

1 Samuel Chapter 6

Verses 1-5: The Philistine “priests and diviners,” tasked with determining how to ease the heavy hand of God on their people (5:11), ultimately devised a plan for returning the Ark to its rightful “place” in Israel.

1 Samuel 6:1 "And the ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months."

Seven months the Philistines were punished with the presence of the Ark; so long it was a plague to them, because they would not send it home sooner. Sinners lengthen out their own miseries by refusing to part with their sins. The Israelites made no effort to recover the Ark. Alas! Where shall we find concern for religion that prevails above all other matters? In times of public calamity, we fear for ourselves, for our families, and for our country; but who cares for the Ark of God? We are favored with the gospel, but it is treated with neglect or contempt.

We need not wonder if it should be taken from us; too many persons, though the weight of calamities, would occasion no grief. There are multitudes that any profession would please as well as that of Christianity. But there are those who value the house, the word, and the ministry of God above their richest possessions, who dread the loss of these blessings more than death. How willing bad men are to shift off their convictions, and when they are in trouble, to believe it is a chance that happens. And that the rod has no voice which they should hear or heed!

The number "seven" means spiritually complete. The country of the Philistines means in the possession of the Philistines. They moved it from place to place. Everywhere it was taken, the people were stricken with emerods.

1 Samuel 6:2 "And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, What shall we do to the ark of the LORD? tell us wherewith we shall send it to his place."

“The priests and the diviners”: These men of the Philistines, specifically identified in Scripture as having notable fame (Isa. 2:6), were summoned to figure out how to appease God so that He would stop the plague.

“Send it to his place”: The Philistines understood that they had offended God. Their diviners decided to rightfully appease His wrath by sending the Ark back to Israel.

They have realized that the God of the Israelites, who this Ark represents, is too much for them and they want to get rid of it. They must however, be careful how they dispose of it. Diviners were there to tell them when would be the luckiest time for them to move it. "Diviners" were those who sat with the prophet and the elder. They are forbidden to Christians. The priests would decide just how they would return the Ark. The princes wanted to return it to the Israelites before it killed all of the Philistines.

1 Samuel 6:3 "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."

“Trespass offering”: The purpose behind this offering was to both acknowledge and compensate for their trespass of dishonoring the God of Israel. These pagans recognized their sin and the need for manifest repentance, which they did according to their religious tradition by means of consecrated trespass or guilt offerings.

The trespass offering was given when a sin had been committed unintentionally. We must realize that, they would not have taken the Ark, had they known the trouble they would have had from taking it. They have decided to load gifts into the Ark to send back. The priests believe the people will be healed of the emerods the moment they send the Ark back. If they are not healed when the Ark leaves, then it was not God that brought the plague.

Verses 4-5: “Five Golden emerods” (or tumors), and “five golden mice” were made, one for each of the five “lords” of the five Philistine cities. Perhaps the Philistines thought that the making of the golden figures would heal the Philistines of the problems in the physical world that corresponded to them via sympathetic magic. They may also have constituted a compensatory payment to Israel’s God. The linking of tumors and mice is significant and may point to the existence of bubonic plague in the area. If so, it attests to the careful observation of the whole problem by the people of ancient Canaan.

1 Samuel 6:4 "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."

“Five golden emerods, and five golden mice”: It was their custom to make models of their sores (and the mice which brought the plague), in hopes that the deity would recognize that they knew why he was angry and remove the evil which had fallen upon them. The context (of verse 17), suggests that the items were in the writer’s presence at the time the account was recorded. The number 5 represents each of the Philistine cities and lords affected by God’s judgment.

This indicates there must have been a plague of mice as well as the emerods. It also indicates that everyone had the problem, because it says (on you all). The five mice made of gold and the five emerods made of gold were to be sent away with the Ark. In a sense, it was as if they were containing the plague to be sent away. There were five of each because there were five princes.

1 Samuel 6:5 "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."

“Give glory unto the God of Israel ... he will lighten his hand”: While sympathetic magic was the Philistine custom, this statement expressly affirms the intention behind the offerings: They

were to halt the dishonor, confess their sin and give glory to the God of Israel by acknowledging who it was that they had offended and who was the supreme Deity.

We see in this, a recognition that the God of Israel is far too great for them or their false gods to handle. It is possible, that the mice were a symbol of the plague, and not necessarily a literal overrun of mice.

1 Samuel 6:6 "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?"

“Wherefore then do ye harden your hearts”: The diviners correlate the Philistines’ actions of not recognizing God with those of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. This is the same word “harden” that was used (in Exodus 7:14; 8:15, 32). It is an interesting correlation, because the dominant purpose in Exodus Chapters 5-14 is that the Egyptians might “know that I am the Lord” (Exodus 7:5).

Someone is very familiar with the plagues that came on Egypt, when the Pharaoh would not let the people go. They are even aware that the hardness of the Pharaoh's heart is what brought worse and worse plagues on Egypt, until in the end he did let the people go. This is saying, let's not harden our hearts and have more plagues worse than the one we have.

Verses 7-12: It is unlikely that untrained “milk cows” could pull a cart together, and if they did, they would seek to return to their calves. For the cows to pull toward Israel (“Beth-shemesh” was one of its Levitical cities), would prove God was miraculously at work.

1 Samuel 6:7 "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:"

“On which there hath come no yoke”: To know without a doubt that the God of Israel was behind all of their troubles, the diviners devised a plan that would reveal whether God was the One responsible. Using cows which had “never been yoked” meant using animals that were untrained to pull a cart and probably would not go anywhere.

“Bring their calves home from them”: The second element in their plan was to use nursing cows taken away from their calves. For the cows unnaturally to head off in the opposite direction from their calves would be a clear sign that the cause of their judgment was supernatural.

That cows should leave their suckling calves to go to Israelite territory would signify to the Philistines that their problems had come as a judgment from the God of Israel.

This is just saying this must be a new cart that had never had a load on it before. The milk cows were to be untrained to the yoke. They will take their calves off them, so they will not follow the milk cows.

1 Samuel 6:8 "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."

“And lay it upon the cart”: Which God winked at in them, both because they were ignorant of God’s law to the contrary, and because they had no Levites to carry it upon their shoulders.

“In a coffer by the side thereof”: For they dared not presume to open the Ark, to put them within it.

They do not open the Ark. They put the trespass offering of gold in a separate container beside the Ark on the cart. They were actually afraid of the Ark. "Send it away" means there would be no one leading the cart on which the Ark sat.

1 Samuel 6:9 "And see, if it goeth up by the way of his own coast to Beth-shemesh, [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."

“Beth-shemesh”: Named “house of the sun” and located in the Sorek Valley, this was a Levitical city about 15 miles west of Jerusalem. Originally designated for the descendants of Aaron (Joshua 21:16), it was chosen to be the destination of the cows pulling the cart.

This will be one more sign to these people, that the God of Israel brought the plague upon them for taking the Ark. If it goes home, it is God. If it does not go home, but stays with them, it will be a sign that this plague was just something that would have happened anyway even without the Ark. The Philistines did not understand about the God of Israel and they began to regard the Ark itself as God. Beth-shemesh was now in the hands of Judah. It was a city of the priests.

1 Samuel 6:10 "And the men did so; and took two milch kine, and tied them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home:"

Made a new cart; not the lords of the Philistines, but workmen by their orders.

"And took two milch kine, and tied them to the cart": With the gear that horses, asses, or oxen, were usually fastened to a carriage they drew.

"And shut up their calves at home": Or, "in the house"; the cow house or stable where they used to be put; this they did to restrain them from following the cows, which would disturb them in drawing the cart.

1 Samuel 6:11 "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."

Perhaps the same men that made the cart; however they were the Philistines, yet were not punished for touching it, as Uzziah was, though an Israelite (2 Sam. 6:6).

"And the coffer with the mice of gold, and the images of their emerods": Which coffer was placed in a purse or bag hung at the side of the Ark, with the golden mice and emerods in it.

This just means they took the advice of their priests and did as they suggested.

1 Samuel 6:12 "And the kine took the straight way to the way of Beth-shemesh, [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 Beth-shemesh."

“Lowing as they went”: With the moaning from instinctive unwillingness to leave their calves behind, the cows went straight to Beth-shemesh, not turning to the right or left, leaving the inescapable conclusion that God had judged them.

There was no one leading these milk cows. They went directly to Beth-shemesh leaving no doubt that this was indeed, the LORD who had sent this plague to them. The lords of the Philistines did not want to take someone else's word that they went there without someone leading them. They followed to see for themselves what would happen.

1 Samuel 6:13 "And [they of] Beth-shemesh [were] reaping their wheat harvest in the valley: and they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see [it]."

“Reaping their wheat harvest”: Sometime in June. These harvests were accomplished with the whole city participating.

This was at the time of the wheat harvest. Everyone was in the field harvesting the wheat. They had been without the Ark for seven months and are thrilled that it is back. The Ark symbolized the presence of God to the Israelites. They felt when the Ark was there, God was residing with them.

1 Samuel 6:14 "And the cart came into the field of Joshua, a Beth-shemite, 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."

“Joshua, a Beth-shemite”: The cows stopped in the field of Joshua, where there was a large stone which was verifiable to the writer at the time the account was written.

“Burnt offering”: Because the cows and cart were used for sacred purposes, they could not be used for normal everyday purposes. Therefore, the men of Beth-shemesh sacrificed the cows using the cart for the fire.

The "they" that broke up the cart for firewood would, possibly, have been the priests; because no one was to touch the Ark but those appointed of God for that job. This great stone was a natural altar. The milk cows were the offering. This would have been an unusual offering. Usually the male was offered and it must be a young animal.

1 Samuel 6:15 "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 Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices the same day unto the LORD."

“Levites”: the men of Beth-shemesh, being Levites, were qualified to move the Ark.

“Put them on the great stone”: The stone mentioned was used as a pedestal for both the items of gold and the ark. At the time the account was written, it stood as a witness that God had returned to the land.

This was a Levitical city so the people, as well as the priest, should be well acquainted with the law. The offerings must also be done by the priest. Some of the things they were doing, even with the offering, were not in full keeping of the law. They were, however, overjoyed at the return of the Ark. This offering was acceptable to the LORD because of their attitude.

1 Samuel 6:16 "And when the five lords of the Philistines had seen [it], they returned to Ekron the same day."

“Five lords of the Philistines”: The lords of the Philistines, upon seeing that the Ark arrived safely, returned to Ekron.

We remember these five lords of the Philistines had come to see with their own eyes that the Ark had gone to Beth-shemesh. They have stayed a little way off so as not to be captured. They went back to Ekron to tell the news.

1 Samuel 6:17 "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;"

These were returned along with the Ark.

"For Ashdod one, for Gaza one, for Ashkelon, one, for Gath one, for Ekron one": Which were the five principalities of the Philistines that belonged to the five lords before mentioned; and each of these were at the expense of a golden emerod, and sent it along with the Ark to make atonement for the offence they had been guilty of in taking and detaining it.

These five cities had five princes who headed them. They represented the entire Philistine people. It is interesting to me, that the number "five" means grace. It is the grace of God that saves any of us.

1 Samuel 6:18 "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 Beth-shemite."

That is, as many golden mice as there were cities under the jurisdiction of the five lords, which are the same before mentioned: both of fenced cities and of country villages; walled and un-walled towns. It seems by this, as it was but reasonable it should be that the several villages adjacent and belonging to the five principal cities contributed their part towards the expense of the five golden emerods, and five golden mice. Since they were afflicted both in their persons; but especially in their fields as well as those in the cities.

“All the cities”: This was either to show that under the name of the five cities were comprehended all the villages and territories belonging to them, in whose name and at whose charge these presents were made. Or to express the difference between this and the former present, the emerods being only five, according to the five cities mentioned (1 Sam. 6:17), because it may seem the cities only, or principally, were pestered with that disease.

“The great stone of Abel”: Which is mentioned as the utmost border of the Philistines’ territory to which the plague of mice did extend; the word stone being easily understood out of (1 Samuel 6:14), where this great stone is expressly mentioned, as the place on which the Ark was set.

In the trespass offering, they were saying that they unknowingly sinned against God. It seemed that the mice of gold were more than five because each little village sent a golden mouse. They tried to all participate in the trespass offering. The stone that the Israelites offered on here was memorialized and kept as a reminder of this happening.

1 Samuel 6:19 "And he smote the men of Beth-shemesh, 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."

This action on the part of the men of Beth-shemesh constituted the sin of presumption. This is first addressed (in Num. 4:20 and is mentioned again in 2 Sam. 6:6-7).

The presumptuous mishandling of the “Ark” was inexcusable for men from a priestly city (Num. 4:5-6, 15-20). To mishandle, abuse, or violate the sanctity of the Ark was a grievous sin (2 Sam. 6:6-8).

It seemed that, after they sacrificed to God, they got curious and opened the ark and looked in. Even the Philistines were smarter than that, and they did not know the law. Everyone who looked into the ark was killed. This was forbidden and they knew that it was forbidden. The punishment for a sin in full knowledge is greater than a sin of ignorance. They were sorrowful after it happened. They were lamenting for the dead not repenting of the sin.

1 Samuel 6:20 "And the men of Beth-shemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? and to whom shall he go up from us?"

“Who is able to stand before ... God”: This question climaxes the narrative of the ark. No one is able to stand against God’s judgment. This applied to the people outside the covenant as well as those under the covenant. Presumption before God is unacceptable.

“To whom shall he go”: The expression was used to denote the desire to take the Ark away from them.

The answer is no one. This was a city of priests, who should have known better than to look into the Ark. This is possibly why the punishment is so severe. This group of priests was trying to get someone to take the Ark. This is so sad, since this is where God had it sent from the Philistines. It is as if they are blaming God for what happened. It was their sin of looking into the Ark which caused the deaths. They do not want to take the blame for their own sins.

1 Samuel 6:21 "And they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjath-jearim, saying, The Philistines have brought again the ark of the LORD; come ye down, [and] fetch it up to you."

“Kirjath-jearim” was a fortified city that originally belonged to the Gibeonites. It is first mentioned as a member of a Gibeonite confederation of four fortress cities which also included Gibeon, Chephirah, and Beeroth (Joshua 9:17). Kirjath-jearim was also known as Baalah (Joshua 15:9), Baale of Judah (2 Sam. 6:2), Kirjath-baal (Joshua 15:60), and Kirjath (Joshua 18:28). These names suggest it was an old Canaanite “high place,” a place of idolatrous worship.

The city was originally assigned to the tribe of Judah (Joshua 15:60), and later given to Benjamin (Joshua 18:14-15, 28). Kirjath-jearim was on the western part of the boundary line between Judah and Benjamin (Joshua 15:9). When the Ark of the Covenant was returned by the Philistines it was brought to this city (7:1-2). The Ark remained here for 20 years, and it was from Kirjath-jearim that David transported the Ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:2-3). Kirjath-jearim has been tentatively identified with the area of Abu Ghosh about eight miles northwest of Jerusalem on the Jaffa Road.

This city was possibly chosen, because it was the nearest city of any size. "Kirjath-jearim" means city of forests. This was not a true statement. The Philistines had not brought it. They had loosed it and it had come home. This is a Gibeonite town first assigned to Judah. Afterward it went to Benjamin.

1 Samuel Chapter 6 Questions

1. The Ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines _____ months.
2. What does the number "seven" mean?
3. Everywhere the people took the Ark; the people were stricken with _____.
4. Who did the Philistines call together, to decide what to do about the Ark?
5. What is a "diviner"?
6. Why did the princes want to return the Ark to the Israelites?

7. What did they decide should be sent back with the Ark?
8. The _____ offering was given, when a sin had been committed unintentionally.
9. What was the trespass offering they were to send back?
10. What were the mice made of?
11. How do we know the plague was on everyone?
12. How many emerods made of gold did they send?
13. What did the sending of the emerods away to Israel symbolize?
14. What are the Philistines admitting about God, when they send the offering with the Ark to Israel?
15. What did the Philistines know about the plagues in Egypt?
16. What would they carry the Ark on?
17. What would pull the cart?
18. What would be absolute proof to these people, if this plague was from God, or not?
19. Where does the cart go?
20. What were the people doing, when they looked up, and saw the Ark coming?
21. What did the Ark symbolize?
22. This great stone was a natural _____.
23. Why was this a good choice of cities for the Ark to come to?
24. Who had followed the Ark, to see where the milk cows took it?
25. What were the Philistines saying with the trespass offering?
26. What did the Israelites do with the milk cows that pulled the cart?
27. Who is able to stand before the holy LORD God?
28. Where was the Ark sent next?
29. What does the name of the city mean?