

In some translations of verse 19 we read that the Lord strikes down fifty thousand and seventy men of Beth-Shemesh, the village where the Philistines return the ark to Israel. In others, it is just seventy. Both numbers are supported by Hebrew manuscripts but seventy seems more consistent with the likely population of Beth-Shemesh.

Either way, the Lord inflicts a grievous punishment on the people of the town. We might wonder why.

The ark represents God's glory and His holiness which He is ever careful to protect. Adam and Eve had close personal communion with God but then estranged themselves from Him. With the law the Lord lays down strict rules for access. Only the Levites can carry the ark on the wilderness journey. Even they cannot touch it but must lift it using poles inserted through rings on the sides. Only the high priest can enter the chamber where it resides, the Most Holy Place, and only once a year. To violate these prohibitions brings death.

So we may surmise that the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh, in their joy at the recovery of the ark, neglect to give it due reverence. They forget or dismiss the careless and superstitious errors that led to the loss of the ark in the first place.

The Lord's jealousy toward the ark extends even to the room where the ark would reside in the Second Temple had it not been lost to history before the time of the exile. The curtain before the inner room was a fatal barrier to curious or devout alike. So we may wonder all the more at Mark 15:38: "And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." The entrance to God's holiest place exposed and open to mortal humans! Incredible!

The reason, of course, is that all God's holy demands have been satisfied through His Son. "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Notes

6:4 The five lords correspond to the five cities of the Philistines: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron

Questions for study and discussion:

1. The Lord seems to deal more gently with the Philistines who have taken the ark than the Israelites who recover it. Why, do you think?
2. In their relief at getting rid of the ark and the curses brought by possessing it, the Philistines send a golden guilt offering along with it. What other Bible accounts are similar?

3. How does the use of the milk cows prove that the Lord's hand is in the restoration plan?
4. In verse 13 the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh rejoice that the ark of the Lord has been restored to them. In Daniel Chapter 9, Daniel recognizes that the holy land is soon to be restored to his people. Does Daniel rejoice and celebrate like the Beth-Shemites? Are there times we should mourn and confess rather than rejoice?
5. Why might the sacrifice of verse 14 be displeasing to the Lord? (See 1 Samuel 15)
6. In verse 20, the survivors of the Lord's wrath exclaim, "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?" This echoes again in Revelation 6:17, "For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" What's the answer? Who indeed is able to stand, and why?