

File No. 52

## I SAMUEL 3:19 — 7:15

### THE CAPTURE AND RETURN OF THE ARK

(SBS Bk 2 Story Nos. 25, 26 & 27)

*Story Notes*

#### Chapter 3:19 — 4:42

Israel so disregarded God that they presumed to use the covenant box like an idol—to guarantee their success in battle. This had never happened in all the years when the judges ruled. Perhaps they thought they could revive the days of Joshua. However, they learned that God ruled by his word and that he could not be controlled by their use of his throne (the ark). The ark was intended to assure Israel of God's presence and his nature.

On the day of this battle, Eli and his sons died, together with thousands of Israelites, and the ark of the covenant was captured. His daughter in law believed the glory of God had departed from Israel. In fact, glory is never linked with the ark alone but with the tabernacle as a whole. God wanted Israel to see his glory, in the things that he did and in the worship he had given them and to be a witness to this in the world (Num. 14:21). What had really departed was the moral glory of people living by the word of God. However, the Lord himself, merciful and gracious (Exod. 33:18 – 34:9), had not departed from Israel. His word, through Samuel, was being heard across the land and all his words came true. The nation was being prepared for the days of David.

#### Chapters 5 – 6

The ark could not protect Israel from the Philistines, but it brought Dagon to the ground and its host cities to their knees. The ark was not a charm Israel could use to make things happen, but the throne of God. Israel refused to be a light of revelation to Philistia, but the Lord caused his own light to shine among them so that they would fear him.

The Philistines thought they must give a guilt offering to the Lord: they were in breach of his law and needed to make amends. Belief that does not arise from the revelation of God's grace is likely to be confused and fearful, but God was showing them that they were responsible to him. Diviners advised Philistia to beware of being like Pharaoh in Egypt who stubbornly refused to acknowledge Israel's God. 'Give him glory' they said, 'and gifts representing all the lords and cities of the land.' They also prescribed a test to ensure that their sufferings were the result of having the ark among them. Graciously, God met their requirements and relieved them of any doubt that they had acted appropriately in releasing the ark.

In remembering this story, Israel's prophets drew attention to the purpose of the Lord to set his people free from all slavery so that they may truly worship.

The Levites of Beth-shemesh (Josh. 21:16) honoured God in their offering (although offerings were supposed to be of male beasts). Some residents (probably seventy) did not join in the celebration, and took the liberty to look inside the ark and paid dearly for their irreverence. Fear gripped them and they no longer wanted the Lord among them and they asked a Jebusite (foreigners assigned to menial tasks) city to take up the task.

There may also have been political or cultic reasons why Kiriath-jearim was chosen. Philistines still controlled Israel until David's time and they may have preferred this somewhat neutral territory with a cultic history.

God had brought his ark back to Israel, but Israel was far from ready to receive it and spent a further twenty years in this state.

#### Chapter 7

The return of the ark was God's doing but it did not lessen the power of the Philistines. It may have encouraged Israel, because, after 20 more years of Philistine oppression, they began to cry out to God. Samuel then assumed a more public function as judge. He was not a military leader, as in the book of *Judges*, but a spiritual leader. He reminds us of the ministry of Moses as prophet, priest and judge.

The intercession of Samuel and his offering (a whole burnt offering signified total dedication to

the Lord) led to a total victory over their enemies. Israel had every reason to believe that their national life was safe in the hands of their covenant Lord.

Samuel signalled further victories by his memorial stone. The place where Israel previously lost to the Philistines and lost the ark of God (4:1; 5:1) was now the place of victory. Samuel travelled around Israel and dealt with the personal life of his people, just as he had dealt with their national life. Israel had no reason to complain that God was not their King.

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