–Save This Page as a PDF–

The Philistines Captured the Ark
First Samuel 4:1b-11

The Philistines captured the Ark DIG: Why were the Philistines initially able to defeat Isra'el? Why didn't it help the Israelites to have the Ark of the covenant in the battle with them? What were the three results of bringing the Ark into the battlefield? How did the Philistines find out that YHVH was the true God?

REFLECT: What were the motives of the Israelites when they brought the Ark into battle? In what ways do people tend to treat God the same way today? Do you learn from the defeats in your life? What lesson do we learn from the mistake of the Israelites who looked upon the Ark as a "good-luck charm?"

God would use the Ark to teach both the Jews and the Philistines some important lessons.

The narrative begins abruptly with a battle between **Isra'el** and **the Philistines** (**to see link click Af – Isra'el and the Philistines**). We know that **Isra'el** found **the Philistines** to be **their** most serious enemy in the eleventh century, but the narrative of **Samuel** so far has not given us any preparation for this conflict. Everything in **First Samuel** points to the reign of **David** in **Second Samuel**. **Chapters 1-3** introduce us to **Samuel**, the kingmaker. **Chapters 4-6** now give us the reason for the later emergence of **David**, **the Philistines**.[114]

Isra'el was forced into battle by **the Philistine** attack. **Isra'el went out to fight against the Philistines,** trying to stop **their** expansion into **Jewish** territory**, setting up camp at Ebenezer (7:12), while the Philistines camped at Aphek (4:1b). Aphek** was over twenty miles north of Ekron, the northernmost of the five city-states of **the Philistines** (the others being Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gaza, and Gath), in the foothills to the west of **Shiloh**. The threat was obviously the most serious against **the Tabernacle** there (see **Ae – The Tabernacle at Shiloh**).[115] **The Philistines** were the "curse of **God**," raised up to chastise the backslidings of **the**

LORD's people. Therefore, **Isra'el's** relationship with **the Philistines** was a barometer of **their** relationship with **ADONAI**. When **Isra'el** experienced **defeat**, **they** saw that **it** was the withdrawal of divine favor.[116]

Defeat (4:2-3): An example of divine disfavor is provided by the first defeat at **Ebenezer. The Philistines drew up in battle formation against Isra'el. The battle was fierce, and Isra'el was** badly **beaten by the Philistines – they killed about four thousand soldiers on the battlefield. So, the Philistines won the first battle, but it was not decisive because the Israelites were able to retreat to their encampment. The elders** realized that **God** is sovereign over all affairs, and they also understood that under the covenant, **Isra'el's** success or failure in battle was a direct sign of **God's** favor or disfavor. After all, when **Joshua** led the tribes into Canaan, it was **the LORD** who gave **them** the victory at **Jericho** (see the commentary on **Joshua Bb – And the Walls Came Tumbling Down**). But when **Achan** sinned, it was also **YHVH** who made the same army fail **(Joshua 7)**. Experiencing this new failure, with **four thousand** lost in a single battle, **when the army had returned to camp, the elders of Isra'el** asked: **Why did ADONAI bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines?**

That defeat fitted the pattern displayed during the time period of the **Judges** (see **Judges At – The Twelve Cycles**). Throughout that dark period of **Isra'el's** history, there was a predictable cycle of events. First, **Isra'el** would forget **the LORD** and sin against **His** Torah. So, **God** would give **Isra'el** over into the hands of **their** enemies. During this period of foreign oppression, **they** would sooner or later repent and turn back to **Ha'Shem**. **He** would then send the next leader in the line of **judges** to bring victory and save **them** from **their** enemies. Before long, **the people** would turn again from **YHVH**, engaging in even worse idolatry than before, prompting yet another judgment from **God** in the form of conquest and subjugation. This downward-spiraling pattern continued under the evil leadership of **'Eli** and **his sons** (see **Ar – 'Eli's Wicked Sons**).

Unfortunately, **Isra'el's elders** did not consider **ADONAI's** reasons for **their** defeat. Nor did **they** go to **Samuel**, **the prophet** through whom **God** was speaking. Instead, **they** quickly turned to an action of **their** own making. **Their** solution was to **bring the Ark for the covenant of ADONAI from Shiloh, so that He** would **come among the Israelites and save them from their enemies. They** believed that **God's Presence** and power were physically tied to **the Ark**. **Isra'el's** history was replete with dramatic occasions when the presence of **the Ark** brought divine power for victory **(Num 10:35-35)**. It was all too easy for

people to believe that it was **the Ark** that brought miraculous power rather than **God Himself**! Especially in a time when **people did not know ADONAI (3:7)**, it was practically inevitable that **they** should think that **the Ark** was some kind of "good-luck charm." So **they** chose to bring **the Ark** into battle like the pagans brought their idols into battle **(2 Sam 5:21; 1 Chron 14:12). They** did not turn **their** hearts to **God**. **They** did not ask **the LORD** why **He** had permitted **their** defeat; nor did **they** humble **themselves** and seek **first God's** Kingdom and **His righteousness (Mt 6:33)**.

An illustration of this can be seen in the contrast between the leaders of the First Great Awakening in America (mid-18th century) and the Second Great Awakening (early 19th century). The First Great Awakening arrived as an unexpected and mighty work of **God** as **His Spirit** attended the simple and faithful preaching of **His Word**. There was no particular technique or method to the First Great Awakening, and its leaders devoted themselves to personal godliness, to prayer for **God's** will, and to fervent, if plain, biblical preaching. This true revival was a sovereign outpouring of **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** that fundamentally changed the character of America. But in the Second "Great" Awakening, the emphasis shifted to the techniques of revivalism that have dominated religious culture ever since: altar calls, numbers-driven fund-raising, and manipulative evangelistic tactics. Far too many believers today have followed **the elders'** lead in seeking techniques instead of turning to **God Himself** and humbling themselves in seeking **His** grace.



Ark (4:4-9): So the elders sent a delegation **to Shiloh and brought from there the Ark for the covenant of ADONAI-Tzva'ot, who is present above the cherubim. The Ark** was the sign of **God's Presence**, and there as **His** priests, were the two most offensive to **Him**. **The two sons of 'Eli, Hophni and**

Phinehas, were there with the Ark for the covenant of God, wanting to take credit for the supposed upcoming victory**.** There is no indication that **'Eli** approved that **the Ark** be taken into battle. Evidently, **he** was overruled by **his** two sons. It was unlikely that **the elders** of **Isra'el** gave much thought to what **YHVH** might have been thinking about **their** actions. In **their** minds, **they** had the "good-luck charm," and **when the Ark of the covenant of ADONAI entered the camp, all Isra'el gave a mighty shout that resounded through the land. There were three results for Isra'el relying on their "good-luck-charm."**[117]

The first result was the false confidence of **the Israelite** army. This was a sad picture because **the Israelites** thought **they** were placing **their** trust in **the LORD's Presence**, when, in fact, **they** were merely trusting in a man-made object. It shows that **they** would have been willing to follow the ways of **YHVH** if only **'Eli** and **his sons** had led **them** correctly.[118] **Their mighty shout**, which echoed so loudly as to be heard in **the Philistine** camp two miles away, was reminiscent of earlier holy wars (see **Deuteronomy Ag – The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh**), in which **Isra'el** had triumphed **(Josh 6:5; Jud 7:20)**. But **their** enthusiasm was merely a prelude to defeat. **They** believed that **ADONAI** was with **them** as before; when, in fact, **He** had not approved of the battle **they** were fighting, had not promised **His Presence**, and would not act to protect **them** from **their** foes.

The second result was that the arrival of **the Ark** had effects not only on **the Israelites**, but also in **the Philistine** camp. **On hearing the shout, the Philistines asked, "What does this great shout in the Hebrews' camp mean?" Then,** through **their** spies, **they realized that the Ark of ADONAI had arrived in the camp. And the Philistines became afraid,** saying: **God has entered the camp! We're lost! Nothing like this has ever happened before. We're lost! Who will rescue us from the power of these mighty gods?** In reference to the Ten Plagues in **Egypt, the Philistines,** being polytheistic, believed that **those were the gods that completely overthrew the Egyptians. The Philistines** had heard of **the Ark** from the mighty power that **Ha'Shem** exerted when **Moses** led **the Israelites from Egypt**. **They** believed that the arrival of **the Ark** signaled the coming of whatever **god** or **gods** its owners worshipped. However, **their** leaders encouraged **them** to **be strong and behave like men, you Philistines; so that you won't become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been to you (Judges Chapters 10, 13-16). Behave like men, and fight!**

Defeat (4:10-11): The third result was **the defeat of Isra'el** in battle, with disastrous effects. **So, in the second battle, the Philistines fought and Isra'el was decisively defeated, with every man fleeing to his own tent. It was a terrible slaughter and 30,000 of Isra'el's foot soldiers fell.** But in **Isra'el's defeat**, the purposes of **ADONAI** were established according to **His prophecy** to **Samue**l (see **Ax – Samuel's First Prophecy**). **Moreover, the Ark of God was captured.** In pagan theology, **the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob** was then **a** defeated **god** (but in short time **they** would learn differently). Never in the history of **Isra'el** had **the Ark of God** ever fallen into enemy hands.

And fulfilling the prophecy of **the man of God**, the house of **'Eli** ended when **the two sons of 'Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died** (see **Au – God's Rejection of 'Eli's House**)**.** In addition, it also ended the prominence of **Shiloh** as the center of **God's** covenant people; in hot pursuit, **the Philistines** overran and destroyed **Isra'el's** religious capital. As a result, **the Tabernacle** was moved to **Nov** (see the commentary on **the Life of David Av – David at Nov**). **Psalm 78:59-64, Jeremiah 7:12-15** and **26:6-9** laments how **ADONAI abandoned the Tabernacle at Shiloh, the Tent He had made where He could live among people. He gave His strength into exile, His pride to the power of the foe. He gave His people over to the sword and grew angry with His own heritage. God** would use **the Ark** to teach both **the Jews** and **the Philistines** some important lessons.

Thus ended the rule of **the priests** at **Shiloh**; for **YHVH** planned to anoint **a king** through **Samuel** (see **Bx – Samuel Anoints Sha'ul**). For whatever **Isra'el** and **the Philistines** might have thought, the capture of **the Ark** and **the defeat** of **Isra'el's** army didn't point to the overthrow of **God**. **The elders** thought that by bringing **the Ark they** had ensured that **He** would defend **His** honor; little did **they** realize that **the LORD** intended to defend **His** honor by sending **the Philistines** to bring judgment on **His** idolatrous people![119]

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for being so loving, wise and discerning to see the intents of men's **hearts** and to see beyond the outward actions. **But ADONAI said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or his stature, because I have already refused him. For God does not see a man as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but ADONAI looks into the heart" (First Samuel 16:7).** Thank **You** that what **You** desire most from mankind is a relationship of love **(Mathew 22:36-37).** How wonderful that **You** call **Your** children to **pray** to **You** and **You** hear. **You** do not desire empty words, but*

meaningful words from a ***heart*** *of love.* ***And when you are praying, do not babble on and on like the pagans; for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him*** ***(Matthew 6:7-8).***

Praise ***Your*** *great wisdom, love and power that sought to teach a lesson to both* ***the Israelites*** *and* ***the Philistines*** *by allowing* ***the Ark*** *of the covenant to be captured.* ***The Israelites*** *learned that to worship* ***You*** *is not by having something which they used as a "good-luck charm."* ***The Ark*** *of the covenant was very important for it symbolized the covenant that the people made with* ***You*** *to follow and to obey, but it was not the physical box that was the key, rather was the relationship of the people to love and follow* ***You*** *as their* ***Lord****. Thank* ***You*** *for now living inside those who love* ***You (John 14:23).*** *In* ***Messiah Yeshua's*** *holy name and power of* ***His*** *resurrection. Amen*