

Independence Day

1 Samuel: Lessons in leadership – Session 2ⁱ



To show us that God's leadership is independent of human manipulation and is to be feared - from 1 Samuel: 4:1 – 7:2.

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. ²The 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. ³And 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.” ⁴So 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. ⁵As 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. ⁶And 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, ⁷the 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. 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 in the wilderness. ⁹Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight.” ¹⁰So 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. ¹¹And 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)

• *Because they think the Lord has defeated them (1 Samuel 4:3), taking the ark into battle is one way they can ensure victory. Crudely put, they are trying to force God to deliver them to protect his own honour – for surely God wouldn't let anything happen to the ark, the sacred possession that he had given them.*

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

• *That he is actively working against Israel.*

1 Samuel 5:1-12

After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. ²Then they carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon. ³When 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. ⁴But 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. ⁵That 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"?

▪ Dagon's 'victory' is short-lived. With clever and almost comic satire the author portrays the battle between Dagon and Israel's God. Dagon cannot even stand upright in God's presence. One fall could be co-incidental – 2 falls cannot be. That the second fall is where Dagon's head and hands are broken off is reminiscent of ancient near practices in the time of the Judges, where body parts of prisoners of war were hacked off. Because Dagon's body parts fell on the threshold, his priests could no longer step there, because the threshold had been touched by something sacred (1 Samuel 5:5).

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?

• The ark is doing its own victory circuit, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake (the Philistines clearly believe the tumours are the work of God 1 Samuel 5:10). The ark may have fallen into Philistine hands but the Philistines have fallen into God's hand!

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)

• These will ‘give glory to the God of Israel’ (1 Samuel 6:5). They acknowledge Israel’s God’s superiority by showing the means by which he has demonstrated his superiority.

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?

• This judgment on Israel shows that with privilege comes responsibility. The Israelites, although they are the people of God, still worship a holy God, and cannot claim immunity because of their relationship with God. God judged them, just as he judged the Philistines.

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)

• A follower of Jesus trusts that Jesus provides the forgiveness that enables them to be part of God’s family. As part of God’s family, there will be times when we stuff up, but if we keep trusting in Jesus’ forgiveness, then we remain part of the family. The judgment on the Israelites sounds harsh, but it shows us that God that takes obedience seriously (and remember that the Old Testament Israelites had more interaction with God (he spoke to them through their prophets and leaders) and so they were warned).

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

• God’s power is independent of human manipulation. God is the one to be feared. God is not a tame lion who can be taught to perform some circus tricks. God can do what he wants.

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).

• God may do what he wants, but followers of Jesus can trust that God will use his power for their good, even if they can’t see it at the time – or even later looking back (the evidence is the death of Jesus on the cross – that’s where God ultimately acts in the best interests of others).

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?

• To show us that God is quite capable of acting on his own accord. He can do what he wants. He doesn’t need a judge to act for him.

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