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Adam Clarke Commentary 1 Samuel 5

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

The Philistines set up the ark in the temple of Dagon at Ashdod; whose image is found next morning prostrate before it, broken in pieces, 1 Samuel 5:1-5. The Philistines are also smitten with a sore disease, 1 Samuel 5:6. The people of Ashdod refuse to let the ark stay with them; and the lords of the Philistines, with whom they consulted, order it to be carried to Gath, 1 Samuel 5:7, 1 Samuel 5:8. They do so; and God smites the inhabitants of that city, young and old, with the same disease, 1 Samuel 5:9. They send the ark to Ekron, and a heavy destruction fags upon that city, and they resolve to send it back to Shiloh, 1 Samuel 5:10-12.

Verse 1

Brought it from Eben-ezer unto Ashdod - Ashdod or Azotus was one of the five satrapies or lordships of the Philistines.

Verse 2

The house of Dagon - On this idol, which was supposed to be partly in a human form, and partly in that of a fish, see the note on Judges 16:23. Some think that this idol was the same with Dirceto, Attergatis, the Venus of Askelon, and the Moon. - See Calmet†s Dissertation on the gods of the Philistines.

The motive which induced the Philistines to set up the ark in the temple of Dagon, may be easily ascertained. It was customary, in all nations, to dedicate the spoils taken from an enemy to their gods:

- 1.As a gratitude-offering for the help which they supposed them to have furnished; and,
- 2.As a proof that their gods, i.e., the gods of the conquerors, were more powerful than those of the conquered.

It was, no doubt, to insult the God of Israel, and to insult and terrify his people, that they placed his ark in the temple of Dagon. When the Philistines had conquered Saul, they hung up his armor in the temple of Ashtaroth, 1 Samuel 31:10. And when David slew Goliath, he laid up his sword in the tabernacle of the Lord, 1 Samuel 21:8, 1 Samuel 21:9. We have the remains of this custom in the depositing of colors, standards, etc., taken from an enemy, in our churches; but whether this may be called superstition or a religious act, is hard to say. If the battle were the Lordâ€s, which few battles are, the dedication might be right.

Verse 3

They of Ashdod arose early on the morrow - Probably to perform some act of their superstition in the temple of their idol.

Dagon was fallen upon his face - This was one proof, which they little expected, of the superiority of the God of Israel.

Set him in his place again - Supposing his fall might have been merely accidental.

Verse 4

Only the stump of Dagon was left - Literally, Only x"x"x" (dagon) (i.e., the little fish) was left. It has already been remarked that Dagon had the head, arms and hands of a man or woman, and that the rest of the idol was in the form of a fish, to which Horace is supposed to make allusion in the following words: -

Desinat in piscem mulisr formosa superne

"The upper part resembling a beautiful woman; the lower, a fish.―

All that was human in his form was broken off from what resembled a fish. Here was a proof that the affair was not accidental; and these proofs of God†s power and authority prepared the way for his judgments.

Verse 5

Tread on the threshold - Because the arms, etc., of Dagon were broken off by his fall on the threshold, the threshold became sacred, and neither his priests nor worshippers ever tread on the threshold. Thus it was ordered, in the Divine providence, that, by a religious custom of their own, they should perpetuate their disgrace, the insufficiency of their worship, and the superiority of the God of Israel.

It is supposed that the idolatrous Israelites, in the time of Zephaniah, had adopted the worship of Dagon: and that in this sense 1 Samuel 1:9 is to be understood: In the same day will I punish all those who leap upon the threshold. In order to go into such temples, and not tread on the threshold, the people must step or leap over them; and in this way the above passage may be understood. Indeed, the thresholds of the temples in various

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places were deemed so sacred that the people were accustomed to fall down and kiss them. When Christianity became corrupted, this adoration of the thresholds of the churches took place.

Verse 6

The Septuagint and Vulgate make a very material addition to this verse: Και μεÏfον Ï"ηÏ, χωĨ•αÏ, αÏ...Ï"ηÏ, ανεφÏ...εÏfιν μÎ...εÏfιν μÏ...εÏ.· και εγενεÏ,,ο ÏfÏ...γχÏ...ÏfιÏ, θαναÏ,,οÏ... μεγαλη εν Ï,,η πολει ; Et ebullierunt villae et agri in medio regionis illius; et nati sunt mures, et facta est confusio mortis magnae in civitate: "And the cities and fields of all that region burst up, and mice were produced, and there was the confusion of a great death in the city.― This addition Houbigant contends was originally in the Hebrew text; and this gives us the reason why golden mice were sent, as well as the images of the emerods, (1 Samuel 6:4), when the ark was restored.

Verse 7

His hand is sore upon us, and upon Dagon our god - Here the end was completely answered: they now saw that they had not prevailed against Israel, on account of their god being more powerful than Jehovah; and they now feel how easily this God can confound and destroy their whole nation.

Verse 8

The lords of the Philistines - The word $x_1x^2x^3x^{TM}$ (sarney), which we translate lords, is rendered by the Chaldee $x^2x^2x^3x^{TM}$ (tureney), tyrants. The Syriac is the same. By the Vulgate and Septuagint, (satrapae), satraps. Palestine was divided into five satrapies: Ashdod, Ekron, Askelon, Gath, and Gaza. See Joshua 13:8. But these were all federates and acted under one general government, for which they assembled in council.

Let the ark - be carried about - They probably thought that their affliction rose from some natural cause; and therefore they wished the ark to be carried about from place to place, to see what the effects might be. If they found the same evil produced wherever it came, then they must conclude that it was a judgment from the God of Israel.

Verse 9

The hand of the Lord was against the city - As it was at Ashdod, so it was at Gath. The Vulgate says, Et computrescebant prominenter extales eorum; which conveys the idea of a bloody flux, dysentery, and ulcerated anus; and it adds, what is not to be found in the Hebrew text, nor many of the versions, except some traces in the Septuagint, Et fecerunt sibi sedes pelliceas, "And they made unto themselves seats of skins;― for the purpose of sitting more easy, on account of the malady already mentioned.

Verse 11

Send away the ark - It appears that it had been received at Ekron, for there was a deadly destruction through the whole city. They therefore concluded that the ark should be sent back to Shiloh.

Verse 12

The men that died not - Some it seems were smitten with instant death; others with the haemorrhoids, and there was a universal consternation; and the cry of the city went up to heaven - it was an exceeding great cry.

It does not appear that the Philistines had any correct knowledge of the nature of Jehovah, though they seemed to acknowledge his supremacy. They imagined that every country, district, mountain, and valley, had its peculiar deity; who, in its place, was supreme over all others. They thought therefore to appease Jehovah by sending him back his ark or shrine: and, in order to be redeemed from their plagues, they send golden mice and emerods as telesms, probably made under some particular configurations of the planets. See at the end of 1 Samuel 6:21 (note).