

Ark of the Covenant

BACKGROUND PASSAGES

Main Passages

I Samuel 5:1-6:15 Ark captured by Philistines
II Chronicles 5:2-14 Ark brought into temple

Related Passages

I Samuel 4 Philistines capture ark
Exodus 25:10-22 God gives instructions concerning the construction of the Ark
Hebrews 9:1-5 Contents of the Ark
II Chronicles 6-7 The Temple dedication

Suggested Homiletic Passage

II Chronicles 5:7-14

MEMORY VERSE

Don't you know that you are God's sanctuary and that the Spirit of God lives in you?

I Corinthians 3:16

LESSON OBJECTIVE

In the Old Testament, the Ark of the Covenant was God's dwelling place among His people. The capture of the Ark by the Philistines and subsequent return showed that Jehovah was the one true God. Today He dwells in the hearts of believers through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

LESSON

The Ark of the Covenant played a vital role in the community of Israel in the Old Testament. It was God's dwelling place within the Israelite community and therefore a most precious possession. Originally housed in the tabernacle, it later was housed in Solomon's temple. The story of its capture by the Philistines (in *I Samuel*) and the temple dedication (in *II Chronicles*) further illustrate the importance of the Ark. Today God dwells with His people through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

I Samuel 5:1-6:15

In I Samuel 4 the Israelites had displeased God. The Israelites carried the Ark into battle, hoping that God would grant a military victory against the Philistines. The result was a total disaster. The Ark was captured by the Philistines during the battle. Compounding the tragedy, the judge and high priest of Israel, Eli, died the same day upon hearing news of the Ark's capture. The glory of God in the ark had departed Israel as the Philistines basked in the glow of victory. But God was not surprised by these events and He was not about to share his glory with any false god, as the Philistines soon painfully learned.

The narrative picks up just after the capture of the Ark. In 5:2 the Philistines took the Ark to the city of Ashdod and placed the Ark in the temple of Dagon next to a statue of Dagon. The Philistines worshipped many gods, but Dagon was the chief god, to whom was attributed rain and assurance of bountiful harvests.¹ The Philistines may have recognized the importance of the Ark to Israel and hoped that it might help them, too, or they might simply have attributed the victory to Dagon and placed the Ark in the temple as a war trophy.²

A curious thing happened that night. When the people entered the temple the next morning, they found the statue of Dagon on its face before the Ark. This is certainly a picture of God asserting His authority over the false god. The Bible does not record the reaction of the Philistines other than to note that they returned Dagon to his original place. The next morning Dagon was once more on his face before the Ark. In addition, his head and arms had been broken off, leaving only the body prostrate before the ark.

The Philistines still did not understand (or refused to accept) what God was trying to tell them. In verse 6 the Lord's hand was heavy upon the people of Ashdod, and he afflicted them with many tumors. The men of Ashdod finally realized they were dealing

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with a Being who was beyond their control and more powerful than their gods.

Not knowing what to do, they gathered together all the Philistine leaders to discuss the predicament. It was decided to send the Ark away to the city of Gath. Verse 9 states, “After they had moved it, the Lord’s hand was against the city of Gath, causing a great panic.” Both young and old were afflicted by tumors, just as they had been in Ashdod.

The Gathites sent the Ark to the city of Ekron. News of what had happened to Ashdod and Gath had reached Ekron ahead of the Ark. The Ekronites, wanting nothing to do with the Ark, pleaded with the Philistine leaders to return it to the Israelites. As it was with Ashdod and Gath, the hand of God was heavy upon the Philistines. Many Ekronites were afflicted with tumors while others just died (v.12).

At the beginning of chapter 6 the Philistine leaders met with their priests and “diviners” to decide how to properly return the Ark. The Ark had been in the hands of the Philistines for seven months, and still they were not convinced that all the trouble they had endured was from the hand of the God of the Israelites.

It was suggested that the Ark not be returned without a trespass offering. The Philistines had five rulers, so it was suggested that they make five gold images of the tumors that had afflicted the people, along with five golden mice. Mice were also likely part of the afflictions from God. The mice could have facilitated the rapid spread of disease. In verse 10, the Ark was loaded on a cart and attached to two female milk cows. The symbolic gold tumors and mice were placed in a box on the cart. Since milk cows were used that had never been yoked, it was unlikely they would pull together.³

In verse 9 the Philistines had decided that if the cattle went towards Israel on their own accord, then they would know that it was the God of Israel who was judging them. If the cows did not, then “... it was just something that happened to us by chance.”

The Philistines followed the cart as the cows worked in tandem and headed toward the Israelite settlement of Beth-shemesh (v,12). They observed the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh harvesting wheat in the valley. Upon seeing the ark, the Israelites were overjoyed. The Levites were called to come take possession and set the Ark upon a rock. The cart was cut up and used to create a fire. The cows were killed and sacrificed to the Lord. The Philistine rulers returned to the city of Ekron. Despite their attempt at reconciliation, the Lord’s hand was against the Philistines all of Samuel’s life (I Samuel 7:13). Samuel was Eli’s successor.

God had preserved His glory and returned the Ark to the people of Israel. A great revival broke out in Israel, leading to the destruction of the false idols in the land. It would still be several decades before the Ark was properly housed within Solomon’s temple. For the time being, the people of Israel rejoiced at God’s provision in protecting the Ark.

II Chronicles 5:2-14

In II Chronicles 5 Solomon had completed the first temple. It was time for the dedication of the Temple to God’s glory. It would be a grand spectacle and time of worship as all of Israel came to participate. The Levites took up the Ark and, in verse 7, carried it into the inner sanctuary of the temple, which was the most holy place called the Holy of Holies. Not a small space, this was a room 30' by 30' by 30'. Two large winged cherubim were in the room, their wings extending 15' each, covering the entire width of the room. The Ark was placed beneath the wings of the cherubim, so that their wings formed a cover over the Ark. A thick curtain covered the front of the room. This was the curtain that was torn in two at Jesus’ crucifixion.

In verse 11 the priests came out of the most holy place as the Levitical singers, accompanied by 120 trumpets and various cymbals and musical instruments, praised God. As they worshiped, the temple was filled with a cloud. The Levites “were not able to continue ministering, for the glory of the Lord filled

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God's temple." (II Chronicles 5:14) God had accepted the work of Solomon and the Israelites.

From now on, the Holy of Holies could only be entered once a year on the Day of Atonement, by a consecrated priest. God would dwell among His people, but even then at a distance. Today the presence of God, in the life of the covenant community, is personal. Believers are indwelt with the Holy Spirit. "Don't you know that you are God's sanctuary and that the Spirit of God lives in you?" (I Cor. 3:16) Just as the Israelites were blessed to have God dwelling among them, believers are even more blessed to have Him within our hearts, receiving guidance and teaching from our ever present Lord.

Origin and contents of the Ark

Exodus 25:10-22 is where God gave instructions concerning the construction of the ark. The ark was 45" long, 27" wide, and 27" high. Rings were attached to each corner. Two gold-covered poles were inserted through the rings and were used to carry the ark. The rings may have been attached to the bottom of the Ark, so that it could be lifted "on high."⁴ The lid of the Ark was called the mercy seat. On top of the mercy seat were two winged cherubim. Exodus 25:22 states, "I will meet you there above the mercy seat, between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the testimony; I will speak with you from there about all that I command you regarding the Israelites."

What was in the Ark? Hebrews 9:4 speaks of three items. The three items were the tablets of the ten commandments, a gold jar containing manna, and the rod of Aaron's which had budded. It was a common practice in antiquity to place covenant and treaty documents in a sanctuary box.⁵ Some believe the staff and jar were removed at some point before Solomon's temple was completed as II Chronicles 5:10 states "Nothing was in the ark except the two tablets ..."

The Ark Today?

Where is the ark today? After the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and plundered the Temple, the Ark was lost to history. It was possibly destroyed by king Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians.

Contrary to the story line of the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the Nazi's did not find the Ark only to be consumed by the wrath of God and a talented team of special effects artists. Still, there is no lack of theories suggesting that the ark survived to the current day. Several sites around Jerusalem, including under the Temple mount, have been argued as the location of the Ark. Other sites such as caves near where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found and even Ethiopia have been suggested.

If the Ark is ever recovered it would be the greatest archeological discovery of all time. Needless to say, it will only be revealed if God desires so and will be in His perfect timing .

SUGGESTED HYMNS

1. *Abide with Me*, 88, 2008 Baptist Hymnal.
2. *Breathe on Me*, 332, 2008 Baptist Hymnal.
3. *Without Him*, 470, 2008 Baptist Hymnal.
4. *We are Called to be God's People*, 391, 2008 Baptist Hymnal.

AGE GROUP CONSIDERATIONS

The concept of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit may be difficult for some younger children. It may be best to tell them that when we trust in Jesus, God is always with us even though we cannot see Him.

The background information about the Ark may also be taught, though is not essential to the lesson. Older children will find fascinating some of the theories about the possible existence of the Ark today.

STUDENT APPLICATIONS

1. Students will know that the story of the Philistines and the Ark is recorded in the Old Testament book of I Samuel.
2. Students will know that the Ark of the covenant was the symbol of God's presence to the nation of Israel.
3. Students will know that God actually "met" the priests at the Mercy seat on the Ark.

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4. Students will know that God indwells believers today through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
5. Students will know that God caused the idol of Dagon to fall face-first before the Ark.
6. Students will know that God punished the Philistines for stealing the Ark by sending tumors and other punishments.
7. Students will know that the Ark was placed in the Holy of Holies when the Temple, which God had Solomon construct, was finished.
8. Students will know that God's glory descended as a cloud on the temple during the dedication ceremony.

RESOURCES/CREDIT

1. *Life Application Bible*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 442.
2. David Alexander & Pat Alexander, eds. *Eerdmans' Handbook to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 233.
3. *Ibid.*, 234.
4. *Manners & Customs of the Bible*. (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1996), 79.
5. Robert P. Gordon, *The International Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, F.F. Bruce, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 175.