Supremacy

God manifested His power before the Philistines.

How well do God's people consider God's power and holiness? Is it enough to affect the lives that they lead? We know that the Lord (*Yahweh*) is Lord over His people, but what about the other nations? Is He Lord over them also? In this passage, the Lord revealed His power and glory beyond Israel's boundaries. He is "Judge of the whole earth" (Gen. 18:25). Here He acted against the Philistine establishment that held Him up to ridicule, even as earlier He acted against His own religious establishment that made a mockery of His name (1 Sam. 2:30-36; 3:10-18). In both, He brought the central religious figure tumbling to the ground.

Anyone who acts contemptuously against the Lord, either Israelite or Philistine, was doomed for judgment. Both the Israelites and the Philistines were about to learn a big lesson about Yahweh. He would not permit the Israelites to use the ark of the covenant as a magic good luck charm, guaranteeing victory no matter their own spiritual state. Neither would He permit the Philistines to demean Him as a trophy of their victory. The people of Beth-shemesh were taught a lesson about God's holiness (6:19-20). The Philistine armies were routed by God's power (7:7-11). The Lord is far more fearsome and powerful than any earthly foe.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 Sam. 4:1–7:17

In the ancient world, any battle between two nations was actually a theological battle. The god of one nation battled the god of the other nation, and the prevailing god was the stronger. Since the Philistines won the battle over the Israelites and were able to capture their sacred symbol, the ark of the covenant, the Philistines mistakenly believed that their god Dagon was stronger than the Israelite God, Yahweh.

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

Sovereignty (1 Sam. 5:1-5)

After winning a military battle against the Israelites, the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant and placed it in the temple of Dagon in Ashdod. The following morning, the statue of Dagon was found face down before the ark. The statue of Dagon was returned to a standing position, only to be found face down again the next morning with its head and hands broken off and lying on the threshold.

VERSE 1

After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod,

Ebenezer was the Israelite encampment where the Philistines fought against Israel and **captured the ark of God. Ashdod** was one of the five major Philistine cities (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath). *Ashdod* was about nineteen miles south of *Ebenezer*, and was apparently the main site of worship for the Philistine god Dagon.

VERSE 2

brought it into the temple of Dagon and placed it next to his statue.

Dagon was the chief god of the Philistines. Various proposals are given for the meaning of Dagon's name. Some Jewish medieval commentators tied Dagon's name to the Hebrew word which means "fish," thus, as seafaring people the Philistines sought to have a great harvest of fish whenever they set out to sea. Few today hold to this view. Another interpretation ties Dagon's name to the Hebrew term for "grain," so Dagon was the Philistine god of the harvest. It is doubtful that the Philistines were speaking Hebrew, so the Hebrew meaning of the name *Dagon* would have had little relevance.

The Philistines likely adopted a new national god when they came across the Mediterranean Sea and settled in Canaan. They were greatly influenced by the local theology of the Ba'al cult in which Dagon was known as the father of the storm god Ba'al. Worship of Dagon along the Mediterranean coast was known since before the time of the patriarch Abraham from northern Syria as far south as Gaza.

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

By bringing the ark into Dagon's temple, the Philistines were supposedly bringing the defeated Israelite god, Yahweh, (represented by the ark) **and placed it next to his statue** (lit. "beside Dagon"), the victorious god. Thus, Yahweh was placed in Dagon's shrine to serve Dagon, a picture of dramatic submission and a great source of encouragement to Dagon's worshipers.

VERSE 3

When the people of Ashdod got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and returned him to his place.

Seriously damaging Philistine belief, to their dismay **early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD.** Dagon's statue was lying face down, prone and groveling before the Lord, a distinct sign of submission before Him. The Philistines could draw one of two conclusions on the matter: Either Yahweh had struck Dagon down, or Dagon clearly recognized Yahweh's sovereignty and had voluntarily bowed himself down. The Philistines had desired to make a political point in their victory over Israel, but Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, was not a mere symbol to emphasize national politics. He was neither a political prop to boost Israelite morale in battle, nor was He a prop to bolster the Philistines' false belief.

So they took Dagon and returned him to his place. It is always disturbing when the god one worships topples over. So the Philistines had to pick up and stand up their god. They had thought that Dagon was so powerful in battle, but he didn't even have the strength to lift his own face out of the dust!

The writer tells the story with a certain measure of humor, and it would be hilariously funny if it wasn't so terribly tragic. Isaiah described the practice of making idols and the thoughts of the craftsman behind them (Isa. 44:13-19). The craftsman would cut down a tree, measure out the wood and chisel it into a human figure. The rest of the wood he would burn and cook his dinner over the fire, keeping himself warm in the process. He would then worship the idol he made from the rest of the wood and say, "Save me, for you are my god" (v. 17). He worshiped a mere block of wood. How tragic!

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

VERSE 4

But when they got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. This time, Dagon's head and both of his hands were broken off and lying on the threshold. Only Dagon's torso remained.

The next morning, not only was Dagon's statue lying facedown **before the ark of the LORD,** but this time, **Dagon's head and both of his hands were broken off and lying on the threshold.** Only **Dagon's torso** remained. In ancient battles it was not uncommon for the conquering king to behead the enemy and cut off his hands (1 Sam. 17:51,54; 31:9; 2 Sam. 4:12). Thus, the Lord's actions toward Dagon depicted a grisly military execution (1 Sam. 31:8-10). In the previous chapter Eli had fallen and broken his neck when he heard of the ark's capture (4:18). This effectively ended the abomination brought on by Israel's worship leadership.

Now Dagon had been thoroughly humiliated. An idol without head and hands better represents what he truly is: A being that cannot sense anything nor do anything (Ps. 115:1-8). With no head, Dagon had no eyes to see, ears to hear, nose to smell, or mouth to speak. From the Philistine perspective, with no hands for acting, their (false) god Dagon had no power whatsoever. He had been robbed of all power and emptied of all his dignity. The false god had been completely dethroned.

VERSE 5

That is why, still today, the priests of Dagon and everyone who enters the temple of Dagon in Ashdod do not step on Dagon's threshold.

In the ancient world, the thresholds of temples were treated with respect because the **threshold** marked the boundary between sacred space and profane or common space. The writer notes that even some time after the event, **still today,** the Philistines continued to honor Dagon's threshold. This shows a period of time had passed since the event in Ashdod and when it was written down. Thus, the "defeated" Yahweh defeated the "victorious" god on Dagon's home turf, in his own temple. Dagon paid homage to the Lord (vv. 1-3a), was completely unable to right himself (v. 3b), and Dagon was destroyed and rendered totally helpless (vv. 4-5).

The "idols" may look different than in Samuel's day, but they are at the same time totally helpless and horribly dangerous. The only power a false god has is the power to destroy the lives of its worshipers. But our

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

God is still in the business of exposing the idols in our societies as completely helpless. The idol of wealth is fleeting and cannot deliver what it promises, and people's lives are destroyed in the process. Our society is consumed with the idol of sex, ever present on the internet, in movies and on TV, represented in pornography and sexual immorality. The idolater is seeking to meet the craving for companionship that each person rightfully has, but the idol cannot deliver. People are lonelier now with no deep relationships, and their lives are destroyed as a result. The idol of power, expressed through political ideologies, corporate dominance, and the never-ending search for more influence, leads to dead ends.

Explore Further

Read "Philistines" on pages 1264–1266 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In what ways were the Philistines a threat to the Israelites?

Judgment (1 Sam. 5:6-10)

God brought devastation on the people of Ashdod and afflicted them with tumors. The people called a council of Philistine rulers to determine what to do with the ark. The ark was moved to Gath, only to have that city's inhabitants afflicted with tumors. So, they sent the ark to Ekron, causing panic among the people there.

VERSE 6

**The LORD's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod.
He terrified the people of Ashdod and its territory and
afflicted them with tumors.**

Dagon had lost his hands, but the Lord still had His! Dagon's hands were severed and powerless, but **the LORD's hand** was powerful and oppressive. The expression "the hand of the LORD" or its equivalent occurs eight times in chapters 5–6. The term **heavy** is the same as the term "glory" (compare 4:21) that had departed from Israel, but the "heaviness" of God was certainly present among the Philistines. The presence of this powerful God **terrified the people of Ashdod and its territory.**

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

The Lord **afflicted them with tumors.** The term translated *tumors* in other contexts means a mound or a hill, but in this context it means "swellings" (see also Deut. 28:27), that is, hill-shaped growths. The early Jewish scribes wrote an explanatory note in the margin of the text which is related to an Aramaic term meaning "to strain at the stool," thus commonly translated "hemorrhoids." Hemorrhoids may be the result of having diarrhea from bubonic plague, cholera, or dysentery. Regardless, these *tumors* were no laughing matter. Bubonic plague, cholera, and dysentery are major killers, and diarrhea, if not arrested, is one of the most deadly illnesses even in the world today.

VERSES 7-8

When the people of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, "The ark of Israel's God must not stay here with us, because his hand is strongly against us and our god Dagon." So they called all the Philistine rulers together and asked, "What should we do with the ark of Israel's God? The ark of Israel's God should be moved to Gath," they replied. So they moved the ark of Israel's God.

The Philistines understood the reason for the plague. It was because of **the ark of Israel's God.** They had to get rid of it. **"His hand is strongly against us and our god Dagon."** They confessed that neither Dagon nor they could stand up to Israel's God. They had desired to take possession of Israel's ark as a token of victory, but now the ark was having victory over them. Instead of having the ark, in a way, the ark had them.

They called all the Philistine rulers together, the rulers of the five Philistine cities, to discuss the matter. **"What should we do with the ark of Israel's God?"** The first step was simply to move the ark to another city, to **Gath.**

VERSE 9

After they had moved it, the LORD's hand was against the city of Gath, causing a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, from the youngest to the oldest, with an outbreak of tumors.

The people of Gath received the same judgment as the people of Ashdod—**the LORD's hand was against the city of Gath.** In the Old Testament, when the Lord started fighting He often threw the enemy into panic, thus the Lord was **causing a great panic,** tumult, or confusion among the

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

enemy (Deut. 7:23). The entire city, **from the youngest to the oldest,** suffered the plague of tumors.

VERSE 10

The people of Gath then sent the ark of God to Ekron, but when it got there, the Ekronites cried out, "They've moved the ark of Israel's God to us to kill us and our people!"

In a desperate move, the people of Gath **sent the ark of God to Ekron.** It was a rather selfish move because their brothers in Ekron readily exclaimed, **"They've moved the ark of Israel's God to us to kill us and our people!"** It is almost like a victory tour turned around. The "victorious" people were now being defeated. Israel's "defeated" God was now proving to be the victor. No one wanted to keep the ark because it meant certain death for the city.

"The hand of God was very heavy" against the people of Ekron (v. 11, KJV), and many people died (v. 12). As a result, the people of Ekron cried out in great anguish, "and the outcry of the city went up to heaven" (v. 12). Would God be moved by their cries?

Since no one wanted the ark of Israel's God, and the presence of the ark would eventually kill all of the Philistine people, the Philistine lords decided to send it back to Israel.

Many people believe that they have God all figured out, and they can gain the upper hand. As Paul said of sinful humanity, "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18). When people have lost their fear of God, virtually nothing will limit what they can and will do. "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served what has been created instead of the Creator, who is praised forever. Amen" (1:25). Pride and arrogance against God will soon prove to be their undoing.

The psalmist described "the kings of the earth" and "rulers" who express their rage and rebellion "against the LORD and his Anointed One" (Ps. 2:1-3). The Lord is unfazed by their arrogance. He ridicules and laughs at their puny efforts to exert dominance over Him (vv. 4-5). He has placed His Anointed One, His Son, over them to rule the universe and break anyone who would rebel against His authority (vv. 6-9). But God gives a gracious warning to those who would be arrogantly against His authority and rule (vv. 10-12). Anyone, no matter who he is, who stands against the Lord in his unholy arrogance, will face His judgment. His punishment may come in the form of tumors, or it may be far more severe.

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

Explore Further

Read "Ark of the Covenant" on pages 115–117 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Notice the ark's importance in the worship life of Israel and how the ark played a major part in Israel's story from Sinai to the temple in Jerusalem. Why might the Israelites have come to view the ark as a means of defeating the Philistines?

Reverence (1 Sam. 6:13-15,19-20)

After seven months, the Philistines decided to send the ark back to the Israelites with a guilt offering. A new cart was prepared with two cows, the ark of the covenant, and the guilt offering before being sent toward Beth-shemesh (6:1-12).

VERSES 13-14

The people of Beth-shemesh were harvesting wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they were overjoyed to see it. The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there near a large rock. The people of the city chopped up the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD.

The town of **Beth-Shemesh** was about fourteen miles west of Jerusalem and was located in a fertile valley on the border with the Philistines (2 Chron. 28:18). It was one of the levitical cities (Josh. 21:16; 1 Chron. 6:59), given to the Levites to reside in and from which to minister to the spiritual needs of God's people in the area, such as preserving and teaching God's law (Lev. 10:11; Deut. 10:8; 33:10; 2 Chron. 17:8-9; 35:3; Neh. 8:7-19). As a levitical city, the people of Beth-Shemesh should have been especially knowledgeable of God's requirements in the Mosaic law regarding care and treatment of the ark. But they failed to obey God's instructions (Num. 4:15) and they felt God's judgment. They trifled "with the holy throne of Yahweh's presence."[1]

The Philistines sent the ark back to Israel on the back of a new ox cart drawn by two cows with nursing calves. Divinely compelled to leave their calves behind and against their nature, the cows led the cart away into Israelite territory.

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

The people of the city chopped up the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. The people may have intended the sacrifice as a reverential act toward the Lord, but according to the Mosaic law it was a reckless act. Male cows were to sacrificed to the Lord, specifically males without defect (Lev. 1:3; 22:19). Considering that this time period immediately followed the time of the judges, specifically the leadership of Eli and his sons, it explains why Israel acted almost as if they didn't know that God's law existed. There was spiritual laxity among the people and even their Levite leadership.

VERSE 15

The Levites removed the ark of the Lord, along with the box containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. That day the people of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the Lord.

Since **the Levites** were to care for the tabernacle and the ark, they were the ones who **removed the ark** from the cart and placed it on a large rock located in the field. Then the people, probably under the leadership of priests, **offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the Lord.**

Verses 17-18 describe the "guilt offering" the Philistines offered to the God of the Israelites along with the return of the ark. They had fashioned golden replicas of the tumors they were afflicted with, five of them, one for each Philistine city. The Hebrew text indicates "five gold tumors *and* five golden mice," or "five gold tumors *namely/that is* five golden mice," that the golden tumors were mouse-shaped. The Hebrew conjunction can be translated either way. Regardless, the offering was an attempt to appease their guilt before Israel's God.

VERSE 19

God struck down the people of Beth-shemesh because they looked inside the ark of the Lord. He struck down seventy persons. The people mourned because the Lord struck them with a great slaughter.

What did the people of Beth-shemesh do that was so horrible that God would strike them down? First of all, no Israelites outside the Aaronic priesthood were permitted to see even the exterior of the ark, much less its interior (Num. 4:5-6). Not even the Kohathites, the levitical group entrusted with transporting the tabernacle furniture, were permitted to look **inside the ark.** Aaron and his sons were to cover the ark.

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

Once covered, Aaron and his sons were to assign each of the Kohathites to his specific task (vv. 15-20).

Instead of concealing the ark, the Levites displayed the ark on a large rock for all to see (1 Sam. 6:15), and touching it, **they looked inside the ark of the Lord.** The ark was not to be opened, or even touched, out of respect for the Lord (2 Sam. 6:6-7). They displayed a shameless disregard for the ark's sanctity, displaying utter sacrilege.

VERSE 20

The people of Beth-shemesh asked, "Who is able to stand in the presence of the Lord this holy God? To whom should the ark go from here?"

The people of Beth-shemesh's response was no better than the Philistines. They mourned over God's judgment rather than over their own sin. They were more concerned with the consequences of their irreverent actions than the severity of their sin. There was no self-examination, searching their hearts, and weeping over their sin. The concern of the people of Beth-shemesh was simply that **the ark,** and the power of the Lord, this holy God, needed to be removed and sent to someone else.

In Jesus's day, the Gerasene people saw His power and authority at work as He cast a legion of unclean spirits out of their local madman (Mark 5:1-20). The people became frightened at the power of Jesus over the demons, but they were also concerned at their financial loss from the herd of pigs that drowned. Instead of falling down in worship, "they began to beg him to leave their region" (v. 17), and they saw Jesus get into the boat and leave. The mighty God was in their presence, and instead of adjusting their hearts around that fact, they asked Him to leave. How tragic!

Explore Further

Read "Holy" on page 758 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How is God separate from His creation and yet He interacts with His creation?

1. Robert D. Bergen, *1,2 Samuel*, vol. 7, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 102.

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources