

# "The Ark is Returned – but God's Wrath Continues"

Unlike human beings, God is not a respecter of persons. His laws and commands must be met by all, great and small, whether His children or not. It does not matter who you are, you must obey Him. There are no excuses and no allowances. In this chapter we see the Ark returning to its own country. However, the slaughter by God does not end, but continues. It must be repeated – God cannot be placated. He must only be obeyed!

## Verses 1-9

1.

"And the ark of the Lord was in the country of the Philistines seven months.

2.

And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? tell us wherewith we shall send it to his place.

3.

And they said, If ye send away the ark of the God of Israel, send it not empty; but in any wise return him a trespass offering: then ye shall be healed, and it shall be known to you why his hand is not removed from you.

4.

Then said they, What shall be the trespass offering which we shall return to him? They answered, Five golden emerods, and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines: for one plague was on you all, and on your lords.

5.

Wherefore ye shall make images of your emerods, and images of your mice that mar the land; and ye shall give glory unto the God of Israel: peradventure he will lighten his hand from off you, and from off your gods, and from off your land.

6.

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Wherefore then do ye harden your hearts, as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When he had wrought wonderfully among them, did they not let the people go, and they departed?

7.

Now therefore make a new cart, and take two milch kine, on which there hath come no yoke, and tie the kine to the cart, and bring their calves home from them:

8.

And take the ark of the Lord, and lay it upon the cart; and put the jewels of gold, which ye return him for a trespass offering, in a coffer by the side thereof; and send it away, that it may go.

9.

And see, if it goeth up by the way of his own coast to Bethshemesh, then he hath done us this great evil: but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that smote us; it was a chance that happened to us.”

The Philistines were too scared to leave the Ark in their country, and too scared to remove it! Wherever it went they lost their kinsmen in their thousands! After seven months of death and sickness, they had to do something. So, they called together their pagan priests and magicians to give them the answer.

They all advised that if the Ark was to be returned, it had to go with an offering to appease the God of the Israelites. They, decided to send a trespass offering, one that compensated for offending the foreign God and admitting their guilt. This, would lead to their healing and would be proof that this was the cause of their suffering. The leaders asked what form the offering should take.

The priests and diviners agreed they ought to send five gold emerods – solid gold representations of the tumours that plagued the Philistines, and numerous golden mice (not just five – see later note), representing the five princes of the Philistines. (Possibly, the plague of tumours was joined with a plague of mice, but this is not clear from the texts). Also, the people

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had to glorify the God of Israel, in the hope that He would remove His hand of pestilence from them.

Though these were occultists and pagans, they appear to have been led by God to utter truths to their leaders, for they advised them not to *“harden (their) hearts, as the Egyptians...”*. This testimony to God’s anger and actions, by those who did not know Him personally, is remarkable. They continued to point out the foolishness of Pharaoh and his people who tried to stand against God, even as He ‘wrought wonderfully among them’ with plagues and death.

The occultists then gave a plan of action – to make a brand new cart to carry the Ark away. It was to be yoked to two milking cows, whose calves must be removed from them. The Ark had to be placed on the cart, with the gold objects in a box at the side of it.

The cows were then to be left loose with the cart... if they walked toward Bethshemesh, this was proof that God was indeed plaguing them. But, if the cart moved elsewhere, they were wrong to assume God’s hand in the matter and mere chance was to blame. Effectively, the priests and occultists were putting a fleece before God.

### Verses 10-12

*“And the men did so; and took two milch kine, and tied them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home;*

*And they laid the ark of the Lord upon the cart, and the coffer with the mice of gold and the images of their emerods.*

*And the kine took the straight way to the way of Bethshemesh, and went along the highway, lowing as they went, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left; and the lords of the Philistines went after them unto the border of Bethshemesh.”*

Men did as they were told and prepared the cart. The cows were urged to go, and as they walked they lowed. Their trek was not alone, for the Philistine lords wanted to see where the cart was going. Slowly, the cart, its contents, with the lords following, made their way up the

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coastal road.

When the small band reached the border of Bethshemesh, the lords stopped and waited. This was because Bethshemesh ('house of the sun' or 'sun temple') was in south-west Judah. They did not wish to encounter the Hebrews yet!

The lords had seen enough – their priests foretold that if the cart made its way, without turning this way and that, to Bethshemesh, then it would be proof that the Hebrew God was the cause of all their recent troubles. This was the proof they needed, so they did not wish to continue with the cart.

As they sat on their horses on the hills above Bethshemesh, they were now convinced they had just escaped far greater wrath from this foreign god. To these pagans, gods were localised. Therefore, the God of the Hebrews, once located back on Hebrew soil, would not be able to torment them.

That is what they wrongly thought; they had no idea that past and future victories against them were given by the same God, Whose might and power extends over all of creation, not just between tribal borders! (Christians ought to remember this, when they attempt to localise God to their own congregations and minds!!).

### Verses 13-16

1.

"And they of Bethshemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley: and they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it.

2.

And the cart came into the field of Joshua, a Bethshemite, and stood there, where there was a great stone: and they clave the wood of the cart, and offered the kine a burnt offering unto the Lord.

3.

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And the Levites took down the ark of the Lord, and the coffer that was with it, wherein the jewels of gold were, and put them on the great stone: and the men of Bethshemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices the same day unto the Lord.

4.

And when the five lords of the Philistines had seen it, they returned to Ekron the same day.”

It was the time of the wheat harvest and the men of Bethshemesh were out in their valley fields, reaping. Then, someone spotted the approaching cart. Suddenly, they realised what was on the cart and the sounds of rejoicing filled the air!

The cows finally stopped next to a great stone in a field owned by Joshua, who lived in the city. The men quickly removed the Ark in the specified manner, without touching it in any way with their hands. They cut up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the two cows whole, as a burnt offering to God.

It was the resident Levites, the tribe used by God for His service as priests, etc., who removed the ark from the cart in proper manner. They also removed the box containing the gold objects and put both on the great stone. All the while the Philistine lords watched from their hilltop vantage point. When they had seen enough, they made their way back to Ekron with a sigh of relief.

### Verses 17-21

1.

“And these are the golden emerods which the Philistines returned for a trespass offering unto the lord; for Ashdod one, for Gaza one, for Askelon one, for Gath one, for Ekron one;

2.

And the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both of fenced cities, and of country villages, even unto the great stone of Abel, whereon they set down the ark of the Lord: which stone remaineth unto this day in the field of Joshua, the Bethshemite.

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3.

And he smote the men of Bethshemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the Lord, even he smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore and ten men: and the people lamented, because the Lord had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter.

4.

And the men of Bethshemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God? And to whom shall he go up from us?

5.

And they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjathjearim, saying, The Philistines have brought again the ark of the Lord; come ye down, and fetch it up to you."

The golden 'emerods' represented each of the five Philistine royal cities – Ashdod ('powerful'), Gaza ('the strong'), Askelon (possible meaning: weight/balance/infamous fire), Gath ('winepress') and Ekron ('emigration'). There were numerous golden models of mice, representing every city, town and village owned by the five lords.

Unfortunately, the men of the city decided to open the Ark to see what was inside. We might ask why God should wreak havoc on them, but perhaps we do not fully understand the strictness of God as did the Hebrews. The priests should have warned the men not to touch anything. But, in their zeal, the men died. God killed 50,070 people of the region that day! The people were in shock and the leaders cried out in anguish... who is able to stand against Almighty God? And where should the Ark go next, to stop the slaughter?

They sent runners to the men of Kirjathjearim ('city of forests'), on the northern boundary of Judah. We cannot be sure if the men of Bethshemesh told them the whole truth (though the sudden death of over 50,000 people would soon be common knowledge!), but they related how the Philistines had sent the Ark back to them, and asked them to come and get it.

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God is not to be trifled with. What He says, He means. Men dared to take His Ark captive, and they failed, paying for it with their lives. God's own chosen people touched what belonged to Him, and so thousands died. We must remember that if 'leaders' in the churches lead badly, then the whole church will suffer as a result, as God removes His presence from them. He can also punish them on this earth. It is the duty of every Christian to listen and to reject what is not of God. They must jealously protect and honour what belongs to Him, including His word. It is true that scripture defends itself, but it is also true that we are to show our allegiance to him by defending His word, as a matter of honour and praise.

We cannot 'pass the buck' to others. Each of us is responsible before God for our own actions and inactions. It is also true that when we allow false teachers and preachers to stand before us as leaders, we are culpable and held accountable by God. If we do not reject the word of false teachers, then God will not allow us to go unpunished. This is why the lives of so many believers today are miserable and unfruitful.

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