

1 Samuel Chapter 4

Verses 1-11: Israel's disobedience here is in contrast to their later obedience and subsequent victory over the Philistines (in 7:12).

1 Samuel 4:1 "And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside Ebenezer: and the Philistines pitched in Aphek."

"The word of Samuel came to all Israel": The text of (1:1 - 3:21), climaxes with the establishment of Samuel as God's spokesman/representative. Observe that "the word of the Lord" (3:21), has become equivalent to "the word of Samuel."

"Philistines" From the period of the judges through the end of David's reign, the Philistines ("Sea People"), were an ever-present enemy of Israel. They were non-Semitic immigrants (see Gen. 10:14; 1 Chron. 1:12, Jer. 47:4-5; Amos 9:7), who settled along the coastal regions of southern Canaan, organizing their power in five chief cities: Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath and Gaza (1 Sam. 6:17; Judges 3:13). The introduction of the Philistines into the narrative provides a link between the judgeship of Samuel and the judgeship which Samson was not able to complete (Judges Chapters 13-16).

"Ebenezer": the location of this site has not been specifically identified. Opposite Aphek in Israelite territory, it is possibly modern Izbet Sarteh on the road to Shiloh. When translated it means "stone of help," and its mention here (and 5:1; and again in 7:12), of another location mark this section as a literary unit.

"Aphek": This site is located near the source of the Yarkon River, at the southern end of the coastal Plain of Sharon, approximately 5 miles east of the Mediterranean. This city marked the northeastern edge of Philistine territory.

For the "Philistines" (see the note on Joshua 13:2-3).

This battle with the Philistines had been an ongoing thing. The Israelites might win a war against them, but they never seemed to be rid of them completely. The word of Samuel above is actually a Word from God. "And" shows us this is a continuation of the last chapter. Eli was so old at this time that God was now speaking through Samuel. The LORD is about to punish Eli, his two sons, and all the people because of their disobedience to His commandments. Ebenezer" means the stone of help. "Aphek" means fortress.

1 Samuel 4:2 "And the Philistines put themselves in array against Israel: and when they joined battle, Israel was smitten before the Philistines: and they slew of the army in the field about four thousand men."

Prepared for battle, and put their selves in a posture for it; they formed in a line of battle, and so invited and challenged the Israelites to fight them.

"And when they joined battle": Engaged with each other, the Israelites doing the same, putting themselves in a proper form and posture for fighting; or "the battle was spread", or "spread itself". That is, as the Targum, they that made war were spread; the soldiers were placed in order for battle, to the right and left, which took up on both sides a large space. Though Abarbanel understands this in a very different sense, and takes the word to have the same signification as (in Psalm 78:60), where it has the sense of forsaking. And so here the Israelites forsook the battle, and fled, which brought on their destruction. Flight being, as the Jews say, the beginning of fall or ruin, as it follows:

"Israel was smitten before the Philistines": They had the worst of it and were beaten.

"And they slew of the army in the field about four thousand men": So many fell upon the spot, in the field.

It appears, these two armies met in the open field and the Philistines won. Israel lost about four thousand men in the battle.

1 Samuel 4:3 "And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the LORD smitten us to day before the Philistines? Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies."

"Wherefore hath the Lord smitten us to day": The question of the elders reflected their knowledge that the Lord both fought their battles (2:10; 17:47), and allowed their defeat. To be defeated clearly meant that God was not "among" them (Num. 14:42; Deut. 1:42). Instead of inquiring of the Lord for direction, they proceeded to take the matter into their own hands.

"Let us fetch the Ark": The Ark symbolized the presence and power of the Lord. Yet, Israel treated it like a good-luck charm, which would ensure them victory over the Philistines. Knowing that victory or defeat depended upon the Lord's presence, they confused the symbol of His presence with His actual presence. In this way, their understanding of God resembled that of the Philistines (4:8).

The "Ark" symbolized the ruling presence of God among His people. (See the note on 1 Kings 8:10-12; 2 Chron. 8:11). The low spiritual condition of the Israelites here caused them to confuse the symbol with that which it symbolized so that they took the Ark into battle. Although the Ark had been present when they crossed the Jordan River (Joshua 3:11), and when they had gained the victory at Jericho (Joshua 6:7-8, 13), it was God who had granted them guidance and victory. Israel's plan had bordered on a superstitious fetishism, if not outright idolatry. As such, it was doomed to failure.

The Israelites are surprised at their defeat in this war. They know when they lose in battle that it is punishment from God. They send for the Ark, believing that the presence of God will cause them to win the battle. They have forgotten that the LORD blesses them, when they keep His commandments. He will not save them just because they physically carry the Ark with them.

They are using the Ark, as if it is some type of good luck charm. They are not in the will of God. The blessings of God are not with them.

This is probably, a suggestion of the elders to go and get the Ark. They are not in good standing with the LORD however. The Ark symbolized the presence of God with them. It also symbolized that they were His chosen people. They have forgotten that this is conditional on their keeping His commandments.

1 Samuel 4:4 "So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from thence the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, which dwelleth [between] the cherubims: and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, [were] there with the ark of the covenant of God."

“Dwelleth between the cherubims”: A repeated phrase used to describe the Lord (see 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15, 1 Chron. 13:6; Psalms 80:1; 99:1; Isa. 37:16). It spoke of His sovereign majesty.

“Hophni and Phinehas”: These were the two wicked sons of Eli (2:12-17, 27-37), of whom it was said that they “didn’t know the Lord” (2:12). The fact that they were mentioned together recalls the prophecy that they would die together (2:34).

The LORD's presence being symbolized by the Ark caused them to want to bring it to the forefront of the battle. They were not concerned for the Ark, but for themselves. The sins of Hophni and Phinehas were the very cause of the LORD not being with Israel at this time. The throne of the LORD is in heaven, but he had dwelt with the children of Israel in the sanctuary.

1 Samuel 4:5 "And when the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again."

As far as we know, this was the first time since the establishment of the people in Canaan that the Ark had been brought from the permanent sanctuary into the camp. The shout of joy represented the confidence of the army that now the Ark, which had witnessed so many splendid victories of the chosen race, was among them.

They shouted because they thought God would win this battle for them. They wanted to use God's power, when they needed Him to save them. They did not want to obey His commandments however. It seemed that everyone in the camp shouted, when they saw the Ark in the camp.

1 Samuel 4:6 "And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, What [meaneth] the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews? And they understood that the ark of the LORD was come into the camp."

“Hebrews”: (In Genesis 14:13), the name “Hebrew” was applied to Abram. Consequently, the name came to refer to the physical descendants of Abraham. It was used to distinguish them as a class of people distinct from the foreigners around them. It means that Abram was a descendant of Eber in the line of Shem (10:25; 11:14-16).

This triumphal shout of the Hebrews frightened the Philistines. They were not afraid of the Hebrews, but they were afraid of the God of the Hebrews.

1 Samuel 4:7 "And the Philistines were afraid, for they said, God is come into the camp. And they said, Woe unto us! for there hath not been such a thing heretofore."

"And the Philistines were afraid", when the spies returned, and reported to them the reason of the shouting. For they said: "God is come into the camp"; into the camp of Israel, because the ark represented him, and was the symbol of his presence. And these Heathens might take the ark itself for an idol of the Israelites. The Targum is, "the ark of God is come"

And they said, woe unto us; it is all over with us, destruction and ruin will be our case, victory will go on their side now their God is among them.

"Not been such a thing heretofore": The idol to the Philistine, was thought to be the actual dwelling place of his deity. Hence, when Israel brought the Ark into the camp, the Philistines concluded that God was present, an exclamation that reflected a knowledge of God's power.

Even though the Philistines were worshippers of false gods, they still knew that the God of these Hebrews had won many battles against Israel's enemies. They knew they were no match for Israel's God.

1 Samuel 4:8 "Woe unto us! who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty Gods? these [are] the Gods that smote the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness."

"The Gods that smote the Egyptians": Evidently, the news of God's victory over the Egyptians was common knowledge to the Philistines.

Gods here, is speaking of Elohim, which is a plural word speaking of the One True God. The plagues these Philistines are speaking of are actually the ten plagues brought against Pharaoh to cause him to let the people go. Those plagues actually happened in Egypt, before the crossing of the Red Sea.

1 Samuel 4:9 "Be strong, and quit yourselves like men, O ye Philistines, that ye be not servants unto the Hebrews, as they have been to you: quit yourselves like men, and fight."

"Servants ... as they have been to you": Israel's failure to uproot all the inhabitants of Canaan (see Judges 1:28), cause them to fall under the judgment of God. As a consequence of this judgment, Israel was enslaved to Philistine oppression (see Judges 10:13-16). The Philistines feared that they would become servants of the Hebrews.

The Philistines rallying cry to show themselves as real "men" was a familiar one in the ancient Near East (Deut. 31:6-7, 23; Joshua 1:6-7, 9; 2 Chron. 32:7 with 1 Cor. 16:13-14).

This was a call to bravery, even if they lost their lives. They would rather die, than be the servants of these people who had served them. Be brave, and fight.

1 Samuel 4:10 "And the Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten, and they fled every man into his tent: and there was a very great slaughter; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen."

The result was strictly in accordance with those immutable laws which have ever guided the connection of Israel and their God-Friend. As long as they clung to the invisible Preserver, and served Him with their whole heart and soul, and kept themselves pure from the pollution of the idol nations around them, so long was He in their midst, so long would they be invincible.

But if, as now, they chose to revel in the impure joys, and to delight themselves in the selfish, shameless lives of the idolatrous world around them, and only carried the Ark on their shoulders, with no memory of Him. Whom the mercy-seat and the overshadowing cherubim of that Ark symbolized, in their hearts. Then, to use the solemn words of the hymn of Asaph; "Then God was wroth, and greatly abhorred Israel, and forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, and delivered his strength into captivity, and his glory into the enemy's hand". (See Psalm 78:59-61), where the crushing defeat of Aphek and the signal victory of the Philistines are recounted in detail.

We see a terrible slaughter. The men of Israel, seeing they were losing the battle, ran every direction to get back to their homes. When they scattered out, it made it easier for the enemy to kill them. The 30,000 that died were all foot soldiers. Israel did not have chariots and horses to fight with. God was their strength in battle. This time, He was not with them, because of their sins.

1 Samuel 4:11 "And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain."

"The Ark of God was taken": In spite of their hopes to manipulate God into giving them the victory, Israel was defeated and the Ark fell into the hands of the Philistines. The view of having the Ark of God being equivalent to having control of God, possessed both by Israel and then the Philistines, is to be contrasted with the power and providence of God in the remaining narrative.

"Hophni and Phinehas": In fulfillment of (2:34 and 3:12), Eli's sons died together.

The two sons of Eli would have been near the Ark. When it was taken, they were killed. The judgment, God had spoken on them earlier, has come to pass.

1 Samuel 4:12 "And there ran a man of Benjamin out of the army, and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes rent, and with earth upon his head."

The messenger from the battle came with his "clothes rent" and with "earth upon his head," traditionally signs of mourning.

The clothes being rent and earth upon his head was a sign of extreme mourning. Shiloh is where the Ark had been in the tabernacle. Some scholars believe this Benjamite was Saul.

1 Samuel 4:13 "And when he came, lo, Eli sat upon a seat by the wayside watching: for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city, and told [it], all the city cried out."

“His heart trembled for the Ark of God”: Eli’s concern for the Ark stands in stark contrast to his earlier actions of honoring his two sons over honoring the Lord (2:29-30; compare 4:17-18).

Somehow Eli knew this was wrong to take the Ark without God sending it. His heart trembled, not so much for his sons and the people as it did for the Ark. It appears he had sat down at the gate to await its return to Shiloh. The city cried out for the great loss of life, but they cried out even more for the loss of the Ark, which symbolized God's presence with them.

1 Samuel 4:14 "And when Eli heard the noise of the crying, he said, What [meaneth] the noise of this tumult? And the man came in hastily, and told Eli."

The blind old man, we must suppose, was seated on his chair of state, surrounded by priests and Levites, who were in attendance on him as high priest and judge. As the runner drew near, and the torn dress and the dust sprinkled on his head, the symbols of disaster became visible, the wail of woe would soon run through the place. The cry of sorrow was the first intimation to the blind Eli: he was soon to hear the details. His question was probably, addressed to the little court standing by his throne. The narrative is so vivid we seem to hear the sound of the cries of grief and terror which Eli heard, and to see the scene of dismay and confusion which those sightless eyes were prevented from looking on.

It seems the man had told the people of the city first. Their moaning with grief has attracted Eli's attention. He asks for the reason for all of the crying. The man probably, had not found Eli, because he was at the gate, rather than in his usual place. The man quickly tells Eli what has happened.

1 Samuel 4:15 "Now Eli was ninety and eight years old; and his eyes were dim, that he could not see."

Which is very properly observed, he being now come to the end of his days, and which also accounts for his blindness after mentioned.

"And his eyes were dim, that he could not see": Could not see the messenger, and read in his countenance, and perceive by his clothes rent, and earth on his head, that he was a bringer of bad tidings; or his eyes each of them "stood"; were fixed and immovable, as the eyes of blind men be. In (1 Samuel 3:2) it is said, "his eyes began to wax dim". But here that they "were" become dim; and there might have been some years between that time and this, for Samuel then was very young, but now more grown up.

The translation of the eyes being dim here could mean that he was legally blind from cataracts. He is at a very old age, and this probably, has something to do with his blindness.

1 Samuel 4:16 "And the man said unto Eli, I [am] he that came out of the army, and I fled to day out of the army. And he said, What is there done, my son?"

It is very probable that the people of whom Eli inquired told him there was a messenger come from the army, though they did not choose to relate to him the news he brought.

"And I fled today out of the army": So that as he was an eyewitness of what was done in the army, the account he brought was the earliest that could be had, in bringing which he had made great dispatch, having run perhaps all the way.

"And he said, what is there done, my son?" Has a battle been fought? On which side is the victory? Is Israel beaten, or have they conquered? How do things go? He uses the kind and tender appellation, "my son", to engage him to tell him all freely and openly.

Eli cannot see the man, so he has to tell Eli who he is. He explains to Eli, that he ran for his life. Eli asks the outcome of the battle.

1 Samuel 4:17 "And the messenger answered and said, Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath been also a great slaughter among the people, and thy two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken."

He delivered his account gradually, beginning with generals, and then proceeding to particulars, and with what he thought Eli could better bear the news, and so prepared him for the worst; in which he acted a wise part.

"Israel is fled before the Philistines": They have given way and retreated, and which might possibly be done without great loss, and which, though it was bad news, might not be so very bad.

"And there hath also been a great slaughter among the people": This is worse news still; however, the number of the slain is not given, nor any mention of particular persons that were killed: so that, for anything yet said, his own sons might be safe: but then it follows.

"And thy two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead": The news of which must be very affecting to him, and strike him closely; though he might expect and be prepared for it by what both the man of God and Samuel from the Lord had related to him.

"And the Ark of God is taken": The thing he feared, and his heart trembled before for it; this was the closing and cutting part of the account; the messenger foresaw that this would the most affect him, and therefore deferred it to the last.

Eli realizes from all of the crying of the people, that Israel has been defeated. The man tells him that both of his sons are dead. Worse than the death of his sons (which God had already warned him of), was the loss of the Ark.

1 Samuel 4:18 "And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he fell from off the seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake, and he died: for he was an old man, and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years."

“And he died”: As was the case with Hophni and Phinehas, Eli died. Thus, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord, all of the priestly line through Eli had been wiped out (2:29-34; see note on 2:31).

“He had judged Israel forty years”: Over that time Eli fulfilled the office of both priest and judge in Israel.

The shock of losing the Ark was too much for Eli. Even though he had not punished his sons severely for their sinful acts in the tabernacle, he still loved the LORD. The Ark was a symbol of the LORD. He fainted or had heart failure when he heard the news of the Ark. He fell backwards and broke his neck also. He was heavy-set and the weight of his body had broken his neck. He had been judge of Israel 40 years.

1 Samuel 4:19 "And his daughter in law, Phinehas' wife, was with child, [near] to be delivered: and when she heard the tidings that the ark of God was taken, and that her father in law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and travailed; for her pains came upon her."

It was near her time as it was commonly expressed. Ben Gersom derives the word from a root which signifies to complete and finish; denoting that her time to bring forth was completed and filled up; though Josephus says that it was a seven months' birth, so that she came two months before her time. The margin of our Bibles is, "to cry out"; and so Moses Kimchi, as his brother relates, derives the word from a root which signifies to howl and lament, and so is expressive of a woman's crying out when her pains come upon her.

"And when she heard the tidings that the Ark of God was taken": Which is mentioned first, as being the most distressing to her.

"And that her father in law and her husband were dead": Her father-in-law Eli is put first, being the high priest of God, and so his death gave her the greatest concern, as the death of a high priest was always matter of grief to the Israelites. And then next the death of her husband, who should have succeeded him in the priesthood; for though he was a bad man, yet not so bad as Hophni, as Ben Gersom observes; and therefore, the priesthood was continued in his line unto the reign of Solomon. No notice is taken by her of the death of her brother-in-law.

"She bowed herself, and travailed": Put herself in a posture for travailing; perceiving she was coming to it, she fell upon her knees, as the word used signifies; and we are told, that the Ethiopian women, when they bring forth, fall upon their knees, and bear their young, rarely making use of a midwife, and so it seems it was the way of the Hebrew women.

"For her pains came upon her": Sooner it is very probable than otherwise they would, which is sometimes the case, when frights seize a person in such circumstances: or were "turned upon

her"; they ceased, so that she could not make the necessary evacuations after the birth, which ensued in her death. Some render it, "her doors were turned", or changed; the doors of her womb (as in Job 3:10), though these had been opened for the bringing forth of her child, yet were reversed, changed, and altered, so as to prevent the after birth coming away, which caused her death.

The shock of the loss of the Ark, and the death of her husband, and father-in-law brought on premature labor.

1 Samuel 4:20 "And about the time of her death the women that stood by her said unto her, Fear not; for thou hast borne a son. But she answered not, neither did she regard [it]."

Her death that quickly came on after she was brought to bed.

"The women that stood by her": Who were called to her labor and assisted in it.

"Said unto her, fear not, for thou hast born a son": Perceiving that she was very low spirited, they endeavored to cheer and comfort her, by observing to her that the worst was over; and besides she had brought forth a man child, which was usually a matter of joy to a family, and particularly to the woman that bears it, which causes her to forget the sorrows and pains she has gone through in bearing it (John 16:21).

"But she answered not, neither did she regard it"; said not one word in answer to them, nor was the least affected with joy and pleasure at what they related to her. Being not only a dying woman, on the borders of another world, and so had no relish for temporal enjoyments. But also overcome with grief with what had happened, not only to her family, but more especially to the Ark of God.

The women who attended her at the baby's birth tried to cheer her up, by telling her that she had a son. She was so near death herself that she did not respond to their news.

1 Samuel 4:21 "And she named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory is departed from Israel: because the ark of God was taken, and because of her father in law and her husband."

The name "Ichabod" means "Where Is the Glory?" It takes its place among several Old Testament compound names that bear the common Semitic word "I" as their first element, such as Job and Jezebel. The old tradition handed down since the days of Josephus that the "I" had a negative force is doubtless incorrect.

The word "departed" carries the idea of having gone into exile. Thus, to the people of Israel, the capturing of the Ark was a symbol that God had gone into exile. Although this was the mindset of Israel, the text narrative will reveal that God was present, even when He disciplined His people (see note on Ezek. 10:18-19).

She, undoubtedly, had heard that she had a son, because she named the baby Ichabod. "Ichabod" means "where is the Glory". The spirit of the LORD had been removed from them. She was aware that Israel had caused God to remove from them. She grieved greatly over the loss of the Ark, the death of her husband and her father-in-law.

1 Samuel 4:22 "And she said, The glory is departed from Israel: for the ark of God is taken."

The capture of "the Ark" signaled a problem between God and His people. Israel had fallen into apostasy and believed they could make God do their will. Even the priest and his sons were not following God's ways.

We see why she named her baby Ichabod. The glory of the LORD had been taken away because the Ark was taken by the heathen Philistines.

1 Samuel Chapter 4 Questions

1. Where did Israel pitch their tents, when they went out against the Philistines?
2. The word of Samuel is actually a Word from _____.
3. What one word shows us this is a continuation of the last chapter?
4. Why was God speaking through Samuel at this time?
5. What does "Ebenezer" mean?
6. What does "Aphek" mean?
7. How many of Israel was slain in the first battle?
8. What question did the elders ask, when they came back into the camp?
9. What did they go and bring out of Shiloh, to insure their victory?
10. Why are the blessings of God not with them?
11. They are using the Ark, as if it is what?
12. Who, probably, suggested they go get the Ark?
13. What is symbolized by the Ark?
14. Who were with the Ark?
15. Why did the Israelites shout?

16. What effect did this have on the Philistines?
17. Who were they afraid of?
18. What did the leader of the Philistines tell them to do?
19. What is the word "Gods" translated from in verse 8?
20. The plagues actually happened where?
21. What would have been worse than death for these Philistines?
22. How many Israelites died in this battle?
23. Why were they called footmen?
24. What happened to Eli's sons?
25. What happened to the Ark?
26. Where was Eli waiting for news of the battle?
27. How old was Eli at this time?
28. What happened to Eli, when he heard the bad news?
29. What happened to Eli's daughter-in-law, when she heard of the loss of the Ark and her husband's death?
30. Who named the baby?
31. What did she name him?
32. What does "Ichabod" mean?