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### **Beyond the Vale: The God of Christmas**

Perception. it is an interesting thing. The story is told of two high school football receivers in Texas, equally talented. Both got to play in the championship game before thousands their senior year. One player saw the crowds, heard the cheering, and so enjoyed the game that he decided at that moment he wanted to play in the NFL. The other player likewise saw the crowds, heard the cheering, and so enjoyed the game such that because of the experience, he was ready to give up the game and pursue a career as a doctor. Interesting! Two almost identical players enjoying the same game yet walking away with two different passions.

Christmas is like this! During this time of year, many pulpits turn to the topic of Christ and the

Christmas story. And of these messages, many will focus on Christ, His purpose in coming, and the sacrifice made — which is wonderful.

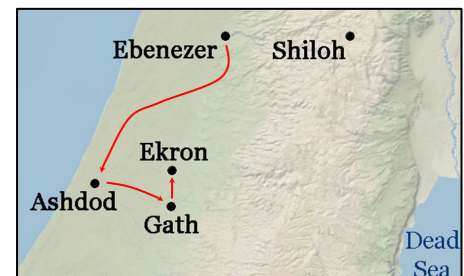
However, this year, as I have reflected upon Christmas, I began thinking of Christmas from the perspective of God the Father, and it was so encouraging and edifying! And so that is what I want to do with you this morning. I want to go beyond the vale and discuss with you The God of Christmas. In this regard, I want to begin by looking at Christmas from the perspective of God and His office as the King of Kings!

When I think of this facet of God the Father, many passages come to mind. However, one of my favorites is that which is found in 1 Samuel 5 which contains one of the greatest rags to riches, long-shot stories in the Bible. It is that time when God demonstrated His grandeur to the Philistines and single-handedly brought the nation to its knees — without the mediation of man! God did it at a time when the Philistines had just won the greatest victory over God and His people they could have ever imagine! In Latin, the passage before us would be labeled “*Victus Victor*” — the conquered now the conqueror! Look with me at v. 1 and God’s vanquishing of the RELIGION of the Philistines.

1 Samuel 5:1, “Now the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod.”

The books of Judges and 1 Samuel overlap. As we read about the early days of Samuel’s life into adulthood (1 Samuel 1-4), the latter chapters of the book of Judges was also going on. That means, prior to 1 Samuel 4, Samson was wreaking havoc amongst the Philistines! And presumably in response to Samson, the Philistines — in 1 Samuel 4 — endeavored to strike a blow against God’s people by marching on Shiloh (which at the time served as a quasi-capital city where the Ark of the Covenant was kept). God’s people received word of the approaching army of the Philistines and so went out in force to oppose them.

The two armies met at the city of Ebenezer. On the first day of battle, the Philistines drew first blood and 4,000 Jewish men died. In response, the elders of Israel agreed that on the next day God’s people should be led into battle with the Ark of the Covenant at their head. For as we learned from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, no army can be defeated who possess the Ark of the Covenant!



The second day battle could NOT have gone worse for God’s people. Not only did they lose 30,000 soldiers, but the Ark of the Covenant was lost to the Philistines. Now this was a big deal for the Ark of the Covenant was a symbol of the covenant presence of God. From the perspective of the Philistines, the God of Israel had been defeated by the gods of the Philistines!

1 Samuel 5:1, “the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod

[which was one of their five capital cities].”

You can just imagine the celebration! Think of it! What the Egyptians could not do (which all of Palestine by this time would have known), the Philistines did — they conquered Israel and its God! Now when the parade arrived in “Ashdod” we read this:

1 Samuel 5:2, “Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it to the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon.”<sup>1</sup>

This is quite significant. In essence, the Philistines were presenting the conquered god of the Jews — Yahweh — to Dagon with the implication that Dagon was king over Yahweh!

This was such a stinging declaration! For Dagon was the false deity and the chief god of the Philistines. Dagon was believed to be the father of Baal and Dagon was associated with the perverse fertility and grain rites of Canaan. And though temples of Dagon were scattered throughout the land of the Philistines, nevertheless two elaborate temples had been built, one in Gaza and one in Ashdod, where much evil was carried out in the name of “Dagon”.

And so, in 1104 BC, the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord our God — this Holy vessel — was placed in subjection to an evil and perverse religion that it might be ridiculed, mocked, and scorned. Yet one thing we know: God will NOT be mocked!

1 Samuel 5:3, “When the Ashdodites arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and set him in his place again.”

What a shock! Yesterday there was dancing, singing, and rejoicing over the greatness of Dagon. Today that god was found prostrate before the Lord! Now brothers and sisters, the odds that there could have been an earthquake that would have toppled Dagon such that it lay prostrate before the Ark are astronomical. Nevertheless, that’s how the Philistines must have interpreted the situation, and so we read that they:

- (1) Up-righted their stone deity,
- (2) Fastened him securely to the ground,<sup>2</sup>
- (3) And then went on with their day’s work — no doubt pondering the significance of what had just happened.

1 Samuel 5:4-5, “But when they arose early the next morning [the connotation here is that there is an urgency; the priests awoke longing to know if anything else had happened], behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord. And the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were CUT OFF on the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor all who enter Dagon’s house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.”

God is so amazing! One couldn't get any more shocking or dramatic display of power! Let me explain the imagery. As barbaric as it may sound, in ancient days the head and hands of a conquered foe were viewed as trophies of war (cf. Judges 8:6; 1 Samuel 17:54; 31:9ff; 2 Samuel 4:12). And thus, in military executions the head and hands of the individual would be severed and displayed as a declaration of a general's dominance and sovereignty over the enemy.

In light of this, do you understand what is going on here? The god of the Philistines was executed in his own temple by the God of Israel! Again, Dagon's hands and head were NOT broken off; they were "CUT OFF" and placed on the "threshold" — which was a place of dishonor as that is where people walked! Dr. Bergen wrote of this:

Dagon's head and hands had been... 'cut off'... in a manner reminiscent of grisly military executions... The Philistines' conquering divine hero had been humbled and then mercilessly executed in his own stronghold. Though 'in exile,' the Lord had proven his superiority to the regional supreme deity. (Bergen, 1996, pp. 97-98)

In other words, through this providence, God declared Himself to be the King of kings and Lord of lords! And so indeed!

- (1) Dagon is nothing; God is everything!
- (2) Dagon ought not to be feared; fear God alone!
- (3) Dagon is of vanity; God alone is glorious!
- (4) Dagon has been bound; God alone reigns!

Walter Brueggemann put it this way:

Dagon has been robbed of power to act and emptied of the dignity proper to a god. In a word, Dagon has been dethroned. The presumed power of Dagon, which seemed so real after the routing of Israel, is exposed as null... Yahweh has in fact preempted the alien temple of Dagon so that it now belongs to Yahweh and is an arena of Yahweh's sovereignty. (Bergen, 1996, p. 36)

In fact, so great was God's triumph here, a new religious practice began that day amongst the Philistines where their priests no longer would "step on the threshold of a temple door." No doubt this was to honor Dagon. But in reality, the practice testified to the greatness of God! And yet, the demonstration of God's greatness here had just begun. For not only did God demonstrate His Superiority over the RELIGION of the Philistines, before it was all over, it was God's intention to Demonstrate His Greatness over the Philistine NATION. Notice with me the Victory Tour of the Ark of the Covenant, beginning with God's vanquishing the Philistine nation at Ashdod.

1 Samuel 5:6, "Now the hand of the Lord was heavy on the Ashdodites [in contrast to Dagon's hands which had been cut off], and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territories."

It wasn't enough that God humbled Dagon in the false-deity's stronghold, we read here that God ravaged the city and its territories! Yet what specifically was the judgment? Based on the pathology/evidence, most commentators suggest that God sent a strain of Bubonic plague on Ashdod<sup>3</sup> — which if you know anything about the disease, you know it is quite a serious disease. It is brought by the fleas that were on rats/mice, symptoms of the plague included the swelling of the lymph glands in the arm pits and under the legs, a severe headache, fever, delirium, bleeding in the lungs, and mental disorientation. Accompanying the disease is an intense desire to sleep — where if permitted, the lungs fill with blood and the victim drowns. So severe is the disease that historically well over half of those who contract it die! Truly at this point the Philistines of Ashdod were confronted with a brutal plague. Easily half their population lay dead,

1 Samuel 5:7-8a, "When the men of Ashdod saw that it was so, they said, 'The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is severe on us and on Dagon our god.' So they sent and gathered all the lords [lit. "tyrants,"<sup>4</sup> but essentially "governors"] of the Philistines to them and said, 'What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?' And they said, 'Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath.' And they brought the ark of the God of Israel around."

At one and the same time this is both incredible and pathetic! Why do you suppose the Philistine lord's chose Gath to house the Ark of the Covenant? Gath was the home of the Anakim (Joshua 11:22) — men of great stature in literal size and personal glory. In light of their greatness, surely the God of Israel would easily be managed — which brings us to the Gath leg.

1 Samuel 5:8b, "...Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath."

If you look at the map in your notes, you will observe that Gath was situated roughly twelve miles inland and slightly south of Ashdod. What made this city stand out was their extremely large (as in physical size) population. Recall that it was from Gath that the Philistine giant came (1 Samuel 17:23). It also was from Gath that other giants arose,<sup>5</sup> like Ishbi-benob (2 Samuel 21:16), Saph (2 Samuel 21:18), and the unnamed monster of 2 Samuel 21:20-22 known as "a man of great stature". He had six fingers on each hand and six toes.

Because of this and much more, Gath was known as a warrior city. It was the "Sparta" of the Philistine clans. As such, they were self-sufficient, proud, and not the city you would want to fight if you were going to battle against the Philistines. And yet no doubt to their utter amazement, the people of Gath would have the same problem as those in Ashdod.

1 Samuel 5:9-10a, "And it came about that after they had brought it around, the hand of the Lord was against the city with very great confusion [lit. "panic"- it's getting worse; the death and destruction is becoming more severe!]; and He smote the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them. So they sent [lit. "exodused"- they got it out

of there!!] the ark of God to Ekron...”

Well, so much for Gath and its strength, confidence, and ability! On account of the sovereign power of the Lord, the Gathites are reduced to whimpering children, and so likewise seek to be rid of the presence of God. Yet this time, without an assembly of the lords, they autocratically sent the Ark to Ekron — another of capital city of the Philistines,

1 Samuel 5:10b, “And it happened as the ark of God came to Ekron...”

This city was the farthest north capital city of the Philistines<sup>6</sup> — and in fact the largest. In its heyday, the city itself covered forty acres. And yet, looking at the map, you will note that this city was by-passed in order to bring the ark to Ashdod.

Why was that? If Ashdod was the stronghold of Dagon, and Gath was known for its strength in warfare, Ekron was known for its association with the worship of Baal-zebub (2 Kings 1:1-6, 16) — which in the New Testament is identified as none other than Satan himself (Matthew 12:26; Mark 3:23, 26; Luke 11:18). It was here that the worship of Baal came into its own! And so, *if Dagon couldn't control God, then maybe his son could! Let's place the Ark into the hands of Baal!* Yet the leaders of Ekron would have none of it!

1 Samuel 5:10b-11a, “...and it happened as the ark of God came to Ekron that the Ekronites cried out, saying, ‘They have brought the ark of the God of Israel around to us, to kill us and our people.’ They sent therefore and gathered all the lords of the Philistines...”

It is interesting that when we come to this point in the Ark's journey, the Ekronites don't wait around for their population to be slaughtered. They don't even give their god a chance to oppose Yahweh. Rather, they immediately convene the council of the Philistine lords with accusations, “They have brought the Ark... to kill us and our people” (v. 10b). So, what did they do?

1 Samuel 5:11b, “They sent therefore and gathered all the lords of the Philistines and said, ‘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.’”

How the roles have been reversed! Not only did Dagon bow before the Lord, but now the entire Philistine nation is begging for relief! The Philistines who were the author of the Massacre of Ebenezer are now the vanquished — as untold tens of thousands are left to bury their dead! Truly, the conquered has become the conqueror- *Victus Victor!*

And yet the text indicates that the Ekronite lord didn't act fast enough. For during the council, the devastation and vanquishing of Ekron had begun!

1 Samuel 5:11c-12, “For there was a deadly confusion throughout the city; the hand of God was very heavy there [with each leg of the Ark's Victory Tour, the language gets stronger

which means the plague was getting worse<sup>7!!!</sup>]. And the men who did not die were smitten with tumors and the cry of the city went up to heaven.”

This is the climax of the Ark’s victory tour! Not only are the Philistines begging for relief, but this pagan people are now crying out to the one true God for mercy, “the cry of the city went up to heaven” (v. 12)!!!<sup>8</sup> What a reversal! In 1 Samuel 4:13, God’s people are crying on account of their loss. Now in this text, it is the Philistines who are crying (1 Samuel 5:12)!<sup>9</sup>

And so the Philistines — who just days before fancied themselves as greater than the Egyptians for they conquered the God of Israel (cf. 1 Samuel 4:8, 10; 5:1-2) — find themselves conquered... as rats, tumors, plagues, and death overrun and invade the land leaving terror and suffering in its wake.

From all of this I hope you see that the God of the Bible is the only true God! There is no other God except Him! He truly is the King of Kings!

Psalm 2:1-4, “Why are the nations in an uproar, and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed: ‘Let us tear their fetters apart, and cast away their cords from us!’ 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them.”

Psalm 21:1, “The king’s heart is *like* channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.”

Isaiah 40:15, “Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust.”

Christian! That is your God! And that is the God who sent His Son to the earth. That is the God behind Christmas! When we think of Christmas from the perspective of God’s Regal Greatness, what ought to come to mind? Look with me as this relates to the coming of Christ.

Galatians 4:1-5, “Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. 4 But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”

This passage is intimately related to Christmas, for it speaks of Christ’s First Advent, “...God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law...” And why does this text say that Christ came? It was, v. 5, to “...redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”

Let me explain this briefly. The question is asked, “If a sinless being was all that was necessary

in order to redeem a sinful man, why couldn't an angel die in our place?" The answer is given implicitly in what we just read. What is the ultimate reason a person goes to hell? It is NOT firstly because of the millions of sins they committed in their life. This is what determines the depth of their suffering after they die, but NOT the ultimate reason for why they are sent to hell. Ultimately, a man goes to hell because they are guilty of violating the covenant God established with man in Adam. Paul wrote speaking of Adam:

Romans 5:19, "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners [this is what we mean by Original Sin], even so through the obedience of the One [referencing Christ] the many will be made righteous."

This is why people go to hell — they stand guilty of violating the original agreement that served as the basis for man's relationship with God!

As that is true, how only can a sinner be saved? Not only must their daily sin be forgiven, BUT their original sin must be removed. And the only way this can happen is if another man could be born under the original agreement (the Covenant of Works), yet NOT be represented by Adam which means he would have to be born perfect! He then would then have to uphold the original agreement with God which Adam violated (which means, He could never sin). And then this man would have to die in our place on account of the punishment due to us in Adam, thus giving us the right-standing He earned by His righteous life!

That is what Paul is talking about here! Get this, "...God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law [the Covenant of Works. Why?], in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (v. 5)! That is the gospel! Christ came to uphold the covenant Adam violated. And if you and I will rely upon His work as your own, our sin will be wiped away! Glory be to God!

That being said, I invite you to reflect upon the revelation here concerning The God of Christmas! From His perspective, what was involved in the coming of Christ?

Did you notice the very first statement in v. 4? "But when the fulness of the time came, God..." This statement regarding "the fulness of the time" is from the perspective of God the Father and indicates that Christ's coming was in accord with God's Sovereign determination from the beginning of time.

Did you get that? The coming of Christ — His birth, life, death, and resurrection — was NOT a second plan, something accomplished in response to man, or something that came as the result of Satanic opposition. Rather, the Christ-event was established and set by God before the foundation of the world!

1 Peter 1:20a speaking of Christ and His first advent, "For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world..." Hebrews 4:3b speaking of Christ's redeeming work, "...His works were finished from the foundation of the world." Galatians 4:4a: "But when the fulness of the



time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law..." And guess what? Nothing has or could ever thwart this plan! Not Satan, not man, not a Philistine giant nor a false god! God's will- God's redemptive plan- has and will always be done!

Spend any amount of time meditating upon this and you will arrive at the glorious realization and affirmation that NOT ONLY does our God reign, BUT His salvific plan for your life will most certainly come to pass!

John 10:27-29, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. [How can we be certain of this? Well, Christ continued...] My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand."

Philippians 1:6, that no doubt is why Paul could write with such confidence, "*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*"

This means that if God has deigned to save you in Christ, there is nothing anyone can do — not even yourself — that can stop it! Nothing "...can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39b)! So, Christmas from God's perspective? It was and is the beginning of a Salvific Plan that could never be thwarted, delayed, impaired, or corrupted. So, fear not, your salvation is securely held and protected by God!

## References

Bergen, R. D. (1996). *1, 2 Samuel: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (The New American Commentary)*. Nashville: Holman Referenc.

## End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> This was a common practice in the ancient near east. When a people were conquered, their gods were taken and placed in the sanctuary of the god of the victorious army. Because Israel had no image, the Philistines settled for the ark (as would the Babylonians years later when they settled for the utensils of the temple, Ezra 1:7).

<sup>2</sup> This is interesting. In order to protect their deities from being toppled, the ancients used to fasten them down tightly to the floor. In fact, Isaiah, picking up on this, mocks the idolater in Is. 40:20; 41:7; 46:6-7. How could a deity who couldn't protect himself from falling over, protect the worshipper?

<sup>3</sup> A suggestion adopted by older commentators, like Josephus, was that the Philistines were afflicted with dysentery (*Ant.* vi. 1. 1). Today, this doesn't have many adherents. However, for a variety of views, see

Robert Bergen's *1, 2 Samuel*, footnote #67, p. 98.

<sup>4</sup> Rayburn wrote, "The Hebrew word translated 'ruler' is a Philistine loan-word. It is like our newspapers writing of what the 'Imams' are doing and saying in Iran."

<sup>5</sup> Also, from Gath came another giant named Goliath- different from David's (2 Samuel 21:19).

<sup>6</sup> It was six miles due north of Gath, twelve miles northeast of Ashdod, and nineteen miles inland.

<sup>7</sup> Keil and Delitzsch wrote, "The longer the Philistines resisted and refused to recognize the chastening hand of the living God in the plagues inflicted upon them, the more severely would they necessarily be punished, that they might be brought at last to see that the God of Israel, whose sanctuary they still wanted to keep as a trophy of their victory over that nation, was the omnipotent God, who was able to destroy His foes." (*Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 2, I & II Samuel, p. 61).

<sup>8</sup> This is reminiscent of the time when the Egyptians are said to have, "cried to God" on account of the plague that had devoured their city (cf. Ex. 11:6; 12:30). It also is reminiscent of the cry that will occur in the end times when people will "cry" for the rocks to crush them (Rev. 6:15-17). In all of these cases, we must note that the cry is not for salvation, but the cessation of judgment.

<sup>9</sup> I want to address the shock that may have arisen in some hearts on account of this passage. For when most think of God today, they think of love. Thus, a passage like this no doubt is offensive and shocking. God laid the Philistines to waste here. There is very little mercy. In fact, the more the Philistines resisted, the greater was God's hand upon them.

So how do we respond to this? At the outset we must affirm the Scriptural teaching that indeed God is a God of grace and mercy (cf. Psalm 145:17; Luke 18:19; Acts 14:17; Jn. 3:16; 1 Jn. 3:16-17). And yet we must recognize that this "grace and mercy" is reserved only for His children (Matthew 13:24-30). To the non-Christian who hates the Lord- to the one who is at war with God, who runs from His presence, who gnashes his teeth at His Christ, who would crucify the Lord again if they had the chance (e.g., Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28; cf., Acts 7:54)- we see in our text the frightening and all-too-real response that someday will be meted out to them. Truly in the words of Christ, let the non-Christian reader take note that "...unless you repent, you will all likewise perish," (Luke 13:3, 5).