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# God among the Pagans

1 Samuel 5:1-6:1<sup>4</sup>

*Russ Kennedy*

Victorious nations have always put their captured goods on public display. Sometimes, those things have worked their way into the fabric of the nation's life.

The Coronation Chair of England sits on the ancient stone of Scone where the kings of Scotland were crowned. That stone was captured by Edward I in the thirteenth century.

The USA has many WWI and WWII Museums in which captured German and Japanese weapons and artifacts are on display overtly intending to show the superiority of the American and Western Allies.

This is where we find ourselves in the Saga of the Travels of the Ark.

The Ark of the Covenant was the central piece of furniture in the Jewish tabernacle, and later, Temple. It was placed in the inner room, the Holy of Holies. It was a gold covered chest with a removable lid. It had two winged cherubim on its top whose wingers overspread the box and touched at the center. It contained the two tablets of the Law, a pot of preserved manna and the rod of Aaron the first priest.

It had sets of rings on each side so that it could be carried on poles. This was the authorized way to transport it. No one was to touch it. It was draped in cloth and hidden from when it was traveling about in the wilderness years.

The glorious (Shekinah) presence of God in a fiery pillar of cloud hovered over Ark between the cherubim. It rose up into the sky and was visible to all the camp and the city.

So this ark, this altar, this portable throne of Yahweh has now been captured by the pagan Philistines. So begins the travels of the ark. But God is not at the disposal of the Philistines. His ark may be in their hands, but whether they realize it or not, they are on the sovereign hands of God. This is not going to turn out like they think.

Now who are the Philistines? They were a people who had moved in and occupied portions of central Palestine. They were worshippers of the Canaanite idols but Dagon seems to be their primary deity at the time of our story. They were a warlike people whose weapons were made of bronze and iron.

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They established 5 fortified camps that grew into larger walled cities. These were Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath were known as the Philistine Pentapolis.



While the Ark is traveling, the structure of the text points us to God being among the pagans and what that will bring.

## The Defeat of Philistine Idol

(5:1-5)

God is never defeated. His people may look like it at times. At times He may even appear to be captive and at the mercy of pagan unbelievers. But, the night is long and filled with suspicious noise.

<sup>1</sup> When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. <sup>2</sup> Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. <sup>3</sup> And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. <sup>4</sup> But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. <sup>5</sup> This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

## Dagon is Bowed

(v. 1-3)

The captured Ark is brought into the temple of Dagon. There it will be display as a vanquished god. Dagon is stronger. Yahweh could not even prevent the capture of His most powerful talisman. Now it sits in captured splendor at the side of mighty Dagon.

Thud! Sometime during the night God knocks the idol Dagon on its face. At some level this is both bizarre and brilliant. The Philistine priests come in the next day to find their god flat on his face before the Ark. Poor idol. Can't stand up. And can't even put himself back. He has to be picked up and set back on his pedestal.

## **Dagon is Broken**

**(v. 4-5)**

Thud! Whack! The sword of God prods the idol onto its face. It flashes down on his false neck. The severed head rolls unbloodily to the temple door and clunks up against the threshold. Yahweh's sword scythes through the wooden hands seemingly gripping the threshold which now lie, palms down like the god was desperately trying to crawl out of the Presence of Glory.

So striking and frightening was this that the narrator deliciously says that the priests of Dagon will not touch the thresholds of their temples. Ah, brilliant piece of superstition that.

Far away a baby's cry and so sadly named. Where is the glory? It has departed. It has left the camp of the Lord and now sits in majestic glory in the temple of an idol. There as the bright gold gleams, headless and handless, the stump of Dagon is still all Dagon.

Now this sounds like something you would see on FX or the SciFi channel. But make no mistake. Our God will not be mastered false idols and fake deities. All false religions and false worships will lie beheaded and behanded before the Lord of the universe. So there will be times where God appears to be defeated. He may even be hanging on a cross dying. But "it is finished" is a triumphant declaration and victory is only three days away.

## **The Plague of the Philistine People**

**(5:6-12)**

But God is not only going to bow and break Dagon, The troubles have just begun.

### **In Ashdod**

**(v. 6-8)**

<sup>6</sup> The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. <sup>7</sup> And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god." <sup>8</sup> So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?" They answered, "Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath."

The first resting place of the Ark is in the city of Ashdod. The hand of God was heavy. What irony. Dagon's hands lie helpless on the threshold. God's hand lies heavy on a whole city and its environs. The people were growing tumors on their bodies. This must have happened rather quickly. It is horrible.

So what do we do? This has to be the work of the Jewish artifact. The talisman needs to be moved. Rather than repent and submit to God, just remove the instrument of His judgment. So let's send it to Gath.

Now by anyone's measure this is just foolish. Let's see if this is really the Ark's doing. Let's send it to a sister city and see if they get sick. Sounds like a marvelous idea. Gath is the furthest from Ashdod and the closest to Israel. Maybe the Achish is the ruler here already and later we will find him to be both weak and kindly disposed towards David. Possibly the Philistine lords just simply overrule objections.

**In Gath****(v. 9)**

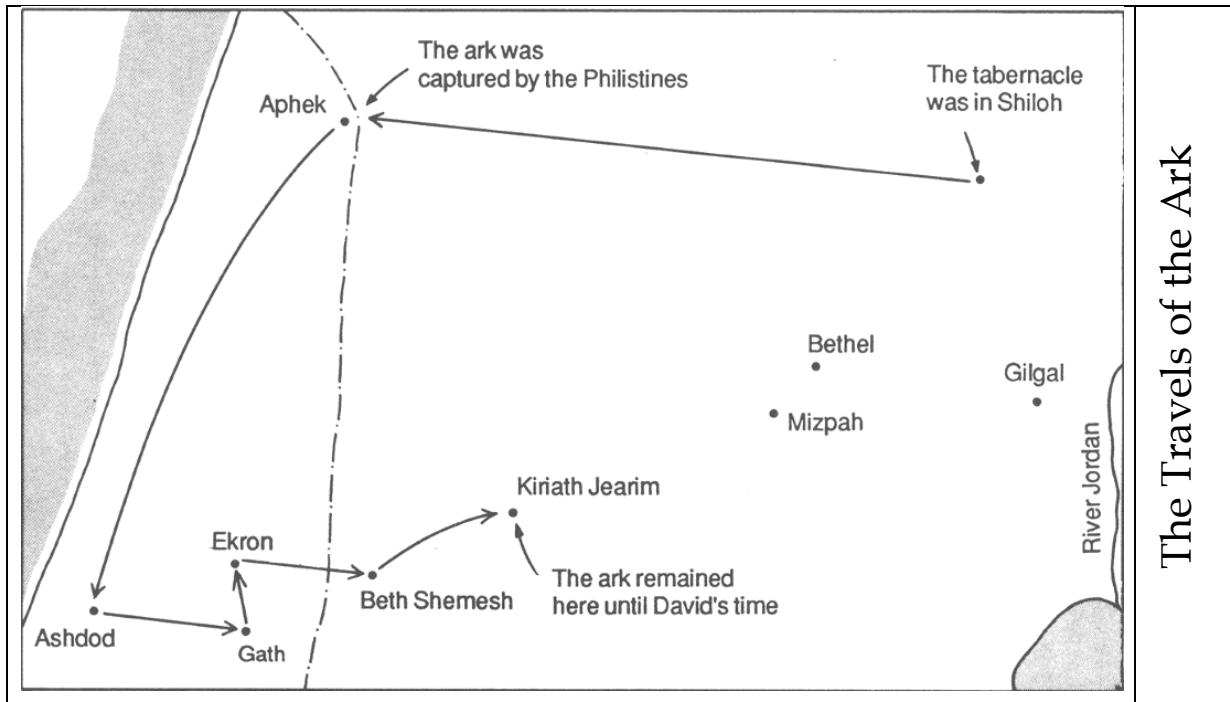
So they brought the ark of the God of Israel there. <sup>9</sup> But after they had brought it around, the hand of the Lord was against the city, causing a very great panic, and he afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them.

One thing is obvious: they are not giving up control of the Ark. They intend to keep it. And, they have no intention of submitting to Yahweh. And so we are not surprised by what happens next. The tumors begin to break out on the men of the city. It puts the city in a panic.

**In Ekron****(v. 10-12)**

<sup>10</sup> So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. But as soon as the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, "They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people." <sup>11</sup> They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people." For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. <sup>12</sup> The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

So Ekron is the next unfortunate recipient of the Ark. Its presence and the poisonous threat it poses almost causes a civil uprising. The people cry out against their rulers. Is this some plot to weaken the cities of Gath and Ekron? What are the Philistine lords thinking?



Now, it is time to pause and be sure that you are not thinking or hearing this text with *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in your minds. The Ark itself is simply a gold covered acacia wood box. It has no radioactive core. It is not some kind of alien power source. In fact, the whole movie is based on the foolish and pagan thinking of both the Israelites and the Philistines. It was not an instrument of war nor a powerful talisman. It is not a relic of the gods.

It was the glory of God which was manifested on the ark that was the point. From the text, it was NOT the ark that struck the Dagon nor afflicted the people. It was GOD who did so. This was His mercy seat, His portable throne, His chest of treasures. Yahweh God struck down Dagon. Yahweh God afflicted the Philistines. Yahweh God's hand wielded the sword and was heavy on the people Yahweh God caused the tumors to grow on only the men.

I want you to see something else. The judgment of God does not bring about the repentance of the Philistines. They think they have defeated the Israelite tribal deity. They are in defiance of Yahweh, the God of the Universe and their rightful sovereign Lord. The smiting of Dagon and the affliction of the people serves to amplify their fear. But it does not cause them to repent, to bow, to submit. They want to keep the vanquished deity among themselves. They just need to figure out a way to do it.

And now the people are fed up with their lords. The people summoned the Philistine lords and handed them an ultimatum. Send it back. If we keep it here, we will all become sick and die. And now their cry comes up to heaven. The language here is the same as when the cry of Israel in Egypt rose up to the heaven. God delivered the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. Will God deliver the Philistines?

And...

**6:<sup>1</sup>** The ark of the Lord was in the country of the Philistines seven months.

Seven months. This is a spiritual calamity for Israel and a physical calamity for the Philistines. All because Israel would not trust and obey God and the Philistines will defy God. What we have just read does not occur over a few days or a few weeks. It is seven long, horrible, hard months.

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## Reflect and Respond

The point is that God is not a local, tribal deity. He is the one and only God wherever He is.

The Ark was the locus of the manifestation of the Presence of God.

Later, Jesus is the Ark of the Covenant

The church is the dwelling place of God

God is going into all the world among the pagans

As God's people go

AS the Word and Spirit create the people of God

As God's people live among the pagans

Gordon J. Keddie said this so well that it is worth hearing him in this extended section. He wrote in his *Dawn of a Kingdom: the Message of 1 Samuel*:

Sin is any and all rebellion against God and his revealed will, as set down in his Word, the Bible. Unbelief is the condition of those who reject God. Error is the expression of unbelief in action. Error, as opposed to truth, is the point at which sin strikes at God.

1. The perfect comment on God's dealings with the Philistines over the ark is in Romans 1:18-19 where we read, 'The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.' Unbelief, when faced by the facts, suppresses them in sheer unrighteousness! The Philistines are a prime example of this spiritually blind opposition to truth. Notice how they handled the ark. They knew the history of Israel (4:8; 6:6), but it did not stop them expressing contempt for God by placing the ark at the foot of Dagon as a tribute to the fish-god's supposed superiority. When God knocked Dagon down, they did not get the message. And when Dagon was then decapitated and his head deposited on the threshold of the temple, far from seeing the utter impotence of their vaunted 'deity', they made the spot where Dagon lost his head into a holy place! (5:5). The dogs returned to their vomit! The facts said one thing, but the heart-commitment of the Philistines required them to say the opposite. In their unbelief they suppressed the truth – that is to say, they reinterpreted the truth in terms which continued to bolster the basic presuppositions of their system of belief. That which proved it to be a worthless delusion (Dagon's head on the threshold) was made to add to the corpus of their faith in Dagon (a new ritual observance relating to a new holy place)! Unbelief recognizes the truth only in reversion from it – even when it stares truth in the face! The principle of sin – that of enmity to God (Romans 8:7) and aversion to truth (John 3:19) – is so powerful that it enslaves the mind and stamps its prejudices on every rational process. Facts that challenge these prejudices are reinterpreted in favour of the latter and both mind and conscience turn the truth of God into a lie (Romans 1:25).

2. Unbelief tries to evade the wrath of God without turning to him in his way. Seven months of misery – in Scripture, the number seven is symbolic of completeness – convinced the Philistines that they had had enough pain on account of the ark. They were not convinced that they should turn to God and honour him. Instead they decided to get rid of the ark and thereby, they hoped, induce God to leave them alone... They are like the people of Gadara, who, after the loss of their pigs, asked Jesus to depart from them (Luke 8:37). The method by which the Philistines sought to alleviate the judgments of God also gives insight into the tragedy of their unbelief. It is true that they made an effort to appease the wrath of God. It is true that they had a sense of God's 'eternal power and divine nature' (Romans 1:20). But at no point did they trouble to ask how God ought to be worshipped or how his wrath should have been appeased. If they did not know already about the rituals of Israel's worship, it would have been easy enough to find out from any Israelite priest. But they did not. Why? Because they thought they could approach God in their own way. They were not about to surrender either their autonomy or their religious system!

This is characteristic of all unbelieving response to God's dealings. This remains true whether the person concerned is a [Muslim], a Buddhist, a Jew, a nominal Christian or a Marxist. Unbelief in all its forms is self-justifying religion. Any attempt to please God – or whatever 'god' is in view – is inevitably an exercise in pleasing self, i.e. seeking justification and peace of mind without any change of heart in terms of the claims of the one living and true God. Unbelief will try anything – false religions, muttered incantations, transcendental meditation – but the truth of God. So instead of a genuine atonement for sin through the shedding of blood, the Philistines come up with a pay-off in grotesque gold trinkets; instead of the sacrifices of a broken spirit and a contrite heart they unashamedly cling to their pagan superstitions and hope that God will go away!

(Keddie p. 73-75)

The cross looked like a defeat. It was the ultimate act of defiance against God. But out of it comes a surprise which eclipses the moment in the temple in Ashdod. Paul declares that the apparently defeated one was in fact the powerful victor:

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in it [the cross]. (Colossians 2:15)

As John Woodhouse pungently stated: (Woodhouse p. 110)

"To defy God is as stupid as it sounds, and far more stupid than it often looks. Don't do it."

