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The Ark at Beth-Shemesh

First Samuel 6: 10-21

The Ark at Beit-Shemesh DIG: Why did Ha'Shem bring judgment against the people of Beth Shemesh? What does this reveal to us about whom He requires to be obedient to His Word? How can the loss of the Ark and the judgment against the people of Beth-Shemesh be traced back to 'Eli's failure as high priest? What does this teach us about the wide-ranging effects of sin?

REFLECT: When have you treated God with too much familiarity? How do you maintain proper respect for His holiness? Do you use "signs" to determine if ADONAI is for or against a plan of yours? What signs? How do you know if they are from God? What effect is your life having on people around you? Are you leading others toward godliness or toward sinfulness? Who can you help?

The presence of the holy Ark was very dangerous, for the Philistines and for Isra'el as well.

The Philistines had made all the preparations for sending **the Ark** back to **the Israelites** (**to see link click [Bj](#) - The Ark Leaving Philistia**). **They took two milk-cows, harnessed them to the cart and confined their calves to the shed. Then they put the Ark on the cart, along with the box containing the gold rats and the models of their tumors. And sure enough, without veering to the right or to the left, the cows went straight down the road to Beth-Shemesh, their nursing calves left behind, mooing as they went. YHVH was on the way home! It was an Exodus! The LORD returned in glory, having yet again defeated an oppressive enemy of Isra'el. This was the coming glory that Dagon could not defeat. During the whole ordeal God said nothing, decreed nothing, asserted nothing, and required nothing. He operated in total silence. There is no doubt, however, either for Isra'el or for the Philistines, that the sovereign will of ADONAI dominates the story.¹⁵⁷ The leaders of the Philistines followed them as far as the border of Beth-Shemesh (6:10-12).** We can scarcely

imagine the relief of **the Philistines** as **Ha'Shem's** holy **Ark** finally departed from **their** hands.

The LORD's accommodation to the way that **the Philistines'** handled the situation (**5:8-9**) should not encourage us to rely on superstitious approaches to discerning **God's** will. Subjective signs that we think up are no way to understand **God's** will (see the commentary on [Judges Ba - The Sign of the Fleece](#)). Instead, **they** invite us to act upon our own hunches and sometimes provide an opportunity for Satan to deceive us. Rather, we should remember the testimony of **Peter**, who witnessed several clear divine revelations, including the audible speaking of **God's** voice. Yet, **Peter** tells us that **we have something more sure, the prophetic Word**, that is the Bible, **to which you will do well to pay attention as a lamp shining in a dark place (Second Peter 1:19a)**. If we want **ADONAI's** revelation, the place to find it is in the holy Scriptures, which **YHVH** has given to us as **a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119:105)**.

Apparently, **God's** purposes with **the Philistines** were finished, at least for the time being. We should not suppose that the **five models of golden tumors** and the **five golden mice** atoned for **their** sins; nevertheless, **the LORD** had sufficiently humbled **them** and made **His** point. **The Philistines** returned home, only too glad to get rid of the dangerous **Object** of **their** destruction. How easy it is for us to do likewise when **God disciplines** us (see the commentary on [Hebrews Cz - God Disciplines His Children](#)) and we are glad to avoid the pain, thinking little of what **He** wanted to teach us. **The Philistines** were like **the wicked men** that **Job** observed, who complained: **God, depart from us! We don't desire the knowledge of your ways (Job 21:14)**. How much better to treasure **God's Word** and to humble ourselves in trusting obedience to all that **He** has revealed!¹⁵⁸



So, **God's** holy **Ark** returned to **Isra'el** after **seven months** in **Philistine** hands. **The Philistines** had wanted only to escape **Ha'Shem's** wrath and discern enough of **God's** will to think that **they** could escape **His** judgment. Now, as **the Ark** returns to **Isra'el**, we ask ourselves: **How can we stand in the presence of such a holy God?** As Richard Phillips relates in his commentary on *1 Samuel*, **the first answer** is that **God's people** are to receive **God's** presence **with joy**. We see such **joy** modeled by **the people of Beth-Shemesh** who **were harvesting their wheat in the valley**. **When they looked up and saw the Ark, they rejoiced to see it (6:13)!** **The Philistines** only may have wanted to get rid of so holy a **God**, but **the LORD's people** knew of **His** mighty grace. **Nehemiah** said that **the joy of ADONAI is our strength (Nehemiah 8:10)**. Believers are **strongest** when we are **rejoicing in the Lord**, and **God is never** more fully praised by us than when we most **rejoice in Him**.

Secondly, God's people are to dwell **in reverence**. It turned out that **Beth-Shemesh** was a **Levitical city** (see the commentary on **Numbers Gj - Levitical Cities**), in which **the clan of Kohath** lived (see **Numbers At - The Clan of Kohath**), **the clan** assigned to care for **the Ark** of the covenant when **the children of Isra'el** were on the move in the wilderness (**Numbers 4:4-12**). **The cart entered the field of Joshua and stood there by a large stone**. It was not surprising, then, for **them** to immediately arrange a sacrifice. **Then the Levites removed the Ark of ADONAI and the box that was beside it, which contained the gold objects, and put them on the large stone. They cut up the wood of the cart and offered up the cows as a Burnt Offering to the LORD** (see the commentary on **Leviticus Ai - The Burnt Offering: Accepted by**

God). What was surprising, however, was **their** failure to observe the mitzvah that only **bulls** were to be **offered (Leviticus 1:3 and 5)**. **Upon seeing this, the five leaders of the Philistines returned that day to Ekron (6:14-16)**.

After the return of **the Ark**, the narrative moves quickly to its conclusion. A summary statement is made to indicate that all **the Philistines** had submitted to **YHVH**. **The gold tumors which the Philistines sent back as a guilt offering for ADONAI were one each for Ashdod, Gath, Ashkelon, Gat and Ekron; and the gold mice also corresponded to the number of all the cities of the Philistines that belonged to the five leaders - fortified cities and country villages. [The large stone] is a witness to this day of the great mourning [which resulted from] putting the ark of ADONAI on it in the field of Joshua the Beit-Shemesh (6:17-18)**.

But that was followed by an even more fatal offense. Trouble, instead of blessing, came to **them** because **the Ark of God** was not given due **reverence**. Remarkably, **the Levites** had allowed **ADONAI's** holy **Ark** to become a tourist attraction. What a sight it must have been to the eyes of country-folk: a large shining **golden** box, adorned with such finely crafted cherubim that **YHVH** had employed craftsmen specifically anointed by **the Ruach (Exodus 30-35)**. How natural it would have been for crowds to gather to see **the Ark of the covenant**, now in **Beth-Shemesh** for the first time! But what seems natural to us is sometimes irreverence to **God**.¹⁵⁹

Indeed, when **the Ark** was ready to be transported, **Aaron** went **in with his sons, took down the inner veil of the Tabernacle** (see the commentary on **Exodus Fq - The Inner Veil of the Sanctuary: That is Christ, His Body**), and **covered the Ark of the covenant with it. Then they placed a yellow-orange covering of fine leather (Exodus 26:14), and on top of that spread an all-blue cloth. Then they inserted the carrying-poles**. This would guard **the holy Ark** from the gaze of human eyes. No one was to **look on the holy things even for a moment, lest they die (Numbers 4:20)**. Therefore, **ADONAI killed 70 people of Beth-Shemesh for looking at the Ark. Then the people mourned because ADONAI had struck them with such a terrible slaughter (6:19)**. Those **people** somehow lacked the proper attitude toward **YHVH**, not honoring and **reverencing the Holy One**. As it was one of the darkest times of the history of ancient **Isra'el**, it was no surprise to find the spiritual condition of **the Israelites** at such a low ebb. Now the time was ripe for **Samuel's** new ministry (see **Bm - The Last Judge**). **ADONAI** had not forgotten **His people** even in the darkest time.¹⁶⁰

The example of **Beth-Shemesh** reminds us that we do not show **reverence** for **YHVH** by treating **Him** according to our own wisdom or sentiments, but only by obeying the mitzvot of **His Word**. How much blatantly carnal worship is offered up to **God** today, designed to appeal to the flesh with no **reference** to biblical principles (and often in direct violation of Scripture), and how greatly such **irreverence** must account for the lack of true spiritual blessing experienced by the flock! Just as **the Kohathite priests'** incredible ignorance in handling **the Ark** revealed the spiritual decline of that generation, so does the lack of **reverence** for **ADONAI** in worship signal a spiritual decline among us today.

The people of Beth-Shemesh further showed **their** spiritual poverty by responding to **God's** wrath not unlike **the Philistines** when **they** cried out: **Who can stand before ADONAI, this holy God? To whom can we send it, to get it away from us?"** Then, just as **the Philistines** of **Ashdod** had palmed off **the Ark** first to **Gath** (see [Bg - The Ark at Gath](#)), and then to **Ekron** (see [Bh - The Ark at Ekron](#)), **the people of Beth-Shemesh sent messengers to the people living in Kiriath-Jearim with this message, "The Philistines have returned the Ark of ADONAI. Come down and bring it back up with you" (6:20-221)**. This shows the ultimate result when **God's people** drift from **God's Word**. When this happens, the Church then takes on the attitude of the world and ultimately rejects **YHVH** in unbelief.¹⁶¹

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for being such a fair and **righteous God**. **You** so graciously call out to all to **come to You**. **Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 11:28-29)**. **You** so kindly reveal the truth about how great **You** are when people look at the magnificence of **Your** creation and realize how incredibly designed it is every tiny detail of each animal, plant, human and planet. Thank **You** for **Your** wonderful gift of salvation (**Romans 5:17, Ephesians 2:8-9**)! Praise **You** that all who hear and believe (**John 5:24**) are **sealed** with the promised **Ruach Ha'Kodesh**. **After you heard the message of truth - the Good News of your salvation - and when you put your trust in Him, you were sealed with the promised Ruach Ha-Kodesh. He is the guarantee of our inheritance, until the redemption of His possession - to His glorious praise (Ephesians 1:13-14)**! In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and Power of **His** Resurrection. Amen*