



## Icabod: The Glory of God Departs from Israel (1 Sam 4 - 5)

*Commentary: Week Four*

New American Commentary<sup>1</sup>

### 4. The House of Eli is Devastated as the Ark of God is Captured

This section provides narrative confirmation of the destruction of Eli's family line, just as Samuel's words to Eli in the previous section provided its verbal confirmation. As at other times in Israelite history and in accordance with Torah promises (cf. [Lev 26:17](#); [Deut 28:25](#)), here the Lord would bring judgment to bear on the sins of his people through the medium of a troublesome foreign army (cf. [2 Sam 24:1, 13](#)), in this case the Philistines. In so doing the Lord demonstrates his sovereignty over all peoples, even those outside the covenant tent.

#### (1) The Philistines Kill Eli's Sons and Capture the Ark [4:1b-11](#)

[4:1-4](#) An undisclosed period of time after Samuel's conversation with Eli, the Israelites became involved in a "fight against the Philistines" (v. [1](#)). The Philistines, who are understood to have migrated to the coastal regions of southwest Israel in large numbers during the first half of the twelfth century B.C., had become a serious threat to the Israelites during the period of the Judges. The Philistine army established a base camp along the banks of the Yarkon River at Aphek (NT Antipatris, modern Ras el-Ain/Tel Aphek), some twenty miles northeast of Ekron (modern Khirbet el-Muqanna?); the Israelites encamped two miles to the east at Ebenezer (modern Izbet Sartah). Taking the initiative in battle, the Philistines attacked and slew "about four thousand" Israelites (v. [2](#)).

Consistent with the biblical perspective presented elsewhere in the Former Prophets, the elders interpreted Israel's defeat at the hands of the Philistines as a judgment from the Lord (cf. [Judg 2:14](#); [3:8](#); [4:2](#); [1 Sam 12:9](#)). Their solution, bringing the ark of the Lord's covenant into the battle arena, suggests that they were attempting to demonstrate in a tangible way their commitment to the covenant. Alternatively, it might have been an attempt by the elders to twist God's arm into helping them instead of trying to find out the reason for God's displeasure. [First Samuel 8:4f](#). doesn't speak well for the elders' spiritual wisdom.

The NIV's translation of [4:3](#) assumes the second possibility—that the elders believed the ark's presence among them would save them. This rendering misses the sense of the original. The Hebrew syntax in [4:3](#) suggests instead that the elders believed that the Lord, not the ark, would go with them and save them from their enemies. In fact, the ark was present among Israel's forces for leadership and protection at various times in Israel's history (cf. [Num 10:33-36](#); [Josh 3:3-7](#); [4:1-18](#); [6:6-21](#)). The problem with Israel was not the bad theology of the elders—faith in things rather than faith in God—but the sins of "Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas," who "were there with the ark of the covenant of God." As in the case of Achan (cf. [Josh 7](#)), all Israel would have to suffer because of the sins of a very few.

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1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 89-108.

**4:5–9** The arrival of the “ark of the LORD’s covenant” was greeted with wild shouts of exhilaration that caused “the ground” (v. [5](#)) to shake. So great was the commotion in the Israelite camp that the Philistines heard it two miles away.

The Philistines expressed two significant reactions to the ark’s presence among the Israelites: fear and vigorous determination to defeat Israel and its God. Fear arose in the Philistine camp because of their knowledge—however imperfect it may have been—of Israelite religion and history. They apparently understood that the ark was the visible throne of Israel’s invisible deity (cf. [4:4](#); [Exod 25:20–22](#); [Num 7:89](#)). They also believed the Israelites to be polytheistic, an assumption that was justified during much of the period of the Judges (cf. [Judg 2:12, 17, 19](#); [3:6](#); [6:10](#); [10:6, 13–14](#); [18:14–24](#)). Finally, the Philistines understood that Israel had experienced a supernatural deliverance from the Egyptians, though the details were muddled (“*gods*” had “struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the desert”! [v. [8](#)]). Knowledge of these details, compounded by a fear of the consequences of losing to “the Hebrews” (v. [9](#))—a term used mainly by non-Israelites—energized the Philistines to battlefield bravery.

**4:10–11** Israel’s earlier joyful shouts welcoming the Lord’s arrival among them proved premature. The presence of Yahweh, God of the Sinai covenant, in the camp of Israel meant that the covenant’s Supreme Enforcer had now been forced into a direct confrontation with the two most egregious violators of the covenant. Though the Israelites expected God to be an ally against the Philistines, the Lord had his own agenda. Judgment would begin at home; sons of the covenant who violated the covenant would experience God’s wrath first. The Israelites were routed, and “the slaughter was very great”—some “thirty thousand” (v. [10](#)) casualties. As staggering as the loss of human life was, it was dwarfed by the losses dealt to Israelite culture. For the first time in history Israel’s most sacred material possession was now in the hands of pagans, and its two most powerful active priests had died at the hands of infidels.

The sanctuary at Shiloh seems to have been destroyed by the Philistines shortly after this time. Four textual reasons can be cited in support of this conclusion: (1) never again in 1, 2 Samuel is the city mentioned as a worship center for Israel; (2) the ark was not returned to Shiloh following its reacquisition by Israel (cf. [7:1–2](#)); (3) Samuel moved the center of his activities back to his hometown of Ramah (cf. [7:17](#)); and (4) references in the Books of Psalms ([78:60](#)) and Jeremiah ([7:12–14](#); [26:6, 9](#)) explicitly mention its destruction. Taken together, these facts suggest the possibility that the city—or at least its sanctuary—was violently ransacked during this period of hostility. Archaeological excavations conducted by I. Finkelstein at the site confirm that Shiloh was destroyed by fire in the mid-eleventh century B.C.

## **(2) Eli Dies; Ichabod is Born [4:12–22](#)**

The prophetically announced curse against the house of Eli proceeds here, as two additional generations are now touched by it. Not only does the elderly Eli die in this tragic section, but Eli’s grandson Ichabod is made an orphan, deprived not only of his father but now his mother as well.

**4:12–18** News of the battlefield catastrophe soon found its way some twenty miles back to Shiloh. A Benjamite fleeing the conflict ran past a waiting Eli into the heart of the city to inform the inhabitants of the day’s events. The messenger’s appearance revealed the conflict’s outcome as eloquently as his words; symbolically torn clothing and the heaping of dust on the head were expressions of grief and mourning in ancient Israel (cf. [Gen 37:29, 34](#); [44:13](#); [2 Sam 1:2](#)).

Blind Eli, however, could see none of these portents; he could only hear the sound of all Shiloh's inhabitants crying out in anguish. The elderly priest had been sitting beside the main road to Shiloh awaiting news from the front. The sound of a city in mourning enabled him to formulate a general understanding of the battle's outcome; however, specific details were lacking. How many had died? Who had died? What of the ark? Eli's main concern was not for the safe return of his two sons; rather, "his heart feared for the ark of God" because it was his responsibility (v. [13](#)).

The writer heightens the drama of the key narrative moment by allowing the audience to listen in on the dialogue between the blind priest and the dust-laden Benjamite. Methodically the increasingly awful details were revealed: "Israel fled"; "the army has suffered heavy losses"; "your two sons ... are dead"; "the ark of God has been captured" (v. [17](#)). The messenger's climactic disclosure so stunned Eli that he fell off his chair (Hb. *kissē* = "chair"/"throne"), broke his neck, and died.

With great artistic skill the writer captured this fateful moment with words that convey at least two messages simultaneously. First, it signifies the end of the Elide dynasty. Eli's fall from his chair literally dethroned the Elide dynasty in Israel. Second, Eli's death ended an abomination in Israel that rivaled that of pagan idolatry. The Lord would soon bring an end to an unseeing Philistine abomination by causing an image of Dagon to fall and its neck to break, but first he would bring about the same fate to a blind Hebrew abomination. The parallel between the events of the present section and those of the next chapter are striking and deliberate.

The writer notes that at the time of Eli's death he was "heavy" (v. [18](#)). The Hebrew word employed here (*kbd*) is aptly chosen, for its spectrum of meaning—"honored," "heavy," "burdensome"—applies broadly to the man (perhaps a play on words). As high priest at Shiloh, Eli was a man with much social "weight"/"significance"; because of his practice of eating unauthorized sacrificial portions (cf. comments at [2:29](#)), he was also "heavy"; finally, as a result of the sins he permitted in his own life and household, Eli was a burden that weighed down and ultimately brought disaster upon Israel.

[4:19–22](#) The shredding of the Elide dynasty occurred quickly and violently. On the same day that Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas died, Phinehas' wife went into premature labor and "was overcome by her labor pains" (v. [19](#)). Fatal complications in the birthing process caused the woman to die shortly after giving birth to a son. Instead of rejoicing in the most honorable achievement a woman in the ancient Near East could attain—the birthing of a son—she was listless and distracted because of her anxiety over the ark. With her dying gasps she named the child "Ichabod" (Hb. *ʾî-kābôd*, lit., "Where [is] glory?" or "Nothing of glory"). The name, a derivative of *kbd* (cf. discussion of v. [18](#)), was appropriate, for with the deaths of the patriarch and his two sons the *kbd*—honor, weight, burden—of the Elide dynasty was gone. More than that, the glorious "ark of God" (v. [21](#)), the Lord's throne, had "been captured" (v. [22](#)). For Israel on that day the *kbd* was gone. Not until the glory departed from the temple in the days of Ezekiel would an event of similar magnitude occur again (cf. [Ezek 10:18](#)).

## 5. The Lord Triumphs During Samuel's Career

In this section the Lord continues his fearful judgments against both non-Israelites and Israelites who display a lack of respect for him (cf. [2:30](#)). The Lord acts without regard to geographical boundaries, with equal competence on foreign soil and in Israel's heartland. His actions confirm the Torah's teaching that he is indeed "the Judge of the whole earth" (cf. [Gen 18:25](#); [1 Sam 2:10](#)).

In the previous section the Lord acted in judgment against a religious establishment in Israel that had displayed its contempt for him; here he acts triumphantly against a Philistine religious establishment that held him up to ridicule. In both cases the Lord brought the central religious figure tumbling to the ground.

But the Lord's fierce judgment against Israel's religious establishment centered in Shiloh did not conclude with the destruction of the house of Eli. Citizens of a Levitical city in Israel, Beth Shemesh, who acted contemptuously toward God's holiness are taught in this section that the Lord is a far more fearsome and deadly adversary than any earthly foe. Philistine armies, too, are taught this lesson. When they disrupt a holy convocation to honor the Lord, they become targets of divine wrath.

A common thread binds together the three acts of the Lord's judgment found in [5:1–7:17](#). At the heart of each of the stories is a terrifying and deadly action carried out without a human intermediary. The Lord acts as a divine warrior (cf. [Exod 15:3](#); [Isa 42:13](#); [Jer 20:11](#)) as he breaks out in judgment against all who violate his holiness; he enforces the Sinai covenant even—or perhaps especially—when the objects of his judgment are his own earthly representatives.

### (1) The Lord Overwhelms the Philistines' God [5:1–5:12](#) (Part 1)

In this section Yahweh demonstrates his awesome power against Israel's most feared adversary. Initially he performs a ritual execution of Dagon, the deity who was thought to have given the Philistines victory over both Israel's greatest human champion Samson (cf. [Judg 16:23](#)) and over Israel's God. After slaying their god, Yahweh then directs his judgments against the people who worshiped that god. In so doing Yahweh demonstrates his unconquerable nature and his superiority over all foes.

Yahweh shows that the battlefield capture of the ark is only an apparent conquest of Israel's God. In truth, it is a divine ruse used to gain even greater opportunities to display his unparalleled majesty.

[5:1–12](#) The Philistines, flush with victory over the Israelites, removed "the ark of God" (v. [1](#)) from the abandoned Israelite campsite at "Ebenezer" and brought it some nineteen miles south "to Ashdod." Ashdod was one of the five major Philistine cities located in the Promised Land at this time (cf. [6:17](#)) and apparently was the site of the most important worship center for the god credited with the Philistines' recent battlefield success. The ark was placed there "beside Dagon" (v. [2](#)) within "Dagon's temple." Though Dagon was a well-known Semitic deity worshiped for centuries throughout western Asia as a meteorological and military deity, the non-Semitic Philistines had incorporated this god into their pantheon as well, assigning it a central role in their cult.

Placing the captured symbol of Israel's God in the stronghold of Dagon reflected the Philistines' understanding of the theological dimension of their recent military conquest. The Philistine soldiers had prevailed over Israelite forces, they believed, because Dagon had proven superior to Yahweh on the divine battlefield. Thus it was fitting that Yahweh should exist as an attendant in the household of Dagon, just as Israel would serve Philistia.

However, the Lord defied the Ashdodites' theological understanding of the recent turn of events. Early the next morning, at the time of day prescribed in the Torah for the first daily act of worship toward the Lord (cf. [Exod 24:14](#); [29:39](#), [41](#); [30:7](#); [Lev 6:12](#), [20](#); [9:17](#); [Num 28:4](#), [23](#)), Dagon was found in a posture of reverence and submission before "the ark of the LORD" (v. [3](#)); "his face" was "on the ground" (cf. [Gen 19:1](#); [24:52](#); [Neh 8:6](#)). The writer, subtly suggesting the futility of the Philistine's idolatrous practices (cf. [Isa 44:9–20](#); [Jer 10:5](#); [Hab 2:18](#); [Acts 19:26](#); [1 Cor 8:4](#)), noted that the people of Ashdod had to "put" Dagon "back in his place." Their god, thought to be so virile on the battlefield, in the confines of his own dwelling did not even have the strength to lift his face out of the dust!

Dagon's humiliating act of self-abasement was repeated the following morning, a sure sign that the previous day's events had not been accidental. Once again Dagon was lying prostrate "before the ark of the LORD" (v. [4](#)), but this time there was a difference. Dagon's head and hands had been "broken off" (*Hb. krt*; "cut off") in a manner reminiscent of grisly military executions (cf. [17:51](#); [31:9](#); [2 Sam 4:12](#)). The Philistines' conquering divine hero had been humbled and then mercilessly executed in his own stronghold. Though "in exile," the Lord had proven his superiority to the regional supreme deity.

Dagon's bodily extremities had first been discovered "lying on the threshold" of his temple. Out of respect for their deity, therefore, worshipers entering the temple instituted a policy of refusing to "step on the threshold" (v. [5](#)). Though the practice of recognizing the special character of an entrance into sacred space by means of some ritual was common in ancient Palestine (cf. [Exod 3:5](#); [Zeph 1:9](#)), this particular expression apparently was adopted in Ashdod only after the Lord desecrated Dagon.

The Philistines were aware that the Lord had brought plagues against Egypt in a previous generation (cf. [4:8](#)). Now they themselves would experience a foreshortened version of that scourge. Like the plagues of Egypt, the Lord's plagues in Philistia brought judgment to the foreign gods (cf. [6:5](#); [Exod 12:12](#)) and disease and death to oppressors of the Hebrews. The people of "Ashdod and its vicinity" ([1 Sam 5:6](#)) were afflicted "with tumors." The tumors, often understood to be buboes—not anal tumors or hemorrhoids (= KJV's "emerods")—caused by a rodent-borne disease (cf. [6:4](#)), were one of the maladies the Lord promised to send against those who violated his covenant expectations (cf. [Deut 28:27](#)). Perhaps learning a lesson from history, the Ashdodites decided that "the ark of the god of Israel must not stay" (v. [7](#)) among them. Calling together a pan-Philistine council of "rulers" (*Hb. sērānīm*, "tyrants"), the group decided to "have the ark of the God of Israel moved to Gath" (v. [8](#)). The reasons for Gath's selection are not supplied in the text; perhaps Gath possessed an Israelite populational element or at least had favorable relations with Israel that were believed to make the city immune from the Lord's attack (cf. [7:14](#); [21:10](#); [27:3](#); [2 Sam 15:18](#); [1 Kgs 2:39](#)).

Whatever their reasons for moving the ark to Gath, the logic proved defective. The Lord only increased the magnitude of his judgments, breaking forth in onslaughts against both the emotional and physical well-being of the citizens of Gath. In keeping with a Torah threat directed against Israel's enemies in the Promised Land, the city was thrown "into a great panic" (v. [9](#); cf. [Deut 7:23](#)). Additionally, all age groups in the city were afflicted "with an outbreak of tumors."

In an effort to end the reign of terror in Gath, the ark was "sent" (or "exodused," v. [10](#); a form of *šlh*, "send") to Ekron. The language describing the Gathites' action in removing the ark from their city suggests the writer was consciously alluding to the Egyptian exodus event (cf. [Exod 12:33](#)).

The ark was "sent" north "to Ekron," where its arrival created even more distress than it had in Gath. "God's hand was very heavy upon" (v. [11](#)) that city as the Lord once again increased the intensity of his judgmental actions. In addition to the "panic" (lit., "panic of death") and "tumors," the Lord also slew many individuals. The entire city joined in an anguished cry "to heaven" (v. [12](#)) for deliverance.