

STUDY 2

1 Samuel 5.1 - 7.14

Putting God in a box

Israel's loss

We left Israel in deep trouble. The armies of Israel are defeated. Eli and his sons are dead. The nation is without leadership. And the Philistines have captured the Ark of the Covenant. We are left wondering whether Israel can ever recover from such a national disaster. Was Hannah's song merely wishful thinking?

The Ark of the Covenant

Nations today take pride in their flag, their coat of arms and their national anthem. For Israel the Ark of the Covenant was all this and more. It was the throne of God himself—a symbol of God's holy presence and command over Israel. Only Levites (the tribe of priests) were allowed to carry the Ark, and they did this with long poles so as to avoid direct contact with it. To touch it was to desecrate the throne of God and risk death.

Regional gods

In ancient times each people had its own national god. This national god's domain was thought to end at the nation's border. War between nations was seen as a battle between their gods as much as their armies. The Philistines were a pagan people living in the Promised Land who worshiped a god called Dagon. God had commanded Israel to dispossess them, but Israel had failed to do this.

Just for starters

1. What remarkable 'coincidences' do you know about or have personally experienced?

Raiders of the Lost Ark

Read 1 Samuel 5.1-12

Investigate

2. What did the Philistines do with the Ark of God once it was captured? (5.2)

3. What happened to Dagon in the presence of the Ark of God and how does this reflect on Dagon? (5.3-5)

4. What happened to the Philistine cities of Ashdod, Gath and Ekron in the presence of the Ark of God? How did they try and resolve their problems?

Read 1 Samuel 6.1-12

Think it through

5. Why did the Philistines make it so hard for the Ark to return to the Israelites? (6.9)

6. What does the behaviour of the cows imply?

Triumphant return

Read 1 Samuel 6.13 - 7.2

Investigate

7. What was the response of the following Israelites to the Ark? How appropriate was their response?
 - a. the people of Beth Shemesh? (6.13-16,19-20)

 - b. the Levites (6.15)

 - c. the men of Kiriath Jearim (7.1-2)

Think it through

8. What does the Ark's return mean for Israel? (Remember, it is the Ark of the Covenant.)

9. What does this episode tell us about ...

a. The Kingship of God

b. Manipulating God

c. The concept of coincidence (cf. Proverbs 16.9)

A Free Agent

By afflicting the Philistines with haemorrhoids (that's the real translation of the word 'boils!') and toppling the statue of Dagon, the LORD had humiliated and overcome the Philistines. In these episodes, the LORD shows that no national border and no box could ever contain him. Nor could either the people of Israel, the armies of the Philistines, or other so-called gods contain him. He is a totally free agent and he is able to demonstrate this even when it seems he has lost control.

Humble Return

Read 1 Samuel 7.3-17

10. What does Samuel lead Israel to do? (7.3-6)

11. How does Israel defeat the Philistines? (7.7-14)

Think it through

12. What are some of the ways we "put God in a box" today?

13. What is the proper response to the kingship of God?