

Independence Day

1 Samuel: Lessons in leadership – Session 2ⁱ

The story so far

The book of 1 Samuel is set in a time, around 1000BC, when Israel's leader was:

- A king
- A judge
- Parliament

The name of the leader who has just been born is:

- Samuel
- Sampson
- Samsung

The circumstances of the birth of this leader remind us that with God's leadership:

- He opposes the humble and backs the proud
- He likes the humble and tolerates the proud
- He raises the humble and brings down the proud

There are 2 things that would be good to know before we read the following passage:



1. The Philistines and their relationship to Israel. The Philistines were originally sea-faring peoples from the Aegean Sea who controlled five cities in Palestine (Ashdod, Gath, Ekron, Ashkelon and Gaza) on the coastal plains. The book of Judges tells us that when the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they were unable to dislodge the Philistines from these cities – probably because their iron chariots gave them a military advantage. God left the Philistines there to test Israel's obedience. The Philistines attacked Israel on a number of occasions and oppressed them.

2. The 'ark of the covenant' and what it meant to Israel. The ark was a divinely designed gold-



covered, portable box about 1.14m long by .7m wide and high. The book of Exodus tells us that the ark sat behind the curtain in the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle. The ark contained copies of the 10 commandments God gave to Moses. Between the cherubim on the top of the ark was where God promised to meet Moses for further instruction. The lid of the ark was traditionally called the 'mercy seat' and was sprinkled yearly with the blood of the sacrifice to atone for sin. Thus the ark was especially significant to Israel because it was the place of divine revelation and reconciliation.

1 Samuel 4:1 – 11

Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. ² The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. ³ And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? 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." ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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, ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight." ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

Q1. Why do the Israelites take the ark into battle? (1 Samuel 4:3)

Q2. The ark ends up galvanizing the Philistines to fight harder – what does this show about God?

1 Samuel 5:1-12

After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. ² Then they carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon. ³ When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. ⁴ But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. ⁵ That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold. ⁶ The LORD's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation on them and afflicted them with tumors. ⁷ When the people of Ashdod saw

what was happening, they said, “The ark of the god of Israel must not stay here with us, because his hand is heavy on us and on Dagon our god.”⁸ So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and asked them, “What shall we do with the ark of the god of Israel?”

They answered, “Have the ark of the god of Israel moved to Gath.” So they moved the ark of the God of Israel.

⁹ But after they had moved it, the LORD’s hand was against that city, throwing it into a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, both young and old, with an outbreak of tumors. ¹⁰ So they sent the ark of God to Ekron.

As the ark of God was entering Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, “They have brought the ark of the god of Israel around to us to kill us and our people.”¹¹ So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and said, “Send the ark of the god of Israel away; let it go back to its own place, or it will kill us and our people.” For death had filled the city with panic; God’s hand was very heavy on it. ¹² Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven.

Ashdod was one of the 5 Philistine cities (1 Samuel 5:1). Dagon was most likely a vegetation or grain deity and widely worshipped throughout Mesopotamia. Setting the ark beside Dagon is putting the ark in a subservient position – not an unusual thing in Ancient Near East thinking, since battle victories determined which god was stronger (1 Samuel 5:2). So in Philistine thinking, Dagon had defeated Israel’s god.

Q3. What do you make of Dagon’s “victory”?

In 1 Samuel 6:5 we will be told that rats were destroying the land. Rats carry bubonic plague, which results in tumours – swellings in the armpits, groins and sides of the neck.

Q4. As the ark moves between the Philistine cities – what impression does this give you?

1 Samuel 6:1-21

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 back to him without a gift; 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 give glory 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 Israel's god dealt harshly with them, 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 but 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 the Levites 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 inhabitants of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy of them to death because they looked into the ark of the LORD. The people mourned because of the heavy blow the LORD had dealt them. ²⁰ And the people 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 town.”

Q5. Why do you think the Philistines make models of the disease/vermin that has been inflicted on them? (see 1 Samuel 6:5)

The book of Numbers tells us that the Israelites were not permitted to go in and look at the holy things of the Most Holy Place.

Q6. That some of the Israelites were put to death for looking at the ark – what does this show?

Q7. If we're a follower of Jesus, does that mean if we stuff up God will judge us like he judged the Israelites? (hint: the answer has something to do with the fact that New Testament believers could call God "father", which Old Testament people couldn't do)

Q8. What do we learn about God's leadership?

God is the same now as he was in 1 Samuel (passages like Psalm 55:19 "God, who is enthroned from of old, who does not change" tells us that God remains the same).

Q9. If God will do what he wants, what motivation is there for us to trust him? (hint: for New Testament believers, there is the promise that God acts for their good in all circumstances, Romans 8:28-30).

Q10. The role of the judge was to lead the people – but under God's instruction. Why do you think Samuel, who is the judge of Israel by this time (and whom the entire book is named after!) might be missing from this story?

ⁱ COPYRIGHT City Bible Forum (www.citybibleforum.org) a ministry of Evangelising Commerce Inc (NSW), 2013. This material may be reproduced free-of-charge for non-profit use only as long as this copyright notice appears, and the study is not modified in any way. For any other use, or to modify the material, please contact us to arrange copyright permission, which may involve a small fee to help finance the production of such resources by the staff of City Bible Forum. Contact info@citybibleforum.org or tel: (02) 9251 1166 or GPO Box 3266, Sydney NSW 2001.