

1 Samuel 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Samuel chapter 7 And the men of Kiriath-Jerim came and took up the Ark of the Lord, and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eliezer to have charge of the Ark of the Lord.

From the day that the Ark was lodged at Kiriath-Jerim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord. And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreth from among you, and direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.

So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtoreth, and they served the Lord only. Then Samuel said, Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you.

So they gathered at Mizpah, and drew water, and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the Lord. And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.

Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines.

[1 : 11] And the people of Israel said to Samuel, Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines. So Samuel took a nursing lamb, and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord.

And Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him. As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the Lord thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines, and threw them into confusion, and they were defeated before Israel.

And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah, and pursued the Philistines, and struck them, as far as below Beth-kar. Then Samuel took a stone, and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer.

For he said, Till now the Lord has helped us. So the Philistines were subdued, and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines, all the days of Samuel.

The cities that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath, and Israel delivered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.

[2 : 21] Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life, and he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. And he judged Israel in all these places. Then he would return to Ramah, for his house was there, and there also he judged Israel.

And he built there an altar to the Lord. At the end of the previous chapter, in 1 Samuel chapter 6, the men of Beth-shemesh were judged as a result of their treatment of the ark, were fearful of it, and so brought it to Kiriath-Jerim.

At the beginning of chapter 7, the men of Kiriath-Jerim bring the ark of God to the house of Abinadab, and his son Eliezer is consecrated to look after it. Kiriath-Jerim was one of the cities of the Gibeonites, which means that its population was predominantly Gentile.

Even though it was under the rule of Israel. The ark in Kiriath-Jerim is in a sort of wilderness period. It's waiting to be installed in the house once more, but for now the tabernacle remains divided.

It would be almost a century before the ark was brought up to Jerusalem, something that we see in 2 Samuel chapter 6. It would be even longer before the house and everything within it was reunited in the temple of Solomon.

[3 : 31] 20 years after the return of the ark to Israel, Samuel and the Israelites re-establish and affirm the covenant at Mizpah. They acknowledge their sin, they forsake their foreign gods, and they ask Samuel to pray for them.

They recognise their need to turn to the Lord from the heart, and not merely to manipulate the Lord into delivering them, as they had attempted at Aphek. They pour out water before the Lord, and perhaps this symbolises the pouring out of their hearts.

In Lamentations chapter 2 verse 19 we read, Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the night watchers. Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord.

Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street. There is another symbolic pouring out of water in 2 Samuel chapter 23 verses 16 to 17.

Then the three mighty men broke through the camp of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate, and carried and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it.

[4 : 33] He poured it out to the Lord and said, Far be it from me, O Lord, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives? Therefore he would not drink it.

These things the three mighty men did. Here it seems most likely that the pouring out of the water represents the pouring out of their hearts. Hannah's words in chapter 1 verse 15 might give further support to this.

But Hannah answered, No, my Lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Peter Lighthouse suggests that it might be a symbol of the Spirit, and God's blessing being poured out on Israel again, like water on parched ground.

That would be another possibility. As they are doing this, the Philistines gather together and go up against Israel. And the contrast with the battle of Aphek is quite striking here. Here the Israelites are the fearful ones, not the Philistines, as in chapter 4.

However, even though they do not have the Ark of the Covenant to bring to the battle, the storm chariot of the Lord fights for them. The Lord thunders against the Philistines and confuses them so that they are overcome, and they flee before the Israelites.

[5 : 47] This is another great battle that seems to be won, not by military might, but by worship. Samuel here is like Moses at the battle against the Amalekites in Exodus chapter 17.

The lifting up of Moses' hands to the Lord was the means by which that battle was won. And here Samuel's offering of the suckling lamb, his calling out to the Lord, and the people's repentance are the means by which the Lord achieves his victory.

Samuel's offering of the lamb seems to violate the regulations of Deuteronomy concerning the one central sanctuary. However, when we consider the fact that the central sanctuary had been torn apart, we can see that the regulations concerning it were suspended.

Once the heart problem of the people has been addressed, the conquest of the land could occur in earnest. At the very place where the Philistines had camped 20 years earlier, prior to the battle of Aphek, in chapter 4 verse 1, Samuel established a memorial stone, Ebenezer.

It marks the help of the Lord that they had received to that point. All of the territory that they had lost to the Philistines is now recovered, the Philistines are driven back, and the Lord judges the Philistines for all of the days of Samuel.

[6 : 59] This is a more sustained judgment upon the Philistines than there was at the time of the ark's sojourn in the land of Philistia. In chapter 7 then, we see Hannah's prayer coming to fruition.

The corrupt house of Israel has been torn down at Aphek, and the rich and the oppressors have been crushed. First with the battle of Aphek in its aftermath, the plaguing of the Philistines, and then in Samson's crushing of the heads of the Philistines in the temple of their god, an event that probably occurred in the intervening 20 years.

Now the poor and the weak are being raised up from the dust, as they return to the Lord in humility and repentance. A story that began with Hannah pouring out her heart to the Lord, now comes to its height in Israel pouring out its heart to the Lord.

A question to consider, what can we learn in our struggles from the contrast between Aphek and Ebenezer?