

1 Samuel 5

The Heavy Hand of Yahweh

INTRODUCTION

People of God, in the center of St. Peter's Square in Rome stands a 4,000-year-old Egyptian obelisk. Originally dedicated to the sun god in Heliopolis, it was brought to Rome and placed in Emperor Nero's Circus, where many Christians, including the apostle Peter, were martyred. It once bore a golden ball at its pinnacle representing the sun, since it was a monument to the sun god in the city of the Sun – Heliopolis.

In the 1500s, the Catholic Church moved this obelisk to its current location, in the courtyard of St. Peter's Basilica. They removed the golden ball and placed a cross at its pinnacle. They also built a pedestal for it and inscribed these words:

On the eastern side: "Behold the Cross of the Lord, flee ye adversaries. The Lion of the Tribe of Judah has won."

On the western side: "Christ conquers, Christ reigns, Christ rules; may Christ defend His people from all evil."

The obelisk, which once stood as a symbol of sun worship and idolatry, and which later stood as a silent witness to the deaths of Christ's saints, including Peter, is now crowned with the cross, and stands as a testimony of Christ's triumph

over pagan idolatry and the victory that Christ's saints have in the midst of death.

DAGON!

In 1 Samuel 4, the LORD defeated Israel in battle by the Philistines, and Eli, Hophni, and Phineas died, and the Ark of the Covenant was captured, and taken into exile by the Philistines. In memory of the horrible event, Phinehas' wife, before she died after giving birth to a son, named him Ichabod - the Glory has Departed.

In 1 Samuel 5, we read of how the glory of God went into exile. The Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant and placed it in the temple of Dagon in Ashdod as a trophy of Dagon's victory over Jehovah. But when the people of Ashdod arose early the next morning, the image of Dagon had fallen down prostrate before the Ark of the LORD. So the people picked up Dagon, and put him back in his place. And the next day the people found Dagon fallen over again, this time with Dagon's head and feet cut off on the threshold of the Temple. And the people looked and said, *Dagon!*

THRESHOLD

A superstition arose in Ashdod because of this. The Priests of Dagon and all who entered the house of Dagon refused

to tread on the threshold of Dagon from that day on. But treading on the threshold of a dead idol should be the least of your worries. For what men ought to fear is falling into the hands of the Living God (Heb. 10:31). Which is exactly what happened to Dagon.

Dagon, the dead idol he is, is helpless to stand before the LORD, and the Philistines are about to become like their idol.¹

A couple of things stand out about the threshold. First, Dagon's severed hands lying on the threshold show his desperate attempt to flee from the presence of God. With Yahweh's arrival, the temple of Dagon has just been reclaimed as the temple of Yahweh, and this false god is a trespasser. His attempted escape ends in humiliation—decapitation and dismemberment. It is yet another head-crushing victory for the LORD of Glory, illustrating His inevitable triumph over all false gods.

The threshold also carries the symbolism of new birth, and even fertility. Recall how Hannah prayed for a child at the entrance of the Tabernacle of the LORD; and how the river of living water flows out from the threshold of Ezekiel's temple. Here, the threshold of Dagon's temple becomes the

¹ Jim Newheiser, 1 Samuel, 40.

place where the so-called god of fertility, meets his end. His lifeless body lies at the very symbol of his own fruitfulness.

GOD OF (IN)FERTILITY

His severed hands further illustrate that Dagon is incapable of productivity. In Scripture, hands or arms often signify strength, and a man's sons are an extension of his strength, his enduring legacy passed down through his lineage.

The Man of God prophesied against Eli's house, saying:

“Behold, the days are coming when I will cut off your arm and the arm of your father’s house, so that there will not be an old man in your house.”

Here we see a parallel between the idol and his worshipers. Dagon, the god of fertility, and productivity is stripped of his strength, rendered impotent and incapable of producing life at the threshold when his head and hands are cut off. Eli, in union with Dagon breaks his neck, and has the two arms of his sons cut off. Truly, those who put their trust in Dagon will share his fate.

Thus, the threshold of Dagon is transformed from a place of birth and fertility to a place of judgment and death. Dagon has no power in his own house, no ability to defend himself, and no way to propagate and perpetuate his faith.

Men have to prop him up, and put him in his place. But the Lord doesn't need man's help. Yahweh alone is the source of life and strength, because He is the true and living God.

THOSE WHO TRUST IN THEM BECOME LIKE THEM

Those who trust in idols inevitably become like them—lifeless, senseless, and void of true productivity and creativity. As Psalm 115:8 declares, "*Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them.*" Idols are deaf and dumb, incapable of vision or action, and their worshipers mirror these traits. This spiritual truth explains why creativity and imagination wither during times of apostasy and idolatry.

When a culture abandons the worship of the Creator, its wellspring of originality dries up. Hollywood serves as a striking example: unable to produce anything truly new, it often recycles old stories, remaking them in ways that are frequently inferior, hollow, and devoid of meaning.

This lack of fresh ideas reveals a kind of spiritual bankruptcy. Just as Satan can create nothing but corrupts and degrades what God has made, idolatry stifles human creativity, leaving its followers incapable of producing works that endure.

Idolatry darkens the mind, hardens the heart, and renders people foolish and infertile (Romans 1:21-23). A culture steeped in idolatry turns to imitation, distortion, and triviality, having lost its connection to the ultimate Source of life and inspiration.

The works of an idolatrous culture are parasitic; they do not merely degrade, but they devour. They consume the minds, hearts, and creativity of those who embrace them, leaving behind a trail of lifeless forms and meaningless shadows.

The greatest cultural achievements have come from people who honor Jesus Christ. Idolatry leads to brutalist architecture, while Christianity has inspired the beautiful cathedrals and churches of Europe. Christianity gave rise to "The Lord of the Rings," whereas idolatry produced "The Rings of Power."

Only through the worship of the true and living God can imagination be redeemed, creativity restored, and works of lasting beauty and significance brought forth.

Idolatry also make people stupid. It blinds the heart and dulls the mind, reducing people to absurdities. Consider the ridiculousness of a god that needs you to pick him up and put him back in his place. If your god trusts in you, he is no god at all.

During the Presidential inauguration, a Jewish Rabbi said in his benediction, that not only do we put our trust in God, but God puts his trust in us. Just another reminder that Jews and Christians do not worship the same God.

For in John 2 it states, *“But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to men, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”*

God does not put his trust in us. The Lord God is Jesus, and he knows what kind of foolish idolatry is bound up within the heart of man. The only way for us to be saved is by putting our trust in Him, and Him alone. We need him to lift us up and put us back in our place, not the other way around.

THE HEAVY HAND OF THE LORD

1 Samuel then continues in v. 6 and says, *The hand of the LORD was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and He terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both in Ashdod and its territory.* The word "heavy" is the same word "glory," signifying the that God is once again killing his enemies with His glory, because they give glory to a false god who has no glory.

Contrary to the broken hands of Dagon, the hand of Yahweh was heavy, glorious and unstoppable. After crushing Dagon's head and chopping off his arms, Yahweh's

glory continued to defeat His enemies. As Scripture so often demonstrates, first the head is crushed, then the body is defeated. Here, the Philistines—aware of the plagues Yahweh inflicted on the Egyptians (4:8)—now experienced a plague reminiscent of those that devastated Pharaoh's kingdom (Deut. 28:27).

The tumors associated with rats or mice in the next chapter suggest the people were struck with the bubonic plague, a disease caused by bacteria transmitted through fleas that live on rodents. As a seafaring people, the Philistines may have unknowingly brought these infected rats aboard their ships.

In God's perfect sovereignty and providence these rats likely arrived just before the Ark was taken into exile. Through this divinely orchestrated timing, Yahweh unleashed a devastating blow that brought death and humiliation to the Philistines.

The bubonic plague attacks the lymphatic systems, and causes painful, swollen lymph nodes in your groin, arm pits, and neck, called *buboes*—along with fever, chills, and severe weakness. The Bubonic plague destroys the immune system and the body breaks out in horrible black tumors all over. The physical suffering of the plague highlighted the Philistines' spiritual plight, as they cried out, “*The ark of the God of Israel*

must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god.”

Despite how badly God afflicts some people, they still continue in their hard-hearted rebellion, and refuse to repent and trust in Him for salvation. The best they can come up with is, get God away from me.

Even as the Ark was sent from Ashdod to Gath and then to Ekron, the "heavy hand" of Yahweh was still upon them, inflicting death and disease everywhere the Ark went. The Philistines are desperate to resolve the problem, saying: "*Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people.*"

Notice the difference between Dagon and Yahweh. Dagon, incapacitated and unmoving, needed men to pick him up and set him back in his place, but the God of Israel needed no such assistance. His hand alone sovereignly orchestrates events, and He will direct the Ark's path back to His place and accomplish His purposes. Thus the people say, "*Let it return to its own place.*"

The narrative concludes with an acknowledgment of Yahweh's glory: "**The hand of God was very heavy there.**" His "weight" of glory filled the Philistine cities, leaving death and cries that reached to heaven itself. Just as Yahweh struck

down Egypt with plagues and defeated their gods to compel Pharaoh to release Israel, so He struck down the Philistines and defeated Dagon to compel the Lords of the Philistines to send the Ark back to its rightful place.

We even hear the comparison made by the Philistines themselves in chapter 6, when they say, *“Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had dealt severely with them, did he not send the people away, and they departed?”*

Like modern rulers whose solutions are often worse than the problems they are trying to solve — as was clearly seen by all during Covid — the lords of the Philistines helped spread more disaster instead of mitigating it. After Dagon’s fall and Ashdod’s ruin, their "brilliant" plan was to send the Ark to Gath and then to Ekron, spreading plagues and death wherever it went. Their arrogance was rivaled only by their folly.

CHRISTUS VICTOR

Their defeat wasn’t just a result of their foolishness, however—it was the hidden wisdom of God on display. When the Philistines captured the Ark, they thought they had triumphed over Israel’s God, placing it in Dagon’s temple as a trophy. But their arrogance set the stage for their

humiliation: Dagon was defeated, and plagues ravaged their cities and surrounding territories. The Lord had used turned His enemies' victory into their great ruin and utter defeat.

The Ark's journey into Philistia is a type of Christ's death, descent into Hades, and victory over the death and the Devil.

1 Corinthians 2:6-8 says that the rulers of this age, both human and spiritual, failed to grasp the hidden wisdom of God in the cross. They saw Christ's death as their victory over God. But actually, the cross was God's hidden wisdom, His trojan horse, to smuggle the Lord of life behind enemy lines and to win the victory over these very same forces death and darkness.

In His death, Christ descended into Hades and triumphed over Satan, sin, and death. He broke the power of the grave. And like the Ark's exile in Philistia, Christ's descent demonstrated His supremacy over His enemies. Had the rulers known that killing Christ would seal their doom, they would never have crucified the Lord of Glory.

But, "*having disarmed the principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in the cross*" (Colossians 2:15). The false gods of the nations, the idols

worshiped in ignorance, and the demonic forces behind them were all exposed as the powerless frauds they are when the Lord was brought down captive to Hades, and resurrected again from the clutches of death, victorious in battle with the Keys of death and Hades secured firmly in His hands.

The Devil wielded the fear of death as a weapon to enslave the children of men. But his arms were broken and his head was crushed, when the crucified Lord of Glory laid His heavy hands upon them, when he spread them out to be pierced on the cross.

And once his spirit arrived in that dark cavern, the Light of Light shone forth with a brightness greater than 10,000 suns. The light shined in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Even death itself, the last enemy, could not withstand Him who is the Life of Life. Christ did not merely escape death; He destroyed it, broke open its prison bars, and destroyed all its locks. Jesus Christ now possess the keys to death and Hades. As the early Church sang, "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and giving life to those in the tombs." Death, which had reigned as a tyrant over humanity, was turned into a servant of Christ, now powerless to hold those who belong to the Lord.

In His death and descent into Hades, Christ not only secured our salvation but also proclaimed His cosmic lordship over all the gods. He is the Victor who has defeated sin, the Liberator who has rescued the captives, the Warrior who has crushed the serpent, and the King who has plundered the stronghold of death. His victory is total, His reign is eternal, and His triumph is the hope of all creation.

So flee from all your dead idols, for every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, the Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Put your trust in Jesus Christ, and be saved from the plague of sin and death.

CONCLUSION

Just as the obelisk in St. Peter's Square bears witness to Christ's victory over the gods of Egypt and Rome, so does the story of Dagon's fall before the Ark proclaim the supremacy of our God over Dagon. Both monuments, whether crafted in stone or written in Scripture, testify to the same truth:

That all idols, temples, superstitions, and ideologies erected in impious reverence to the gods of the heathen, can only become expiated of their impure superstition when consecrated to the invincible cross of Christ.

“Behold the Cross of the Lord, flee ye adversaries. The Lion of the Tribe of Judah has won.”

“Christ conquers, Christ reigns, Christ rules; may Christ defend His people from all evil.”

Amen.