

## Searching For the Right Hand Read 1 Samuel 5

It was not the best of times. It was wholly the worst of times. It was a time when men “did what was right in their own eyes.” Though our story takes us into the beginning of 1 Samuel, it is the tail end of the period of the Judges and there is still “no king in Israel.” On the other hand, for the Philistine foes of Israel, encroachment upon Israelite land was progressively more successful.

A Philistine soldier kicked at one of the numberless Israelite corpses tumbled, pell-mell about the battlefield. *Yahweh, Israel’s god, is defeated*, he thought. A sultry mid afternoon sun made it difficult to clump over to two lifeless priests and a box the Israelites had claimed held their God’s presence. The box and priests had been abandoned in a hasty retreat, *from Dagon our god*. The Philistines believed that it was a struggle in the heavens between the two gods that decided the outcome of the combat on earth. *The hand of Dagon rules!* the soldier concluded.

This was the second battle in a row in which the Israelites were defeated by the Philistines (1 Samuel 4). After the first time, the Israelites had been perplexed that Yahweh would have allowed the Philistines to triumph. Their solution was to haul the Ark of God with them to the next bout. Desperation drove them to it, but faith should have restrained the Israelites from using the Ark of God as a good luck charm. Yahweh could not allow this. Thus, the Israelites lost both the battle and the Ark of God to the enemy, and their two priests lay dead on the spoiled landscape. Scripture narrates the sequel to this defeat by way of a repeated word: “hand.” Taking note of a word which is used often in a Biblical text is the first “key” to a dynamic Bible study.

The Philistines transported the captured box (Ark) of God, as a trophy, to the presence of Dagon their god, as though Yahweh was to worship Dagon. In the same way that Yahweh could not permit His people to handle His Ark as a rabbit’s foot; neither could He allow the Philistines to believe that Dagon had defeated Him.

Therefore, the morning after the Philistines located the Ark before their idol, they found Dagon “fallen on his face” (1 Sam. 5:3). They raised Dagon up only to discover, the following sun up, that he was prostrate before the ark again. Moreover, “the head of Dagon and both the palms of his *hands* were cut off” (v. 4). Perhaps his head was cut off because God was demonstrating to the Philistines that idols cannot think; but we may wonder why its hands were removed. We must read the chapter slowly, carefully, and often (the best way to study Scripture) in order to arrive at a solution.

What happened next would be laughable if it was not so pitiable. Yahweh “ravaged” the Philistines living in the town of Ashdod and “smote them with tumors” for the “*hand* of the LORD was heavy” on them (v. 6). Thus, they carted the Ark to another Philistine town named Gath, because, “The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His *hand* is severe on us and on Dagon our God” (v. 7).

Though the Philistines were determined to retain the Ark, none wanted it, for in Gath the identical revolting development reoccurred—“the *hand* of Yahweh was against the city with a very great confusion. . .” (v. 9). Hence, when the Ark was banished to the next town, Ekron, the forewarned people cried out, “They have brought the ark of the God of Israel around to us, to kill us and our people” (v. 10). The Lord who is sovereign despite His people’s rebelliousness, compelled the Philistines to resolve to “send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place” (v 11). Their motive for having the ark transferred back to the Israelites was

that “There was deadly confusion throughout the city; the *hand* of God was very heavy there” (v 11).

By paying attention to the repetition of the word “hand,” we recognize that the term signifies power. The Lord’s “hand,” establishing Dagon’s absence of power, is first demonstrated by Dagon’s severed head and hands in his topple before the Ark of God. The Lord confirms that, in spite of appearances, He “reigns over the nations” (Ps. 47:8). Israel’s disobedience cannot thwart God’s will. The Philistines’ victory cannot bring to naught God’s plans. Neither can our foibles, sins, or mistakes mess up God’s purpose in our lives. The hand of our God rules.