

1 Samuel 6:19

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he smote the men of Beth-shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD, even he smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore and ten men: and the people lamented, because the LORD had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter.

Analysis

And he smote the men of Beth-shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD, even he smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore and ten men: and the people lamented, because the LORD had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter.

The narrative takes a devastating turn. The Hebrew 'ra'ah' (to look, gaze) combined with the preposition 'be' (into) suggests more than casual glancing - this was intrusive inspection, perhaps opening the Ark to view its contents. Such presumption violated explicit commands (Numbers 4:20) that even Levites must not look upon holy objects. The number 'fifty thousand and seventy' has puzzled interpreters - Beth-shemesh likely could not have supported such a population. Some Hebrew manuscripts read 'seventy men, fifty of a thousand' (seventy leading men), while others suggest textual corruption. Regardless of the exact count, the 'great slaughter' (makkah gedolah) demonstrated that proximity to holiness without proper reverence brings death, not blessing. The same Ark that defeated Dagon now strikes Israelites who treat it casually.

Historical Context

Beth-shemesh was a modest town; population estimates for Israelite villages rarely exceed a few thousand. The textual difficulty with the number has generated various solutions: scribal error, idiomatic expression, or cumulative plague deaths over time. The Septuagint omits 'fifty thousand,' reading simply 'seventy men.'

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. What does this judgment teach about the relationship between God's grace and His holiness?
2. How do believers today sometimes treat sacred things with dangerous casualness?

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Numbers 4:15 (Parallel theme): And when Aaron and his sons have made an end of covering the sanctuary, and all the vessels of the sanctuary, as the camp is to set forward; after that, the sons of Kohath shall come to bear it: but they shall not touch any holy thing, lest they die. These things are the burden of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of the congregation.

2 Samuel 6:7 (References Lord): And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God.

Colossians 2:18 (Parallel theme): Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,

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