

Supremacy

God manifested His power before the Philistines.

1 SAMUEL 5:1-10; 6:13-15,19-20

Native to China and Japan, kudzu was introduced to America in the 1870s. Admired for its beauty, it was used for shade and promoted to prevent soil erosion. The Southeast's heat and humidity allowed it to thrive, growing up to a foot a day. Kudzu blocks sunlight, kills other plants, damages power lines, and engulfs buildings and forests, causing millions of dollars in damage each year. It's known as "the vine that ate the South."

What recent purchase have you made that left you disappointed?

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UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

1 SAMUEL 4:1–7:17

Between Egypt and Canaan, God gave Moses detailed directives about life in the promised land and about how His people were to worship Him properly. Part of God's instructions included the place where His people were to worship Him, a tent-like structure known as the tabernacle. The inner-most and holiest part of the tabernacle would house the ark of the covenant.

The ark contained three items: the tablets of stone that Moses received on Mount Sinai, a golden jar containing some of the manna that God supplied in the wilderness, and Aaron's staff, which had miraculously budded (Heb. 9:4).

The top of the box was covered with a solid gold lid. Two angelic beings, cherubim, also made of gold, were on the lid. They faced each other, and their wings overarched the lid. The empty space below the wings was known as the mercy seat. This area symbolized the presence of God. The Hebrews thus referred to Him as, "the LORD of Armies, who is enthroned between the cherubim" (1 Sam. 4:4).

When the Israelites settled into the promised land, they erected the tabernacle in Shiloh and placed the ark of the covenant in the most holy area or holy of holies. In time, the Israelites came to see the ark as a talisman, a good-luck charm that could aid them in battle. The plan backfired; the Philistines, the enemies of God's people, captured the ark—but eventually sent it back to them.

For the next twenty years, the ark resided on a hilltop in Kiriath-jearim, west of Jerusalem. The dramatic events in this week's study occurred between the ark's being at Shiloh and arriving at Kiriath-jearim. Visitors today to Kiriath-jearim will find a church overlooking the valley below. Atop the church is a statue of a large box with a lady standing on it. In her arms is a baby. The statue depicts the ark of the covenant and Mary with the baby Jesus—symbols of both the old and the new covenants.

Scan 1 Samuel 4:1–7:17, looking for how people, both Israelite and non-Israelite, treated the ark of the covenant. In what ways did they treat it properly and respectfully? How did they treat it disrespectfully?

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EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

SOVEREIGNTY (1 SAM. 5:1-5)

[1] After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod, [2] brought it into the temple of Dagon and placed it next to his statue. [3] When the people of Ashdod got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and returned him to his place. [4] But when they got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. This time, Dagon's head and both of his hands were broken off and lying on the threshold. Only Dagon's torso remained. [5] That is why, still today, the priests of Dagon and everyone who enters the temple of Dagon in Ashdod do not step on Dagon's threshold.

VERSES 1-2

Philistine aggression against the Israelites precipitated these events. The Philistines had lined up in military formation in Ebenezer and had killed about four thousand Israelite soldiers. The Israelites regrouped and decided to take the ark of the covenant with them when they returned to the battlefield. Again, the Israelites were soundly defeated. Not only did thirty thousand Israelite soldiers die in battle, Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli the high priest were slain (1 Sam. 4:1-11). The Philistines took the ark to •***Ashdod***, one of their five primary cities—the others being Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza.

The Philistines worshiped many gods. They had no concept of the God (singular) of the Israelites. When the Israelites earlier brought the ark of the covenant into the military camp at Ebenezer, the Philistines did not speak of the Lord. Instead, they said, "A god has entered their camp! . . . Woe to us! Who will rescue us from these magnificent gods? These are the gods that slaughtered the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness" (1 Sam. 4:7-8).

Transporting the ark from Ebenezer to Ekron would have been both closer and easier. Bringing the ark to Ashdod indicates that this ancient city housed a substantial sanctuary for ***Dagon*** worship. To put a representation of an enemy's god in one of their temples would symbolize not only that the victor's army was superior but also that the victor's god was greater and more powerful

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than that of the defeated people. Thus, a military defeat was seen as an embarrassment for both the people and their supposed god.

VERSES 3-5

•***Dagon*** was the Philistines' primary deity. Bringing the ark to the Dagon temple meant the Philistines credited Dagon with their victory over the Israelites.

The symbolism in verse 3 is rich. Having one's face to the ground indicated subservience and vulnerability. The statue of Dagon being in that position while before the ark of the Lord underscored this false deity's powerlessness before Yahweh. Further underscoring Dagon's helplessness, the people who tended to this so-called god had to return him to his place. He, of course, was incapable of doing this himself.

Whereas yesterday's events might have been explained away as an accident, today's scene would not allow such an interpretation. Again, the idol was face down in the dirt. This time, the head and hands were ***broken off***. The Hebrew word here means "to cut." Hence, the hands and head had been severed intentionally; this was no accident. Having no head or hands meant this so-called god of the Philistines could neither think nor act. He was useless.

What lesser "god" in your life needs to be toppled over?

KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

There is one and only one living and true God. (See Isaiah 40:25; John 17:3.)

JUDGMENT (1 SAM. 5:6-10)

[6] The Lord's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod. He terrified the people of Ashdod and its territory and afflicted them with tumors. [7] When the people of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, "The ark of Israel's God must not stay here with us, because his hand is strongly against us and our god Dagon." [8] So they called all the Philistine rulers together and asked, "What should we do with the ark of Israel's God?"

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"The ark of Israel's God should be moved to Gath," they replied. So they moved the ark of Israel's God. [9] After they had moved it, the LORD's hand was against the city of Gath, causing a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, from the youngest to the oldest, with an outbreak of tumors. [10] The people of Gath then sent the ark of God to Ekron, but when it got there, the Ekronites cried out, "They've moved the ark of Israel's God to us to kill us and our people!"

VERSE 6

The contrast is clear. Dagon's hands had been removed, yet ***the LORD's hand*** was still powerful. The Old Testament writers spoke of God's hand as a symbol of His power and involvement in the lives of His people (see Ex. 9:3; Isa. 41:10).

God's hand being ***heavy*** indicated that He was applying persistent pressure on the Philistines; this was unrelenting. The Hebrew word translated ***terrified*** does not mean that He simply startled or scared them. Some translations say He "ravaged them." The picture is of Ashdod and its surrounding territories being ruined and made desolate.

The exact nature of the ***tumors*** has been the subject of debate. Possible explanations have included everything from hemorrhoids to boils or to lymphatic swelling. This final possibility would have indicated the presence of bubonic plague.

VERSES 7-10

The Philistines declared that the ***hand*** of the Israelites' God, whom they could not see, was ***strongly against*** them. At that moment, their god Dagon, whom they could see, had no hands. The Philistines understood the scene for what it was. It was a showdown between the God of Israel and their god Dagon. Dagon was the obvious loser.

Suffering from tumors, the people of Ashdod believed the ark's presence in their temple posed a threat to their health and their religion. So, ***they***—likely the leaders in the city of Ashdod, the temple leaders, or both groups—called for outside help. The group of ***rulers*** may have been five men—each who ruled over one of the five chief Philistine cities.

Why would the rulers suggest moving the ark to ***Gath***, yet another major Philistine city? Some biblical scholars believe the choice indicated Gath did not have a Dagon temple. Others have

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postulated that the Philistines' pride and determination eclipsed their sense of caution. Unwilling to let go of their captured prize, the Philistines sent it to another of their cities.

The Philistines hoped that the change in location would change the results. Much to their surprise, the Lord's response in Gath was nearly identical to what happened in Ashdod. The word translated ***panic*** carries the idea of turmoil and confusion. This is strengthened by the usage of the Hebrew word translated ***afflicted,*** which can mean to strike, scourge, and send judgment. With people of all ages suffering from the tumors, no wonder the people were in a panic.

The people of Gath decided they had suffered enough. They sent the ark ten miles north to Ekron. Of the five Philistine cities, this one was closest to Israelite territory.

The response of the people of Ekron shows that they had heard what had happened in Ashdod and Gath. They believed that having the ark was a death sentence.

Why do you think God brought such heavy punishment on the Philistines? What do God's actions reveal about His character?

REVERENCE (1 SAM. 6:13-15,19-20)

13 The people of Beth-shemesh were harvesting wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they were overjoyed to see it. 14 The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there near a large rock. The people of the city chopped up the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. 15 The Levites removed the ark of the LORD, along with the box containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. That day the people of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the LORD. . . . 19 God struck down the people of Beth-shemesh because they looked inside the ark of the LORD. He struck down seventy persons. The people mourned because the LORD struck them with a great slaughter. 20 The people of Beth-shemesh asked, "Who is able to stand in the presence of the LORD this holy God? To whom should the ark go from here?"

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VERSES 13-15

After having the ark in their territory for seven months, the Philistines consulted their priests and diviners (1 Sam. 6:1-2). They told the Philistines to use a cart pulled by two milk cows and send the ark plus an offering into Israelite territory.

•***Beth-shemesh*** was the logical target location. It was on the border between the Israelite and Philistine territories. Centuries earlier, Moses had designated Beth-shemesh to be a levitical city; descendants of Aaron, the first high priest, were to live there (Josh. 21:13-16). This historical link to Hebrew worship made this an appropriate destination for the ark to stop. Pointing out that ***the Levites*** removed the ark indicated that it was not mishandled. Old Testament law had dictated that they were responsible for transporting the ark (Deut. 10:8).

The Philistine priests and diviners had instructed the people to prepare a box. The ***gold objects*** inside were five representations of the tumors and the mice that had brought the people untold misery and death (1 Sam. 6:3-6). After the ark and the box containing the gold objects were removed from the cart, the Israelites offered ***burnt offerings*** to God. This was a time of celebration.

VERSES 19-20

Recall that God afflicted the people of Ashdod and Gath with tumors when the ark was in their cities. This verse uses variants of this same verb four times to describe what God did to some of the people of Beth-shemesh—He ***struck down seventy persons***. This repetition highlighted the severity of the people's offense. What exactly was that offense?

God had instructed that the ark was to be covered when it was not sitting in its place in the holy of holies. No one except Aaron and his sons (the priests) were to see the ark (Num. 4:1-20). They were to exhibit great reverence when covering and moving the sacred objects. Here, the people put the ark on display and evidently looked inside.

Personal curiosity had eclipsed any sense of reverence and decorum that these seventy persons should have had. God held them accountable. Having experienced God's judgment, the people's mood went from being overjoyed to mourning.

The Hebrew word translated ***stand*** can carry the idea of presenting oneself, enduring, or even serving. After what they had just seen, the people were wondering who would be able to do stand in the presence of God.

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The people of Beth-shemesh used the same phrase Hannah had used earlier; they referred to the Lord as ***holy*** (1 Sam. 2:2). This word pointed out that God was set apart from other entities. There was (and is) no other like Him.

When the Philistines had captured the ark some months before, they had decimated the city of Shiloh, where the tabernacle had stood for over three hundred years. Returning the ark to that location, therefore, was not an option. Where then should it go? This was the people's question.

According to 1 Samuel 6:21–7:2, the ark went to Kiriath-jearim. This town was about fifteen miles away from Beth-shemesh and eight miles west of Jerusalem. It was also on the road that led to Shiloh. The ark would remain there for the next twenty years, until David moved it to Jerusalem.

In what ways might we be guilty of trivializing that which is holy?

BIBLE SKILL: *Focus on something within the passage to gain a better understanding of its message.*

The ark of the covenant is the central piece in this story of Israel and the Philistines. Increase your knowledge of this sacred object by reading about its construction in Exodus 25:10-22 and 37:1-9. Next, read an article about the ark of the covenant in a Bible dictionary. What was to be the attitude of the Israelite people toward the ark of the Lord? What do we learn from the importance of the ark in Judaism that informs our own attitude toward the worship of God?

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APPLY THE TEXT

+ We can be assured that God is the only true God.
+ We should recognize that God will judge our sin.
+ We can enter into the presence of God only in the way He has prescribed.

How can we show proper reverence for the things of God? Be ready to discuss your thoughts with your Bible study group.

Examine your own life. Are there any modern-day "idols" that are vying for your loyalty and attention? What actions can you take to make sure the Lord has your sole devotion?

Memorize Psalm 97:9.

Prayer Needs

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