

Israel had suffered a military defeat at the hands of the Philistines but they believed that the situation could be remedied by bringing the ark of the covenant with them into the camp. However, Israel discovered the hard way that the LORD is not a tool that we use to obtain what we want. We are His servants, not the other way around. Israel's mistake led them to an even greater defeat than before.

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

“And the word of Samuel came to all Israel” – Before the LORD began speaking to Samuel, “there was no open vision” in Israel (1 Sam. 3:1). There was no prophet that could speak the word of the LORD to the nation. Now the LORD had begun using Samuel to speak to the nation and, as a result, Samuel became a judge to lead and guide the people in the ways of the LORD.

“Now Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside Eben-ezer: and the Philistines pitched in Aphek” – Since before the time of Samson, the Philistines had been the constant nemesis of Israel. The Philistines oppressed Israel and took territory from them and the two frequently engaged in battle over territory. This battle was another Philistine attempt to oppress Israel. We don't know exactly where Eben-ezer and Aphek were, but they seem to have been on either side of the border between Philistia and Israel. Our best evidence puts these two locations a couple of miles apart.

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.

Israel suffered around 4,000 casualties in their loss to the Philistines. The LORD was guiding the circumstances that would bring about the death of Eli's sons (1 Sam. 2:34).

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.

“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?” – The survivors of the battle return to the camp and inform the elders of Israel of the outcome of the battle. The elders respond by questioning the reason for Israel's loss. They recognized that their fortunes in battle depended on the LORD and that the reason they lost that day was because the LORD was not with them. However, instead of asking the LORD for direction, they take matters into their own hands and use their own flawed human reasoning to address the problem.

“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” – The ark represented the presence of the LORD, the One Who dwelt above the mercy seat between the cherubims (v. 4; Ex. 25:22; Lev. 16:2; Num. 7:89). Since Israel was defeated because the LORD was not with them in battle, the elders decided that the solution was to take the LORD with them by taking the ark into battle. However, they were using the ark as a good-luck charm, confusing the object representing the LORD with the actual presence of the LORD. The LORD could be with them in battle while the ark was still in the tabernacle because His presence is not dependent upon the location of physical objects. Israel mistakenly believed that they could manipulate the LORD into giving them victory by bringing the ark to the camp.

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.

The elder's plan made sense to human reasoning so they sent for the ark of the covenant of the “LORD of hosts, which dwelleth between the cherubims.” They believed they were transporting the LORD's presence from Shiloh to the battlefield and were thus insuring victory. Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's two sons, accompanied the ark. The LORD's purpose was being fulfilled (1 Sam. 2:25b “*Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the LORD would slay them*”).

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.

After being discouraged by their recent defeat to the Philistines, the Israelite army celebrated the arrival of the ark of the covenant with a “great shout.” The Hebrew word translated “rang again” means “to cause a commotion; to stir up.” Some Bible versions translate this as “the earth resounded” or “the earth shook.” The idea seems to be that the celebration was so loud and boisterous that the ground shook because of the loudness of their shouting. The scene may have been like being in a stadium when the home team scores. Israel believed that victory over the Philistines was a certainty now that the ark was with them but their belief and their enthusiasm was not based on truth.

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.

“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?” – Our best evidence shows that the camp of the Philistines was a couple of miles away (see notes on v. 1) and the shouting and celebrating of the Israelites was so loud that the Philistines could hear it even at that distance. They wondered what could have caused such a commotion in Israel's camp after so soon suffering a defeat.

“And they understood that the ark of the LORD was come into the camp” – The Philistines likely sent spies to ascertain the meaning of the shouting that they heard from Israel's camp. The spies returned with the news that the ark of the LORD was now present in Israel's camp.

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. 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.

“And the Philistines were afraid, for they said, God is come into the camp” – The Philistines had fought against mortal men in the previous battle and had defeated Israel. Now they become afraid at the prospect of going into battle against Israel with God helping them.

“And they said, Woe unto us! for there hath not been such a thing heretofore [yesterday; formerly]” – If they meant that Israel had not brought the ark to the battlefield before that day, then they were partially mistaken. Israel had not done so since the tabernacle had been set up at Shiloh, so within the lifetime of these Philistines this had never been done. However, based on the literal meaning of the Hebrew word translated “heretofore,” they may have meant that Israel did not have God in their camp during the previous battle in which they were defeated by the Philistines. The idea seems to be that God coming into the camp had changed things and now they had to fight God.

“Woe unto us! who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty Gods?” – It seems that the Philistines did not understand that Israel was monotheistic, believing in the One true God. Their information seems to be based on rumors and stories passed throughout the region. What they did know was that Israel’s God had performed some mighty works in their behalf, even though they didn’t know His name.

“these are the Gods that smote the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness” – These Philistines had heard the stories of what the LORD did in Egypt to free Israel from bondage, although they were fuzzy on the details. What chance did the Philistines have if the God that demolished Egypt, the most powerful nation at that time, were to exercise His power against them?

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.

“Be strong, and quit [to be; to become] yourselves like men, O ye Philistines” – The statements in this verse may have come from the Philistine leaders encouraging their men to not give up but fight even harder in the face of what they believed were overwhelming odds. They urged their soldiers to strengthen themselves and “be men” in the upcoming battle.

“that ye be not servants unto the Hebrews, as they have been to you” – The Philistines had oppressed and enslaved Israel in the past, and now they are urging each other to not allow the situation to reverse itself so that they become slaves to Israel.

“quit yourselves like men, and fight” – The Philistines rallied themselves to “be men” and fight. The result was that the Philistines fought even harder than they did in the first battle. Bringing the ark into the camp without consulting the LORD actually worked against Israel.

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. 11 And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain.

“And the Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten, and they fled every man into his tent” – Despite having the ark with them, Israel was defeated yet again and the survivors had to run for their lives back to their camp.

“and there was a very great slaughter; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen” – Israel’s defeat was more severe than before, this time losing 30,000 men instead of the 4,000 that died in the previous battle.

“And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain” – In addition to losing the 30,000 men, the unthinkable happened: the ark was captured, something that Israel never believed that the LORD would allow. Hophni and Phinehas, the two priests who had accompanied the ark and may even have been carrying it, were killed when the Philistines took the ark.

Verses 12-16: One of the Israelite survivors came back to Shiloh as a messenger with news of the battle. Eli sat outside by the road anxiously waiting for word of the battle because he feared what might happen to the ark. Perhaps he feared because he recognized that taking the ark to the camp was a mistake and that the LORD would not be with Israel during the battle. He questions the messenger about the outcome of the battle.

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.

The messenger informs Eli of Israel’s massive defeat and the great loss of life. He also mentions that Eli’s sons were killed and that the ark of the covenant of the LORD had been captured by the Philistines.

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 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” – It seems that Eli was more concerned for the ark of God than for his sons, perhaps because he expected the death of his sons after the LORD had told him that they would both die on the same day (1 Sam. 2:34). Eli fell backwards off his seat when he heard the news of the ark being taken. He may have fainted or perhaps he was so devastated by the news that he became weak and couldn’t remain seated upright without a support.

“and his neck brake, and he died: for he was an old man, and heavy” – Eli’s body was fragile due to his age and the fact that he was overweight caused his fall to be more severe than it might have been and harder on his fragile body. The result of these factors was that the fall broke Eli’s neck and he died.

“And he had judged Israel forty years” – Eli had served both as the high priest and as a judge over Israel. Israel had looked to him as a spiritual leader as well as a civil one, the latter for four decades.

Chapters 5-6: The LORD showed His superiority over the Philistine god Dagon, compelling the Philistines to return the ark to Israel after seven months.