

## Samuel to King David 1 Samuel Ch.6 – The Ark Returned

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.  
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Hello and welcome to Truth for Today, where we are continuing with the series “Samuel to King David”, which we temporarily laid aside last December. Today’s talk which covers 1 Samuel chapter 6, is entitled: “The Ark Returned” though, before considering the narrative, perhaps we ought to remind ourselves just what the ark was and what attraction it had for the children of Israel. Probably, when mention is made of the ark in the world at large, the image conjured up is the one made by Noah, that was used to carry his family safely through the flood, along with many animals. Obviously, that is not the ark that we read of in 1 Samuel 6.

### **The Ark of the Covenant**

The first mention of the ark we are concerned with in our talk today is found in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Exodus verses 10 to 14, which I shall read from the English Standard Version:

“They shall make an ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside shall you overlay it, and you shall make on it a moulding of gold round it. You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it. You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark by them.”

From this description, it can be seen that the ark in Exodus bore no resemblance to that of Noah. Amongst the various names accorded to it in Scripture are the ‘ark of the covenant’ or ‘of the testimony’, the ‘ark of the LORD’ and occasionally the ‘ark of God.’ All such terms emphasise that the ark had an extremely important place in the worship of the children of Israel. [Measuring approximately \(using units with which we are familiar\) 131 cm in length by 79 cm wide and 79 cm in height.](#) As it was covered all over in beaten gold, it was a very beautiful object. Its value though, to the Israelite, was not measured in material wealth for it served as the symbol of the Divine Presence leading the people of God through the wilderness and on into the promised land.

We have heard in previous talks how, when they were fighting the Philistines at the battle of Aphek, the Israelites took the ark from its resting place at Shiloh into their camp, hoping that it would bring them victory. Unfortunately, it only made the Philistines fight harder, with the result that the ark was captured by them and taken back to Ashdod as the spoils of war, where they placed it in the House of Dagon, their god. [We heard about this, in a Truth for Today talk, just before Christmas last year, when Jonathan Hughes was speaking about chapter five of 1 Samuel.](#)

After seven months of plagues and other afflictions, as the ark was moved from city to city, the Philistines met in counsel to decide to return it to Israel. This is the point where we take up the

narrative under the title of today's talk of "The Ark Returned." Before we consider the action of the Philistines, we must look at the dreadful statement in verse 1 of chapter six:

"The ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines for seven months."

What a disgrace that the people of God could not make any effort, during those months, to retrieve the ark and restore it its rightful place. They were a cowed and defeated nation. A most exquisite and sacred object, that was extremely necessary to their worship of God, was languishing in the possession of a pagan people. Something as precious in the culture and religious life of the Israelites, that had traversed the wilderness at the forefront of the procession to the Promised Land, should have called for more energy and concern. As we shall see, it was the Philistines, under God's powerful hand, that eventually brought the ark back to the border of Israel.

### **The Philistines' Council of Reference**

Because it is pertinent to our talk today, I want to give thought to some questions that the Philistines asked their priests, which are found in 1 Samuel 6 verse 2:

"And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, 'What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place?'"

Before we consider the questions let us look at the panel of experts, namely priests and diviners, that supposedly had all the answers. This group had the reputation of providing supernatural guidance by strange and grotesque means. The diviners, according to one commentary, were high-up the social echelon often with others such as magicians, sorcerers, soothsayers or augers. Equally diverse were the methods of discovering the sought after answers using the entrails of recently killed animals, studying the stars, the flight of birds or contact with evil spirits. Such procedures obviously relied upon the prejudice, natural fear and superstition, of the enquirers to produce satisfactory answers. Needless to say, such practices had been forbidden to God's people as Deuteronomy 18:10-12 makes plain:

"There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a wizard or a necromancer, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you."

Obviously, such practices were permanently banned by the Mosaic Law, though sadly some future rulers, for instance Manasseh, dabbled in such practices. It is also certain that Bible-believing Christians, led by the Spirit of God, should also not be participating in such pursuits. Ouija-boards and tarot cards might seem harmless fun to non-Christians, but believers have to pay attention to the word of God. It remains true today that if a council of reference is made up of those who reject the word of God the answers to all enquiries will not be heavenly. The Philistines did not have such scruples, therefore they could enquire for answers from their soothsayers and fortune tellers.

### **The Philistine's Questions**

After the calamitous events recorded in chapter five, when the Philistines experienced an eruption of tumours and though we are not sure of the exact nature of this affliction, the Philistines were confident that it was caused by the ark remaining in their country. The questions they put to their priests indicate that they were conscious that, though they had defeated the armies of Israel, the God of Israel was not defeated. They needed to send back the ark in a dignified and respectful way. Verses four and five are instructive:

“And they said, ‘What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?’ They answered, ‘Five golden tumours and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. So you must make images of your tumours and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land.’”

The guilt offering of five golden mice and five golden tumours, was emblematic of the plagues that afflicted the Philistines. [Some commentators suggest that the linking of the mice \(or rats in other translations\) with tumours is indicative of bubonic plague being the curse which so affected the Philistines. Whether this was so or not, the Philistines were very anxious to bring the plague to a conclusion.](#) After seven months of suffering they felt a great need to placate Jehovah. There is also a thought that a measure of compensation was involved in the giving of the golden offerings. Reparation for the wrongs committed!

From the answers and suggestions of the priests of Dagon we notice the respect or fear that the Philistines had for the ark, even to the point of giving glory to the God of Israel. [I am not suggesting for a moment that they were followers of the living God but they were aware the ark was symbolic of the power and influence of Jehovah.](#) They were persuaded to treat its return with high regard, even to the point of manufacturing a new cart for its carriage. Obviously, they had no knowledge of such Hebrew Scriptures that existed at that time, which demanded that the ark was to be carried on the shoulders of Levites? The new cart was, in their eyes, a respectful method that enabled the sacred object to reach Beth-Shemesh, just over the border of Israel.

Though it was not known at that juncture, the new cart syndrome carried a curse for the Israelites, especially for Uzzah who lived at Gibeah (2 Samuel 6). Decades hence, when David sought to transport the ark to the recently conquered Jerusalem, he used the same method of a new cart pulled by oxen. Sadly he was persuaded that the methods of the Philistines were as satisfactory, or even superior, to the procedure laid down by Moses. Surely this is a lesson for us to learn whenever we are tempted to over-ride Scripture. When it was a matter instigated by the Philistines in their own land God overlooked such digressions.

### **The Return of the Ark**

From verse six it would appear that not all of the Philistines wanted to appease the God of Israel by returning the ark with so much wealth. However, their priests told them not to harden their hearts, citing the troubles of the Egyptians when they refused the overtures of God (Exodus chapters 7-10). Perhaps this doubt, where some were hardening their heart against sending the ark back with the golden offerings, lead to the test of the “two milk cows” which is outlined in verses seven to nine:

“Now then, take and prepare a new cart and two milk cows on which there has never come a yoke, and yoke the cows to the cart, but take the calves home away from them. And take the ark of the LORD and place it on the cart and put in a box at its side the figures of gold, which you are returning to him as a guilt offering. Then send it off and let it go its way and watch. If it goes up on the way to its own land, to Beth-Shemesh, then it is he that hath done us this great harm, but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that struck us; it happened to us by coincidence.”

Despite this test being designed by the Philistines, God demonstrated His power by causing the milk cows to by-pass their natural instincts, which would have been to seek the company of their calves. [Instead they went straight along the way to Beth-Shemesh notwithstanding the cows had never been harnessed to a cart previously.](#) According to verse nine the Philistines were convinced

that it was, “[God] who has done us this great harm.” Consequently, the ark was returned to the borderland of Israel where the people of Beth-Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest. Once convinced by the behaviour of the cows, the Philistines could not wait to rid themselves of the ark of God, which to their mind had been responsible for so much death and destruction while it rested in their land.

Beth-Shemesh was a suitable destination for the ark, for it was a Levitical city (Joshua 21:13-16) though it had pagan antecedents, which the meaning of its name, “house or temple of the sun-god”, would tend to confirm. [Archaeological evidence would also suggest Philistine occupation, but the fact that they agreed to Beth-Shemesh as the terminus of the test would verify that the Philistines acknowledged that it was under Israelite control.](#) And so it was, when the test of the cows proved that the living God was exercising His power, that the five lords of the Philistines that had accompanied the new cart departed after making sure the ark was out of Philistine land (verse 16).

The effect of the return of the ark upon the people of Beth-Shemesh is recorded for us in verse thirteen:

“Now the people of Beth-Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it.”

It is little wonder that they rejoiced, for with the return of the ark a national disgrace had been assuaged. They had not defeated their ancient foe yet the precious ark, the symbol and secret of their God, was back in the land where it was destined to be. At the same time we must acknowledge that the Israelites were not involved until it entered their territory. [It was the Philistines who had been motivated, by the judgment of God, to remove it back to Israel.](#) We state again it was little wonder that the people rejoiced when they lifted up their eyes to witness the stately procession, with its precious load, coming up out of enemy territory back into the Promised Land. [The wheat harvest was temporarily forgotten as they made ready to offer a sacrifice to the LORD.](#) We have noted that Beth-Shemesh was a Levitical city so we must conclude that it was a suitable place for the ark to rest. We must also recall the dreadful state of affairs that preceded the loss of the ark, when Eli’s evil sons corrupted the worship of the LORD. There had been no national revival, or return to true worship, in the months that had passed since the destruction of the tabernacle at Shiloh. Later events proved that the priests and Levites were not sufficiently sanctified to carry the responsibilities involved in holy matters.

### **Rejoicing and Broken Hearts**

Initially the return of the ark initiated worship and rejoicing:

“The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth-Shemesh and stopped there. A great stone was there. And they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. And the Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the box that was beside it, in which were the golden figures, and set them upon the great stone. And the men of Beth-Shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the LORD. And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Eckron” (1 Samuel 6: 14-16).

The people of Beth-Shemesh lost no time in leaving their lawful occupation to bow in worship of their God, who we know as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 15 states that it was “that day.” May we all show such alacrity to gather in thanksgiving and praise to our God. The great stone, mentioned in verse 14, was obviously used as an altar, the fire was fuelled by the new cart, while the slain milk cows were the substance of the offering. The quoted verses also call for

two further comments. The first of these concerns the phrase “split the wood”, which reflects the preliminary activities of another burnt offering from hundreds of years earlier. This was when Abraham walking in company with Isaac his son “cut the wood for a burnt offering” (Genesis 22 verse 3). On that occasion a ram replaced Isaac as a subject for the sacrifice.

These statements are a pertinent reminder, to us, of the great sacrifice of the Lord Jesus when He died upon the cross. We can never exhaust the meaning and effects of the eternal efficacy of His sacrifice as Hebrews 10 verses 12-14 reminds us:

“But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”

I trust that all of us today, as we listen to these words, are, by grace, trusting in the Lord Jesus for our salvation and eternal blessing.

The second point from the above quote from 1 Samuel 6 is that the five lords of the Philistines “returned that day to Eckron.” The successful conclusion of the test of the milk cows proved the power of the living God extended into the Philistine’s land. They could not join in the worship, though they did leave their golden tributes to the LORD.

[A writer of fiction would consider this a suitable place to end the story of the ark’s return to the land of promise. Levites were present at Beth-Shemesh to handle the ark and to conduct the proceedings, sacrifices were readily available, and an altar was nearby allowing the ordinance of worship. All was in place for the repeat of the phrase present in many children’s stories of “..they all lived happy ever after”. “Not so! Verses 19 & 20 proclaim a terrible conclusion to this chapter when many hearts were bereft as family relationships were broken:](#)

“And [God] struck some of the men of Beth-Shemesh, because they looked upon the ark of the LORD. He struck seventy men of them, and the people mourned because the LORD had struck the people with a great blow. Then the men of Beth-Shemesh said, ‘Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?’”

The rampant upsurge of spiritual corruption that had afflicted Israel, in the time of Eli’s sons, was still exercising its malign influence. Whether the translation should be “looked on the ark” or “in the ark” is immaterial. The facts seem to be that the Levites, who should have known better, allowed irreverent and profane revelling around the sacred ark, where the glory of the Eternal One had been manifested. In this day of grace we must never forget that God is holy and that we enter His presence with the respect due to Him.

The one ray of hope, following the judgment of God upon the men of Beth-Shemesh, is that they realised that something was wrong. The Scriptures contained a warning regarding dealing incorrectly with the ark in addition to laying out the correct procedures. They realised that they had done wrong when God’s judgment fell upon some of their neighbours. Their confession of the holiness of God was the beginning of the way back. They knew they were in error, but tried to shift the responsibility from themselves by removing the ark to Kirjath-Jearim. [Decades had to pass before David, in his role of king, was able to remove the ark from Kirjath-Jearim and even he got it wrong at first \(2 Samuel: 6\).](#) Despite our day being the day of grace, we must respect the holiness of God for He has not changed. As Isaiah wrote, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts” (Isaiah 6:2). Many centuries have passed since those words were written, but God never changes and it is incumbent upon us to recognise that. As Peter wrote in his first letter chapter one and verse 15:

“But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.” May these things be so for His Name’s sake.

We must draw this talk to a conclusion but before I do so, can I remind you that you have been listening to a talk from Truth for Today entitled “The Ark Returns” based upon 1 Samuel 6 and numbered T1293.

May the blessing of the Lord be upon you this day and thank you for your company.

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