

I. ELI & SAMUEL

I SAMUEL 1-3

Hannah cannot have children

¹There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. ²He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. ³Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to YHWH of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of YHWH.

⁴One day when Elkanah was sacrificing – (when he gave portions to his wife Peninnah and to her sons, ⁵he would give Hannah a double portion, because he loved her, though YHWH had closed her womb. ⁶Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because YHWH had closed her womb. ⁷So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of YHWH, she used to provoke her in this way) –

One day when Elkanah was sacrificing, Hannah began to weep and would not eat. ⁸Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?”

⁹After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before YHWH. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of YHWH. ¹⁰She was deeply distressed and prayed to YHWH, and wept bitterly.

Elkanah's genealogy is traced back to his great-great-grandfather. He is from the district of 'Ramathaim' ('the double height'), associated here with 'the hill country of Ephraim' (see 'Aramathea' in the Newer Testament, Mark 15:43). The reference may be to the Ramah that is midway between Jerusalem to the south and Bethel to the north (see map).

Joshua set up the Tent of Meeting, containing the ark, at Shiloh (see Joshua 18:1; 19:51), and Elkanah would go there on pilgrimage each year with his family. It is about 25ks from Ramah to Shiloh (see map below).

His wife, Hannah, cannot have children. We see her weeping near the entrance to the tent of meeting (verse 10). Eli, the high priest, is sitting nearby (verse 9). We are told that Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are priests at Shiloh (verse 3).



The Chronicler

The Chronicler does not have this story, but he does give Elkanah's genealogy (see 1Chronicles 6:34-35). He gives Elkanah Levitical descent.

Hannah prays earnestly for a male child, and makes a solemn promise that if God deigns to answer her prayer she will consecrate the child to God as a Nazirite. This vow is described in Numbers 6:1-21. The two central elements are those mentioned here: abstinence from alcoholic drink and leaving one's hair uncut. There is a link here with an earlier 'judge', Samson (see Judges 13:5, 7; 16:17).

She has come from a communion sacrifice (see verse 4) which customarily included the drinking of wine. Her demeanour causes Eli to suspect that she is drunk (verse 13).

Her earnest reply convinces Eli of the genuineness of her pleading, and he assures her that her prayer will be answered (verse 17). 'Handed over' translates the Hebrew שָׁאֵל [šā'al]. The same verb appears in verse 20, verse 27, and again in verse 28 [שָׁאֵל. šā'ûl]. This constant play on the word fits Saul, not Samuel, which has led scholars to the suggestion that this narrative was originally part of the story cycle of Saul, and has been borrowed by the prophetic school who wanted to fit the story of Saul into a prophetic context.

There is another play on words in the Hebrew of verse 18. 'Favour' [חֵן, ḥēn] echoes 'Hannah' [חַנָּה, ḥannāh].

When YHWH 'remembers' (verse 19), the one remembered is the recipient of God's gracious love. Hannah has her child and names him 'Samuel' [שָׁמוּئֵל, 'the name is El']. As already noted the link in verse 20 with 'handed over' [šā'al] is awkward. It points to Saul, not Samuel.

¹¹She made this vow: "YHWH of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death. He will drink no wine nor strong drink, and no razor will touch his head."

¹²As she continued praying before YHWH, Eli observed her mouth.

¹³Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."

¹⁵But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before YHWH. ¹⁶Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time."

¹⁷Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant what you have handed over to him." ¹⁸And she said, "Let your servant find favour in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

¹⁹They rose early in the morning and worshipped before YHWH; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and YHWH remembered her.

²⁰In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have handed over my request for him to YHWH."

Samuel is consecrated

²¹The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to YHWH the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. ²²But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of YHWH, and remain there forever; I will offer him as a Nazirite for all time."

²³Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him; only—may YHWH confirm what you have said." So the woman remained and nursed her son, until she weaned him.

²⁴When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine. She brought him to the house of YHWH at Shiloh; and the child was young.

²⁵Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli.

²⁶And she said, "Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to YHWH. ²⁷For this child I prayed; and YHWH has granted me the request that I handed over to him. ²⁸Therefore I have dedicated him to YHWH; as long as he lives, he is handed over to YHWH."

She left him there for YHWH.

Elkanah is honouring the vow made by his favourite wife (verse 21; see Numbers 30:14).

Measures are not consistent throughout the Bible, but an 'ephah' is probably between 10 and 12 litres.

The author has inserted a psalm (verses 1-10) which presumes a king (verse 10). The editors considered it appropriate in this setting, for the child, Samuel, is God's chosen king-maker.

It opens in a hymn of praise of God's transcendence ('holiness') and power, which is experienced by Hannah as 'vindication' ('salvation': יְשׁוּעָה, yēšū'āh).

God knows everything. Those who, in their pride, think they can ignore and thwart YHWH, will find to their dismay that they must suffer the full consequences of their pride. Those, on the other hand, who are humble and know their dependence on God, will experience God's blessings.

The psalmist is expressing a key insight of Yahwism: that God hears the cry of the poor (see Exodus 3:7).

Verse 9 is echoed in Zechariah:

Not by might, nor by power, but by
my spirit.

— Zechariah 4:6

In the New Testament Luke 1:46-55 draws on Hannah's song in the song of Mary (in some manuscripts it is the song of the 'childless wife' Elizabeth).

The Greek Septuagint translates 'ministering' in verse 11 as leitourgōn (from which our English 'liturgy').

¹Hannah prayed, "My heart exults in YHWH; my strength is exalted by my God. My mouth swallows up my enemies; I rejoice in my vindication.

²There is no Holy One like YHWH; there is no Rock like our God.

³Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for YHWH is a mindful God; by him actions are weighed. ⁴The bows of the mighty are broken, while the feeble are girded with armour. ⁵Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The childless wife has borne seven, while she who has many children is bereaved.

⁶YHWH kills and brings to life; he sends down to Sheol and raises up.

⁷YHWH makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. ⁸He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour. For the waters of the underworld are YHWH's, and on them he has set the world.

⁹He guards the way of his faithful ones, but the wicked perish in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. ¹⁰YHWH! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. YHWH judges the ends of the earth; may he give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed."

¹¹Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, while the boy remained ministering to YHWH, in the presence of the priest Eli.

¹²Now the sons of Eli were worthless fellows who did not acknowledge YHWH ¹³or the due portion for the priests from the people. When anyone offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, ¹⁴and he would thrust it into the kettle or pot; and the priest would keep for himself whatever the fork brought up. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there.

¹⁵Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the one who was sacrificing, "Hand over meat to be roasted for the priest; for he will not accept boiled meat from you."

¹⁶If the man said to him, "Let them burn the fat first, and then take whatever you wish," he would say, "No, you must give it now; if not, I will take it by force."

¹⁷The sin of the servants was very great in the sight of YHWH; for they were treating the offerings of YHWH with contempt.

¹⁸Meanwhile Samuel was ministering before YHWH, a boy wearing a linen ephod.

¹⁹His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice.

²⁰Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, "May YHWH repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to YHWH"; and then they would return to their home. ²¹And YHWH took note of Hannah; she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters, while the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of YHWH.

This is the second mention of Eli's sons (see 1:3). Their behaviour is in sharp contrast with that of Elkanah and Hannah. The portion of the sacrifice reserved for the priests was regulated (see Leviticus 7:31ff and Deuteronomy 18:3). Eli's sons are portrayed as disregarding YHWH and his revealed will, by taking for themselves what should have been set aside for God. Blood was to be splashed on the altar, and fat was to be burned to make smoke that would rise up to God.

Samuel's behaviour is in sharp contrast to that of Eli's sons. The boy is already dressing as a priest, wearing a linen ephod (see Exodus 28:4).

The reference to the sexual sins of the sons echoes the story in Numbers 25:6-15.

The final sentence in verse 25 expresses a theological understanding that is typical of the Deuteronomists. They are preparing us for the account of the death of Eli's sons. Since they died, it is assumed that it was God's will for them to die, so the Deuteronomists concluded that God must have willed the behaviour that led to their death.

Once again we see a stark contrast between Eli's priest sons and the young Samuel.

Recall Luke's words about the boy Jesus: 'Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour' (Luke 2:52).

²²When Eli had grown very old, he kept hearing what his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. ²³He said to them, "Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people. ²⁴No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear the people of YHWH spreading abroad.

²⁵If one person sins against another, someone can intercede for the sinner with YHWH; but if someone sins against YHWH, who can make intercession?" But they would not listen to the voice of their father; for it was the will of YHWH to kill them.

²⁶All the while the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with YHWH and with the people.

Eli's family is to be replaced

²⁷A man of God came to Eli and said to him, "YHWH has spoken thus, 'I revealed myself to the family of your ancestor in Egypt when they were slaves to the house of Pharaoh.

²⁸I chose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to offer incense, to wear an ephod before me; and I gave to the family of your ancestor all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel.

²⁹Why then look with greedy eye at my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded, and honour your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?"

³⁰Therefore YHWH the God of Israel declares: 'I promised that your family and the family of your ancestor should go in and out before me forever'; but now YHWH declares: 'Far be it from me; for those who honour me I will honour, and those who despise me shall be accursed. ³¹See, a time is coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your ancestor's family, so that no one in your family will live to old age. ³²Then in distress you will look with greedy eye on all the prosperity that shall be bestowed upon Israel; and no one in your family shall ever live to old age.

³³The only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared to weep out his eyes and grieve his heart; all the members of your household shall die by the sword.

³⁴The fate of your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be the sign to you—both of them shall die on the same day.

³⁵I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed one forever. ³⁶Everyone who is left in your family shall come to implore him for a piece of silver or a loaf of bread, and shall say, Please put me in one of the priest's places, that I may eat a morsel of bread.'"

Verses 27-36 function as theological reflection on what has been presented. The hand of the Deuteronomists is obvious.

Reference is made first to God's setting aside priests to offer sacrifice. Then Eli is held responsible for the behaviour of his sons. We are being prepared for the replacement of one priestly line (Eli's house ends with the exiling of Abiathar; see 1Kings 1-2) with another line (that of Zadok, who plays a leading role during the reigns of David and Solomon). The reference in verse 33 points ahead to Abiathar, who would later be the only one to escape when Saul attempted to wipe out all Eli's descendants (see 1Samuel 22:6-23). For the account of the death of Eli's sons see 1Samuel 4:11.

The 'faithful priest' (verse 35) is 'Zadok' (see 2Samuel 15:24-27), whose priestly line (see 1Kings 2:26-27, 35) was in favour, especially after Abiathar was banished by Solomon to Anathoth (1Kings 2:26-35).

Reference to 'my anointed one' [מָשִׁיחַ, *mēšīḥ*] supposes the existence of the monarchy (compare 2:10).

The Deuteronomists are using this ancient story to support their polemic against the non-Jerusalem priesthood, the priests of the 'high places' (see 2Kings 23:9).

For the third time we are told that Samuel is ministering to YHWH (see 2:11, 18). The word translated 'boy' implies 'not-yet-experienced' (compare Jeremiah 1:6-7).

The narrative is evidence of the storyteller's art.

The lamp referred to in verse 3 burned through the night and was extinguished in the morning (It is not the lamp of Exodus 27:20 and Leviticus 24:2).

This the first mention of the 'ark' (verse 3). Later (see 4:4) it will be referred to as 'the ark of the covenant of YHWH of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim'. It is called the 'ark of the covenant' because it contained the covenant (see Deuteronomy 10:1ff). It is called the ark of 'YHWH of hosts', for it was YHWH who led the army against their and his enemies. The 'cherubim' acted as a warning against anyone unauthorised who might be tempted to touch the ark (see 1Kings 6:19-28).

The message Samuel receives from God (verses 11-14) reinforces the reflection of the Deuteronomists (2:27-36). The priestly house of Eli is rejected – a claim that supports the power exercised by the priests of the line of Zadok (see 2:35), and the reform of Josiah that reduced the status of the country priests.

¹Now the boy Samuel was ministering to YHWH under Eli. The word of YHWH was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of YHWH, where the ark of God was.

⁴Then YHWH called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down.

⁶YHWH called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know YHWH, and the word of YHWH had not yet been revealed to him.

⁸YHWH called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that YHWH was calling the boy. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, YHWH, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰Now YHWH came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

¹¹Then YHWH said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. ¹²On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. ¹⁴Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall never ever be expiated by sacrifice or offering."

¹⁵Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of YHWH. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am."

¹⁷Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." ¹⁸So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is YHWH; let him do what seems good to him."

¹⁹As Samuel grew up, YHWH was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of YHWH. ²¹YHWH continued to appear at Shiloh, revealing himself to Samuel. ^{4:1}And his word to Samuel went out to all Israel.

The second part of verse 17 is an oath formula. Eli uses his power as priest to demand that Samuel reveal the full content of the message given to him by YHWH. When he hears God's word, he submits to God's will.

Here for the first time Samuel is declared to be a prophet [נָבִי, nābī']. His words, being inspired by God, were never wasted. Dan is in the extreme north of the holy land. Beer-sheba is in the extreme south.

We have already seen the young Samuel exercising a priestly function, and soon we will see him exercising political power as the last and the greatest of the 'judges', chosen to be the king-maker. He is thus pictured as a second Moses, combining in his person the priestly, prophetic and leadership roles.

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In chapters 1-3 we have an editing by the Deuteronomists at the time of Josiah of an earlier composition. This earlier composition has a special interest in prophecy. It appears to include material that was originally linked to Saul, but was used to fill out the picture of the last judge, who was also the prophet chosen by God at this turning point of the history of Israel.

In the following chapters the Deuteronomists are editing a much earlier document concerning the loss and the return of the ark – something that happened during the time of Samuel (though he does not feature in the account)..

II. THE ARK

I SAMUEL 4-6

The ark is captured by the Philistines

¹Eli grew very old and the behaviour of his sons went from bad to worse in the presence of YHWH.

In those days the Philistines mustered for war against Israel, and Israel went out to battle against them; they encamped at Ebenezer.

The Philistines who were encamped at Aphek ²drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle was joined, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle.

³When the troops came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has YHWH put us to rout today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of YHWH here from Shiloh, so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies." ⁴So the people sent to Shiloh, and brought from there the ark of the covenant of YHWH of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

⁵When the ark of the covenant of YHWH came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded.

⁶When the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, "What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" When they learned that the ark of YHWH had come to the camp, ⁷the Philistines were afraid; for they said, "Gods have come into the camp." They also said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. ⁸Woe 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 and pestilence. ⁹Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, in order not to become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight."

¹⁰So the Philistines fought; Israel was defeated, and they fled, everyone to his home. There was a very great slaughter, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers.

In chapters 4-6 the focus of attention moves from Samuel to the ark (see 3:3).

For the first time in the Books of Samuel, we hear of the Philistines. Clearly they are the dominant power in the district. They are mentioned in passing in Joshua 13:2-3, and feature in Judges 3:3,31; 10:6-7,11; and especially in the legends surrounding Samson (Judges 13-16).

Aphek is north of the five main cities of Philistia: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath.

The presence of the ark gave the assurance of the presence of YHWH. The fact that Israel was defeated and the ark captured could not mean that the gods of the Philistines were more powerful. It must mean that YHWH wanted the Israelites to lose. A reason is found: the infidelity of the Shiloh priesthood.

The word 'elep came to mean thousand. Here (verses 2 and 10) it refers to a military unit of unspecified size.



The ark is captured and the sons of Eli die, as foretold in 2:34.

A man runs the 35ks from Aphek to Shiloh with the dreadful news that the army of Israel fled, that there was much slaughter, that his two sons were among those who died, and, finally, that the ark was captured. It was this final piece of news that led to Eli's death.

We find out in verse 18 that Eli was not only a priest, but also a 'judge', considered by the people of Israel to be raised up by God as their leader. This is an indication of an editorial comment by the Deuteronomists who identified all leaders prior to the kings as judges.

The news causes Eli's daughter-in-law to give birth prematurely. She names her son 'Ikabod [אִי-קָבֹד]. 'kabod' means 'glory'. The initial 'î appears to mean 'Alas!' or 'Where is?' The loss of the ark is understood as a symbol of YHWH's abandoning of his people. At a deeper level it is a statement that YHWH is not bound to the ark.

¹¹The ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

¹²A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line, and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with earth upon his head. ¹³When he arrived, Eli was sitting upon his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. When the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. ¹⁴When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, "What is this uproar?" Then the man came quickly and told Eli. (¹⁵Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set, so that he could not see.) ¹⁶The man said to Eli, "I have just come from the battle; I fled from the battle today." He said, "How did it go, my son?"

¹⁷The messenger replied, "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great slaughter among the troops; your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured." ¹⁸When 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 he was an old man, and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years.

¹⁹Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. When she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she crouched down and gave birth; for her labour pains overwhelmed her. ²⁰As she was about to die, the women attending her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer or give heed. ²¹She named the child Ik-abod, meaning, "The glory has departed from Israel," because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. ²²She said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

¹When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod; ²then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and placed it beside Dagon. ³When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of YHWH. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. ⁴But when they rose early on the next morning, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of YHWH. His head and both his hands had been broken off upon the threshold; only his trunk was left intact. (⁵This is why to this day the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not step on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod.)

⁶The hand of YHWH was heavy upon the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and struck them with tumours, both in Ashdod and in its territory.

⁷And when the inhabitants of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us; for his hand is heavy on us and on our god Dagon." ⁸So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines, and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?" The inhabitants of Gath replied, "Let the ark of God be moved on to us." So they moved the ark of the God of Israel to Gath. ⁹But after they had brought it to Gath, the hand of YHWH was against the city, causing a very great panic; he struck the inhabitants of the city, both young and old, so that tumours broke out on them. ¹⁰So they sent the ark of the God of Israel to Ekron. But when the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, "Why have they brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people?" ¹¹They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines, and said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people." For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there; ¹²those who did not die were stricken with tumours, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

The etymology of the name 'Dagon' is uncertain. As a name for a god 'Dagon' is common in Mesopotamia from the middle of the third millennium. It is found also in Syria, and in the texts of Ugarit. In the Bible he is presented as a Philistine deity (see Judges 16:23; 1Chronicles 10:10).

The Philistines set the ark up in their temple as a trophy of war. Their god, Dagon, has shown his power over the god of Israel. Or so they think. We are reassured that YHWH is the more powerful one. Dagon is helpless before him.

The people too are affected and want to rid themselves of the ark. Though not mentioned here in the Hebrew text, the Greek Septuagint speaks also of a plague of mice (*μύς*, see 5:6 and 6:1 as well as 6:4).

The Philistines have achieved a victory over the Israelites, but not over the God of Israel!

Verse 12 pictures God as hearing the cry of the Philistines (compare Jonah 4, and the cries from Nineveh).

The Philistines are portrayed as being aware of the requirement of the Torah for ‘reparation offerings’ [כֹּסֶם, ’āšām, verses 3-4; see Leviticus 5:14-19; 7:1-7).

The Philistines are portrayed also as knowing the story of what the God of the Israelites did in Egypt (verse 6). The image of God mocking his enemies is found in Psalm 2:4.

Since the cows have never before been yoked, and since their calves are left behind, it is almost certain they will turn for home. If, despite this, they head for the nearest Israelite town, this is surely a sign that the Israelite God wants his ark back in its proper place.



¹The ark of YHWH was in the country of the Philistines seven months.

²Then the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, “What shall we do with the ark of YHWH? Tell us how we should send it back to its place.”

³They said, “If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a reparation offering. Then you will be healed and will be ransomed; will not his hand then turn from you?”

⁴And they said, “What is the reparation offering that we shall return to him?” They answered, “Five gold tumours and five gold mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines; for the same plague was upon all of you and upon your lords.

⁵Make images of your tumours and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel; perhaps he will lighten his hand on you and your gods and your land. ⁶Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had made fools of them, did they not let the people go, and they departed? ⁷Now then, get ready a new cart and two milch cows that have never borne a yoke, and yoke the cows to the cart, but take their calves home, away from them.

⁸Take the ark of YHWH and place it on the cart, and put in a box at its side the figures of gold, which you are returning to him as a guilt offering. Then send it off, and let it go its way.

⁹And watch; if it goes up on the way to its own land, to Beth-shemesh, then it is he who has done us this great harm; but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that struck us; it happened to us by chance.”

The ark back in Israel

¹⁰The men did so; they took two milch cows and yoked them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home. ¹¹They put the ark of YHWH on the cart, and the box with the gold mice and the images of their tumours. ¹²The cows went straight in the direction of Beth-shemesh along one highway, lowing as they went; they turned neither to the right nor to the left, and the lords of the Philistines went after them as far as the border of Beth-shemesh.

¹³Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. When they looked up and saw the ark, they went with rejoicing to meet it. ¹⁴The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh, and stopped there. A large stone was there; so they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to YHWH. ¹⁵The Levites took down the ark of YHWH and the box that was beside it, in which were the gold objects, and set them upon the large stone. The people of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and presented sacrifices on that day to YHWH.

¹⁶When the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron. (¹⁷These are the gold tumours, which the Philistines returned as a guilt offering to YHWH: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron; ¹⁸also the gold mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and unwallled villages. The great stone, beside which they set down the ark of YHWH, is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh.)

The cows head towards the Israelite village of Beth-shemesh.

Only Levites could touch the ark (verse 15).

A huge stone in the field acted as a reminder of this event.

Failure to show appropriate respect to the ark results in divine anger and ‘great slaughter’. The inhabitants of Beth-shemesh, though Israelites, respond as did the Philistines of Ekron (see 5:10). They don’t want the ark in their village.

The ark finds temporary residence on the hill at Kiriath-jearim, and will remain there till David finds a place for it in Jerusalem (compare Psalm 132:6 which refers to ‘Jaar’.

The ark was not taken back to Shiloh. Though the destruction of the sanctuary at Shiloh is not mentioned in this account, it is mentioned by Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 7:12,14; 26:6) and in Psalm 78:60. In 1 Samuel 21:1 and 22:9 we find the priest located not at Shiloh but at ‘Nob’, just outside Jerusalem. In all likelihood Shiloh at this time was in ruins.

Nor was it taken to the shrine at Mizpah, where it had been in earlier times (see Judges 11:11; 20:1; 21:8). Was this because the Philistines insisted on the ark remaining in a town which they controlled?

Kiriath-jearim is in the tribal area of Benjamin. Saul, Israel’s first king, was from Benjamin. It is not surprising that he would want the ark to stay in his own tribal area.

¹⁹However, no members of the priesthood were present at the celebration with the people of Beth-shemesh when they greeted the ark of YHWH; so he killed seventy of them. The people mourned because YHWH had made a great slaughter among the people.

²⁰Then the people of Beth-shemesh said, “Who is able to stand before this holy thing? To whom will it go from us?”

²¹So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, “The Philistines have returned the ark of YHWH. Come down and take it up to you.”

^{7:1}And the people of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the ark of YHWH, and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. They consecrated his son, Eleazar, to have charge of the ark of YHWH.



