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The Ark Narratives

I Samuel 4:1b—7:17

a The Philistines Defeat the Israelites (4:1b-11)

The Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

—I Samuel 4:10, 11

Chapters 4—7 in I Samuel are called “The Ark Narratives” by many Bible scholars. These chapters focus on events extending from the removal of the ark of the covenant from Shiloh to its arrival at Kiriath Jearim [KEER-ee-ath—JEE-uh-rim].

First Samuel 4 begins with Israel preparing to meet the Philistines in battle. One of several groups of “Sea Peoples,” the Philistines were a great military power and Israel’s principal enemy during the time of Samuel, Saul, and David. The Philistines, the only non-Semitic inhabitants of Canaan, came from Caphtor, usually identified with Crete and other Aegean islands (see Deut. 2:23;

Jer. 47:4; Amos 9:7). They arrived in Canaan in several waves of migration, one during the patriarchal period (about 2000 B.C.), another sometime around 1200 B.C. The new immigrants settled on the southern coastal plain of Israel, a region later known as Philistia.

The Philistine government was a federation of five lords, each of whom controlled one of five principal cities—Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gaza, and Gath. The Philistines used a variety of advanced technologies for their time, and were experts in metal work, especially iron (see I Sam. 13:19, 20).

When Samuel was about thirteen years old, the Israelites engaged the Philistines in battle at Aphek, a strategic city bordering Philistine territory on the north. The battlefield was most likely the Plain of Sharon. There the Philistines could have made the best use of one of their most effective weapons, the chariot (see I Sam. 13:5; II Sam. 1:6). Overwhelmed by the Philistines’ superior military might, Israel lost four thousand men (I Sam. 4:1, 2).

When it became evident that the battle would go to the Philistines, the elders of Israel called for the ark

of the covenant to be brought from Shiloh to the battlefield. They mistakenly believed that the ark was a type of good-luck charm that would turn the tide of battle in Israel's favor (vss. 3, 4).

As a symbol of God's power and presence, the ark had gone before Israel at the crossing of the Jordan and at the battle of Jericho (see Josh. 3—6). The elders in Samuel's day failed to understand, however, that a religious symbol could not substitute for trust in God. The mere presence of the ark was no guarantee that God would deliver Israel.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I have any "good-luck charms" that might distract me from wholly trusting God?*

When the Philistines heard the uproar in the Israelite camp at the arrival of the ark, they were terrified. They knew the ark was associated with the divine power that had freed the Israelites from Egypt three centuries earlier (I Sam. 4:5-8).

With words designed to bolster their sagging courage, the Philistines fought on to victory, slaughtering thirty thousand Israelites in the process (vss. 9, 10). Some scholars have suggested that poison-tipped arrows and close combat were responsible for such heavy losses for Israel. Among the casualties were the ark itself and its caretakers, Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's two sons (vs. 11; Ps. 78:60-64 recounts Israel's defeat and the loss of the ark). Thus Samuel's prophecy concerning Eli's sons was fulfilled in detail (see I Sam. 2:34).

b God's Glory Departs (4:12-22)

She named the boy Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel"—because of the capture of the ark of God and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband.
—I Samuel 4:21

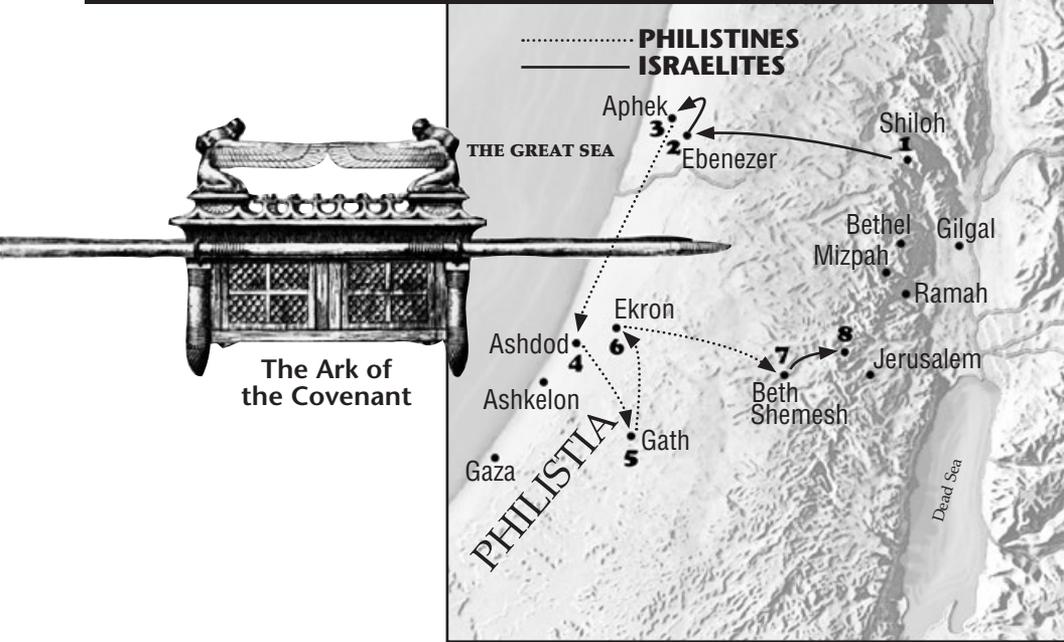
Following Israel's decisive defeat by the Philistines, a Benjamite messenger delivered the news to Shiloh (vs. 12). His torn clothes and the dust on his head were the cultural signs of mourning for the dead or for national disaster.

Eli was sitting anxiously by the city gate waiting for word of the ark's fate, but the runner apparently sprinted past him. The Benjamite delivered his message to the townspeople, who responded in unison with a great cry of distress (vs. 13). The thirty thousand men who had died in battle may have included most of the male population of Shiloh. Perhaps no home was untouched by death.

The Benjamite gave Eli a four-part message, in ascending order of significance: (1) Israel had fled in battle; (2) the casualties were heavy; (3) his two sons were dead; and (4) the ark had been taken (vss. 14-17).

When Eli heard that the ark of the covenant had been lost, he fell backward off his chair and broke his neck. The shock of the news caused him to collapse. Apparently his age and weight contributed to the sever-

The Ark's Movement



- 1. SHILOH:** The ark was kept in the tabernacle at Shiloh (I Sam. 4:3).
- 2. EBENEZER:** As Israel began to lose the battle with the Philistines, the elders had the ark brought to Ebenezer in hopes it would bring victory (I Sam. 4:1-8).
- 3. APHEK:** The Philistines defeated Israel and captured the ark, bringing it to their camp at Aphek (I Sam. 4:1-11).
- 4. ASHDOD:** The Philistines took the ark to the temple of Dagon at Ashdod, where the pagan god was destroyed and tumors (perhaps caused by infected rats) plagued the people (I Sam. 5:1-7).
- 5. GATH:** At Gath the plagues continued (I Sam. 5:8, 9).
- 6. EKRON:** At Ekron the plagues spread (I Sam. 5:10-12).
- 7. BETH SHEMESH:** After a seven-month absence of the ark, great rejoicing erupted over the ark's return to Israel at Beth Shemesh (I Sam. 6:1-20).
- 8. KIRIATH JEARIM:** Since Shiloh was destroyed by the Philistines (Jer. 26:9), the ark was brought to rest at its new home, Kiriath Jearim (I Sam. 6:21—7:2).

ity of his injury. Thus ended the forty-year rule of one of Israel's last judges (vs. 18).

Eli's was not the last death that occurred on that dark day. His pregnant daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, heard the news of the ark's capture and of the deaths of her husband and his father. She went into premature labor and died shortly after the baby's birth. Unconsoled by the news that she had given birth to a son, the dying woman named the child Ichabod, meaning "no glory" (vss. 19-22).

The Israelites often failed to make a distinction between God's presence in their midst and religious symbols, like the ark, which represented that presence. When the ark departed from Israel, it signified for the dying woman that God's glory had fallen into the hands of the Philistines. Israel had fallen prey to the pagan notion that gods could be captured and carried away (see Isa. 46:1, 2). In the years that followed these events, the prophets assured the people that

The Philistines

The Philistines, descendants of Noah's son Ham (Gen. 10:6, 14), were one of a group of migrating Sea Peoples from the Aegean Sea area. In the 12th-century B.C., the Philistines evidently left Crete and Cyprus and invaded Egypt. After the Egyptians drove them out, the Philistines settled along the southwest coast of Canaan.

Central in the religion of this seafaring people was the god Dagon (see Judg. 16:23). Some scholars believe he was depicted as part human, part fish.

By Samuel's time these warlike people were well established in five cities in southwest Canaan (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath) and were constantly pressing inland against the Israelites. The Philistines were Israel's major enemy from Samson's day until the time of David.

Since their main cities were located in a land corridor often used by invading armies, the Philistines were eventually overrun and disappeared from the annals of history. Their one legacy was the application of their name to the land of Canaan. The region between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River became known as Palestine, or "the land of the Philistines."

God was indeed as much with His people during times of chastisement as during times of blessing. Often God's presence is felt more keenly when the way is rough than when it's smooth.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I tend to think that God is with me only when things are going well?*

I Samuel 5:1—7:1 in Brief

After the Philistines captured the ark, they took it to Ashdod, where God destroyed their image of Dagon. God caused tumors and plagues of rats to follow the ark wherever it went. After seven months the Philistine diviners advised the people to return the ark—along with a guilt offering of golden likenesses of the tumors and rats—to appease the God of Israel.

The Israelites eventually brought it to Kiriath Jearim, located about ten miles west of Jerusalem. The ark could not be returned to Shiloh because that city had been completely destroyed by the Philistines (around 1050 B.C.).

C Samuel Sacrifices to the Lord (7:2-9)

Samuel took a suckling lamb and sacrificed it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. He cried out to the LORD on Israel's behalf, and the LORD answered him. —I Samuel 7:9

Twenty years passed with the ark at Kiriath Jearim, and the people of Israel longed for renewed fellowship with the Lord (vs. 2). The ark was kept in this city from shortly after the battle of Aphek, around 1104 B.C., until David moved it to Jerusalem in 1003 B.C., the first year of his reign over the united kingdom of Judah and Israel (see II Sam. 5:5; 6:1-11). The ark had been at Kiriath Jearim 20 years when the events of I Samuel 7 took place.

For over 20 years, the ark of the covenant was in Kiriath Jearim, identified with the village of Abu Ghosh about ten miles west of Jerusalem.



Samuel challenged the people of Israel to set aside the gods of Canaan they were worshipping. Sorting out the identity and relationships of the Canaanite deities is a difficult task. Each nation had its own patron god or favorite deity. Often they were the same gods worshiped by neighboring populations, but with different names and localized characteristics and functions.

Canaanite gods & goddesses

| Names | Nations |
|--|---|
| 1. EI (chief of the pagan gods) | Canaan, Mesopotamia |
| 2. Asherah (mother goddess, goddess of the sea) | Canaan, Aram, Phoenicia |
| 3. Baal (chief Canaanite deity) a. Hadad (in Aram) b. Adad (in Mesopotamia) | Canaan, Aram, Phoenicia, Mesopotamia |
| 4. Ashtoreth (goddess of love and war) a. Astarte (in Phoenicia) b. Ishtar (in Babylon) | Canaan, Aram, Phoenicia, Mesopotamia, Philistia |
| 5. Dagon (vegetation god) | Philistia, Mesopotamia |
| 6. Chemosh (chief god of the Moabites) | Philistia, Mesopotamia |
| 7. Molech (patron god of the Ammonites) | Ammon |
| 8. Resheph (god of war and the underworld) | Aram |

Samuel addressed the nation in his first recorded act of public worship at about the age of thirty-three. Samuel challenged the people of Israel to demonstrate their change of heart by getting rid of all their foreign gods. If they would, then God would deliver them from the oppressive hands of the Philistines (I Sam. 7:3).

Israel complied and abandoned worship of the Baals and Ashtoreths and the rituals associated with the worship of these pagan gods (vs. 4).

Ask Yourself . . . *Is there anything in my life that distracts my attention from God? If so, what do I have to do to eliminate that distraction?*

In an agricultural world, Canaanite gods and goddesses were portrayed as humanized forces of nature. Baal was the chief Canaanite deity and controlled moisture—rain, mist, and dew. He therefore had power over an essential element of good harvests. Ashtoreth was Baal’s female counterpart. In some mythologies she is portrayed as Baal’s mistress or wife. She was the goddess of love and war. Together, Baal and Ashtoreth seem to have functioned as fertility gods whose sexual liaison somehow caused the earth to experience annual fruitfulness. In the minds of the Canaanites, and some Israelites, to ignore these gods was to risk a poor harvest.

After the people disposed of their idols, physically and emotionally, Samuel told them to congregate at Mizpah, where he would intercede with the Lord on their behalf. There

Samuel led the people in a ceremony in which water was poured out before the Lord (vss. 5, 6). This is the only passage in Scripture where the pouring of water is said to be a sign of repentance.

The Israelites begged Samuel to continue his intercession for them so that God would save them from the Philistines (I Sam. 7:7, 8). Samuel agreed, and after fervent prayer and the sacrifice of a lamb, “the Lord answered him” (vs. 9). How the Lord responded to Samuel prior to the battle is not known. We can only assume that the prophet clearly recognized God’s voice.

d The Israelites Defeat the Philistines (7:10-17)

While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the LORD thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. —I Samuel 7:10

The Philistines prepared to attack while Samuel was in the process of offering sacrifices for the nation. As they approached, however, God terrorized the Philistines in a thunderous display of divine power. The concussion of noise could have been literal thunder or simply the voice of

God (compare John 12:19).

Buoyed by divine support, the Israelites engaged their enemies. The Philistines fled from the pursuing Israelites in panic and disarray. The Philistines were struck down and soundly defeated. So complete was the victory that they did not invade Israel again in Samuel's lifetime (I Sam. 7:10, 11).

Samuel's prayer had hardly fallen from his lips before God thundered His response from heaven. While such examples of God's immediate answers to prayer are exciting to read about, it is important to remember that He most often answers in a still, small voice and acts in ways seldom attended by such obvious displays of His supernatural power.

Ask Yourself . . . *How has God answered my prayers recently?*

After defeating the Philistines, Samuel expressed the people's gratitude to God by erecting a stone monument between Mizpah and Shen (location unknown). He called the monument "Ebenezer," which

means "stone of help" (vs. 12).

God's help was so great that Israel got back all the land the Philistines had taken, broke the power of the Philistines over other neighboring peoples, and established peace with the Amorites (vss. 13, 14). The name "Amorites" is a general designation for the original inhabitants of Canaan (see Josh. 10:5).

Throughout his life, Samuel served Israel as a circuit judge, making the rounds from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah to his hometown of Ramah (I Sam. 7:15-17). This route was roughly 50 miles in circumference. As a judge Samuel's function was primarily threefold—civil (I Sam. 7:16; see Exod. 18:16), military (see I Sam. 12:11), and religious (see 7:6, 17b). In his priestly capacity, Samuel erected an altar to the Lord in Ramah because the tabernacle in Shiloh had been destroyed. In whatever capacity Samuel served, worship was always his first priority.

Ask Yourself . . . *What role does worship play in my spiritual growth?*