

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Twenty-Ninth Week - Wednesday

THE PHILISTINES RETURN THE ARK

"Now the ark of Yahweh was in the country of the Philistines seven months. And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, 'What shall we do with the ark of Yahweh? Tell us how we should send it to its place.' . . . Now the people of Beth Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley; and they lifted their eyes and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it. . . . Then He struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of Yahweh" (1 Samuel 6:1-2, 13, 19).

With all their anxiety to repair the error they had committed, the Philistines had a lurking suspicion that there might not, after all, be any real connection between the ark of the Lord and the inflictions to which they had been exposed. It might have been just a chance happening. Thus they came up with a plan of returning the ark that would make the matter very clear.

First they prepared a new cart, feeling that the sacred ark required a vehicle not previously employed for lowly uses. To the cart were attached to cows that had never been under the yoke, and were therefore likely to rebel in thus being forced to pull. Also, these cows had calves shut up at home; and from the well known impatience of such animals in being separated from their young, it was certain they would naturally be altogether disinclined to leave the place where their calves remained. And it was also decided that the cows were not to be driven or guided in any way but left entirely to their own impulses. Now if the cows took the direct course to the land of Israel instead of turning back to their calves or going in any other direction, it was to be concluded that it was the hand of the God of Israel which had been so heavy upon the Philistines.

The cows proceeded along the road to Beth Shemesh, quietly lowing at being separated from their calves but not turning aside to either the right or left. The Philistines doubtless followed behind and beheld these actions with great admiration. Finally the ark came into Beth Shemesh, where the people were at work in the fields, for it was harvest time. Their exultation and delight at the return of the ark--that glory which had departed from Israel--may be well imagined.

Now it must be observed that Beth Shemesh was a city of the priests; and some of them, with the Levites, formed a part of the population. In such places the public grief for the loss of the

ark may well have been of peculiar intensity. Therefore, in the transports of joy they determined to offer a sacrifice on such an extraordinary occasion, and allowed themselves to dispense with the ordinary law which forbade any sacrifice to be offered except on the one altar in the court of the tabernacle. Thus they took down the ark from the cart and placed it near a great stone that might serve for an altar. The cart was broken up to serve for fuel, partly because there was no other wood at hand and partly so that it might not be used for any less noble service after having borne the ark. They killed the cows and offered them up on the stone for a burnt offering.

One who has studied the laws regulating sacrifices sees in this transaction other irregularities besides the one just pointed out. By offering the sacrifice here, they necessarily dispensed with the sacred fire originally kindled from heaven. Moreover, in whole burnt offerings only the male animal could be used, though the female was allowed in peace offerings where only parts of the victims were consumed upon the altar. It may be conceived that the Bethshemites were led into this last irregularity by their wish to prevent the cows from being thereafter engaged in any less sacred service. Whatever the reasoning, it shows the beginning of an encroaching and disorderly spirit regarding the plainest directions of the law; and if left unpunished would lead to further violations.

The offense of the people was even greater in that they looked into the ark by removing the lid with the cherubim. This was nothing more than flagrant curiosity. To see the ark exposed in the open fields must have been a painful sight to the priests, who never approached the ark without the most profound reverence. And even the Philistines had restrained themselves from being so irreverent. Rather than dare to open the ark, they had simply placed their golden offerings in a casket, which they laid upon the top of the ark. The people of Beth Shemesh were heavily punished. A large number of them were smitten dead upon the spot.

There is some doubt about the number who died. In the authorized version we read of "fifty thousand and threescore and ten men." The mode of expressing this number is rather peculiar, suggesting that it has been misunderstood. It is to be noted that Josephus, with the same text before him for authority, makes the number to be seventy--the very number which is stated *above* fifty thousand. It is the same in the Septuagint. It is therefore reasonably conjectured that these authorities read not "fifty thousand" but "fifty of a thousand," which by a kind of decimation of the number of offenders, whatever was the actual population, would make the whole number concerned not exceed 1400 (which seems a suitable population for such a place as Beth Shemesh). The supply of the particle *of* in such a case is not only admissible but is often required by the construction of the Hebrew language. The reader may refer to Exodus 19:12; 36:8, 19, 34; Joshua 10:13; 2 Samuel 23:24; and 2 Kings 17:25 for other instances.