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The Ark at Ashdod

First Samuel 5: 1-7

The Ark at Ashdod DIG: How do the Philistines take different forms at different times? How does secular philosophy and science battle against ADONAI and His Word? Why did the Philistines place the Ark in Dagon's temple? Why did Dagon keep falling over? Why did he lose his head and his hands? Why did they send the Ark to Gath?

REFLECT: Who are the Philistines today? What can God do against the Philistines? What are some examples? What can you do against the Philistines? The hand of the LORD was against the Philistines of old. How is His hand against them today? How did the incident of Dagon prostrating before the Ark foreshadow the future (see Philippians 2)?

When the Philistines captured the Ark and arrogantly treated ADONAI as though He were just another god, they invited the judgment of God upon themselves.

Philistines today: The apostle **Paul** informs believers that the events of the TaNaKh happened to them as an example and were written down for our instruction (**First Corinthians 10:11**). This shows that the principles taught by this ancient episode are relevant for us today. Like **Isra'el** of old, the Church in the West is in a state of weakness, having apparently been routed in the battle for our generation. Anyone who doubts this reality need only look at the news today: our land is dominated by **Philistine** powers with scarcely a hint of genuine **godly** influence. There are a string of parallels between the situation in **First Samuel Chapters 4 and 5**, and the Church of today. It is **God**, and **God's** case, apparently completely routed and almost, it seems, destroyed by **the god of this world (Second Corinthians 4:4a)**. The picture is that **the enemy** is triumphant and rejoicing.

The Philistine enemy takes different forms at different times. At the forefront of **the unbelieving army** today are secular philosophy and science. **The world** has always regarded those who believe in **Yeshua Messiah** as **foolishness** (see the commentary on **First Corinthians, to see link click [An](#) - The Foolishness of Worldly Wisdom**). Today,

however, believers are pictured as spouting “hate speech,” and dangerous to the public good.

If anything, the assault from science is even more intense. It is not taken for granted in secular media and public education that Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, published 166 years ago at this writing, not only shook, but destroyed the biblical account of the world, thus freeing “enlightened minds” from the shackles of biblical truth. As a result, on the surface, we might very well come to the conclusion that the modern-day **Philistines** have been as successful as **their** ancient prototypes. Many believe that **they** have demolished the Church altogether. The secularization of our lives seems to be almost complete.

Secular society has advanced from godless rationalism to godless hedonism. Even the building blocks of human society – gender distinctions and the institution of marriage – are under ferocious assault. So thorough is the postmodern **Philistine** victory that a large portion of the Church has virtually given up even trying to influence the culture around it, and frankly admits to adopting worldly **Philistine** values such as pragmatism, relativism, and debauchery as being a normal part of everyday life. Our situation is similar to that of **Isra’el** under the heel of **the Philistines**. The twentieth and twentieth-first centuries have been for us a massive defeat not unlike **the Israelite calamity at Ebenezer** (see [Bb - The Philistines Capture the Ark](#)).¹³⁵

Yet it is not that **the Philistines** wanted to do away with **God** altogether. **Their** actions described here perfectly depict the attitude toward **God** today: **When the Philistines had captured the Ark of God they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod**, one of the five chief **Philistine** city-states (**Joshua 13:3**), three miles inland from the coast, and approximately thirty-three miles west of Jerusalem. **Then the Philistines took the Ark of God and brought it to the temple of Dagon, their national god**, where **Sampson** lost his life (**Judges 16:23-30**), and set it next to the idol (**5:1-2**). Ancient literature identifies this deity as a fish **god**, whose image had the lower body of a fish and the upper body of a man. **Dagon** seems to have been the leader of **the Philistine** pantheon and is noted to be the father of Ba’al. Placing **the Ark** in **the temple of Dagon** was supposed to be a sign of **Dagon’s** power and **God’s** inferiority – a visual representation that **the god of the Philistines** was victorious over **the God of the Hebrews**.¹³⁶ So, **they** did not destroy **the Ark**, but instead **they** put it in **their own temple** near **their god**.

Similarly, **the Philistine** world today doesn’t really want to eliminate **God**, but only to domesticate **Him**. We see this truth in the desire of unbelievers to be married in a church. Even more, we see it in the use of a Bible and the invocation of **God’s** name when public

officials are sworn into office. When Harry Truman was sworn in as president, he kissed the bible. You don't see that anymore! Not many actually believe in the Bible and its teaching is forbidden in public affairs, but if it can be taken off the shelf to lend a little "holiness" to our government, then that is fine. Our courts and legislative sessions open with prayers for **God** to bless America, so long as **God** does not try to tell anyone what to do. This is what **the Philistines** intended for **the Ark**: **God** could remain if **He** knew **His** place and stayed quiet.

God and the Philistines: Most of the observations about the Bible in the world today could be made at the end of **First Samuel 4**, when the surviving **widow** of **'Eli's house** died with the word **Ichabod**, "**the glory has departed**," on **her** lips. So, what does **Chapter 5** have to say? We might put it this way: whereas **Chapter 4** shows the weakness of a spiritually corrupt and fallen Church against **the Philistine** powers, **Chapter 5** asks, "What can **God** do about **the Philistines**?" They are, after all, **God's** enemies as well as **His people's**, so what will **God** do to **the Philistines**? The answer is provided in dramatic fashion. **Early the next morning, when the people of Ashdod got up, there was Dagon**, struck down, flat on his face before the Ark of God. Undeterred, **they took Dagon and set him in his place again (5:3).**¹³⁷ The fact that **they** had to stand **him** up again should have told **them** that **their god** couldn't even take care of **himself**, let alone any of **them**! But **they** didn't learn anything, so shortly **they** would have to learn the lesson a second time.

The Philistines, however, failed to deal with the power of **YHVH**. The battle was not between **Isra'el** and **the Philistines**; but between **Isra'el's God** and **the gods of the Philistines**. **They** had not adequately understood **Ha'Shem's** first two commandments (**Exodus 20:3-6**). **They** did not understand that a **god** like **Dagon**, who was made out of wood, had no real power and was no match for **ADONAI**. As a result, even the capture of **the Ark**, the precious symbol that it was, could not stop **the LORD's** actual power.



But on the second day, the drama intensified. **Dagon** had been **propped up again**, as all **idols** must be (see the commentary on [Isaiah 19 - Bel Bows Down, Nebo Stoops Low and They Go Off Together to Captivity](#)). Nevertheless, **they** found **Dagon face down before the Ark**. Early the following morning, **when they got up**, **Dagon had again fallen down with his face to the ground before the Ark of ADONAI**. The fake **god**, who had been **propped up**, had been knocked **down** by the real **God**. But **this time**, the **head of Dagon and both hands lay there, severed, on the threshold**; all that was left of **Dagon was his** disfigured torso. Then **they** should have known that the **God of Isra'el** was the only powerful **God**, **they had no excuse** (see [Romans 1 - The Evidence Against the Pagan Gentile](#)). **This is why, to this day, the priests of Dagon and those entering his temple never walk on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod (5:4-5)**. Over time a superstition developed among the **Philistines** that the **threshold of the temple** was cursed because **the head and hands of Dagon** had fallen on **it**. For that reason, **they** would **leap over it (Zephaniah 1:9)**. The presumed power of **Dagon**, which seemed so real after the routing of the **Israelites at Ebenezer**, was exposed for what **it** was, **so much wind and waste (Isaiah 41:29)**. Yet **YHVH**, who was presumed defeated, acted so powerfully as to dominate even **their** foreign **temples**. Ironically, **God** had, in fact, captured that alien **temple of Dagon** so that it then, in effect, belonged to **Him**.¹³⁸

In the ancient world, severed **heads** (see the commentary on [the Life of David 1 - David Kills Goliath](#)) and severed **hands (Judges 8:6)** were battlefield trophies that assisted the victor in establishing the correct body count. **ADONAI** had defeated **Dagon** in **his own temple**, a premonition of things to come. At **the temple of Dagon** in Gaza, the power of **God** - symbolized by the hair on **Samson's head** and the strength of **his hands** - had defeated **the Philistines** and **their god** (see the commentary on [Judges 16 - The Death of Samson](#)).

The hand of the LORD: With the reference to **Dagon's hands** being rendered helpless, the **Ruach Ha'Kodesh** introduces a major motif of **the hand of the LORD**. This motif is so common within the **Ark** narratives (**4:1b-7:1**) that it is found eight times (**4:8, 5:6, 7, 9, 11, and 6:3, 5, 9**). The first reference came from the lips of **the Philistines**, who related the divine **hand** to **the plagues of Egypt (4:8)**, and rightly so (**Exodus 9:3**). **They** did not take lightly the possibility that the fate of **the Egyptians** might happen to **them** also (**6:6**).¹³⁹

As if the downfall and fragility of **Dagon** had not yet been enough to demonstrate **his** impotence, and the superiority of **ADONAI**, the next event emphasized the point even more. **The people of Ashdod** recognized the terrifying **plague** that struck **their city** as **the hand**

of the LORD.¹⁴⁰ He ravaged them, striking Ashdod and its surrounding area with tumors. When you put all the evidence together, it seems that YHVH sent infected mice (6:4) among the Philistines and spread a terrible plague (also see [Isaiah Gw - Then the Angel of the LORD Put to Death a Hundred and Eighty-Five Thousand Men in the Assyrian Camp](#)). According to the covenant, God should have sent that affliction on the disobedient Jews (Deuteronomy 28:58-60). But in His grace, He punished the enemy. When the Philistines captured the Ark and arrogantly treated ADONAI as though He were just another god, they invited the judgment of God upon themselves.¹⁴¹ When the people of Ashdod came to understand what was happening, they couldn't get rid of the Ark fast enough. They cried out: The Ark of the God of Isra'el can't remain with us, because He is oppressing us and our god Dagon (5:6-7). By removing the Ark elsewhere, the Philistines believed that Ashdod would find healing. Consequently, they immediately sent the Ark to Gath (see [Bg - The Ark at Gath](#)), hoping a change of scenery would change the results.

Dear Heavenly Father, Praise You for Your Awesome love and almighty power! Yes, You are a God of great love, and You are also the mighty Sovereign Ruler of the universe and more powerful than all the armies of the entire world (Revelation 19). You are a God to be both greatly loved and feared in a holy and reverent way. Your Word is so powerful that You win the battle by Your Word! Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The One riding on it is called Faithful and True, and He judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and many royal crowns are on His head. He has a name written that no one knows except Himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which He is called is "the Word of God" (Revelation 19:11-13). We worship You our loving, powerful and Almighty Heavenly Father! In Messiah Yeshua's Name and power of His resurrection. Amen