

WHAT WAS GOING ON IN GATH?

“and all the six hundred Gittites who had accompanied him from Gath marched before the king. “ (2 Sam 15:18)

Wait a minute! Gath was a pagan city. Gath was where Goliath came from. Yet, as our text indicates, the Gittites came from Gath and 600 of them swore allegiance to King David. **“The king said to Ittai the Gittite, "Why should you come along with us? Go back and stay with King Absalom. You are a foreigner, an exile from your homeland. You came only yesterday. And today shall I make you wander about with us, when I do not know where I am going? Go back, and take your countrymen. May kindness and faithfulness be with you." (2 Sam 15:19-20)**

Even though David was willing to send the Gittites away, they wouldn't go. Thus: **“... Ittai replied to the king, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether it means life or death, there will your servant be.’ ” (2 Sam 15:21).**

GATH WAS A PAGAN CITY

- As we have said, Gath was a pagan city. Joshua drove the giants out of all but three cities, and one of those cities was Gath (Josh. 11:21, 22).
- The Philistines were pagans. They didn't worship Jehovah, they worshiped Dagon (1 Sam. 5:1 - 5).
- When the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant they kept it for seven months and Gath was one of the cities where they kept it (1 Sam. 5:8).
- When David fled to Gath he had to feign insanity to escape with his life (1 Sam. 21:10 - 15).
- When David became King in Israel he continued to fight the Philistines (2 Sam. 5:17 - 25).
- The war with the Philistines continued many years. As an old man David became exhausted fighting a Philistine and was almost killed (2 Sam. 21:15 - 17).
- At the same time another battle that took place in Gath. There a huge man with six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot taunted Israel and was killed by Jonathan, David's nephew (2 Sam. 21:20, 21).

SOME AT GATH BECAME FOLLOWERS OF JEHOVAH

- How is it then, that anyone from Gath became followers of Jehovah? Somehow, they did!
- When Uzzah died for touching the ark, for example, David entrusted it to a Gittite: **“David was afraid of the Lord that day and said, "How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?" He was not willing to take the ark of the Lord to be with him in the City of David. Instead, he took it aside to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. The ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and the Lord blessed him and his entire household. “ (2 Sam 6:9-11)**
- When Absalom, David's own son rebelled against him, so many Israelites joined in the

rebellion that David was forced to flee for his life. It was then that Ittai and 600 Gittites pledged to follow David even if it meant death (2 Sam. 15:21).

- In the final battle when Absalom was defeated, David placed one third of his army under the control of Ittai the Gittite (2 Sam. 18:2).
- Obviously, something happened in Gath!

DAGON

Dagon was the chief deity of the Philistines and is mentioned in three different passages in the Bible:

- **“Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands." (Judg 16:23)**
- **“After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then they carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon.” (1 Sam 5:1-2)**
- **“The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. They stripped him and took his head and his armor, and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim the news among their idols and their people. They put his armor in the temple of their gods and hung up his head in the temple of Dagon. “ (1 Chron 10:8-10)**

According to ancient mythology Dagon was the father of Baal. Since “dag” in Hebrew means “fish”, Strong in his Exhaustive Concordance states that Dagon refers to the “fish god”. He was believed to be half fish and half man. This furthered the idea that both man and fish evolved from primordial waters. While scholars debate the true identity of Dagon he was obviously inferior to the God of Israel.

JEHOVAH VS. DAGON

As we have already stated, something obviously happened in Gath that caused many people to abandon the worship of Dagon, and give their loyalty to Jehovah the God of Israel. Some time later there would be a contest on Mt. Carmel between Baal and Jehovah (1 Ki. 18:16 - 46). A similar contest was now taking place between Jehovah and Dagon.

Let's start by remembering that the celebration honoring Dagon was short lived during the days of Samson.

“Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands." When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, "Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain." (Judg 16:23-24)

Their rejoicing, however, was cut short when the God of Israel gave Samson supernatural strength to tear down the Temple of Dagon. There were about 3,000 men and women on the roof and when the temple collapsed and thus it was said that Samson “killed many more when he died than when he lived” (Judges 16:25 - 30).

Perhaps some people in Gath remembered that story and were led to ponder the power of the One True God.

A more recent example for the Gittites to consider, however, was what happened when they captured the ark of the God of Israel. Please consider:

“After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. 2 Then they carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon.” (1 Sam. 5:1,2)

Now the stage was set for the Gittites to compare one god with the other.

“ When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place.” (1 Sam. 5:3).

Note that Dagon was powerless to do anything for himself, and his worshipers had to put him back in his place.

“But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold.” (1 Sam. 5:4, 5).

But the battle between Jehovah and Dagon had just begun.

“The Lord's hand was heavy upon the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation upon them and afflicted them with tumors. When the men of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, "The ark of the god of Israel must not stay here with us, because his hand is heavy upon us and upon Dagon our god." (1 Sam. 5:6, 7)

Now news of this contest spread beyond Ashdod.

“So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and asked them, "What shall we do with the ark of the god of Israel?" They answered, "Have the ark of the god of Israel moved to Gath." So they moved the ark of the God of Israel. But after they had moved it, the Lord's hand was against that city, throwing it into a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, both young and old, with an outbreak of tumors.” (1 Sam. 5:8, 9)

Surely, some of the more astute Gittites were starting to make some comparisons.

“So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. As the ark of God was entering Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, "They have brought the ark of the god of Israel around to us to kill us and our people." (1 Sam 5:10)

Now, the defeat of Dagon had become nation news and they called together “all” the rulers of the Philistines.

“So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and said, "Send the ark of the god of Israel away; let it go back to its own place, or it will kill us and our people." For death had filled the city with panic; God's hand was very heavy upon it. Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven.” (1 Sam 5:11-12)

PAGAN OFFERINGS FOR JEHOVAH

“When the ark of the Lord had been in Philistine territory seven months, the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us how we should send it back to its place." They answered, "If you return the ark of the god of Israel, do not send it away empty, but by all means send a guilt offering to him. Then you will be healed, and you will know why his hand has not been lifted from you." (1 Sam 6:1-3).

Remember! We are trying to understand why the “Gittites”, that is, the people of Gath, came to follow David and become worshipers of the God of Israel. Certainly, the story before us helps us to understand why.

“The Philistines asked, "What guilt offering should we send to him?" They replied, "Five gold tumors and five gold rats, according to the number of the Philistine rulers, because the same plague has struck both you and your rulers. Make models of the tumors and of the rats that are destroying the country, and pay honor to Israel's god. Perhaps he will lift his hand from you and your gods and your land.” (1 Sam 6:4-5)

Now that the Philistines had made a deliberate decision to “honor Israel’s God” a new piece of information is introduced. These pagans had heard what the God of Israel did to Pharaoh. Note:

“Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did? When he treated them harshly, did they not send the Israelites out so they could go on their way?” (1 Sam 6:6)

To eliminate the possibility that they had experienced merely a series of unusual co-instances, the “priests and the diviners” of the Philistines proposed a test. (1 Sam. 6:7 - 12).

- They would put the ark, and the offerings to Jehovah, on a new cart.

- This cart would be pulled by two cows that had never been yoked.
- These two cows would have new calves.
- Their calves would be penned up.
- The Philistines would “keep watching it” to see what happened.
- If the cows abandoned their calves and pulled the cart toward Beth Shemesh, **“then the Lord has brought this great disaster on us. But if it does not, then we will know that it was not his hand that struck us and that it happened to us by chance.” (1 Sam 6:9)**

ANOTHER PIECE OF EVIDENCE

“So they did this. They took two such cows and hitched them to the cart and penned up their calves. They placed the ark of the Lord on the cart and along with it the chest containing the gold rats and the models of the tumors. Then the cows went straight up toward Beth Shemesh, keeping on the road and lowing all the way; they did not turn to the right or to the left. The rulers of the Philistines followed them as far as the border of Beth Shemesh.” (1 Sam 6:10-12)

Suppose you were a Gittite whose whole culture was devoted to the worship of Dagon. Suppose you were there to see Dagon on his face. Suppose some of your family members died when the ark of the God of Israel came to their city,. Suppose you have tumors in your secret parts that were healed when the “priests and diviners” of the Philistines made offerings to Jehovah, the God of Israel.

Just suppose!

FACTS ARE FACTS

As we have already mentioned, the people of Gath had a great deal of evidence proving that the God of Israel was superior to Dagon. Even the pagan “priests and diviners” considered the evidence and concluded that they needed to make offerings to Jehovah.

Once the crisis was over, however, facts were forgotten and most of the citizens in Gath reverted to the pagan routine around which their lives had revolved for generations.

There were Gittites in Gath, however, who could not be content with the status quo. They could no longer in good conscience bow down to a god without a head or hands. Among those courageous thinkers were Obed Edom who kept the ark in his home for three months, and Ittai who led 600 other Gittites in the service of King David.

These courageous Gitties are a good example for people in our own generation. May their numbers increase!