



Handling the Holy: What do you do with the Glory of God? (1 Sam 6-7)

Commentary: Week Five

New American Commentary

(1) The Lord Overwhelms the Philistines' God [6:1–6:12](#) (Part 2)

[6:1–12](#) After a period of seven months—a number to be understood literally but probably included because of its symbolic overtones—the Philistines made the decision to “send” the ark “back to its place” in Israel. Following the MT, the NIV states two reasons for the decision to return the ark: so “you will be healed, and you will know why his hand has not been lifted from you” ([6:3](#)). The LXX and 4QSam^a read differently and suggest it was for the purpose of removing the Lord’s hand of judgment from the land. Whatever the reason, sending away an offended and powerful deity was not a task to be undertaken lightly; if done improperly, Yahweh might become even more provoked, with dire consequences for all Philistia. Thus “the priests and diviners” (v. [2](#)) were called upon to determine the most efficacious means of removing the ark from their region. “Diviners” were a class of religious leaders that Israelites were forbidden to consult (cf. [Deut 18:10, 14](#)).

With remarkable concern for detail the writer chronicles the ensuing conversational exchange between the Philistines and their religious experts. The present section contains the longest recorded speech given by Philistines in the Old Testament (120 words in the Hebrew), as well as the Old Testament’s longest stretch of dialogue between Philistines (four consecutive statements). Such extraordinary detail by the writer suggests that he may have had access to an eyewitness source but also that he was guided in formulating the present composition by motives beyond those of mere historical reportage.

The writer used the Philistine dialogue—particularly the statements by Philistia’s religious authorities—to demonstrate a theological point: the spiritual darkness of Philistia’s leaders—the diviners and those who consulted them— was in fact the true source for their present problems. The Torah ([Deut 18:9–19](#)) warned that although surrounding nations consulted diviners, Israel must not; for such individuals were “detestable to the Lord” and a cause for the Lord driving inhabitants from the Promised Land. Instead, Israel must listen to a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord would raise up. Of course, such a prophet already had been provided in the person of Samuel (cf. [3:20](#)). Thus, this passage implicitly buttresses the theological foundation laid elsewhere for two prominent ideas: holy war against the Philistines and the divine authority of Samuel.

Interestingly, the diviners’ statements express a knowledge of certain details of the Torah’s narrative ([6:6](#)), theology ([6:5](#)), and ritual ([6:3](#)). The diviners understood, for example, that the Philistines needed to “pay honor to Israel’s god” and that one way to do that was by presenting “a guilt offering” (*’āšām*; cf. [Lev 5:14–6:7; 7:1–6](#)). However, the means they recommended was totally wrongheaded.

In addition to missing the Torah requirement of the slaying of a ram as part of the guilt offering (cf. [Lev 5:15](#)), the detestable diviners recommended appeasing Yahweh with ten fashioned images of gold, a violation of the Decalogue’s prohibition against all likenesses of animals and humans (cf. [Exod 20:4; Deut 5:8](#)). Incredibly, the recommended statues were to be of ritually detestable animals (cf. [Lev 11:29](#))—“rats”! As if that were not enough, Yahweh was also to be given a gift of five golden images of unclean portions of the human anatomy—“tumors”! This advice apparently represents a syncretistic blend of pagan imitative magic and perverted Torah ritual.

Lastly, the priests and diviners directed the Philistines to transport the ark on a cart, a means of transportation for the ark expressly forbidden in the Torah ([Num 7:7–9](#); cf. [2 Sam 6:3–13](#)). Their recommendations were framed in a historical lesson from the Torah suggesting the need for immediate action: “Why harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did?” (v. [6](#)).

The diviners and priests directed the Philistines to send the ark back to Israel for two purposes: first, to remove the deadly object—and thereby Israel’s deity—from their territory; and second, to determine the true origin of the Philistines’ recent societal upheavals. To accomplish both ends simultaneously, the ark along with a chest containing the Lord’s guilt offering were to be placed on “a new cart” (v. [7](#)) pulled by “two cows” that had calved and had “never been yoked” and who had been forcefully separated from their unweaned calves. If a team of cows that had never been trained or yoked could work together to pull the cart straight for a stretch of several miles, all the while ignoring their maternal instincts to respond to the cries of their unweaned calves, then Yahweh would indeed be accepted as the source of “this great disaster.” However, if the cows failed to pull the cart “as far as the border of Beth Shemesh,” then the whole series of recent Philistine catastrophes would be understood to have happened “by chance” (v. [9](#)).

Having set up the test according to the diviners’ guidelines, the Philistines observed that “the cows went straight up toward Beth Shemesh, keeping on the road and lowing all the way” (v. [12](#)). Not once did the untrained cows “turn to the right or to the left.” In convincing fashion Yahweh had demonstrated that the Philistines’ troubles were no accident of nature. To the Philistines their troubles were thus interpreted as the deliberate actions of an angry foreign deity; however, to the informed Israelite audience they were the triumphant execution of Torah-promised judgments against a nation who had desecrated the Promised Land through abominable practices.

(2) The Lord Judges Irreverent Israelites [6:13–7:1](#)

The Lord’s stern judgment of sin was not limited to actions against the house of Eli or the Philistines. When the citizens of the Levitical city of Beth Shemesh—people who should have been especially cognizant of Torah guidelines regarding the proper treatment of the ark—failed to obey divine law (cf. [Num 4:15](#)), they too were judged. This section details the tragic results of Israelites trifling with the holy throne of Yahweh’s presence. The magnitude of the divine judgment against them suggests that Israel was to fear the Lord far more than Philistia or any other earthly foe.

The present narrative appears to be yet one more indictment against the Levites during the period of the Judges. It thus takes its place alongside the story of the Levite who served as priest for the Danites (cf. [Judg 17:7–18:31](#)), of the Levite who cut up his wife’s corpse and mobilized Israel in fratricidal warfare (cf. [Judg 19:1–20:10](#)), and of Eli and his sons.

[6:13–18](#) The citizens of Beth Shemesh were working in the fields harvesting wheat “when they looked up and saw the ark” (v. [13](#)). Beth Shemesh was a Levitical city set aside for the clan of Kohath, the Levitical family charged with responsibility of caring for the ark of the covenant ([Num 4:4, 15](#)) and was also a designated home for the descendants of Aaron (cf. [Josh 21:13–16](#)). It is reasonable to assume that many if not most of the Israelites in this city were from the tribe of Levi and that they, more than most Israelites, would have had cause to celebrate the ark’s return.

Acting in priestly fashion, the people prepared a great sacrifice to the Lord in celebration of the ark's return. "The field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh" (v. [14](#)) was turned into a temporary worship site as the cows that had pulled the cart were ritually slaughtered and presented "as a burnt offering [*'ōlā*] to the Lord" in a fire made from the chopped up remains of the wooden cart. Though this act was seemingly one of great reverence for Yahweh, it was actually a reckless one: the Torah taught that only male animals were to be used in burnt offerings (cf. [Lev 1:3](#)). The author's description of this forbidden act of offering up heifers as burnt offerings thus serves as an early indication of impending divine judgment against the Beth Shemeshites.

With the ark and the golden gifts from the Philistines displayed prominently atop a "large rock" in Joshua's field, one that would be celebrated in subsequent Israelite history (v. [18](#)), the Israelites continued their revelry with a festive event that included additional offerings of food gifts. The Philistine tyrants observed the Israelites' joyous activities and then returned to Ekron "that same day" (v. [16](#)), no doubt with a sense of relief. They left behind not only the Israelite ark but five gold tumors and five gold rats "according to the number of the Philistine towns belonging to the five rulers" (v. [18](#)), the fortified cities of "Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron" (v. [17](#)). Ironically, their foolish strategy for ridding themselves of the ark had worked!

[6:19–20](#) According to the Torah ([Num 4:5–6](#)), no Israelites outside the Aaronic priesthood were permitted to see even the exterior of the ark, much less its interior. Even the Kohathites, whose God-given duty it was to transport the ark, were forbidden either to touch or view the sacred box. Thus, the first duty of the Israelites—especially the Kohathites, whose charge it was to care for the holy things of Israelite worship (cf. [Num 4:2](#))—would have been to hide the ark from view while avoiding any physical or visual contact with it.

However, during the festivities associated with the ark's return, "some of the men of Beth Shemesh" did just the opposite. Far from concealing the ark, they displayed it on a "large rock" and then "looked into the ark of the Lord," touching it in the process. This shameless disregard for the ark's sanctity and the violation of its sacred space brought swift and direct judgment from Yahweh. According to both the MT and LXX, God "struck down" (Hb. *nkh*; cf. [5:6, 9](#)) fifty thousand and seventy men from Beth Shemesh. The number, so large as to defy reason, has been reduced in the NIV and other modern versions, which choose to follow Josephus (*Ant.* 6.1.4) to a more rational "seventy."

Though there are obvious difficulties associated with the extremely large number preserved in ancient versions—for example, the unlikelihood that fifty thousand people ever lived in ancient Beth Shemesh at one time—the MT's reading apparently is the original. Accepting the larger number results in a theological truth consonant with the teachings of the book retained: Israel must respect the Lord more than the might of the Philistines. Although the Philistines with their military prowess could kill thirty thousand Israelites ([4:10](#)), God in his holiness could kill more than fifty thousand. For Israel, life could be found only in a fear of Yahweh that issued forth in obedience to his Torah and his prophet.

In responding to the judgments inflicted on them by the Lord, the Beth Shemeshites behaved like the Philistines: instead of mourning penitently for their sins, they "mourned because of the heavy blow the Lord had dealt them" (v. [19](#); cf. [5:12](#)) and then came up with a plan to remove the ark from their territory (cf. [5:8–9](#); [6:2](#)). Thus they demonstrated the magnitude of their spiritual darkness and so confirmed the Lord's righteous judgments against them.

The Beth Shemeshites summoned the citizens of Kiriath Jearim (also called Baalah [[Josh 15:9](#)] and Kiriath Baal [[Josh 15:60](#)]; modern Abu Ghosh), a Gibeonite city some fifteen miles to the east, to "come down and take" the ark "up to your place" ([1 Sam 6:21](#)).

[7:1](#) Accepting the offer, “the men of Kiriath Jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord.” There is not a little irony in the fact that the ark of the Lord, which had so recently executed the Philistines’ most powerful god, scourged Philistia with deadly plagues, and slain more than fifty thousand Israelites was provided such protection.

No genealogical information regarding Abinadab of Kiriath Jearim or Eleazar his son is provided in the Bible; however, Eleazar is a common priestly name in the Old Testament (cf. [Exod 6:23](#); [1 Chr 9:20](#); [23:21](#); [Ezra 8:33](#)) and it is possible both men were members of the Levitical tribe.

The fact that the ark was taken to Kiriath Jearim and not back to Shiloh suggests strongly that the Shiloh worship center had been destroyed by the Philistines the previous fall. No explanation is given for the choice of Kiriath Jearim as the new abode for the ark, but it may be attributable to the city’s prominence as a traditional religious center (cf. its former name, “Kiriath Baal” = “Baalville”). Some scholars, citing differences in vocabulary and noting that Samuel played a key role in the narratives of chaps. [1–3](#) but is completely absent from the following three chapters, have concluded that [4:1b–7:1](#) was from an originally independent source later inserted into 1 Samuel. However, vocabulary changes are to be expected with a change in topic, and Samuel’s absence from this section of text can best be explained as the writer’s attempt to demonstrate that Israel—with the exception of Samuel—from high priest to Kohathite to ordinary citizen, was spiritually more culpable than the Philistines. Though the Philistines would suffer for their ignorance of the Lord and his Torah, the Israelites would suffer worse for their failure to act in accordance with the spiritual enlightenment that was theirs.

(3) The Lord Rout the Philistines’ Army [7:2–17](#)

This section contrasts the juridical ministry of Samuel with that of the house of Eli. Hophni and Phinehas had sought to bring victory to Israel by bringing the Lord’s ark against the Philistines. Samuel brought victory to Israel by bringing Israel back to the Lord.

In chronicling the events of this section, the narrator is careful to indicate that mighty deliverance from the Philistines came about only after Israel repented and turned wholeheartedly back to God. The movement of Israel’s heart, not Yahweh’s ark, brought about true freedom from Israel’s oppressors.

[7:2–4](#) Twenty silent years separate [7:1](#) from [7:2](#). During that time the Israelites experienced a change of heart. Instead of mourning “because of the heavy blow the Lord had dealt them” ([6:19](#)), they now “mourned and sought after the Lord” (v. [2](#)). Noting Israel’s godly sorrow (cf. [2 Cor 7:10](#)), Samuel seized the opportunity to lead Israel in a spiritual cleansing reminiscent of those instituted by great leaders in the past. He used language recalling that of Jacob (cf. [Gen 35:2](#)) and Joshua ([Josh 24:14, 23](#)) to summon the people to “rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths” (v. [3](#)). Samuel’s separation of Ashtoreths from “foreign gods” may have been for either of two purposes: (1) to indicate that Israel was to rid itself entirely of all the gods, male and female alike, of the fertility religions or (2) to suggest that Israel had two separate tasks to perform in its spiritual purgation. In the second case these two tasks would have been to get rid of all pagan forms of idolatry and to purify the worship of Yahweh by ending the practice of giving Yahweh a divine consort.

But purging the land of the foreign gods and religious practices was only the negative side of Israel’s spiritual renewal. A positive action also was needed. The Israelites had to “commit” themselves (lit., “establish your hearts”) “to the Lord and serve him only.” As they got rid of their idols and embraced the Lord wholeheartedly, they could expect the Torah-promised benefits of a right relationship with the Lord, one of which was victory over enemies (cf. [Lev 26:7–8](#); [Deut 28:7](#)).

The Israelites accepted Samuel's spiritual challenge: they "put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, the Canaanite male and female deities, and served the Lord only" (v. 4). To formalize Israel's renewed relationship with Yahweh, Samuel called all the people to assemble "at Mizpah" (v. 5; modern Tell en-Nasbeh [?], five miles north of Jerusalem), a center for tribal convocations during the period of the Judges (cf. [Judg 20:1](#)), for a time of intercessory prayer, fasting, and confession of sin. When Israel "drew water and poured it out before the Lord" (v. 6), an action unparalleled in the Old Testament in an Israelite religious convocation, they evidently were denying themselves liquids as a symbolic confession that the Lord's favor was more important to them than life-sustaining water (cf. [Jonah 3:7](#); [2 Sam 23:16](#)).

For the first time in the Book of 1 Samuel, Samuel is portrayed acting as a "leader" (Hb. *šp̄t*; trad. to act as a judge). Thus at Mizpah began the ministry of Israel's most venerable judge/prophet since Moses. In his role as judge, Samuel's task was to bring Israelite society into conformity with the Lord's judgments and to mobilize the covenant people in the task of bringing God's judgments to bear on his enemies. Gordon draws parallels between Samuel's activities at Mizpah and those of Moses in [Exodus 17–18](#).

[7:7–8](#) When "Israel had assembled at Mizpah" (v. 7) for national recommitment to the Lord, word reached the Philistines. In all likelihood the Philistines had forbidden the Israelites to hold public assemblies since such meetings could easily be used to mobilize the tribes for war. Thus "the rulers of the Philistines" dispatched a large military force to Mizpah "to attack them." Fear gripped the Israelites when they learned that an attack by their adversaries was imminent.

In language reflecting descriptions of Israel's previous revivals during the days of the Judges, the Israelites urged Samuel to continue "crying out" (v. 8; cf. [Judg 3:9, 15](#); [6:6–7](#); [10:10](#)) to the Lord so that he would "rescue" (cf. [Judg 2:16, 18](#), etc.) them. The people's appeal to Samuel to intercede before the Lord on their behalf probably was motivated by their knowledge that he was a prophet in addition to being a judge. Previously in Israelite history only Moses the prophet-judge was asked by the Israelites during a time of national emergency (cf. [Num 21:7](#)).

[7:9–11](#) This section stands as the actional peak of the deliverance narrative. It is marked as such through its restatement of the key events, with narrative expansion. Samuel's appeal to the Lord included a blood sacrifice of a "suckling lamb" as a "whole burnt offering to the Lord" (v. 9, restatement in v. 10)—an undertaking usually carried out by an Aaronic priest—and a wholehearted prayer "to the Lord on Israel's behalf." In response to Samuel's prayer, "the Lord answered him" audibly, responding "with loud thunder against the Philistines" (restatement in v. 10; cf. [John 12:29](#)). In so doing Yahweh was acting in accordance with Hannah's prophetic prayer ([2:10](#)).

Because the peoples of the ancient Near East believed that every military combat involved a conflict being played out on two planes, the human (terrestrial) and the divine (atmospheric), any unusual meteorological phenomenon during a military operation would naturally be interpreted as evidence of a deity at work (cf. [Josh 10:11](#); [Judg 5:4, 20–21](#)). The loud, unexpected thunder was immediately understood by the Philistines as a bad omen, and it "threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites." Emboldened by their enemies' flight, the newly rededicated soldiers of the Lord "rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to Beth Car" (v. 11), a village of unknown location probably west of Mizpah.

[7:12](#) The victory was a significant one for Israel, and Samuel helped to memorialize it by erecting a stone monument “between Mizpah and Shen,” apparently at the point to which the Philistines had been driven back. The phrase “Thus far” can be taken either spatially (= “as far as this spot”) or temporally (= “all along”). The location of Shen (Hb. *haššēn* = “The Tooth”; LXX, Syriac “Jeshanah”) is unknown, but the Hebrew name implies that it was a jagged rock outcropping rather than a settlement.

Samuel named the newly erected stone monument “Ebenezer” (Hb. *’eben hā’āzer*, “The Stone of [the] Help” or “The Help[er] Is a Stone”) because “the Lord helped us.” The name given the memorial undoubtedly is a confession of faith and trust in the Lord. In the Torah the Lord is poetically referred as the “Stone of Israel” ([Gen 49:24](#)), an obvious reference to his strength exercised in Israel’s behalf; in the Psalms the Lord is frequently praised as a Helper (cf. [Pss 10:14](#); [33:20](#); [40:17](#); [46:1](#); [63:7](#); [115:9–11](#); [118:7](#); [146:5](#)). Thus whether Samuel was confessing that Israel’s strong God is also a source of help for his people or that Israel’s assistance-giving God is strong, the name affirms two of the Lord’s virtues. The phrase “Here I raise mine Ebenezer,” found in the popular hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” alludes to this passage.

Uncertainty exists whether the Ebenezer mentioned in [4:1b](#) is an anachronistic reference to the site where Samuel’s monument was erected or whether there are two different geographic locations named “Ebenezer.” In either case, the writer seems to be drawing deliberate contrasts between the narratives of chaps. [4–6](#) and [7:3–13](#). All that was lost through sin in the first Ebenezer event was restored through repentance in the second.

[7:13–17](#) Verse [13](#) summarizes Samuel’s career as leader/judge, characterizing it as one that effectively brought the Lord’s judgments to bear against the Philistines. Furthermore, under Samuel’s administration portions of the Promised Land “from Ekron to Gath” (v. [14](#)) were brought back under Israelite control, an area whose control was contested by the Philistines earlier in the history of Israel (cf. [Josh 13:1–2](#)). Israel’s success against the Philistines during the days of Samuel’s leadership was a demonstration of their conformity to the Torah (cf. [Judg 3:3–4](#)), even as their losses to the Philistines under Eli (cf. [1 Sam 4:10](#)) and Saul (cf. [31:1](#)) were the result of breaches of divine law. Since Ekron and Gath were the two easternmost cities of the Philistine pentapolis and thus the ones closest to Israel’s border, it is to be expected that these cities would be hit hardest by an Israelite resurgence.

One of the dividends resulting from Israel’s successes against the Philistines was “peace between Israel and the Amorites.” Having defeated the dominant regional power, Israel had for now become the force to be reckoned with. Rather than challenging the Israelites militarily, Canaanite remnants in the area (cf. [Judg 1:18](#), [34–35](#)) apparently found it preferable to pursue peace.

Samuel continued faithfully in his role as leader/judge over Israel “all the days of his life” (v. [15](#)), apparently even after Saul had become king. Samuel, who is described by the narrator as one who acted as “judge” (Hb. *šp̄t*) more times than anyone else in the Bible (four times: [7:6](#), [15](#), [16](#), [17](#)), is portrayed as the ideal leader who faithfully dispensed justice among the Lord’s people. His career was an itinerant one, as he annually traveled to four cities in the tribal areas of Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh to dispense justice. These cities were Ramah (cf. [1:1](#)), his home now that his ties with Shiloh were broken; Bethel (modern Tell Beitin, six miles north of Ramah); Gilgal, a city in the vicinity of Jericho (cf. [Josh 5:9](#)); and Mizpah (modern Tell en-Nasbeh [?], three miles north of Ramah). Both Mizpah and Bethel were cities that had functioned as gathering places for the entire nation during the period of the Judges (cf. [Judg 20:1](#), [18](#), [26](#); [21:1–2](#)); Gilgal had been a national religious shrine since the days of Joshua (cf. [Josh 5:2–10](#)) and perhaps an early administrative center as well (cf. [Josh 14:6](#)). The LXX suggests that Samuel conducted his tasks in “sanctuaries” within these cities.

Samuel enhanced the religious significance of his hometown Ramah by building “an altar there to the Lord” (v. 17). Since the Torah prohibited the offering of sacrifices at local sites (cf. [Deut 12:13–14](#)), Samuel’s construction of such a site implies strongly that Shiloh had been destroyed.

The limited geographic scope of Samuel’s activities implies that his primary area of influence was in the tribal domains of Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh. However, Samuel also had a national reputation and sphere of influence. For “all Israel” he (1) was a prophet ([3:20](#); [4:1](#)); (2) led in repentance and recommitment to the Lord ([7:3](#), [5](#)); (3) was recognized as a judge ([8:4](#)); (4) had the influence to select Israel’s first king ([10:17–25](#)); and (5) was mourned when he died ([25:1](#)).

Map: Land of Samuel

