



THE PHILISTINES & THE GOLDEN TUMORS

- *powerful enemies of the Israelites who learned a valuable lesson*
- *a story about the power and authority of God*
- *a lesson about holiness*

KEY VERSES

I am the LORD, and there is no other; there is no God besides Me. —Isaiah 45:5

As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.” —1 Peter 1:15-16

PROLOGUE

The high priest Eli was acting as judge in ancient Israel. His sons Hophni and Phinehas, also priests, were vilely abusing their authority among the Israelites. Eli knew of their sins but did not discipline them or remove them from their positions of leadership (1 Samuel 3:13). Corruption in the priesthood as a result was likely widespread, and wickedness and idolatry throughout Israel were all too common. Though there were some who were still faithful to the teachings of God, they were dwindling.

Samuel’s first prophecy was a difficult one to deliver: the priesthood would be removed from the family of Eli.

In the midst of this corruption, God was beginning to work with the young man Samuel. Samuel’s first prophecy was a difficult one to deliver: the priesthood would be removed from the family of Eli, and all his descendants would die young as punishment (1 Samuel 2:31-33). Hophni and Phinehas would even be killed on the same day (verse 34).

Meanwhile, the Philistines—longtime enemies of the Israelites since they had settled in the Promised Land—continued to threaten Israel’s borders. War was inevitable.





STORY AND STUDY

(This story is based on the events recorded in [1 Samuel 4-7](#).)

The Israelites lose the Ark

The Israelite army went out to battle against the Philistines and camped near their territory. They were expecting a victory, believing themselves to be unbeatable as the chosen people of God, but they were about to be surprised! As the Philistine army moved out to meet the Israelites in battle, many Israelite men lost their lives.

Weary and defeated, the survivors returned to their base camp. “Why have we suffered such defeat today?” asked the elders of the camp in wonder. “Aren’t we God’s special people?”

Remembering Israel’s previous successes in battle and against seemingly impossible circumstances, they decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant into battle with them. “Like Joshua and all the people marching before Jericho, we will surely defeat these Philistines with the Ark of the Lord among us!” they decided, very confident in themselves.

Pause for thought: *At no point in this section of Scripture do we see evidence that the Israelites sought God’s guidance in this decision. They instead superstitiously believed that the mere presence of the Ark of the Covenant, which represented God’s heavenly throne, would grant them victory. (For more about the Ark, its meaning and construction, read [Exodus 25:10-22](#) and [Exodus 37:1-9](#).)*

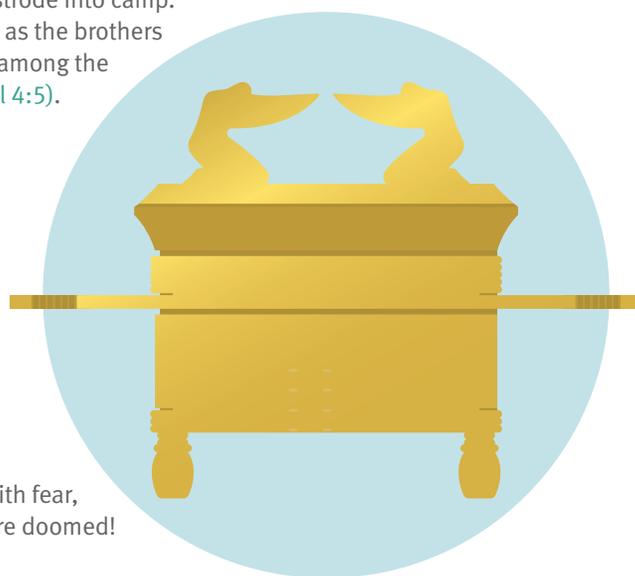
Believing that by bringing the Ark of the Covenant into battle with them, they would be protected and assured victory by God, the army leaders sent word to Shiloh that the Ark should be brought into the camp. The priests Hophni and Phinehas were eager to parade this treasure before the army. Perhaps they were greedily expecting rewards or fame for their assistance to the army.

Carrying the Ark by its special transport poles, the corrupt priests strode into camp. The golden wings of the carved cherubim glinted in the desert sun as the brothers proudly carried the holy treasure. Raucous (noisy) cheers erupted among the men! The excitement was so loud that the ground shook ([1 Samuel 4:5](#)).

They believed that by bringing the Ark of the Covenant into battle with them, they would be protected.

The Philistines capture the Ark

Nearby, the Philistine army could hear the cheers and shouting. With fear, some announced, “They’ve brought their gods into the camp! We’re doomed! These are the gods that destroyed Egypt with horrible plagues!”





“Quiet!” shouted the leaders. “Are we men of Philistia or aren’t we? We are warriors, prepared for battle! If we do not defeat the Hebrews today, we will become their slaves. So be men! Fight!”

With faith in their battle prowess, the Philistines deftly (skillfully) moved against Israel and soundly defeated the miserable Israelites. They attacked with such skill and power that the demoralized (highly discouraged) Israelites fled to their battle tents, attempting escape. The Philistines pursued and several thousand Israelite soldiers were killed. The two corrupt priests, Hophni and Phinehas, were also killed, fulfilling Samuel’s prophecy of Eli’s sons.

The Ark of God was captured and passed into Philistine possession as a trophy.

Upon hearing all this news back in Shiloh from a messenger, the high priest Eli fell from his seat in shock at the mention of the Ark being captured, dying from the fall. Thus Eli’s life and period as both high priest and judge over Israel ended.

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they declared gleefully.*

In the temple of Dagon

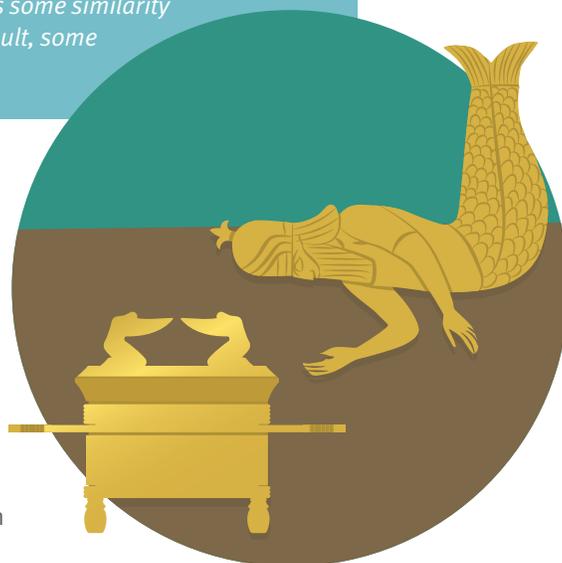
Exultant in their victory over Israel, the Philistines carried the Ark triumphantly to one of their main cities, Ashdod. “We have captured the God of Israel!” they declared gleefully.

The Philistines worshipped a god named Dagon. As tribute to their god, they brought the Ark of the Covenant into a temple of Dagon in Ashdod and placed the Ark near the statue of their beloved god. No doubt there was much delight among the Philistine population as they celebrated their significant battle achievement that day!

Factoid: The god Dagon was a common Canaanite god at this time in history. The meaning of its name and what it symbolized is unclear, but the name Dagon bears some similarity to the words fish, wheat, and cloudy in ancient languages. As a result, some have wondered if the god was depicted as half-man, half-fish.

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The next morning, as the Philistines continued their celebrations, they entered the temple of Dagon. Their cheers and dancing quickly turned to astonishment. There on the floor lay their precious god, facedown on the earth, as if bowing in front of the Ark of the Covenant.





With diminished enthusiasm, they set to work replacing their precious god in its upright position. Perhaps it was just an odd occurrence, they reasoned. Things do fall down sometimes, they reassured themselves. They then continued their merriment, dancing and cheering at their great battle victory, though perhaps with a little less gusto than the day before.

But the next morning as they once again entered the temple, a strange new sight met them. There on the floor in front of the Ark lay their precious god once again. Sort of. It had fallen on its face once again, only this time its head and hands had completely broken off! The pieces were lying on the threshold of the temple.

As the superstitious Philistines cleaned up the pieces of their god, this time in silence, they avoided stepping on the threshold, perhaps believing the same fate might befall them in the presence of this strange Ark of the Israelites.

Rats also began to overrun the territory, spreading disease and filth.

Plague!

Then more strange things began to happen in Ashdod. The people in the city and in the surrounding area began to experience signs of horrible sickness and developed painful tumors! Rats also began to overrun the territory, spreading disease and filth.

The people of Ashdod couldn't take much of this! They knew it was because they had the Ark, and they cried out: "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is harsh toward us and Dagon our god" (1 Samuel 5:7).

A conference among the five main city centers of Philistia was called. Representatives from Ashdod, Gath, Ekron, Gaza, and Ashkelon gathered to discuss the situation. What was to become of the Ark? The decision was made to transfer it to the city of Gath.

Factoid: The city of Gath comes up again in history between the Israelites and the Philistines. Goliath the Philistine giant was from the city of Gath.

As the Ark was settled in the city of Gath, the people there began to notice that the hand of God was against them too! The same tumors broke out among the people and continued to spread. "Send the Ark to Ekron!" they cried.

As the Ark was being transported into the city of Ekron, the local population cried out in fear: "Not the Ark of the God of Israel! It will kill us!" So another conference of the Philistine leaders was convened. It was determined that the Ark should be sent back to Israel. It did not belong among the people of Philistia, and God would continue to punish the Philistines for retaining the representation of His holy throne.





“What should we do with the Ark of God? We know we must send it back to Israel, but how?”

Five gold tumors and five gold rats

The Ark of the Covenant had been in Philistine territory for seven months. Distraught at the devastation on their cities and people, ravaged by rats and plague, the leaders called for their priests. They asked, “What should we do with the Ark of God? We know we must send it back to Israel, but how?”

The priests of Philistia said, “Don’t send it back to the God of Israel without a trespass offering, for we have trespassed against the God of Israel by keeping His holy Ark in our territory.”

This seemed reasonable to the Philistine leaders. “What should we send as an offering?” they asked.

Being rooted in an idolatrous culture, the priests of Philistia advised, “Because all of Philistia has been ravaged by tumors and rats, fashion five tumors of gold and five rats of gold, symbolizing each of our five main city centers and the destruction experienced in all five. In this way we will show honor to the power of the God of Israel and perhaps He will relieve our pain and destruction.”

Many of the Philistine leaders nodded at this advice, but some still seemed doubtful. Didn’t they capture this Ark in battle? Didn’t they deserve to keep it as a trophy? Were the plagues really related to the possession of the Ark?

The spiritual leaders sensing this hesitation continued, “Seven months in our territory is long enough. Remember what this God of Israel did to Pharaoh and the Egyptians? Let’s not be like them.”

The Philistines believed that if the animals journeyed willingly in the direction of the Israelites, it could only be because of divine intervention.

A miraculous return

The Philistine priests came up with a plan to hitch two milk cows to a newly-built cart. The cows were to have never before been trained to haul a cart, and their calves were to be separated from them at a great distance. Also, there was to be no driver guiding the direction of the cart.

Since the cows would want to return to nurse their baby calves and would not be used to hauling a cart, the Philistines believed that if the animals journeyed willingly in the direction of the Israelites, it could only be because of divine intervention. That way they would know for certain if the Ark of the God of Israel was to be returned to Israel or remain with them in Philistia.

They completed the cart and the golden idols, hitched the cart to the cows, and placed the Ark and the idols on the cart. The Philistines then stepped away from the unmanned cart and watched.

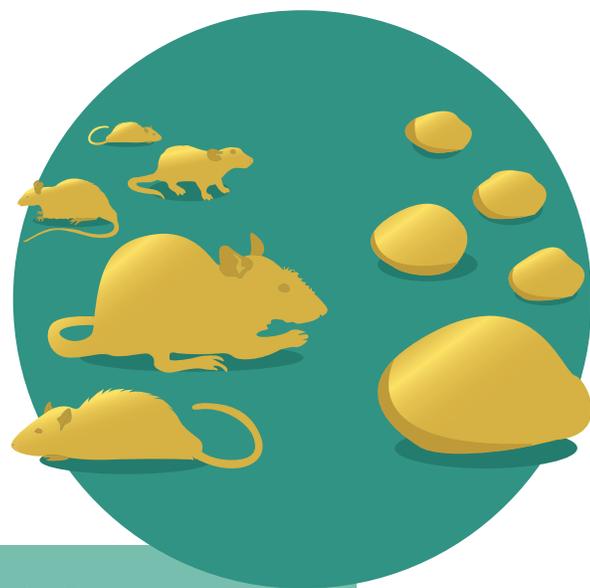




Suddenly the cows began pulling with unified purpose and headed straight toward the road that would take them and the cart to a town occupied by the Israelites. The Philistines watched in silent disbelief! The cows lowed for their calves yet continued straight along the road without wavering to the right or the left.

Wanting to ensure the cows actually returned the Ark, the five leaders of the five cities of the Philistines followed, stopping only at the border of the Israelite town of Beth Shemesh. They watched from a distance as the cows turned purposefully off the road and came to a stop in a field within the territory of the town.

As they removed the golden tumors and the golden rats from the cart, they looked at them with confusion and set them aside to decide what to do with them later.



The Israelites of the town cheered at the return of the precious cargo! The local Levites unloaded the Ark from the cart. As they removed the golden tumors and the golden rats from the cart, they looked at them with confusion and set them aside to decide what to do with them later.

Pause for thought: How would you react if someone gave you a gift of golden tumors and golden rats?!

The five leaders of Philistia, having seen enough, returned to Ekron in stunned silence. Clearly the God of Israel was a powerful God, and they had made a mistake in keeping His Ark among their territories.

They had learned a painful yet valuable lesson about treating what God proclaims holy with reverence.

A final lesson for the Israelites

Sadly, after the initial rejoicing and celebration at the return of the Ark, the Israelites in Beth Shemesh did what even the idolatrous Philistines had not. They touched the Ark itself instead of using the carrying poles. And against the commands that had been given to Israel by Moses through God, they even opened the Ark to peek inside.

Looking into the Ark was expressly forbidden. After all, the Ark with its mercy seat and cherubim represented God's very throne! Under Mosaic law, only a priest was allowed to come before God's presence, and even then, only under very special circumstances (you can read more about some of these special circumstances in [Leviticus 16](#)).



Only God can decide what is holy. It is not our job to decide what is holy; it is our job to honor what God calls holy.

The people of Beth Shemesh paid dearly for this sin. Several thousand were struck down with an illness and died. The survivors cried out, “Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God?” (1 Samuel 6:20). They had learned a painful yet valuable lesson about treating what God proclaims holy with reverence.

Perhaps this is a difficult lesson for a modern audience to understand. Why would God be so severe in His punishment? We must always remember that what God calls holy is not to be treated with flippant disrespect. Only God can decide what is holy. It is not our job to *decide* what is holy; it is our job to *honor* what God calls holy.

The Ark was moved to another Israelite town, Kirjath Jearim, where it remained under the care of a man named Eleazar. (Twenty years later, King David would have it moved to Jerusalem.)

They realized the importance of serving the one true God.

Conclusion

After the return of the Ark and under the guidance of the righteous judge and prophet Samuel, the people began to seek God once again. They realized the importance of serving the one true God only and began to get rid of the idols they had been collecting and worshipping for several years.

With this newfound repentance and return to God, when the Philistines once again attacked, God ensured Israelite victory. The Israelites were even able to drive the Philistines out of their captured territory and recover lands from Ekron to Gath.

?? QUESTIONS

1. Knowledge

What did the Israelites believe would help them win against the Philistines?

What happened in the temple of Dagon when the Philistines brought in the Ark?

What happened to the people and in the towns and surrounding lands of the Philistines while they kept the Ark?



2. Comprehension

What did the Israelites neglect to do before deciding to take the Ark into battle?

How did the Ark arrive safely back in Israelite territory?

Why were several thousand Israelites killed when they handled the Ark improperly?

*Is it possible that we could view the Bible—
God’s word to us—in a similar way today?*

3. Connections

Are there any other times recorded in the Bible when the Israelites (or others) disrespected the Ark and were punished?

How do we know when something is holy? How should we treat something described as holy?

DISCUSSIONS

1. How might things have gone differently if Eli had established religious reform in Israel? In what ways could he have been a better leader?
2. The Israelites expected that the power and presence of the Ark itself would save them in battle, but they neglected to pray to God and seek out His guidance before making their decision. Is it possible that we could view the Bible—God’s word to us—in a similar way today? Is it something, for example, that we might just carry around without actually studying on a regular basis, seeking out God’s guidance in our daily lives? Merely carrying something holy (or having it on our bookshelf) does not ensure that we ourselves are behaving in a holy way. How can we keep from making the same mistake the Israelites made?

ACTIVITIES

1. 20 Questions

Pick a person, place, or thing from this study and have a friend try to guess what you’ve chosen. They are allowed to ask up to 20 questions, one at a time, to which you can answer either “yes” or “no.”

2. What is Holy?

Make a list of things you can think of from the Bible that are described as holy. You can use a word search feature on a Bible research website or use a concordance to help. Talk about why these things are holy to God and how we should treat them. Discuss how God wants us to be holy. Why? How do we do that?

