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July 14th: 1 Samuel 5 & 1 Corinthians 14:1-19

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The Ark among the Philistines. Tongues-speaking.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

1 Samuel chapter 5 So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. But as soon as the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people. They sent therefore, and gathered together 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.

For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. The men who did not die were struck with tumours, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

In 1 Samuel chapter 5, after the battle of Aphek, the ark leaves Israel to go into exile. This is not too dissimilar from what we see in Exodus chapter 33 verses 7-11, where the presence of the Lord leaves the camp after Israel's apostasy. The grace of the Lord is seen at this point, in that rather than sending Israel into exile, He went into exile for

them.

The previous chapter witnessed a complete breakdown of the order of life in Israel. The death of the high priest, his two sons, a catastrophic loss in battle, and the birth of a son named Ichabod, whose name testified to the collapse that had just occurred in Israel. However, to the tragic birth story of Ichabod, we have a response in the New Testament.

Ichabod's birth is described as follows, And about the time of her death, the women attending her said to her, Do not be afraid, for you have born a son. But she did not answer or pay attention. 1 Samuel chapter 4 verse 20 In the New Testament, we encounter another woman who is told not to be afraid, that she will bear a son.

Luke chapter 1 verses 30-31 And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. The woman in 1 Samuel chapter 4 calls her child Ichabod, saying, The glory has departed from Israel, because the ark of God had been captured, and because of her father-in-law and her husband.

And she said, The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured. The birth of a new child associated with the death of his grandfather, and the collapse of an old order. Is answered in the New Testament with the birth of a child who heralds a new age.

A child held in the arms of an old man, witnessed by a praying woman called Anna, and heralded with the words, Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, that you have prepared in the presence for peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel. If the story of Ichabod is the story of the glory departing from Israel, the story of Christ is the story of the glory of Israel returning.

I was alerted to this particular connection by my friend Elliot Ball. The ark is brought to Ashdod and is placed in the house of Dagon, the Philistines' guard, beside the statue of Dagon. The Lord is presented as a defeated vassal of Dagon, the supposedly greater God.

Spoils and symbols of defeated enemies would often be placed in such temples, as an expression of the superiority of the idol that was worshipped there. However, the next morning the Philistines come to the temple of Dagon to find Dagon prostrate before the ark, as if bowing to the Lord. The Lord's throne has been set up in Dagon's temple, and far from Dagon seeming to be the victor, Dagon himself bows down to the Lord.

They restore Dagon to his upright position, but the next day they find that Dagon is prostrate before the ark again. This time, however, the head of Dagon and the palms of his hands have been removed. The decapitated Dagon is like a defeated serpent, whose

head is crushed, and the removal of his hands signifies the removal of his strength.

In 1 Corinthians 10, verses 8-10, the Philistines bring the head of Saul to the temple of Dagon and fasten it there. If it was customary for the Philistines to display the decapitated heads of defeated enemies there, it adds an extra level of irony to the Lord's decapitation of Dagon in his own temple. The falling of Dagon, and his being broken at the neck, also recalls the death of Eli in the previous chapter.

Just as the judge of Israel is broken, so shall the God of the Philistines be. We are reminded in this chapter that God is the God of the Exodus, and there are a number of Exodus motifs that we see in this story. God goes into exile for his people, but God is going to Exodus his own ark and bring it back to the land.

One of the great Exodus themes is the defeat of false gods, or the humiliation of idols. As the Lord humiliates Dagon, strips him of his power, and triumphs over him in his own temple, decapitating him in the very place where the heads of his defeated enemies would be presented, we can see this theme re-emerge. The Lord is above all of the gods of the nations, and can prove his supremacy in the very places of their presumed power.

The hands of Dagon may have been cut off, but the hand of the Lord was heavy on Ashdod and the surrounding region. They are struck with a great plague. The people of Ashdod determine that the ark must be removed from their city, for their own safety and for the well-being of their beleaguered deity Dagon.

The men of Ashdod want the ark to depart from them, much as the Egyptian people desired the Israelites to leave them, as they were plagued by the Lord. The ark is then brought to Ekron, where the same sorts of things happen. The Ekronites insist that the ark be sent back to Israel, because they feared complete destruction at the Lord's hands.

Peter Lighthouse has observed a number of Exodus allusions in the language of the text. He writes, 1 Samuel 5-6 says that the hand of the Lord was heavy on the Ashdodites, and smites them with tumours. Similarly, in Exodus 9-3 we read that the hand of the Lord brought severe pestilence on Egypt.

When the plagues hit, the cry of the city went up to heaven. 1 Samuel 5-12 Similarly, on the night of the Passover, there was a great cry throughout the land of Egypt. Exodus 12-30 In 1 Samuel 5-11, the people pledged with their leaders to get the ark out of Philistia.

Similarly, in Exodus 10-7, Pharaoh's servants advised Pharaoh to let Israel go before Egypt was completely destroyed. Philistia's priests and diviners advised the rulers how to get the ark out of the land. In 6-2, just as the Egyptian magicians warned Pharaoh to remove Israel.

In 6-6, we learn that the priests and diviners even know part of the Exodus story about Pharaoh hardening his heart, and they warn the Philistines not to do the same. The effect

of the whole series of events was that the Philistines came to know Yahweh. 6-9 And this was also the issue throughout the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh.

There are also many verbal similarities. The word smite is used in both Exodus 3-20 and 1 Samuel 5-6-9. The phrase, strike with plague, occurs in both Exodus 9-14 and 1 Samuel 6-4.

And the phrase, destruction of the land, is repeated in Exodus 8-20 and 1 Samuel 6-5. When the ark was brought out to the battle at Aphek, the Israelites were expecting a miraculous and mighty deliverance and the defeat of their enemies, seemingly powerless. The great strength that they had associated with the ark, which had been involved in the crossing of the Jordan and the defeat of Jericho, was not displayed however.

Instead, the ark seemed to be characterized by a tremendous impotence. It was powerless and it did not even defend itself from capture. The Philistines then placed the ark in the temple of their god, at the very power center of their civilization.

And it is there, like a timed explosion, that the might of the Lord finally breaks forth. The Philistines had unwittingly served in the Lord's plan, bringing the ark to the very place where the Lord's victory over them and their god might be most dramatically displayed. A very similar disaster befell the Philistines, probably not many years after this.

We should remember that the chronologies of Judges and 1 Samuel overlap. In Judges 16, Samson is betrayed by one close to him, Delilah, much as Joseph was betrayed by his brothers. Taken captive by the Philistines, his eyes are removed, and he becomes a slave, grinding in the prison.

The lords of the Philistines gather together at the temple of Dagon to sacrifice and celebrate the defeat of their enemy, Samson. They bring Samson out to perform in front of them, to make a mockery of him and to gloat over him. Samson's strength returned to him at this point, and he took hold of the pillars of Dagon's temple and pushed against them, bringing down the entire building, crushing the heads of all the lords of the Philistines and the others within the building, giving up the spirit and dying with them.

And there again we have the theme of deception, or outwitting the serpent. If the lords of the Philistines had known what Samson and the ark would do, they never would have taken them to the temple of Dagon. At the very climax of their apparent victory, the foe that they thought they had vanquished rose up and dealt them a deadly blow from which they could not easily recover.

This god, one who seems to be utterly stripped of power, who is then taken to the very heart of the dragon lair, then rises up to crush the head of the beast. That is, of course, the god that we know in Jesus Christ. A question to consider.

What further parallels between the story of the ark of God in the land of Philistia and the story of Christ can you observe? 1 Corinthians chapter 14 verses 1 to 19 1 Corinthians chapter 14 verses 1 to 19 1 Corinthians chapter 14 verses 1 to 19 1 Corinthians chapter 14 verses 1 to 19 1 Corinthians chapter 14 verses 1 to 19 I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say Amen to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.

Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others than 10,000 words in a tongue. 1 Corinthians chapter 14 continues the discussion of behaviour in gathered worship that has been going on since chapter 11 verse 2 and the discussion of spiritual gifts that has been going on since chapter 12 verse 1. Paul is dealing with a chaotic worship situation in the city of Corinth. There's competitive demonstration of spiritual gifts, there's unintelligible speech, there's people speaking over each other, there's all sorts of disorder going on.

And part of it seems to arise from a seeming overvaluation of the gift of tongues. Elsewhere the gift of tongues is presented as a phenomenon that occurs when the spirit rests upon people. In Acts chapter 2 verse 1 to 4, when the day of Pentecost arrived they were all together in one place, and suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

And divided tongues as a fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Acts chapter 10 verses 44 to 46.

While Peter was still saying these things the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles, for they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Acts chapter 19 verse 6. And when Paul had laid his hands on them the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

In Numbers chapter 11 verses 24 to 25 we have the description of spontaneous prophecy occurring when the Spirit comes upon the elders. So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord, and he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders.

And as soon as the Spirit rested on them they prophesied, but they did not continue

doing it. In 1 Samuel chapter 10 verse 10, speaking of Saul, when they came to Gibeah, behold a group of prophets met him, and the Spirit of God rushed upon him, and he prophesied among them. In these descriptions of the gifts of tongues and prophecy they seem to have a more ecstatic character to them.

They are dramatic signs associated with the descent of the Spirit upon a personal group. Unsurprisingly, given the spirituality that was practiced by the Corinthians, these sorts of dramatic gifts would be very attractive to them. Chapter 13 was not a digression from Paul's argument, and the first verse of this chapter applies the force of it to the spiritual gifts.

Love must be the touchstone of all practice in this area. Chapters 12-14 are all a single undivided argument. Chapter 12 concerns diverse spiritual gifts that are given for the sake of edification, building up, and for unity.

They're expressive of the one Spirit that we all share in. They're not merely for those with more dramatic gifts. Chapter 13 speaks of the indispensability of love, the moderating character of love, and the enduring nature of love.

Once the centrality of love is appreciated, the spiritual gifts will be practiced in a far more edifying and appropriate manner. Paul does not dismiss the spiritual gifts. They are to pursue spiritual speech, but especially prophecy for the reasons that he goes on to discuss.

When we read about the verbal content of tongue speaking in places like Acts chapter 2, we're told that it was praise of God. But the description of tongue speaking in 1 Corinthians has led most commentators to argue that they are not the intelligible languages that we see in Acts chapter 2. This is not an unreasonable interpretation. Rather, it seems that what Paul is describing in Corinth is a sort of ecstatic speech.

It's not necessarily a language. In the Old Testament, for instance, there are a number of different ways of speaking of prophecy. When we're told that the elders prophesied, we shouldn't presume that they were delivering the sort of prophecy that we find in the book of Isaiah.

Likewise, when Saul prophesies, it seems to have been a more ecstatic experience, much as we see variety in the way that prophecy functions in the Old Testament, and different levels of prophetic speech and phenomena. So tongue speaking in the New Testament seems to have involved, in some cases, actual languages, and in other cases just ecstatic speech. The person who engages in such ecstatic speech speaks mysteries in the spirit.

By mysteries here, I think Paul is referring to unintelligible things. Nobody understands what is said. He says that the one who speaks in tongues builds up himself.

Does that mean it's self-edification? Or rather, is he saying that the person who's speaking in tongues in this way in the congregation is merely bolstering their own self-importance? I think it might be the latter. Public tongue speaking has become such a matter of status seeking and demonstration of individual spiritual power that Paul has to challenge it quite forcefully at some points. This wouldn't be the first time in scripture that something that was given by God for the building up of his people and their benefit came to be used for damaging or even idolatrous purposes.

The bronze serpent that the Lord had given to Israel in the wilderness had to be removed by Hezekiah in the book of 2 Kings chapter 18 as Israel had started to treat it like an idol. In contrast to their tongue speaking, prophecy is intelligible speech that builds others up. Anthony Thistleton persuasively argues that rather than the interpretation of tongues being spoken up here, what is meant is the tongue speaker's own capacity to put their speech into intelligible words.

So what we see on the day of Pentecost for instance is a more elevated form of the gift. The exciting of the tongue of the speaker by the spirit that enables them to speak intelligibly in another language. However, when tongue speaking isn't an intelligible language, it's of little benefit.

It's not communicating anything. Paul gives a number of examples of the failure or breakdown of communication. Musical instruments that do not give distinct notes are like tongues that aren't speaking a language.

They leave us unable to recognise what is being played. Likewise, instruments that are designed to give a military signal must do so clearly. These illustrations suggest that we are not dealing with regular languages here.

There are also problems when a meaningful yet foreign language is spoken. Where we do not have the understanding of the language, the experience of hearing a foreign tongue being spoken can simply make us feel like a foreigner to the speaker. Far from bringing people into greater unity, it divides people.

It has a babelic effect. The Corinthians must learn from this. The most important thing is to build others up.

They are eager for manifestations of the spirit. But this should be for the end of building up others in the church, not for puffing themselves up. The tongue speaker then needs to pray that he will be able to put his communication into intelligible words.

The Corinthians probably thought that they were speaking in angelic languages. Paul doesn't deny that their speech is a manifestation of the spirit, but he does greatly downplay the gift. Such ecstatic speech can be a way of the spirit addressing itself to God, but it isn't a language.

Tongue speaking in private prayer can be an expression of the person's spirit to God, much as the babblings and the gurglings of a baby might be an expression of their appreciation for or their need for their parent. But the ideal is to speak to God in intelligible words, so that your understanding is also involved, so that both you and others can say Amen. The true work of the spirit is not like that of pagan religion, which privileges ecstatic phenomena of spiritually elevated individuals.

Rather, the spirit is about intelligible and reasonable communication for the purpose of edification. The irrational ecstasies of pagan religion do not have a proper place within the life of the Church. Paul points out that he is more gifted in tongues than any of the Corinthians.

He's not saying he speaks in tongues more than any of them, as some translations put it, but he's stressing that he has this gift in great measure. However, intelligible communication must take priority in the gathered assembly, and Paul would prefer speaking five intelligible words with his mind than many thousands in unintelligible speech. A question to consider, how might Paul's emphasis upon intelligible communication over ecstatic utterances or dramatic phenomena and the like in gathered worship help us in thinking about our worship and its proper forms?