

FIRST SAMUEL

Chapter 6

The Ark Returned to Israel

The ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months. 2 And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place." 3 They said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand does not turn away from you." 4 And they said, "What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?" They answered, "Five golden tumors and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. 5 So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land. 6 Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had dealt severely with them, did they not send the people away, and they departed? 7 Now then, take and prepare a new cart and two milk cows on which there has never come a yoke, and yoke the cows to the cart, but take their calves home, away from them. 8 And take the ark of the LORD and place it on the cart and put in a box at its side the figures of gold, which you are returning to him as a guilt offering. Then send it off and let it go its way 9 and watch. If it goes up on the way to its own land, to Beth-shemesh, then it is he who has done us this great harm, but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that struck us; it happened to us by coincidence." 10 The men did so, and took two milk cows and yoked them to the cart and shut up their calves at home. 11 And they put the ark of the LORD on the cart and the box with the golden mice and the images of their tumors. 12 And the cows went straight in the direction of Beth-shemesh along one highway, lowing as they went. They turned neither to the right nor to the left, and the lords of the Philistines went after them as far as the border of Beth-shemesh. 13 Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it. 14 The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there. A great stone was there. And they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. 15 And the Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the box that was beside it, in which were the golden figures, and set them upon the great stone. And the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the LORD. 16 And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron. 17 These are the golden tumors that the Philistines returned as a guilt offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron, 18 and the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and unwalled villages. The great stone beside which they set down the ark of the LORD is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh. 19 And he struck some of the men of Beth-shemesh, because they looked upon the ark of the LORD. He struck seventy men of them, and the people mourned because the LORD had struck the people with a great blow. 20 Then the men of Beth-shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?" 21 So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and take it up to you."

6:1 *seven months*. Indicating that the ark had completed its stay in Philistine territory. (TLSB)

6:2 *priests and ... diviners*. The experts on religious matters (priests) and the discerners of hidden knowledge by interpretation of omens (diviners) were consulted (see Dt 18:10; Isa 2:6; Eze 21:21). (CSB)

6:3–5 The Philistine priests and diviners spell out the nature of a suggested guilt offering in terms of “sympathetic magic,” with the departure of the golden statues intended to remove the rats and plagues from their cities. This was not the same guilt offering instituted by God, which was intended for atonement of unintentional sin and cleansing from defilement. (TLSB)

6:3 *guilt offering.* The priests and diviners suggest returning the ark with a gift, signifying recognition of guilt in taking the ark from Israel and compensation for this violation of the Lord’s honor (see v. 5). For the guilt offering in Israel see Lev 5:14–6:7. (CSB)

6:4 *Five gold tumors.* Corresponding to the symptoms of the plague (see 5:6). (CSB)

five gold rats. The disease was accompanied by a plague of rats (v. 5). The Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint) includes this information earlier in the narrative. It is likely that the rats were carriers of the disease, which may have been a form of the plague. (CSB)

6:5 *Make images ... give glory to the God of Israel.* The golden models were an acknowledgment that the disease and the rats were a judgment from the hand of the God of Israel (see note on v. 3). (CSB)

6:6 *the Egyptians and Pharaoh.* The plagues that God inflicted on the Egyptians at the time of the exodus made a lasting impression on the surrounding nations (see 4:8; Jos 2:10). (CSB)

6:7 Divination based on the animals’ inexperience and instinct. (TLSB)

have never come a yoke. Have not been trained to pull a cart. (CSB)

Probably fresh, first-calf heifers never used for field labor; fit animals for sacrifice (cf Nu 19:1–10). (TLSB)

take their calves away. Normally cows do not willingly leave their suckling calves. (CSB)

The cows will not hear or see their calves, prompting the cows to wander in search of them. The cows would then draw the offering away without human guidance. It would be miraculous if two panicky inexperienced animals drew the cart effectively, more so if they drew the ark back to Israel where it belonged. (TLSB)

6:9 *watch.* Priests and diviners were trying to determine whether the affliction they had experienced (ch 5) was the Lord’s hand against them or coincidence. (TLSB)

Beth Shemesh. A town near the Philistine border, belonging to Judah (see Jos 15:10). Its name means “house (or sanctuary) of the sun(-god).” (CSB)

Beth-shemesh. C 15 mi W of Jerusalem. Archaeological evidence shows that Canaanite and Philistine cultures influenced the settlement. The city grew in importance under Israelite rule. (TLSB)

6:12 *went straight.* Hbr emphasizes how effectively and directly the inexperienced cows drew the cart. The diviners would see this as clear evidence that Israel’s God was involved. (TLSB)

lowing as they went. Calling their calves. Typical search behavior. (TLSB)

6:13 *reaping their wheat.* The time of wheat harvest is from mid-April until mid-June. (CSB)

6:14–15 The termination of the trip at Beth Shemesh is just as much a revelation of the hand of God as the journey itself, because it was one of the towns of Judah assigned to the priests at the time of the conquest (see Jos 21:13–16). (CSB)

6:14–15 Shiloh had been desecrated through the actions of Eli’s sons and was no longer a fit place for sacrifice. Because God provided access to His gracious presence through the ark, the Israelites saw fit to offer sacrifice before it. This right use of the ark contrasts with the improper use to which it was put in 4:1–11. (TLSB)

6:14 *stone*. An impromptu altar. (TLSB)

6:17 *guilt offering*. Although Gaza and Ashkelon are not in the list of places affected by the ark (5:6–12), they were two of the five chief cities of the Philistines. The naming of all five cities conveys the message of the Lord’s complete victory over the Philistines. The list also sounds like an inventory. (TLSB)

6:18 *both*. All Philistia. (TLSB)

fortified cities. Typical for larger, older settlements because raids were common. (TLSB)

unwalled villages. Newer or smaller settlements. (TLSB)

witness. A kind of monument to the event. (CSB)

this day. The time of the writing of 1,2 Samuel (see Introduction: Literary Features, Authorship and Date). (CSB)

The author had firsthand knowledge of the place. (TLSB)

6:19 *seventy*. The additional 50,000 in most Hebrew manuscripts is apparently a copyist’s mistake because it is added in an ungrammatical way (no conjunction). Furthermore, this small town could not have contained that many inhabitants. (CSB)

looked upon the ark. The men of Beth Shemesh (Levites and priests among them) were judged by God for their irreverent curiosity. Because God had so closely linked the manifestation of his own presence among his people with the ark, it was to be treated with great honor and respect (see 2Sa 6:7; Nu 4:17–20). This attitude of respect, however, is quite different from the superstitious attitude that led the elders to take the ark into battle against the Philistines, thus treating it as an object with magical power. (CSB)

Or, “looked into.” Text suggests that the men were struck by the Lord because they treated what was holy with irreverence. The men were not consecrated for service with the ark. (TLSB)

6:20 *To whom shall he go up away from us?* The inhabitants of Beth Shemesh respond to God’s judgment in much the same way as the inhabitants of Ashdod, Gath and Ekron (see 5:8–10). (CSB)

I.e., the presence of God by means of the ark. The Lord let them know the priesthood was still needed, despite what He did to Eli’s house. (TLSB)

6:21 *Kiriath-jearim*. C 9 mi NE of Beth-shemesh. (TLSB)

take it up to you. Because of the desecration of Shiloh by Eli's sons, the ark could not return there. Cf Jer 7:9–15; Ps 78:60 for a prophetic comment on the desecration of Shiloh. It appears that Kiriath-jearim was a politically neutral city, already associated with worship, as Shiloh had been. (TLSB)