

Exegetical Notes – 1 Samuel 6:1-7:1

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1 Samuel 6:1-7:1

(Israel had been defeated in battle by the Philistines. 30,000 Israeli soldiers had died. Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli, Israel's High Priest, and Eli's apparent heirs to that title, had died in the battle. The Ark of the Covenant, which Israel had used superstitiously in the battle, had been captured by the Philistines. When Eli heard the news of Israel's losses, he had fallen off his chair and broken his neck. Things looked bleak for Israel.

However, the Philistines suffered, too. In each town where the Ark of God was sickness broke out.)

Verses 6:1-2

¹ When the ark of the LORD had been in Philistine territory seven months, ² the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we should send it back to its place."

- The Philistines believed that they were cursed because of the Ark of God which they had captured. They called to their leaders to return the Ark to the Israelites so that they might end the curse which was upon them.

Verses 3-6

³ They answered, "If you return the ark of the god of Israel, do not send it back to him without a gift; by all means send a guilt offering to him. Then you will be healed, and you will know why his hand has not been lifted from you."

⁴ The Philistines asked, "What guilt offering should we send to him?" They replied, "Five gold tumors and five gold rats, according to the number of the Philistine rulers, because the same plague has struck both you and your rulers. ⁵ Make models of the tumors and of the rats that are destroying the country, and give glory to Israel's god. Perhaps he will lift his hand from you and your gods and your land. ⁶ Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did? When Israel's god dealt harshly with them, did they not send the Israelites out so they could go on their way?"

- The Philistine leaders told the people that “IF” they decided to send the Ark back to the Israelites they should not send it without a “guilt offering.” The leadership is not taking responsibility for what the people do with the Ark. It is the peoples’ decision. However, they do tell the people that if they decide to send the Ark back, they need to acknowledge their guilt for offending YHWH by taking it in the first place. The leadership is not assuming guilt but assigning guilt to those they lead.
- The people ask what offering the leaders would suggest.
- The leaders suggest that the people who have made the decision to send the Ark back to Israel should send with it golden models of the tumors from which they suffered while the Ark was in their possession and five golden rats. They are to send five golden tumors and five golden rats, one tumor and one rat for each of the Philistine leaders. The leaders also suffer from the afflictions. However, the people must, in the leaders’ opinion, assume all responsibility for repentance as well as the costs. While the people acknowledge guilt in this matter, the leaders do not!
- The leaders reminded the people of what happened to the Egyptians when their Pharaoh opposed the God of Israel. But they themselves do not officially bend to the will of YHWH.

Verses 7-9

⁷ “Now then, get a new cart ready, with two cows that have calved and have never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pen them up. ⁸ Take the ark of the LORD and put it on the cart, and in a chest beside it put the gold objects you are sending back to him as a guilt offering. Send it on its way, ⁹ but keep watching it. If it goes up to its own territory, toward Beth Shemesh, then the LORD has brought this great disaster on us. But if it does not, then we will know that it was not his hand that struck us but that it happened to us by chance.”

- The leaders then instruct the people as to how they should send the Ark back. They are to put it and the suggested guilt offering on a new cart, one never used before. They are to hitch two nursing cows to the cart. They are to pen up the cows’ calves so that they will cry for their mothers. The natural instinct of the cows will be to seek their calves. Then they are to set the cows free and see what happens. If the cows go away from the calves into the territory controlled by Israel, then everyone will know that YHWH has brought the curse on the Philistines. But if the cows do not go to Israel,

everyone will know that the leaders were right to take the Ark and that the curse is not from Him.

- It is highly unlikely that the cows will forsake their calves. It is highly unlikely that they will, on their own without any guidance, find their way into Israeli territory. The test is bound to fail and the leaders will show themselves justified in their decision to take the Ark when it does.

Verses 10-12

¹⁰ So they did this. They took two such cows and hitched them to the cart and penned up their calves. ¹¹ They placed the ark of the LORD on the cart and along with it the chest containing the gold rats and the models of the tumors. ¹² Then the cows went straight up toward Beth Shemesh, keeping on the road and lowing all the way; they did not turn to the right or to the left. The rulers of the Philistines followed them as far as the border of Beth Shemesh.

- However, the cows go directly into Israeli territory, to the very town the Philistine leaders indicated.

Verses 13-16

¹³ Now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight. ¹⁴ The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and there it stopped beside a large rock. The people chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. ¹⁵ The Levites took down the ark of the LORD, together with the chest containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. On that day the people of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the LORD. ¹⁶ The five rulers of the Philistines saw all this and then returned that same day to Ekron.

- The people of Beth Shemesh rejoiced when they saw the Ark.
- The cows stopped beside a large rock.
- Members of the Priestly family came and took the Ark off the cart. They set the Ark on the rock. They broke up the cart and used its wood to burn praise offerings to YHWH for the return of the Ark.
- To their surprise, the leaders of the Philistines saw that the Ark was returned to Israel despite the odds of failure. They were forced to admit that YHWH was behind all that had befallen the Philistines following the capture of the Ark.

Verses 17-18

¹⁷ These are the gold tumors the Philistines sent as a guilt offering to the LORD—one each for Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron. ¹⁸ And the number of the gold rats was according to the number of Philistine towns belonging to the five rulers—the fortified towns with their country villages. The large rock on which the Levites set the ark of the LORD is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh.

- The Levites acknowledged that the five tumors and the five rats are a guilt offering to YHWH. They declare that the rock on which the Ark was placed at Beth Shemesh would serve as a memorial to the events surrounding the Ark's capture and its return.

Verses 19-7:1

¹⁹ But God struck down some of the inhabitants of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy of them to death because they looked into the ark of the LORD. The people mourned because of the heavy blow the LORD had dealt them. ²⁰ And the people of Beth Shemesh asked, “Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God? To whom will the ark go up from here?”

²¹ Then they sent messengers to the people of KiriathJearim, saying, “The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and take it up to your town.” ⁷ ¹ So the men of KiriathJearim came and took up the ark of the LORD. They brought it to Abinadab's house on the hill and consecrated Eleazar his son to guard the ark of the LORD.

- Sometime later, 70 of the people who lived in Beth Shemesh where the Ark remained decided to open it to see what was inside. Touching the Ark was forbidden (see Numbers 4:5-6, 20). Only those designated to touch it were permitted to do so. Those who touched it without authorization would die. Thus, those who opened it when it was in Beth Shemesh died.
- This so frightened the people of Beth Shemesh that they did not want the Ark in their presence. They feared the results of offending God. They begged the people of KiriathJearim to come and take the Ark of God away.
- The people of KiriathJearim did take the Ark to their town. They placed it in the house of Abinadab and consecrated his son, Eleazar, to become the protector of the Ark and of anyone who came near it.

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