
God Comes Home

1 Samuel 6:1-7:2⁵

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Seven months. This is a spiritual calamity for Israel and a physical calamity for the Philistines. All because Israel would not trust and obey God and the Philistines will defy God. What we have just read does not occur over a few days or a few weeks. It is seven long, horrible, hard months.

The humor of the narrator runs through this while whole text until the last section.

The structure of the text is evident in the parallel of verses 4-6 with verses 17-18. So the Hebrew parallel thought looks like this.

The Ark Departs (6:1-12)

- A False Religious Consultation (v. 1-3)
- B The Gifts Proposal (v. 4-6)
- C The Testing of God (v. 7-9)
- D The Divine Providence (v. 10-12)

The Ark Arrives (6:13-7:2)

- A' True Worship Celebration (v. 13-16)
- B' The Gifts Purpose (v. 17-18)
- C' The Disobedience of God (v. 19-21)
- D' The Divine Presence (7:1-2)

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The Providence of God in the Departure of the Ark (6:1-12)

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

The Philistine lords have a problem. They are stumped. You have to chuckle a bit here. They turn to their own priests as a sort of last resort...

A The Religious Problem (v.1-3)

² And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place." ³ They said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand does not turn away from you."

God has been a problem for the Philistines. He has afflicted and plagued them since they took the ark. They have moved it around. Now they don't know what to do. So they consult their priests and witch doctors. They are very concerned that the Philistine lords will do something foolish like give the Ark back without appeasing the God of the Israelites.

Here are echoes of the universal knowledge of God. People know they have offended a god. The universal impulse is to either sacrifice something or to give a gift. In either case the desire is to placate the god so that nothing more bad will happen.

B The False Provision (v.4-6)

⁴ And they said, "What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?" They answered, "Five golden tumors and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. ⁵ So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land. ⁶ Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had dealt severely with them, did they not send the people away, and they departed?"

Okay, they need to give a guilt offering. What should they bring? What God required was well known to the Jews. If it is their God wouldn't it make sense to ask His priests? But no, unbelievers are all about their self-salvation projects. Anything except what God requires.

In this case, the priests exercise what is called sympathetic magic. The idea is to represent the offending god's means of wrath in a gift. So, Yahweh God has brought a plague of tumors on the people and a pestilence of mice eating up the grain fields. This is the first we hear of the mice. It may well be that the mice are carrying the plague. Yet, the priests recommend making an appeasement gift of 5 golden tumors and 5 golden mice, one for each of the lords and cities in the Philistine Pentapolis.

In verse 6 our narrator ironically but darkly shows us that the priests and diviners are not ignorant of the Jewish history or religion. But remember that this story is not told and written for Philistine ears and eyes. This is for Israel's edification, as well as ours.

God is a holy God. He will not be defied. His wrath is dangerous and deadly. His wrath must be appeased or we will be consumed. And so in their ignorant darkness, they counsel using human religion to give glory to God. God is not glorified when we come to Him with our own brand of magic. God is glorified when we come to Him through His Son.

Why? Because God's people must never forget Egypt. We must never harden our hearts against God. We must be quick to repent. We must to Him by the means He has established. Egypt is the story of redemption through wrath, through God's judgment.

So, the priests say, "Don't forget Egypt and how God brought such judgment and destruction that the Pharaoh finally let the people go. Even so, let the Ark of God depart to Israel unless God destroys you." Now, this is more than argument from analogy. This is God's providence putting the mouth of the priests and in the pen of the narrator a warning to God's people.

C The Human Plan

(v.7-9)

⁷ Now then, take and prepare a new cart and two milk cows on which there has never come a yoke, and yoke the cows to the cart, but take their calves home, away from them. ⁸ And take the ark of the Lord 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 ⁹ and 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 coincidence."

This is a test. It is stacked in favor of the Philistines. But that makes the result even more sure. Get a new cart, never used. Two milk cows who are going to be separated from the calves. Put the ark and the boxed up gifts on the cart. Release the cows and see where they go. They are going to struggle to pull together. They are going to want to return to their calves. But if they go to Israel then we will know for certain that the misfortunes are not coincidence, but are God's hand.

D The Divine Pilot

(v.10-12)

¹⁰ The men did so, and took two milk cows and yoked them to the cart and shut up their calves at home. ¹¹ And they put the ark of the Lord on the cart and the box with the golden mice and the images of their tumors. ¹² And the 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.

The men here are probably the 5 lords or rulers of the 5 cities. They execute the plan devised by the Philistine priests and sorcerers. Everything correctly done. Everything neatly loaded. And off the cows. They went straight into Israel. Guided by hand of God on the halter rope they take the Ark home. God piloted them home.

The Philistine lords follow to border of Israel watching with what had to be relief.

The Power of God in the Arrival of the Ark (v.13-7:2)

So the ark arrives in Israel where God's people are going about their work.

A' The Joyous Praise (v.13-16)

¹³ Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it. ¹⁴ The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there. A great stone was there. And they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. ¹⁵ And the Levites took down the ark of the Lord and the box that was beside it, in which were the golden figures, and set them upon the great stone. And the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the Lord. ¹⁶ And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron.

This is an interesting place. This valley is the place where many of the judges lived. This is where many of Samson's exploits took place. And we now know this is the harvest season which explains why the pestilence of rats had been such a problem. The people out in their fields harvesting hear the lowing oxen and see the cart. They are overjoyed to see the Ark of God coming home.

The cart stops by a large stone in the Joshua field. In their joy they want to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God. So they call for the Levites who come to take custody of the Ark. After unloading, together they dismantle the cart for the fire and kill the cows to make the offering. God's gracious mercy accepts the offering¹.

Wonder what they thought when they opened the box with the golden mice and golden... tumors. You have to wonder what the "tumors" looked like. The word just refers to a growth that shows on or under the skin. The plight of the Philistines was surely known in Israel, particularly in border cities. An outbreak like that creates refugees fleeing from the plague. Sitting on their horses, the five Philistine lords watch the proceedings. And head home, hopeful.

B' The Clarified Purpose (v.17-18)

¹⁷ These are the golden tumors that the Philistines returned as a guilt offering to the Lord: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron, ¹⁸ and the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and unwalled villages. The great stone beside which they set down the ark of the Lord is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh.

Frankly, this paragraph seems a bit out of place at first. But it is here in order to help establish the parallel structure. The narrator is being sure that Israel understands the original, and pagan purpose of the artifacts. Given the tendency to turn things like this into objects of veneration and even worship, we are being given a contrast. The force of this is to remember where the golden mice and tumors came from and what they were for. But more importantly, remember the stone and the God-pleasing sacrifice offered on it.

C' The Holy Punishment**(v.19-21)**

¹⁹ And he struck some of the men of Beth-shemesh, because they looked upon the ark of the Lord. He struck seventy men of them, and the people mourned because the Lord had struck the people with a great blow. ²⁰ Then the men of Beth-shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?" ²¹ So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the Lord. Come down and take it up to you."

Up till now the narrator has made the most of irony. But casual irreverence and curious disobedience lead to judgment. To us, this is troubling. How could God do this? These people rejoiced at the Ark's return. They sacrificed to God. Couldn't God just overlook this with a warning? It just seems harsh.

Except that is exactly the attitude that God is addressing through this whole journey of the Ark. The point here is that God will not be treated lightly. His Ark, His throne is not a magic talisman or an implement of war to be used by Israel to defeat enemies. The place of God's Presence is not a religious relic to be put on display nor a poisoned artifact to be shuttled around. And even at home with God's people it is to be treated with the reverence and respect it was due.

One author commented, "Thoughtless curiosity is a hair's breadth from reverent decorum. For example, we would consider it a disgrace to exhume the corpses of dead relatives, but we think nothing of going to a museum and viewing the corpses of other people's relatives – albeit mummified ancient Egyptians! One man's desecration is another man's cultural enlightenment!" (Keddie p. 77)

Remember, the Ark was not to be touched. It was only carried about by the poles thrust through the rings. What it seems here is that the men who were struck down because they disobeyed God in either why they looked or how they looked. We are not told exactly. That isn't the point. The point is to emphasize that God is to be revered. God's people do not get a pass. He dwells among His people. But He is not to be presumed upon. They get it. "Who is able to stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?" they cried out. "Where can we send the Ark from here?"

This is the problem of the Old Covenant. God was so close, so near. He was over the Ark. He was just inside the tent and behind the curtain. But He is holy and fearsome God. He loves His people. But the Law both kept them distant and gave them a relationship. Jesus resolved all that. His coming as the Presence of God in this world, not in a golden box, but in a human body has changed everything.

So the Ark has one more stop on its way. Now on to Kiriath-jearim...

D' The Divine Presence (7:1-2)

7:¹ And the men of Kiriath-jearim 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 Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the Lord. ² From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.

For some twenty years the Ark was kept in Kiriath-jearim in Abinadab's hill house under the care of Eleazar. He was set aside for the task. He is probably a Levite. He fulfilled his task well. Here the Ark sat until after David was made king and he brought it up to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6.

Reflect and Respond

But this leads us to ask an important question: Where is God in this story?

He is controlling the thoughts and counsel of the false priests.

He is causing the rulers to follow the advice.

He is guiding the cows, contrary to their nature, to go to Israel.

He is worshipped by God's people with joy and sacrifices.

He is recognized by the memorialization of the great stone.

He is chastening the irreverent for their disobedient.

He is patient in the long execution of His purpose and plan.

Praise God we do not live in the Old Covenant. Yes, we are to still reverence God. He is holy. But we are allowed to draw near now because of Christ. Will you? Do you?

¹ Some commentators have expressed concern that cows were offered when bullocks were required. However, there are many instances in which the sacrifice of heifers was allowed and accepted. Since there is no direct criticism of the offering in the text, we should be very careful passing a moral judgment that the text does not.