

KINGDOMS

Week 2: I Samuel Chaps. 4-7

I. Framework:

- After losing a battle to the Philistines, the Israelite leadership decides that taking the Ark of the Covenant out to battle will ensure success (cf. Joshua 6:2-20; Numbers 10:35). The Israelite forces are again defeated and this time, the enemy captures the Ark.
- The portion of I Samuel that runs from 4:1-7:17 is commonly referred to as the “Ark Narrative”. Our leading man, Samuel, is absent from most of the narrative.
- Who are these Philistines everybody is talking about? Although historical and archeological data about these people (outside of the Bible) is relatively scarce compared to other Ancient Near Eastern peoples, we do know some things about them:
 - They are not understood to be native to Canaan. Their settlement in Canaan is thought to be circa 1200-1175 B.C. It is believed the Philistine people are part of an invasion into the eastern Mediterranean by a coalition designated by modern historians as the “Sea Peoples”. There are records in Greek, Hittite, Egyptian, and other national records about this invasion.
 - The experts think the Philistines originated from either Crete or from regions around the Black Sea (the location of “Caphtor” referred to in Amos 9:7 and Jeremiah 47:4 is disputed). There are some ties between the pottery of the Philistines and that of the Mycenaean Greeks. Upon their defeat by Ramesses III of Egypt (1182-1151 B.C.), the coalition dissolved and the Philistines settled in southwest Canaan.
 - These historical conclusions create some difficulty with other Biblical passages (i.e., Genesis 21:32-34, 26:1-18; Exodus 13:17 & perhaps Joshua 13:2-3). The reference to the Philistines in these passages appears to be anachronistic. Depending on the disputed date of the Exodus (arguments are made between the 15th or 13th Century), the passages in Joshua may or may not be problematic. Scholars resolve the apparent discrepancy primarily by determining:
 - The reference to the Philistines and their territory is added by later redactors of the Torah and early historical books.
 - The Philistines were from Crete and possessed land in Canaan that they used for raising crops, but did not settle a large number of their peoples there.
 - It seems that the Philistines adopted the Canaanite pantheon of gods with Ba'al (“lord” in Ugaritic tongue and god of the skies/weather, also associated with fertility and strength), Astarte (Ishtar, goddess of fertility, war and sex), and Dagon (long thought to be associated with the sea, now thought to be of fertility and grain). Dagon is the God of Canaanite cities called “Beth-Dagon” in the territories of Asher (Joshua 19:27) and Judah (Joshua 15:41), and Gaza (Judges 16:23).
 - In Hellenistic and Roman lingo, the term “Palestine” is derived from the Philistine name. In modern times, the former Philistine territory is still a hotly disputed and violent area. Known to a 21st century listener as the Gaza Strip, it is occupied by the Arab Palestinians and governed by the notorious Muslim entity, Hamas. Some may remember the 1948 Egyptian-Israeli conflict, the “Six Day War” in 1967 and efforts of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1970s-1990s all which culminated in the present State of Palestine in the Gaza Strip and also the West Bank area near Jerusalem.
 - In 4:8 and 6:6, we see that the Philistines are educated in the story of Egypt’s defeat by the hand or finger of the God of Israel. They fear the Hebrew’s God, but not their armed forces. Israel is not known in the annals of Near Eastern history as a military superpower, especially when compared to the militaries of Egypt, Hattusa (Hittites), Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia.

II. Talking Points:

A. Chapters 4-6:

- The ark is in the hands of the Philistines after they defeat Israel for the second time in battle (4:1-11). The numbers of casualties in the two battles (4,000 and 30,000, respectively) are disputed (due to ambiguity in the Hebrew language), but suffice it to say that Israel suffered great losses and retreated. There is biblical evidence that the Philistine conquest eventually included Shiloh (cf. Jeremiah 7:12-14; Psalm 78:60-61), including the taking of the Ark to Kirjath Jearim instead of back to Shiloh (I Samuel 6:21-7:1).
- Upon news of the Ark’s capture reaching Shiloh, two tragic things happen:
 - Eli, the old and blind judge, hears: 1) Israel is defeated in battle, 2) Your sons are dead (as foretold to Eli), and 3) the Ark is captured. The increasing magnitude of the bad news, culminating with the loss of the Ark, causes Eli to fall backwards and break his neck.
 - Phinehas’ wife, full with child, hears: 1) The Ark is captured, 2) Eli is dead, and 3) Her husband is dead. The grief is so great, she goes into labor, dying shortly after birthing and naming her son. She names him “Ichabod” (*Iy-Kabod*) which means “no glory”.

- The term translated “departed” (NKJV) in 4:21 & 22 is better translated “exiled”. There is some Hebrew wordplay/pun in the use of “glory” (*kabod*) and “heavy” (*kabed* or *kobed*) in the Ark Narrative. Having taken the “glory” from Israel, now God’s hand is “heavy” upon the Philistines.
- The victorious Philistines take the Ark to Ashdod and place their war trophy in the temple to their god, Dagon. Compare with the keeping of war trophies in I Samuel 21:9 (Goliath’s sword) and 31:10 (Saul’s armor).
- The Philistines encounter several “omens” that their actions have angered the Hebrew God:
 - The morning following the placement of the Ark in Dagon’s temple, the image of Dagon is found face down on the ground (significant?) before the Ark. Perhaps thinking it was a fluke, the people set the idol back in its place.
 - The next morning finds the Canaanite idol not only fallen, but with its hands and head cut off. This is taken as a symbol of defeat. In ancient times, it was common to get a “head count” after battle of casualties by counting severed right hands of the defeated enemy. Display of the enemy’s severed head was evidence of victory (cf. I Samuel 17:51-57; 31:8-13).
 - A plague of “tumors” and rats come upon the Philistines. Most English translations (based upon the later Masoretic text) omit a portion of 5:6 found in the Septuagint (LXX) and Latin Vulgate: “and in the midst of their land rats sprang up, and there was great panic in the city.” Support for this portion is found in 6:4-5. In addition:
 - Most scholars believe that the “tumors” were not hemorrhoids in the way that we know them, since the tumors in this story are deadly. Instead, it is believed that we are reading of an outbreak of bubonic plague, of which sores and tumors are a symptom. Remember the “Ring around the Rosy” song? It is a song about the bubonic plague and the ringed red sores.
 - Bubonic plague is spread via the fleas from rats carrying the deadly disease biting humans.
 - Dagon, the god of grain, has his crops ravaged by the rats (6:5)
- After foolishly passing the Ark from city to city, they finally determine to send the Ark back to Israel. The Philistine lords consult their priests and diviners for direction. They declare that a sin or trespass offering must be included to appease the Hebrew God. 5 golden replicas of both the tumors and the rats should accompany the Ark back to Israel. In addition:
 - The cart carrying the Ark is to be brand new.
 - It is to be pulled by two milch (nursing mother) cows that have never been yoked before and must be separated from their nursing calves.
 - The cart is to be sent down the road unguided. If the cows travel back to Israelite territory, then, in their mind, it was indeed the Hebrew God who afflicted them and is accepting their offering. To them, and perhaps to us, it must then be the work of deity to guide these inexperienced and unwilling (fighting their instinct against leaving their calves) cows to bring the Ark home.
- Robert Alter, an expert on Hebrew literature, presents an interesting idea in his translation and commentary on the Former Prophets (pgs. 268-269, see bibliography). He postulates that the author may be making a comparison between the cart narrative and the story of Samuel and Hannah. He cites the use of the Hebrew word “*ben*” in 6:7 and 6:10 to represent “calves” This word means “sons” in Hebrew and there are other words available in Hebrew to mean “calf” (*baqar* in Genesis 18:7-8 and *egel* in Exodus 32:4-35; Leviticus 9:3, 8 & Deuteronomy 9:16, 21). There is allusion to the abandonment of a weaning “child” and the ultimate sacrifice of the mother cows (Hannah “sacrificed” Samuel to the Lord’s work) in 6:14.
- Chapter 6 concludes with another tragedy, the death of the people of Beth-Shemesh for looking into the ark (6:19, cf. Numbers 4:2-20). The number declared (50,070) is disputed and attributed to scribal error. It is unrealistic that the population of a small, agricultural border town would have that population. Josephus says 70 in his *Antiquities of the Jews*. Other scholars propose different readings of the difficult Hebrew passage, coming up with various solutions. Whatever the number, it impacted the town heavily (“great slaughter”, NKJV).

B. Chapter 7:

- The Ark remains at Kirjath Jearim for 20 years and Eleazar is charged with its keeping. Samuel is reintroduced to the overall narrative as an influential adult leader. He calls on the people of Israel to put away their worship of the false Canaanite gods (perhaps why God allowed their earlier defeat by the Philistines) and return to the Lord. The people obey and place their confidence in Samuel as their leader. His “judgeship” of Israel differs greatly from those in Judges. He is a judicial and religious figure rather than military leader.
- After the defeat of the Philistines by the Lord (7:10-11) near Mizpah, Samuel erects a victory monument (*Eben-Ezer*, lit. “stone of help”). They also make peace with other Canaanite people (“Amorites” is a common name used in the Bible to refer to the people of Canaan) who likely also saw the invasive Philistines as an enemy.
- The meaning of the statement in the last part of 7:13 is controversial since the later narrative in I Samuel demonstrates that the Philistines were still a powerful and troublesome enemy of Israel. They do not, however, overcome Israel entirely.