

## "Fifty Thousand and Threescore and ten: Did God really kill that many folks?" *Reconsidering 1st Samuel 6:19*

*By Fred Butler*

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One of my favorite portions of Old Testament Scripture is 1st Samuel 4-6. Those early tell of the historical events surrounding the major defeat Israel suffered at the hands of the Philistines. God allows them to destroy the army of Israel, the High Priest and his son's are killed, and most significantly, the Ark of the Covenant is captured. The Philistines treat the Ark like a war trophy and take it to the city of Ashdod where it is placed in a temple at the feet of Dagon, their false god. However, God will not allow His glory to be humbled before a false god, so in a display of His divine, sovereign power, the statue of Dagon is decapitated and thrown down before the Ark in military execution style. Additionally, the Philistine people are struck with a supernatural disease that manifested itself as painful sores breaking out all over their bodies.

After several months of playing a game of "hot potato" with the Ark by passing it between the five main Philistine cities, the leaders decide to return it to Israel, so as to have God's curse removed from them. They prepare a wagon pulled by two female cows to carry the Ark back to the people of Israel. The Israelites discover the wagon and rejoice to see that the Ark of God had been returned to its people. But, some of the men of Beth-Shemesh foolishly looked into the Ark, an act strictly forbidden by God (Numbers 4:20), and according to 1st Samuel 6:19 in the King James Version, "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 (50,070)"

Now, an interesting textual difficulty bubbles to the surface with this verse. The difficulty surrounds the number of men supposedly killed. Did God really strike down 50,070 people at once there in the town of Beth-Shemesh? That God would actually strike down in judgment a massive number of people at once is not new in Israel's history. For example, Numbers 17:49 records that 14,700 people of Israel died in an act of God's judgment, where as Numbers 25:9 states 24,000 were killed by the Lord.

The difficulty isn't really with the idea that God would strike down a large number of people, but it is with the actual number of "50,070" as recorded here in 1st Samuel 6:19. The key objection by archaeological scholars is that there was not enough of a population in the area of Beth-Shemesh during that time in Israel's history to have God strike down 50,000 plus people. Beth-Shemesh was only a village, and there would not be 50,000 villagers available to suffer the wrath of God. In addition, the original Hebrew of the verse has been under dispute for centuries by translators and commentators. Some scholars, including those individuals involved with translating the LXX, the ancient Greek translation of the OT, as well as Jewish historian, Josephus, claim this number of 50,070 is a scribe's copying error. The figure "50,000" has been added to the text, and the original should either read "5,070 men were struck" implying that "50,000" is an accidental inflation of "5,000," or the "50,000" should be dropped altogether and the verse read as "70 men were struck down."

The modern translations of the NIV, NLT, and NRSV reflect that option when they completely drop the "50,000" and state that God had struck down only 70 men. Other translations translate the verse something like "God killed 70 elders, and 50,000 of the common people," or the odd translation of "God struck 70 men of the people, and 50 oxen of a man."

Many Bible believing Christians are troubled by such a variety between translations, because it gives the appearance of an intentional malicious tampering with the Holy Bible. In reality, however, the variety doesn't imply that nefarious translators are trying to corrupt God's Word, but it demonstrates the difficulty of translating a problematic verse to maintain accuracy with the original Hebrew language of 1st Samuel. A faithful translator recognizes the textual nuances that have developed around 1st Samuel 6:19, weighs the differences with the use of textual criticism, and then does his best to render a clear and concise translation based upon that textual information. This is what all reputable Bible translators have attempted to do.

Yet, in spite of any good intentions by translators of 1st Samuel over the centuries, there are Bible believers who claim these translations represent more than just a translator trying to help out a fatigued scribe who miscopied a verse somewhere along the line of textual transmission. In their mind, there is something wicked afoot with all of the variation surrounding 1st Samuel 6:19. Why exactly a malicious-minded Bible translator would intentionally alter the number of people killed in God's judgment is not entirely explained, but it is assumed that there had to have been some devilish scheme involved. Perhaps the translator was attempting to present God as more loving, less cruel, or more merciful by killing only 70 or 5,070 people, but that explanation only begs the question as to why aren't the other passages recording God judgment upon large numbers of people also changed by these dubious translators to present the more friendly, peace-loving side of God?

The most ardent defenders for retaining the reading "50,070" in this verse are found in the camp of the King James Only advocates. This vocal group of individuals insists that God's infallible Word to mankind has been preserved for us only in the King James Version of the English Bible, and because the KJV equals the pure, infallible Word of God, it contains absolutely no translational errors at all. That means any so-called copyist error is only apparent on the surface, but can easily be resolved by a proper, believing study of the King James text. Thus, because the KJV reads "50,070" in 1st Samuel 6:19, God truly killed 50,070 people in Beth-Shemesh. To deny or change how the text reads in the KJV is to deny or change the very Words of God.

I personally have an affinity with the KJV-onlyist's position concerning copyist errors. Their desire to defend the infallible scriptures is to be applauded, because it is rather lazy on the part of scholars to suggest that every OT textual difficulty is the result of a copyist's error that has slipped into the transmission of the biblical manuscripts. The KJV advocates are attempting to defend the Bible from the charge of being contaminated with errors in order to maintain the integrity of the Word of God.

In their zealous defense against critics, however, they will often times stretch the bounds of credulity. Rather than providing a solution that helps explain the details of the original, biblical language God used to give His Word to His people, the explanation is designed to protect the English translation of the KJV text from being revised. Instead of identifying a verse or passage that could be translated with better clarity than what the KJV translators have offered, The KJV advocates argue that the KJV is the most accurate translation ever to be published and it does not need any revision whatsoever. Because they falsely presuppose on the one hand the pure, translational accuracy of the KJV, and on the other hand, that the KJV alone equals the Word of God alone, they elevate the KJV as the absolute standard for all English translations. Thus, in the mind of the KJV advocate any deviation from the KJV by meaningful revision that is meant to lend clarity to the biblical text is considered a departure from God's Word.

The grand potentate of all KJV-onlyism, Peter S. Ruckman, defends the King James reading of 50,070 people slain in Beth Shemesh in his big book of problem texts. Mr. Ruckman begins by first cross-referencing Joshua 21:16 to make the case that Beth-Shemesh had suburbs, implying all the area surrounding the village could also be considered "Beth-Shemesh." Rather than just the actual residents of the village being struck down, other people from the outlying areas were killed when they had wandered into town upon hearing about the Ark returning.

Then, Ruckman points out that in Judges 1:37, the former inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh, the Canaanites the Children of Israel failed to kill in their initial entrance into the Land, are also still present in that area, so they could also be added to the number of people struck down by the Lord. Mr. Ruckman's conclusion about the verse is that many people from all over Israel would have gathered to gawk at the Ark as it rode along being pulled on a wagon. The village of Beth-Shemesh may not have been large, but taking into account the outlying suburbs and the thousands of people who showed up to get a peek at the Ark, it was not impossible for 50,000 people to be struck down dead by God for their insolent disobedience of looking into the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peter S. Ruckman, *Problem Texts*, (Pensacola: Bible Institute Press, 1980), p. 171-172.

Mr. Ruckman provides a plausible solution; it could have been that thousands of people gathered to see the Ark, an object normally hidden from the public. Certainly there are modern day examples of large crowds of thousands gathering to look at rust stains on a water tower that are alleged to be the Virgin Mary. Regardless, I believe Ruckman's over all answer is speculative at best, and ignores some significant grammatical details in the text. His response is a prime example of how KJV advocates specifically design their answers to protect the KJV translation from meaningful revision, not deal with the original language in order to provide a more concise translation of Scripture.

I believe a much better solution can be found in the Hebrew language of the actual passage itself.

First of all, the KJV defenders are missing an important grammatical nuance with the original language. It concerns how the writer of 1st Samuel recorded the number of "50,070." Normally, anytime an OT writer records the number of men, soldiers, or people, he will write the number first, normally expressed by the number in question, 2, 5, 9, etc., then the placement value of the number, 100, 1000, 10,000 etc. The number and its placement value are then followed in sequence by the subject being numbered, like men, or people, or soldiers, etc.

Those three things, the number, the placement value, and the subject, are taken as one set. For instance, if I want to say there were 200,000 men and 3,000 soldiers in Hebrew, I would write something like: "men were 2, 100,000; soldiers were 3, 1000. In some cases, the set will be reversed. In other words, the subject being numbered will be followed by the number and placement value. First Samuel 11:8 is an example of this. The writer states that the men of Israel were 3, 100,000 and the men of Judah, 3, 10,000, expressing the idea of the men of Israel being 300,000 and the men of Judah, 30,000.

In 1st Samuel 6:19, however, there is something unusually about the number. Rather than the number reading as 50, 10,000, 7, 10, men, which would read, "50,070 men," the verse reads 7, 10 **men**; 50, 10,000 **men**, that is translated literally as, 70 men; 50,000 men. In the original Hebrew of 1st Samuel 6:19, the number and the placement values are divided between two sets of men, because the Hebrew word *ish* translated in English as "men," is repeated twice. In addition to that repetition, there is a difference in the vowel points between the two occurrences of *ish* in this clause so as to give the impression that the author meant to convey two different sets of men. The unusual nature of this verse may account for the reason there are so many varied translations of it.

Moreover, the KJVO advocates seem to assume the word *nakah*, translated in the KJV as "smote," means, "to kill" or "put to death." A cursory review of the word *nakah*, however, will reveal that it has a wide semantic range. It can mean more than just "to kill," but can also have the meaning of "to hit," either lightly or severely, "to beat," "cast forth," "to touch," and "to clap" depending upon the context of usage. This wide range in meaning raises the question as to whether or not the author intended to convey that all those people were "smote" by God in the sense they were physically killed. The KJVO advocates want us to believe that when the people took the lid off the Ark, out flew angelic beings who zapped 50,070 people with lightening until their heads melted in a gruesome spectacle reminiscent of the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

In the context of the entire narrative beginning in 1st Samuel chapter 5, the word "smote" does not necessarily imply that in each instance all the people smitten by God were physically killed. For example, in 5:6, the Bible states that God smote the people of Ashdod with agonizing tumors. It doesn't say specifically that they were killed, but only that they were supernaturally struck with some sort of painful tumors. Furthermore, 5:12 distinguishes between those who were actually killed by God and those who were only plagued, or "smitten" with the tumors, yet did not die. The word translated in 5:12 as "smitten" is the word *nakah*, translated as "smote" in 6:19. Thus, it is fairly easy to see that *nakah* does not mean physical death in every instance, and the same could be the case in 6:19.

With this information in mind, how then are we to understand what is being discussed by the writer of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel? I believe there are 2 reasonable alternatives to understanding the number 50,070 to mean something other than God killed 50,070 people at once:

**1). The number could be understood as the total number of people killed on account of the Ark, both unbelieving Philistines, and believing Jews.**

Remember, there are two sets of men being discussed in the verse: 70 men and 50,000 men. That would imply that 70 men died who were in Beth-Shemesh when they foolishly peered into the Ark, where as an approximate total of 50,000 men died of the Philistines. The eminent Baptist theologian, John Gill, writes this in his commentary on 1st Samuel 6:19:

“Abarbinel is of the opinion that only 70 men of Beth-shemesh were slain, and that the other 50,000 were the Philistines that died on account of the ark while it was among them; and reads the words, *with the men of Beth-shemesh he smote – even he smote of the people 70*; that is, of the men of Beth-shemesh; 50,000, that is of the Philistines, and so this gives the sum of all that died on account of the ark, both whilst it was in the hands of the Philistines, and when returned to Beth-shemesh, which is not an improbable sense.”<sup>2</sup>

Hebrew professor, Dr. Eugene Merrill concurs with this possible solution when he writes,

“Hebrew manuscripts have 50,070 men. This seems an unusually large number, but it may be accounted for in some, yet unknown way. The point of course, is that not only unbelievers (the Philistines) suffer when they saw the law of the Lord is disregarded; believers (the Israelites) also suffer when they do not conform to His strict requirements.”<sup>3</sup>

**2). Seventy men from the actual village of Beth Shemesh died who looked into the Ark, where as 50,000 people in the area of Beth-Shemesh suffered from the tumors like the ones given to the Philistines.**

The main objection to this explanation is that it seems to contradict the remainder of the clause in verse 19 where it states, “and the people lamented, because the Lord had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter.” The word “slaughter” suggests a mass killing, but if one were to return to the original language of the text, the Hebrew word translated as “slaughter” in the KJV is *makkah*, which can also have the meaning of “to blow,” as in “to beat,” “to wound,” or “to plagued.” Again, similar to the word *nakah* that is translated as “smote” in the KJV, *makkah* does not necessarily have to mean, “to physically kill.” The writer of 1st Samuel could be describing the heavy hand of judgment that struck the people for their insolence for looking into the Ark. Moreover, the number “50,000” could also mean that over a period of time, 50,000 people eventually died from this judgment. It doesn’t have to be that they all died at once.

I personally lean toward the first explanation. It seems more reasonable from the discussion of the narrative that the writer is addressing the entire number of people, both Philistines and Israelites, who were killed in their handling of the Ark. Taking into consideration that the Philistines killed 34,000 men of Israel in the battles recorded in 1st Samuel 4, the 50,000 deaths suffered by the people of the Philistines from the hand of God was a divine retribution that meted out even more death and destruction than what the Israelites suffered at the hand of the Philistines.

Do either one of these explanations, then, deny the infallibility of the Word of God, or alter the Scripture in any way, as the KJV-only advocates would claim? No, not in the least. No one is denying the truthfulness of 1st Samuel 6:19, nor is anyone trying to dumb down the force of God’s divine, supernatural judgment. Both solutions hold true to the inerrancy of the Scripture, and simply attempt to take into account all of the available textual and historical information offering alternative interpretations based upon a reasonable translation of the original text.

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<sup>2</sup> John Gill, *Gill’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980), p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Merrill, “1 Samuel,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck ed., (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996), p. 437-438.