

FIRST SAMUEL

Chapter 5

The Philistines and the Ark

When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. 2 Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. 3 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. 4 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. 5 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. 6 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. 7 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.” 8 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.” So they brought the ark of the God of Israel there. 9 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. 10 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.” 11 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. 12 The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

5:1 *Ashdod.* One of the five major cities of the Philistines (Jos 13:3), it was located near the Mediterranean coast about 35 miles west of Jerusalem. (CSB)

5:2 *Dagon.* In Canaanite mythology the son (or brother) of El and the father of Baal. He was the principal god of the Philistines and was worshiped in temples at Gaza (Jdg 16:21, 23, 26), Ashdod (here) and Beth Shan (31:10–12; 1Ch 10:10). Veneration of this deity was widespread in the ancient world, extending from Mesopotamia to the Aramean and Canaanite area and attested in non-Biblical sources dating from the late third millennium B.C. until Maccabean times (second century B.C.; in the Apocrypha see 1 Maccabees 10:83–85). The precise nature of the worship of Dagon is obscure. Earlier tradition considered Dagon to be a fish god, but more recent evidence suggests either a storm or grain god. His name is related to a Hebrew word for “grain.” (CSB)

5:3 *Dagon, fallen face downward.* The ark was placed next to the image of Dagon by the Philistines in order to demonstrate Dagon’s superiority over the God of Israel, but the symbolism was reversed when Dagon was toppled to a position of homage before the ark of the Lord. (CSB)

The idol was in a posture of submission and reverence before the place of God’s glorious presence. (TLSB)

cut off. Not simply broken. Decapitation and cutting off the hands of slain enemies were part of ancient warfare (17:51, 54; 31:9). The state of Dagon's idol in the morning is a sign of its military defeat. (TLSB)

5:5 *this day.* The time of the writing of 1,2 Samuel. (CSB)

step on the threshold. Apparently the threshold was considered to possess supernatural power because of its contact with parts of the fallen image of Dagon. Zep 1:9 appears to be a reference to a more general and rather widespread pagan idea that the threshold was the dwelling place of spirits. (CSB)

Priests of Dagon considered the threshold taboo because it had been in contact with key parts of Dagon's image. To step on the threshold would have dishonored the god. (TLSB)

5:6 *The hand of the LORD was heavy.* Dagon's broken hand lay on the ground (v. 4), but the Lord shows the reality and strength of his own hand by bringing a plague (see note on 6:4) on the people of Ashdod and the surrounding area (see vv. 9, 11). God would not be manipulated by his own people (see note on 4:3), nor would he permit the Philistines to think that their victory over the Israelites and the capture of the ark demonstrated the superiority of their god over the God of Israel. (CSB)

Expression about the hand is used numerous times (e.g., vv 6, 7, 9, 11; 6:3, 5, 9). The Philistines realized the Lord was afflicting them. (TLSB)

tumors. Lit, "swellings," "hills." Perhaps enlarged lymph glands of the groin that go along with bubonic plague, or they could be boils and sores (cf v 9). (TLSB)

5:8 *lords of the Philistines.* Of the five major cities of the Philistines (see 6:16; Jos 13:3; Jdg 3:3). (CSB)

the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath. Evidently the leaders of the Philistines did not share the opinion of the Ashdodites that there was a direct connection between what had happened in Ashdod and the presence of the ark; they seem to have suspected that the sequence of events was merely coincidental (see 6:9). The removal of the ark to Gath put the matter to a test. (CSB)

One of the five principal cities of the Philistines, of closest proximity to Judah. (TLSB)

5:10 *Ekron.* The northernmost of the five major Philistine cities, located 11 miles northeast of Ashdod and close to Israelite territory. (CSB)

One of the five principal cities of the Philistines. (TLSB)

5:11 *Send the ark of the God of Israe...own place.* After three successive towns had been struck by disease upon the arrival of the ark, there was little doubt in the people's minds that the power of the God of Israel was the cause of their distress. (CSB)

Ekron was the third Philistine city struck by plague while in possession of the ark. Destroying the ark would have brought greater judgment than possessing it, so the lords of the Philistines determine to send the ark back to the Israelites. (TLSB)

The hand of God was very heavy. Particularly "deathly" in Ekron. (TLSB)

Ch 5 The idol-worshipping Philistines experience the ark not as a means of blessing but as a means of judgment. Not only is their chief god, Dagon, humiliated before the ark, but all the Philistine cities that house the ark experience the “hand” of the Lord in the form of plague. If we despise the means of God’s grace, we, too, stand under God’s judgment (cf 2Sm 6:6–8; 1Co 11:27–32). Through repentance and His promised mercy, God gives us the gift of faith so that His presence may bring our healing and salvation (cf Lk 8:43–48). • Lord Jesus, thank You for being present with us to heal us, to forgive us, and to strengthen us in love for one another. Amen. (TLSB)