacrifices. Before him they rejoiced over the capture of Samson; into his temple they brought the trophies of their victories, the Ark, the armor and head of Saul (1 Sam. 31:9-10). We only know from ancient writers that, for religious reasons, most of the Syrian peoples abstained from eating fish, a practice that one is naturally inclined to connect with the worship of a fish-god."

It is interesting that the mitre or hat worn by Assyrian and Babylonian priests is similar to the one worn by the Pope. And it is a Catholic tradition to eat fish on Fridays. Of course, as can be historically documented, many of the Catholic practices come from the ancient Babylon and Roman religions.

So, not only was the Philistine god, Dagon, destroyed by God, but now He struck the people of Ashdod with deadly tumors. The ark has now become a hot potato. They sent it to another Philistine city, Gath, but the plague began there as well, so they sent it to Ekron, and soon the people started dying there.

After seven months, the Philistines had enough and wanted to return the ark. They asked their priests how to do it. They replied, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty; but by all means return it to Him with a trespass offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why His hand is not removed from you. Then they said, 'What is the trespass offering which we shall return to Him?' They answered, 'Five golden tumors and five golden rats, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines. For the same plague was on all of you and your lords. Therefore you shall make images of your tumors and images of your *rats that ravage the land*, and you shall give glory to the God of Israel, perhaps He will lighten His hand from you, from your gods, and your land" (1 Sam. 6:3-5).

As *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* explains, "By linking tumors, rats, and plague, it strengthens the theory that the tumors were symptoms of bubonic plague spread by an infestation of rats, which, like human invaders, were capable of destroying a country...The Hebrew word for 'plague' is the same as the Egyptian plagues in Exodus 9:14, further

heightening the parallel between the earlier disaster and this. They sent it on a cart pulled by two cows.

“The Philistines hoped the cows would take the ark to Beth Shemesh, reasoning that if cows new to the yoke would desert their newborn calves--even temporarily--to pull a cart all the way there, that would be a supernatural sign that divine owner of the ark had sent the plague against them...Against nature (‘lowing all the way’) because their calves were not with them and not turning ‘to the right or to the left,’ the cows pulled the cart straight to Beth Shemesh. The five Philistine rulers, following the cows to the border, stayed only long enough to make sure that the ark was securely in Israelite hands.”

In this way, God showed his superiority and ended Israel’s first shameful event. When the Israelites saw the ark arriving at Beth Shemesh, they rejoiced. “Then the ark came into the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh...So they split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering. The Levites took down the ark of the Lord and the chest that was with it, in which were the articles of gold [sent by the Philistines], and put them on the large stone...Then He struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the Lord. He struck fifty thousand and seventy men of the people, and the people lamented because the Lord had struck the people with great slaughter” (1 Sam. 6:14-19).

The Bible Knowledge Commentary mentions, “Unfortunately the people of Beth Shemesh...desecrated it by opening it and looking inside perhaps to see if the stone tablets of the Law were still there. This violated the Mosaic statute that only Levites could handle the ark and not even they could touch it directly, to say nothing of looking within it (Num. 4:5, 15, 20). Disobedience in this respect would bring death. The sin of the people was a deliberate, ‘high-handed’ violation of the clear will of God. (According to the NIV and a few Hebrew manuscripts, 70 were put to death, but most have 50,070. This seems an unusually large number, but it may be accounted for in some yet unknown way).

“The point, of course, is that not only unbelievers (the Philistines) suffer when the Law of the LORD is disregarded; believers (the Israelites) also suffer when they do not conform to His strict requirements. After this disaster at Beth Shemesh the ark was moved again to Kiriath Jearim (about 10 miles northwest of Jerusalem). No doubt the ark was taken there rather than to Shiloh, because the latter was

destroyed by the Philistines (Jer. 26:9). The ark was in the custody of the family of Abinadab for about 100 years.”

After 20 years, the prophet, priest and judge Samuel is ready to take charge. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* explains, “After these 20 long years with the ark at Kiriath Jearim, Samuel challenged the people of Israel to prove their loyalty to the LORD by abandoning their foreign gods and turning to the LORD only. The plural Baals and Ashtoreths describe the many local shrines of those Canaanite nature deities. Baal, variously identified as son of El (chief of the Canaanite pantheon) or as son of Dagan (the Mesopotamian deity), was particularly recognized as the god of thunder and rain whose task was to make the earth fertile annually. Ashtoreth (or Astarte) was goddess of both love and war, as were her Babylonian and Greek counterparts Ishtar and Aphrodite respectively. She apparently functioned with Baal as a fertility deity and by their sexual union in some magical way the earth and all its life supposedly experienced annual rejuvenation and fruitfulness.” At Mizpah, they fasted on that day, confessed their sins and accepted Samuel’s spiritual guidance. It was a turning point for Israel. But the gathering roused up the Philistines against them. “Now when the Philistines heard that the children of Israel had gathered together at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. So the children of Israel said to Samuel, ‘Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God for us, that He may save us from the hand of the Philistines.’...Then Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him. Now as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel. But the Lord thundered with a loud thunder upon the Philistines that day, and so confused them that they were overcome before Israel. And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and drove them back as far as below Beth Car...So the Philistines were subdued, and they did not come anymore into the territory of Israel. And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel...Also there was peace between Israel and the Amorites. And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. He went from year to year on a circuit to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, and judged Israel in all

those places. But he always returned to Ramah, for his home was there” (1 Samuel 7:8-17).

It seems the Philistines, a powerful, proud, and sophisticated people, as the Egyptians before them, were always receiving the brunt of God’s wrath.

Some 30 years pass, and Samuel is now around 65 years old, but we come to another crisis. “Now it came to pass when Samuel was old that he made his sons judges over Israel...But his sons did not walk in his ways, they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice. Then all the elders of Israel...came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, ‘Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the other nations. But the thing displeased Samuel...So Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt, even to this day—with which they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also. Now therefore, heed their voice. However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behavior of the king who will reign over them.’”

The Bible Knowledge Commentary explains, “At last Samuel relented. He told the people God would give them what they wanted, but the king would be a despot, a demanding dictator who would enrich himself at the people’s expense. He would press them into his military and domestic enterprises. He would appropriate their properties to his own use and would inflict heavy taxes on them. And when all this happened it would be too late to complain, for the people would have reaped the consequences of their own fleshly desires. Shortly after Saul ascended the throne many of these predictions came to pass and continued to mark the long history of the monarchy in both Israel and Judah (1 Kings 12:12-15; 21:7).”

The UCG Bible Reading Program adds, “But as Samuel gets older, Israel’s faith begins to waver again. Samuel’s sons are not righteous. The people (or at least the elders) worry about what will happen to them when Samuel dies, and decide that what they really need is a human king like those ruling and leading the nations around them. God had anticipated this years earlier (Deut. 17:14-20). But He has Samuel describe to them the problems inherent in

having a human king, which they either don’t believe or think they can endure. The problem is that Israel *already had a King*—ever since the time of Moses and the Exodus, around 1445 B.C., when Israel became a true nation. The King at that time and for the next nearly 400 years was the Rock of Israel, the Eternal God Himself—in fact, the pre-incarnate Word, Jesus Christ (compare Deut. 32:4; 1 Corinthians 10:4; John 1:1-3, 14; 17:5). Though ruling through His chosen ‘judges’—from Moses and Joshua all the way to Samuel—God in the person of Christ sat on the throne of Israel (Judges 8:22-23).

“Indeed, Samuel later tells the Israelites that the period of the judges was the time ‘when the Lord your God was your King’ (1 Samuel 12:12). And it is the reason that when the Israelites told Samuel around 1050 B.C. that they wanted a human king like the nations around them, the Lord told him, ‘They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them.’

“So God then gives them a physical monarch. It is interesting to note, as we will see in the next few chapters, that unlike other ancient rulers, the king of Israel *was not to be an absolute despot*. God will have Samuel anoint Saul “commander” (9:16; 10:1) or ‘captain’ (KJV) over His people. This Hebrew term *nagiyd* used here could be rendered in English as viceroy or governor-general—the stand-in for the *real* monarch. In fact, the very act of anointing a ruler in the ancient world implied a vassal relationship. It is later explained that Israel’s king “sat on the throne of the Lord,” reigning as king *for* Him (1 Chronicles 29:23; 2 Chronicles 9:6-8).

“Also quite different than in other realms was the fact that the king was not also priest over the national religion. Furthermore, in other countries, kings made law and were thus above it. But in Israel, God’s prophet will explain ‘the rights and duties of the kingship’ (1 Samuel 10:25, NRSV). The ruler was *subject* to the law (see Deut. 17:14-20). Essentially, the Almighty set up a constitutional limited monarchy—in which He would send a prophet as His representative to the king to give him his ‘report card.’”