

Death, Despair and Despondence (1 Samuel 4:12-20)

Distressed Messenger (v.12)

A man from Benjamin runs 20 miles from Ebenezer to bring news to Shiloh about the battle (v.10-11).

His clothes were torn, and he had dust on his head. These were expressions of grief and mourning in ancient Israel (Genesis 37:29, 34; 44:13; 2 Sam. 1:2).

The man ran past Eli, who should have been the first one to hear of the news. Eli has become irrelevant, impertinent and inconsequential.

Description of Eli (v.13)

When we first met Eli (1:9), he was called “Eli the priest.” He was sitting at the doorpost of the temple of the LORD (tabernacle). Now he is just called Eli and he is sitting on the side of the road. In chapter 1, Eli can see. Now he is blind. He was sitting when we first met him and now, he is sitting again. This time however, he is not sitting near the ark; he is seated in a chair on a road.

Not only is he old (98) and sitting, but he is blind. His physical blindness has been pervasively increasing (3:2). His diminishing physical eyesight had been indicative of his spiritual condition.

Deeply Troubled and Trembling Eli (v.13)

Eli would have most likely been consulted prior to the ark departing from Shiloh at the request of the elders (4:3) since he was High Priest.

Why is Eli trembling?

He assumed that the LORD would never allow the ark to be taken by pagans...

He knew his sons would be with the ark. Is this the day that was prophesied by the man of God (2:30-31) and Samuel (3:12-13)? This can't possibly be the day that they both die...

The ark was only to go forth with the command of the LORD (Deuteronomy 12:5, 11). How would Eli know whether the LORD was with Israel if Samuel was never consulted?

The safety of the ark was his responsibility as the High Priest

Detailed Description of the Battle and the Death of Eli (v.14-19)

The succession of events is in ascending order of tragedy from the perspective of Eli (v.17):

Israel had fled from the enemy

The army has taken casualties

Eli's sons have been killed

The ark has been captured

The man of God in chapter 2 and Samuel in chapter 3 never mentioned anything about the ark being captured. This is all news to Eli.

While Eli trembled for the ark of God, Eli did not fall off his chair after the ark was mentioned as being captured; just at the mention of the ark. Once the ark was mentioned, he fell off his chair and broke his neck. The Elide Dynasty is now “dethroned.”

Dreadful Labor (v.19-20)

Phinehas' wife is pregnant. We do not know her name, or the name of the woman attending her. This is intentional. The narrator just wants us to focus on the only name given; Ichabod.

The news of the ark being carried away combined with the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband, prompted heavy, pre-mature labor.

The midwife attempted to encourage her. She was giving birth to a son, a sign of divine blessing (Genesis 1:28; Psalm 127:5). Instead of rejoicing, she is lamenting.

With the birth of a son, it should have been the joyful beginning of a new era. Instead, there is going to be death. Her labor is the reminder of the Fall (Genesis 3:16); increased labor pains.

Her husband has been slaughtered, her father-in-law just died, and her brother in law is dead. Combined with the capturing of the ark, this unnamed woman is going to die right after she gives birth, but not until first naming her son.

Parallel Account: Genesis 35:16-18

Both Rachel and Phinehas' wife: Were pregnant, had increased labor pains, were encouraged by the woman attending them, gave birth to sons, named their sons, and died while giving birth

The difference between the two is that Jacob changed the name of his son from Ben-oni to Benjamin. Ben-Oni means “son of my trouble.” Benjamin means “son of my right hand.” The son of Rachel was renamed after her death because of Jacob. The son of Phinehas' wife was not renamed; Phinehas is dead.