

1 Samuel 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Samuel chapter 4 Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.

So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

As soon as the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?

And when they learned that the ark of the Lord had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid, for they said, A God has come into the camp. And they said, Woe to us, for nothing like this has happened before.

Woe to us, who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. Take courage and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you.

[1 : 31] Be men and fight. So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated. And they fled every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell.

And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died. A man and Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head.

When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out.

When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, What is this uproar? Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. Now Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were set so that he could not see.

And the man said to Eli, I am he who has come from the battle. I fled from the battle today. And he said, How did it go, my son? He who brought the news answered and said, Israel has fled from before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people.

[2 : 36] Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured. As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward, from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken, and he died.

For the man was old and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years. Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her.

And about the time of her death, the women attending her said to her, Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son. But she did not answer or pay attention. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory has departed from Israel, because the ark of God had been captured, and because of her father-in-law and her husband.

And she said, The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured. The first sentence of 1 Samuel chapter 4 concludes the narrative of the preceding chapter.

Samuel is established as a prophet of the Lord, but now he drops out of the picture for the rest of the chapter, and for the chapters that follow, which concern Israel and Eli's house. Later he will reappear in a story that can be compared and contrasted with this story of the battle of Apeck.

[3 : 57] The story of the battle of Ebenezer in chapter 7. Ebenezer, meaning Rock of Help, is mentioned at the beginning of this story, as the place where the Israelites camp. However, there is no Ebenezer for Israel in this battle.

This is all taking place in the west of the hill country of Ephraim. It is almost certainly also taking place during Samson's lifetime. There is an overlap between the book of Judges and the book of 1 Samuel.

Having sustained some serious losses, the elders of Israel sent for the ark. They seem to have an important ruling function alongside the Judges in Israel at this time, presumably representing the congregation.

The ark was the footstool of God's throne. The Lord is enthroned above the cherubim. This is a repeated expression found in 2 Samuel 6, 2, 2 Kings 19, 15, 1 Chronicles 13, 6, Psalms 80, 1 and 99, 1 and then Isaiah 37, 16.

The Lord's presence is associated with the cherubim and the cherubim are associated with this object, the Ark of the Covenant. The mercy seat that was placed above the Ark of the Covenant included two cherubim.

[5 : 07] Israel thinks that by bringing this throne, as it were, of the Lord into the battle, that they can treat it like a talisman. God will act on behalf of them because they have brought his footstool into the battle.

They want the Ark to deliver them. The Lord for them can be manipulated by this box. It's a fetishised object. The Ark of the Covenant is something that allows you to control God, to pull his strings.

Essentially, it's acting as a sort of idol. The Ark had been taken around Jericho and in that story there was a great shout and they brought the walls down with the shout.

And it initially looks similar. The Ark of the Covenant comes into the camp, there's a great shout, the Philistines are afraid and it looks like the tide of the battle has turned. But things work out very differently.

The Philistines wonder at the meaning of the shouting and they learn that the Ark has entered into the camp. A god has joined the Hebrews. And this is presumably one of the gods who struck the Egyptians.

[6 : 09] In Genesis chapter 10, the Philistines are associated with the Egyptians and they have clearly heard the story of the Exodus and all the things that were involved there. Even centuries later, the stories are still being told.

And the question here seems to be who will serve whom. There are two nations struggling for dominance and whichever wins this battle will make the others their servants.

Fearful and desperate, the Philistines are called to act like men, to courageously fight what might be their last stand. And they fight hard and utterly defeat the Israelites.

The Israelites scatter. They don't just retreat as a military force. They flee to their homes. The military force has been disbanded. The Ark is then captured and the two sons of Eli are killed, fulfilling the prophecy that was given by the man of God to Eli.

A Benjamite runs from battle. There's been speculation that this was Saul. Perhaps it sets us up for the events that come later in the story of the kingdom being established through Saul.

[7 : 09] Eli is seated. He's concerned for the Ark. Perhaps he's seated on his seat of office at the gates of the city. Eli, like the Philistines earlier, wonders at the reason for the outcry.

Perhaps we are to associate Eli with the Philistines at this point. He is, however, especially concerned for the Ark of God. And it is at the news of its loss that he falls over backwards and dies. He's described as being very heavy and old. The chapter ends with death. This is similar to the death of Rachel in Genesis chapter 35, verses 17 to 18, as she dies giving birth to Benjamin.

And when her labour was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, Do not fear, for you have another son. And as her soul was departing, for she was dying, she called his name Ben-Oni, but his father called him Benjamin.

Perhaps there's also a contrast to be observed between Hannah and the mother of Ichabod. In many respects, this could be read as the end of an old covenant order. After the capture of the Ark, the tabernacle worship was never truly restored again.

[8 : 14] The tabernacle and the Ark would always be separate, a broken house of the Lord, until the Ark was finally brought into the temple. Phineas' wife dying in childbirth is another sign of the

desolation of Israel.

She names her son Ichabod, Inglorious, because the glory has been exiled from Israel. The Ark of the Covenant, the throne chariot of the Lord, upon which the glory of the Lord rode, had been taken away from the nation.

On the other hand, the Lord had entered into exile for his people. The story of the Mosaic tabernacle order began with the death of two sons of the high priest. And here it ends with the death of the two sons of the high priest.

At the end of chapter 4, we see the complete destruction of the house of Israel. The high priest has died, as have his two sons, devastating the priestly house and lineage. The house of the Lord, the tabernacle, has been, as it were, torn in two, with the Ark taken into captivity.

And the house of Israel has been ravaged by their enemies, and has lost thirty thousand men, in not just a great defeat, but an event of national apostasy, akin to that with the golden calf at Sinai.

[9 : 27] A question to consider. What are some ways in which we might seek to manipulate and control God, as Israel tried to do with the Ark of the Covenant in this chapter?

