

THE CAPTURE AND RETURN OF THE ARK

I Samuel 4:1-11; 5; 6:1-16

Review briefly the general character of the period of the Judges and the difference between them and the former great leaders who had been over all the people. The teachers should be prepared to give a brief review of Samuel's birth and call, first letting the pupils tell what they know about it.

Doctrinal Points

We should not ask the Lord to help us attain selfish ends.

The Word is a two-edged sword; it protects the good, but it also destroys those who do not wish to obey it.

Faith without love and good works ("faith alone") is dead.

When we have done wrong, we must acknowledge it and try to atone for it.

Notes for Parents

The ark, we remember, was a chest made to hold the two tables of stone on which the Lord wrote the ten commandments on Mount Sinai. It was the only article of furniture in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle, and from between the two golden cherubim on the mercy seat—which was the cover of the ark—the Lord spoke to the high priest, we are told, “by a living voice” (Numbers 7:89). And we remember the wonderful things the ark had accomplished for the children of Israel: the parting of the waters of Jordan and the bringing down of the walls of Jericho.

All the stories in the Bible about the ark are given us by the Lord to teach us about the place the commandments should have in our lives and about the effect which our regard for the commandments has upon everything we think or do. They belong in our Holy of Holies: they should be “written on our hearts.” We should keep them from love to the Lord and because we love to

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do what the Lord wants us to do. But in our story for today the Israelites took the ark out of the tabernacle and brought it down to the battlefield to give them victory over their enemies, the Philistines. And instead of winning the battle, they were defeated, and the ark was captured and carried off into the Philistine country. When we try to use the commandments to judge other people but are not keeping them ourselves, the Lord cannot give us the victory. Instead, we ourselves are judged.

The Philistines, in the story of the children of Israel, picture a certain kind of temptation. They worshiped the idol Dagon, which had the head and hands of a man but the body of a fish. We know what we mean when we say, "That sounds fishy to me." We mean that the thing is not what it professes to be. When we claim to be good people and talk about being good but are not trying to keep the commandments, the "Philistines" have carried off our "ark."

But the ark immediately began to show its power. When they put it in their temple beside the image of Dagon, Dagon fell down and its head and hands broke off, leaving it nothing but a fish. So the commandments show our professed righteousness to be nothing but a sham. And then a plague broke out among the people and mice began to destroy their crops, just as all our secret evils appear when we begin to compare our lives with what the commandments tell us they ought to be.

So the Philistines sent the ark back to its own country with a trespass offering. When we see that we have been only pretending to be good people, the thing to do is to put the commandments back where they belong, at the heart of everything we do. The trespass offering is our sincere repentance and intention to become really good, to be unselfish instead of selfish in our conduct.

Primary

The details of the return of the ark make an interesting lesson. The simple moral lesson to be drawn is that the Lord cannot make us happy while we are doing wrong. The teacher should be prepared to fill in the story of the capture of the ark and the results of its presence among the Philistines, as the actual

reading suggested for this class is only a brief part of the whole story. There are many details which will interest the children. The teacher might well read to the class I Samuel 5:1-11.

We have just studied the story of Samuel, whose mother brought him, when he was still a little boy, to the tabernacle at Shiloh to be a helper to Eli, the high priest, and of how the Lord called Samuel out of his sleep in the night and gave him a message for Eli. All the people knew that this meant that Samuel was to be a prophet of the Lord, and when Samuel grew up, he became the last of the Judges and was recognized by all the people instead of just by those in some one part of the country.

Before Samuel grew up, the people had a serious lesson which showed them how wicked they had grown through forgetting to worship the Lord. They were being attacked by a nation called the Philistines who lived in the Holy Land along the seacoast. The Philistines were a very strong nation and were getting the better of the Israelites. The Israelites knew that when they did right, the Lord always gave them victory over their enemies, but this time, instead of trying to find out what was wrong with themselves, they took the ark out of the tabernacle and brought it down to the battlefield, believing that it would give them the victory. And the Lord permitted the Philistines to capture the ark and carry it off to their own cities.

Then the Philistines learned a lesson, too. They put the ark in the temple of their god Dagon, and in the night the statue of Dagon fell off its pedestal, and its head and hands were broken off. Then a plague struck the people and many died, and mice began to destroy their crops. So the Philistines knew that they must send the ark back.

When they decided to send it back, who told them how this should be done?
What were they told to send with it?
How did they return it?
Where did the cattle take the ark?

Afterward Samuel called the Israelites together and they confessed their evils and promised to serve the Lord again.

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Junior

The Juniors are old enough to get the general lesson of what is meant by the misuse of the ark and also why it plagued the Philistines. Emphasize the fact that this story leads up to the acceptance of Samuel as Judge over the whole nation. This will help to lay the foundation for the story of the kings.

You remember that the Judges were men raised up by the Lord in different parts of the land to lead the people against particular enemies. None of them except the last was recognized by all the people as their head. And the people did not learn wisdom from their adversities. In spite of the Lord's willingness to help them they continued to go their own selfish way. Finally even the priests in the tabernacle were corrupt. The tabernacle had been set up by Joshua at Shiloh in the center of the land, and regular worship was still conducted there in spite of the fact that the people also worshiped the gods of the other nations. At the time of our story for today, Eli, the high priest, was a very old man and had allowed his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, to take over his duties; and although he knew that they were profaning the tabernacle, he did nothing to stop their evil practices. Then, as you remember, the child Samuel was brought to the tabernacle to wait on Eli and the Lord called him in the middle of the night and gave him a message for Eli. Samuel became the last of the Judges, and the only one recognized by all the people as a man set over them by the Lord.

But before Samuel was grown up, the self-confidence of the people was broken by a great disaster, which is the subject of our lesson for today.

With what enemy were the Israelites fighting?

The Philistines were a people who lived on the plain along the sea-coast. They were an active and wealthy people and had strong, walled cities. The most important of these were Gath, Ekron, Ash-dod, Askalon, and Gaza. In the time of the Judges, the Philistines had grown very confident and were oppressing the Israelites. Always before, when their enemies have become too strong for them, the Israelites had turned to the Lord and asked Him what to do.

What did they do this time?

Was this the same as asking the Lord to help them?

Who brought the ark from Shiloh to the battlefield?

What happened to the ark?

What happened to Hophni and Phinehas?

The Israelites were expecting the Lord to save them without their changing their ways or looking to Him for direction. We sometimes do this ourselves. We do things we know are wrong, and then expect the Lord to save us from the consequences without even being sorry for what we have done.

Where did the Philistines first take the ark?

Where did they put it?

What happened to the statue of their god?

The Philistine idol, Dagon, had the body of a fish and the head and hands of a man. He was really a picture of what the Philistines were like in their minds. The breaking off of the human head and hands left him nothing but a fish.

Wherever the ark was taken in the Philistine country two plagues broke out. The people were afflicted with tumors, and mice infested the fields and destroyed the crops. These two plagues, like the plagues of Egypt, were pictures of the particular evils which were infesting the people.

When you are in a selfish state, does it make you happy to think of the commandments? No, the commandments are a trouble to those who do not want to obey them, and they want to get rid of them.

What was used to send the ark back to the Israelites?

How was the cart drawn?

What gifts were sent with it?

Who told the Philistines how to send it back?

Where did the cows take the ark?

What did the men of Bethshemesh do?

Every story in the Bible is really a parable, a picture of something which may happen in our souls. You will learn more about this story as you grow older, but you can see something of its meaning even now. In our lives our “ark” goes into “Philistine country” when we try to put the commandments away in the back of our

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minds because we don't want to obey them. It is "returned to Israel" when we make up our minds to put the commandments back where they belong, in the center of our lives.

The ark was never returned to Shiloh. It was taken from Bethshemesh to Kirjathjearim and set up in the house of a man named Abinadab, where it remained for twenty years. Both Bethshemesh and Kirjathjearim were "Levitical" cities. That means that they were among the forty-eight cities throughout the Holy Land which had been assigned to the Levites instead of a separate lot when the land was divided among the tribes. So the inhabitants of these cities were Levites and had the right to handle and care for the ark. The ark was finally brought to Jerusalem by King David, who pitched a new tabernacle there for it.

Intermediate

The correspondence of the Philistines and of the details of the return of the ark are the most interesting lesson for this class. The general lesson in regard to the right place of the commandments in our lives is of course important.

When we, as the Israelites did in the time of the Judges, forget our duty to the Lord and begin to imagine that we are good enough to get along without Him, we not only get into one difficulty after another but we actually become worse and worse, and sometimes it takes a very serious setback to make us realize our condition and bring us back into our right relation with the Lord.

Our lesson today is again about Samuel, who was the last of the Judges and the one under whom the whole people was brought finally to a state of repentance. We all remember the beautiful story of the birth of Samuel—how he was dedicated to the Lord's service even before he was born and brought to Shiloh by his mother when he was still a young child to serve the old high priest Eli in the tabernacle. And we remember how the Lord called him in the night and gave him a message for Eli, rebuking Eli for permitting the evil deeds of his sons and telling him that the priesthood should be taken away from his family. The little Samuel represents

the stirring in us of our childhood states of innocence and trust. This is the means the Lord uses to prepare us for the blow which must be dealt in order to shake us out of our self-satisfaction.

The enemy attacking the Israelites in our lesson is the Philistines, an enemy who had already gained considerable power over the Israelites. The Philistines picture the ever-present temptation to think that knowledge of spiritual things will save us without obedience. Many people think that because they belong to the church and have learned something about its teachings they have become good people and can do about as they please. If trouble comes to them, they blame the Lord for not saving them from it.

This is particularly true when we are starting out in the world for ourselves, when our worldly occupations and enjoyments are in the forefront of our consciousness and seem all-important. Our allegiance to the Lord comes to be something we take for granted without examining our actual thought and conduct to see whether or not we are living according to the Lord's teachings.

Israel, whose very worship had been profaned by the misdeeds of Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli, fell an easy prey to the Philistines. This time, instead of seeking guidance from the Lord and being led to amend their ways, they sent for the ark to help them, as the superstitious sometimes rely on some amulet or charm. They took the ark out of the Holy of Holies and brought it down to the battlefield. But, although the Lord's power was still in the ark, it did not save Israel. We know that the commandments are given us to save us from evil, but it should not be hard to see that they cannot save us if we do not keep them.

The ark captured by the Philistines and taken into their country is a picture of the commandments held in our minds in a vague way as something holy but with no practical application to our lives. We should notice that after this the tabernacle, empty of the ark, still remained, just as people whose lives have lost their spiritual meaning often continue to go to church. But our spiritual life is bound up with our keeping the commandments; so the fortunes of Israel went with the ark.

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The commandments in the mind of a person who does not want to keep them do not bring happiness. In the hands of the Philistines the ark caused three disasters. First it caused their idol Dagon to fall and lose its head and hands. Dagon had the body of a fish and the head and hands of a man. Fish, which swim in the water and are cold-blooded, represent the affection for mere knowledge. By adding the head and hands of a man to a fish body, this was made to appear human and fit for worship. But the mere presence of the ark was able to destroy this appearance. We cannot even read the commandments without recognizing that something more than mere knowledge is required of us.

Then appeared the plague of “emerods,” or tumors. Skin eruptions are caused by the coming to the surface of impurities in the system. The commandments bring to light our hidden evils. The mice which destroyed the crops symbolize the many small evils in which we indulge when we are in the Philistine state, which destroy the good which we may try to do.

The return of the ark to Israel pictures in us a return to a state of obedience to the commandments. Our “new cart” is a new idea about the place of the commandments in life and the cows are our new affection for useful living. The calves which were left behind are the natural, selfish forms which our affections have been taking when we were in the Philistine state. The golden tumors and mice are our determination to replace our selfish habits with unselfish service to the Lord and the neighbor. The number five always pictures “a little but enough.” It is used of the small beginnings of goodness. The lowing of the cows for their calves is our natural longing for our former selfish pleasures even while we are allowing obedience to the commandments to lead us into a better state. The sacrifice of the cows after they arrived at Bethshemesh is the consecration of our affections to the Lord.

The ark did not stay at its first stopping place. Bethshemesh was one of the forty-eight Levitical cities—cities which were given to the Levites for their possession when the land was divided by lot among the other tribes—but it was close to the Philistine country.

In our story it represents the first state of worship after the beginning of repentance. The ark was very soon moved to another Levitical city, Kirjathjearim, further inland and on higher ground, and there it remained for twenty years until King David carried it to Jerusalem.

Basic Correspondences

the Philistines = knowledge without obedience

Dagon = pride in one's own intelligence

"emerods" (tumors) = inner impurity appearing on the surface

mice = small evils, especially those connected with pleasures of the senses

cows = affections for useful activities

a cart = doctrine or a general idea of something

Senior

Again the lesson is one of warning for this age group against the temptations which will soon be coming to them as they go out to establish themselves in the world. We cannot say to them too often or too strongly, "Remember that the commandments are always to be kept, and that we need the Lord every step of our way through life."

The period of the Judges was a sort of interlude. Now this interlude has drawn to a close. The Israelites have reached a state of self-satisfaction and indifference to the Lord out of which they must be awakened or they will perish. The Lord prepared the way for this awakening by raising up Samuel, who was to be the last of the Judges, and calling him to deliver a warning to the high priest Eli, who had permitted his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, to desecrate the very worship of the tabernacle. The judgment on Eli and his house predicted through the child Samuel was promptly executed, and our lesson today is one of tragedy.

As a background for this lesson we need to have in mind the general outline of the history of Israel from the time at Sinai when they were given the commandments written by the finger of God

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on two tables of stone and were told to make an ark to hold them and a tabernacle in which to place the ark. From that time on their whole life had centered in the ark and the tabernacle. The ark had led them through the wilderness, across the Jordan, and around the walls of Jericho until they fell. It had been their protection and the source of their instruction. Finally the tabernacle had been set up by Joshua in the center of the land at Shiloh and their worship had been established there.

But once it was more or less permanently established, the people as a whole had apparently forgotten all about it. Some faithful ones still went to the tabernacle to worship, but most of the people were absorbed in their worldly occupations and had drifted into serving the idols of the nations among whom they lived.

Isn't this a true picture of what often happens to us? We are brought up in good homes, taken care of, instructed at home and in Sunday school. We accept the teachings of the church and join it, and believe that we are established as good Christians. Then we begin to earn our living and carry on our independent lives. Our days are busy with our work. We marry and settle in our own homes. We make friends in the community where we live and our pleasures are found in its social life. Some of us still go to church regularly and continue to study and to live the teachings of the church. But many, perhaps the majority, drift away from regular worship and begin to adopt the ideas and standards of the people with whom they associate.

Then the Philistines attack. The Philistines picture the temptation to be satisfied with knowing what is right without making any effort to live according to the truth we know. We get into difficulties. We suddenly find that we have lost our power of resistance to evil, and we remember the safety we had in our earlier lives and habits. The Israelites remembered the ark. But they did not go to the tabernacle to confess their sins and ask for guidance and help. They sent for the ark to be brought down to the battlefield for the sole purpose of saving their lives. We do the same sort of thing whenever we expect the Lord to support us regardless of

our conduct, to save us from the consequences of our own wrongdoing without any effort on our part to repent and amend our ways.

The ark was captured by the Philistines. When the commandments are not kept, they have no power in our lives. They become merely knowledge held in the memory. Hophni and Phinehas were killed and Eli died when he heard that the ark had been taken. When we cease to believe that the commandments must be obeyed, all life goes out of our worship.

The tabernacle became an empty shell. Throughout the Old Testament the ark represents the heart of our worship. Its journeys tell the story of our changing states. When it is leading the Israelites it stands for those times when we are genuinely seeking to be led by the Lord. The various places in which it is set up mirror our considered attitudes toward divine law. When it is neglected, it pictures our states of preoccupation with worldly and selfish concerns. When it is captured by the Philistines it means we have consigned the keeping of the commandments to the realm of the impossible.

But we find that we are not happy in that state. The ark plagued the Philistines. The knowledge of the commandments, when we are making no effort to keep them, is a constant irritant. First the god Dagon was toppled over. Our worship of our own intelligence totters when the commandments enter our thoughts. We are forced to recognize the worldly and superficial nature of our thinking. Dagon had the body of a fish but the head and hands of a man. When, on the second morning, his head and hands were found to have broken off, he was only a fish. And the cold-blooded fish which swim in the sea picture our enjoyment of knowledges for their own sake. The commandments make us realize that such enjoyment does not measure up to our human capabilities. We have to “draw the fish out of the sea and eat them” to make them serve human needs. Then the Philistines were plagued by tumors, and their crops destroyed by mice. The thought of the commandments brings to our attention our hitherto unnoticed evils and

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shows us how our selfish indulgences take the wholesomeness out of even our good deeds.

We try by various reasonings to keep the ark in the Philistine country (that is, we try in spite of our troubles to continue to ignore the commandments). The Philistines sent it in turn to three of their great cities. But the plagues went with it. Finally we are brought to a recognition of the necessity of confession and repentance and the restoration of the commandments to their true place in our lives. The new cart pictures our new way of thinking about the commandments; and the two cows, our new determination to restore the commandments to their rightful control over our actions. The lowing of the cattle after their calves is the longing we have to go back to what seem easier and pleasanter habits. The golden images of the tumors and mice picture the replacing of selfish by unselfish motives. The number five signifies "a little but enough."

It is never easy to bring about such a reversal of the whole course of our thinking and living. The ark proceeded by stages, always welcomed at first but necessitating sacrifices. So the commandments, as they cause us to look more and more deeply into our hearts, take their inevitable toll of our selfish enjoyments.

Adult

The "Philistine state" and the relation of the commandments to it should furnish an excellent basis for discussion, with the details of the story introduced by way of enlightenment and emphasis as you proceed. They are very forceful brought in this way rather than told in story form.

The first book of Samuel tells us about the end of the state of life pictured in the book of Judges and the beginning of a better ordered and directed life, beginning, as it does, with the birth of Samuel and continuing through the whole reign of Saul.

Samuel was the last of the Judges and the only one who came to be recognized by the whole nation as their divinely appointed mentor. In I Samuel 3:20 we read, "And all Israel from Dan even

to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord.” We are all familiar with the story of the child Samuel and realize that he represents a calling forth in us of “remains”—states of innocence and trust from our own early childhood—to which we must return if we are ever to break away from our self-confidence and pride in our own intelligence and come again under the direction and protection of the Lord. Samuel’s call carried with it a condemnation of the current high priest Eli because he had allowed corruption to creep into the very worship of the tabernacle.

In today’s lesson the Lord’s prophecy to Samuel is fulfilled and we have the culmination of the state which had been developing throughout the book of Judges. Eli and his sons die, and the ark is captured by the Philistines.

In AE 700 Swedenborg says: “The Philistines conquered when the sons of Israel departed from the statutes and precepts in not doing them.” And in I Samuel 7:3 Samuel tells the Israelites how they can conquer: “If ye do return unto the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the Lord, and serve Him only.” The Israelites had thought to turn the tide of battle by invoking the power of the ark as a sort of fetish, without examining their conduct to see if it had been in accordance with the words written on the tables preserved in the ark. For this reason the ark did not save them. Its being captured by the Philistines was a symbol of what the Israelites had done to the commandments. They had kept the tables in the ark in the Holy of Holies but had not lived them out in their hearts and lives. This is exactly the Philistine state of knowledge separated from the good of life. The priesthood of Eli and his house perished because, while continuing the formal worship of the Lord, it permitted abuses to creep in, even to the setting up of other gods. It is the same with us whenever we continue going to church and taking our part in the Christian group to which we belong, yet at heart allow ourselves to be led astray into following worldly objectives and indulging in selfish

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practices: the commandments are still nominally our rules of life, but they are really only in our memories and have no vital connection with our thought and conduct. Our “ark” is captured by the “Philistines.”

But our ark cannot remain with the Philistines. The very knowledge of the commandments, if we are doing things contrary to them, will plague us by showing us plainly the ugliness of what we are thinking and doing. The plagues of tumors and of mice were merely the manifestations of the evils into which the people had fallen, habits of sensual living which, as Swedenborg says, “eat up and consume all things of the church.” The Philistines represent “those who are in the memory-knowledge of the knowledges of faith, and are not in a life of charity” (AC 8093). The Philistine state is the state into which we come when we stubbornly persist from day to day in doing what we find pleasant and convenient instead of looking to the Lord for guidance and applying His laws—which we know—in our thought and conduct. Dagon, the god of the Philistines, had the body of a fish and the head and hands of a man. We recall that fish represent affection for knowledges. So the breaking off of the head and hands of Dagon by the presence of the ark, leaving only his fish body, is an interesting picture of the effect of the commandments in showing us our own Philistinism.

How often also, when our knowledge of the commandments rebukes us and shows us our evils, we move them about from place to place in our minds (as the Philistines moved the ark from Ash-dod to Gath and from Gath to Ekron) trying to find some abiding place for them where they will be quiescent and cause us no discomfort! But wherever they go, their power exerts itself to reveal hidden sins, until we realize that only by restoring them to their rightful place in our lives can we have peace.

Swedenborg gives us the correspondence of the return of the ark in considerable detail in several places: in TCR 203, DP 326¹², and especially in AE 700, as well as fragmentarily in other passages. When the Philistines determined to return the ark, they called for

their diviners to tell them how to go about it. This recalls the story of Balak and Balaam. The fact that the diviners employed correspondences shows that the knowledge of these persisted in Philistia as well as in the eastern country. The golden emerods and the golden mice which were to be returned with the ark are symbols of the renunciation of the evils which the ark had exposed. They are called a trespass offering and involve the recognition of sin and the intention of putting love to the Lord and the neighbor in place of self-love as the motive of our outward conduct. The new cart is a “new but natural doctrine.” *The Sower* suggests that it may be a new acknowledgment of the duty of carrying out the commandments in life. The milk cows on which no yokes had come are good natural affections “not yet defiled by falsities.” It is not easy to separate these natural affections from the worldly objects upon which they have been fixed, and this reluctance is represented by the shutting up of the calves at home and the lowing of the cows. We may find an example of this in the difficulty we all find in learning to do good to others without any thought of the gratitude and praise we may receive, or to take our part in the work of our church without expecting everyone else to approve and follow our methods and example.

The cows, under the urging of the divine power of the ark, drew the cart on the road straight to Bethshemesh. Bethshemesh was the nearest of the Levitical towns, where the men had the right to lift the ark from the cart and to make the sacrifice of the cows with the wood from the cart. Spiritually this means that when we do acknowledge our evils and submit to the guidance of the commandments, they gradually resume their true place in our lives, and our natural affections and natural ways of thinking are consecrated to the Lord’s service. We may note here that the ark never returned to Shiloh, but passed from city to city until David finally restored it to its place in the Holy of Holies in the new tabernacle which he set up for it in Jerusalem. When we have fallen into the Philistine state, we can never return to exactly the same simple attitude toward the commandments which we had in the period of

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our early zeal, but if we persist in submitting to their guidance, they will gradually be restored to the central position in our lives and again be written on our hearts, with a new understanding of their force and application.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Explained, n. 700: “By the advice of their priests and diviners they made golden images of the emerods and mice, and set them at the side of the ark upon a new cart, to which they tied two milch kine on which no yoke had come . . . The priests and diviners of the Philistines recommended this to be done because a knowledge of correspondences and representations was a common knowledge at that time, since it was their theology, known to the priests and diviners, who were their wise men. But because men at that time had become for the more part merely natural, they regarded these things in an idolatrous way, worshiping the externals, and giving no thought to the internals that the externals represented.” (See also TCR 203.)

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Who was the last of the Judges? *Samuel*
J. What enemy attacked Israel while Samuel was still a child? *Philistia*
P. How did the Israelites try to win the victory? *took ark to battlefield*
P. What happened to the two priests who took the ark out of the tabernacle? *killed*
J. What happened to the ark? *captured*
P. What was its effect on the Philistines' god? *it fell and broke*
J. What was its effect on the Philistines themselves? *fear, plague*
P. What did the Philistines decide to do? *send it back*
J. Who told them how to send the ark back? *priests, diviners*
P. How was it sent back? *new cart*
P. What was sent with it? *five gold tumors, mice*
J. To what place did it come? *Bethshemesh*
I. What do the Philistines represent? *knowledge without obedience*
I. Why could they not keep the ark? *knowledge not obeyed plagues one*
S. What are pictured by the new cart and the milk cows? *new attitude, kindly affection*
S. How did the Philistine diviners know the way in which the ark should be returned to Israel? *knowledge of correspondences*