

1 Samuel 6-7:1
April 3, 2022

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: What do you think causes God to judge His people? [Let people engage. Ex: disobedience; unwillingness to repent; substituting idols or rituals for Him]

Transition: When the Philistines first captured the Ark of the Covenant, they **thought it was a great victory**. They saw the ark of the covenant as a **trophy**. But as time went on, the Philistines began to regard the ark as a **burden**. The Philistine's had **seven months** with the ark of God in their land. They had **seven months** of dealing with the tumors and the deaths in their cities and surrounding areas. They had **seven months** to respond to God in the right way, but instead, they simply continued to desire to push God further away. They were **needing RELIEF!** But rather than submitting to the Lord or even seeking the Lord for what to do, they turned to their own priests and diviners. Let's see what advice they gave the Philistines and review whether it worked. Let's begin.

BOOK:

The Ark Returned to Israel

6 When the ark of the LORD had been in Philistine territory seven months, ² the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we should send it back to its place."

³ They answered, "If you return the ark of the god of Israel, do not send it away empty, but by all means send a guilt offering to him. Then you will be healed, and you will know why his hand has not been lifted from you."

⁴ The Philistines asked, "What guilt offering should we send to him?"

They replied, "Five gold tumors and five gold rats, according to the number of the Philistine rulers, because the same plague has struck both you and your rulers. ⁵ Make models of the tumors and of the rats that are destroying the country and pay honor to Israel's god. Perhaps he will lift his hand from you and your gods and your land. ⁶ Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did? When he (God) treated them harshly, did they not send the Israelites out so they could go on their way?"

⁷ "Now then, get a new cart ready, with two cows that have calved and have never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pen them up. ⁸ Take the ark of the LORD and put it on the cart, and in a chest beside it put the gold objects you are sending back to him as a guilt offering. Send it on its way, ⁹ but keep watching it. If it goes up to its own territory, toward Beth Shemesh, then the LORD has brought this great disaster on us. But if it does not, then we will know that it was not his hand that struck us and that it happened to us by chance."

¹⁰ So they did this. They took two such cows and hitched them to the cart and penned up their calves. ¹¹ They placed the ark of the LORD on the cart and along with it the chest containing the gold rats and the models of the tumors. ¹² Then the cows went straight up toward Beth Shemesh,

keeping on the road and lowing all the way; they did not turn to the right or to the left. The rulers of the Philistines followed them as far as the border of Beth Shemesh.

¹³ Now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight. ¹⁴ The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and there it stopped beside a large rock. The people chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. ¹⁵ The Levites took down the ark of the LORD, together with the chest containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. On that day the people of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the LORD. ¹⁶ The five rulers of the Philistines saw all this and then returned that same day to Ekron.

¹⁷ These are the gold tumors the Philistines sent as a guilt offering to the LORD—one each for Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron. ¹⁸ And the number of the gold rats was according to the number of Philistine towns belonging to the five rulers—the fortified towns with their country villages. The large rock, on which they set the ark of the LORD, is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh.

¹⁹ But God struck down some of the men of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy (Septuagint says 50,070) of them to death because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. The people mourned because of the heavy blow the LORD had dealt them, ²⁰ and the men of Beth Shemesh asked, “Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God? To whom will the ark go up from here?”

²¹ Then they sent messengers to the people of Kiriath Jearim, saying, “The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and take it up to your place.” **7 1** So the men of Kiriath Jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord. They took it to Abinadab’s house on the hill and consecrated Eleazar his son to guard the ark of the Lord.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

God defines repentance as turning away from all substitutes for him and turning in obedience to Him. Let’s always remember that God’s holiness should be revered in all that we say and do.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (1 Sa 6)*. Victor Books.

B. Before the Israelites (chap. 6).

The Philistines decided to return the ark to Israel, but nobody had the courage to undertake the task. They finally decided to put the ark on a new cart and allow the cows to walk down the road unassisted. It would be natural for the cows to seek out their calves (v. 10); but if they headed instead for Bethshemesh, it would be evidence that God was directing them and therefore that He had sent the plagues. The Philistines added a trespass offering too: five images of the boils, and five images of the mice. God directed the cows and they brought the cart to the field of Joshua, an inhabitant of Bethshemesh. The Israelites in the harvest field rejoiced to see the ark returned. However, they became curious and looked into the ark (vv. 19–20), and God had to judge them. The numbers in v. 19 have created a problem, for there were not 50,000 people in that little village. In Hebrew, letters are used for numbers, and it is easy for a scribe to miscopy or misread a letter. It is likely that seventy men were judged instantly, certainly a “great slaughter” for such a small village. The problem does not affect anything crucial. It is important that we know God did judge their sin. How many were slain is not a vital matter.

Hophni and Phinehas thought they could win victories by trusting the ark when their lives were wicked, and God killed them. Eli died because he had not disciplined his own sons who were dishonoring the Lord. The Philistines died because they treated Jehovah like one of their own gods. The men of Bethshemesh died because they presumptuously looked into the ark. It does not pay to trifle with God.

Merrill, E. H. (1985). *1 Samuel*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Vol. 1, pp. 437-438)* Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

6:1–12. After suffering the humiliation of their god Dagon and the painful and fatal consequences of God's **plague**, the **Philistine** lords decided to **return the ark of the LORD** to Israel. In accordance with their superstitious techniques, they consulted their **priests** and **diviners** who advised them to **send** the ark **back** accompanied with tokens of tribute in the form of **five gold tumors and five gold rats**, representing the five Philistine cities (vv. 17–18). These offerings to **Israel's God** would indicate their acknowledgment of His superiority (v. 5). Furthermore, **the ark** should be sent on a **new** driverless **cart**, as a further test of the source of their troubles. If the animals (**two cows** still nursing their young and not previously **yoked**, v. 7) pulled **the cart** directly back to Israel it would be clear that Israel's God had indeed caused their affliction. **But if** they wandered aimlessly about, the Philistines could attribute their misfortune to mere **chance**.

Though not much is known about divination from the Old Testament, since it was forbidden to Israel, divination texts abound from the ancient Near Eastern world. They indicate both the techniques employed to discover the intent of the gods and those used to avert portended evil. Frequently, as in the present story, it would take a binary form, that is a given test would be applied to which a yes or no response would be possible. Perhaps Gideon's use of the fleece reflects such a divinatory practice, though stripped of pagan overtones. The casting of lots would be similar. In any event, the deepest suspicions of the Philistines were confirmed when the

animals made their way **straight** back to Israel. It was obvious that **the LORD** had been at the root of all their troubles.

6:13–7:1. The Israelites were so overjoyed to see **the ark** after seven months (6:1) that they offered a sacrifice of **the cows to the LORD** at **Beth Shemesh**, the border town where the ark had been directed, about 15 miles west of Jerusalem (see the map “The Wanderings of the Ark of the Covenant”). Unfortunately, **the people of Beth Shemesh** not only **rejoiced** at the return of **the ark** (6:13) and **offered ... sacrifices** in worship (6:14–15), but they desecrated it by opening it and looking inside (6:19) perhaps to see if the stone tablets of the Law were still there. This violated the Mosaic statute that only **Levites** could handle **the ark** and not even they could touch it directly, to say nothing of looking within it (Num. 4:5, 15, 20). Disobedience in this respect would bring death. The sin of the people of Beth Shemesh was a deliberate, “high-handed” violation of the clear will of God (1 Sam. 6:19; cf. 2 Sam. 6:6–7). (According to the NIV and a few Hebrew manuscripts, **70** people were put **to death**. Most Hebrew manuscripts, however, have 50,070. This seems an unusually large number, but it may be accounted for in some yet unknown way.) The point, of course, is that not only unbelievers (the Philistines) suffer when the Law of **the LORD** is disregarded; believers (the Israelites) also suffer when they do not conform to His strict requirements. After this disaster at Beth Shemesh **the ark** was moved again (1 Sam. 6:21), this time to **Kiriath Jearim** (modern Abu Ghosh, about 10 miles northwest of Jerusalem). No doubt **the ark** was taken there rather than to Shiloh, because the latter was destroyed by the Philistines, perhaps after the battle of Aphek (chap. 4; cf. Jer. 26:9). The ark remained in the custody of the family of Abinadab (1 Sam. 7:1) for about 100 years.

Mathews, K. A. (1998). *The Historical Books*. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), *Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (p. 111). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Ark and God’s Holiness (6:1–7:1). The Philistines feared the Lord and honored Him by returning the ark on a new cart bearing a guilt offering. The Israelites at Beth Shemesh welcomed the ark, but they too suffered death because some men looked unlawfully into the ark (see Num. 4:20). They learned like the Philistines that the Lord was a holy God. They sent the ark to the house of Abinadab at Kiriath Jearim, where it resided until the days of David.

Philbeck, B. F. (1972). *1 Samuel*. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), *The Teacher’s Bible Commentary* (p. 167). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

The Ark Returns to Israel (1 Sam. 6:1–7:2)

The passage—As frantic preparations were made to return the troublesome ark to Israelite territory, Philistine priests devised one last test to determine the source of their affliction. First the people were to offer appropriate sacrifices (v. 4) to the Lord that he might lift the plagues which had afflicted them. Then the ark with the guilt offerings was to be placed on a specially prepared cart pulled by two cows. If the cows moved toward their calves which had been penned in Philistine territory, then all would know that the Lord had no part in the plagues which ravaged the land.

The cows, however, turned toward Bethshemesh, and the ark was restored to Israel. Amidst a joyous people, the cart and the cows became part of a sacrifice celebrating the Lord’s return to his rightful home. Even Israelites were not exempt from death associated with the ark, however

(v. 19). God does not play favorites according to biological or national heritage. All people must respect his holiness and live within his laws.

Special points—The ark was soon moved from Bethshemesh to Kiriath-jearim where it remained in obscurity for some twenty years (2 Sam. 6; but see 1 Sam. 14:18). Since a return to Shiloh was not even considered, it is assumed that Israel's former central sanctuary had been destroyed by the Philistines following their victory at Ebenezer.¹

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (1 Samuel 6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

© 2022 Lee Ann Penick

¹ Philbeck, B. F. (1972). [1 Samuel](#). In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), *The teacher's Bible commentary* (p. 167). Broadman and Holman Publishers.