

‘WHY HAS YAHWEH DEFEATED US TODAY BEFORE THE PHILISTINES?’ THE QUESTION OF THE ARK NARRATIVE*

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Summary

This study attempts to use the tools of literary criticism to bring a fresh approach to bear on the impasse which affected earlier studies on the Ark Narrative. Boundaries are established to determine the beginning, middle and end of the narrative and then an attempt is made to read that story. What emerges is a narrative which is concerned to explain, from start to finish, why the Israelites were defeated by a Philistine army, and an attempt to bring a challenge to the nation to respond appropriately to its holy God.

I. Introduction and literature survey

In 1926 Leonard Rost published a proposal that the author of 2 Samuel had borrowed from an earlier story which related ‘the succession to the throne of David’ and inserted it, largely unaltered, into his own history. In the same study Rost also looked carefully at the chapters which precede the *Succession Narrative* and identified 2 Samuel 6 as part of an earlier work. This work was not concerned with how Solomon became king after David but with the fortunes of the Ark. Rost joined 2 Samuel 6 with 1 Samuel 4-6 allowing 2 Samuel 6 to form the conclusion and climax to a *cult legend* which ‘depicts the fate of the Ark from its removal from Shiloh until its installation in Jerusalem’, the *Ark Narrative* (AN).¹

It is a testimony to Rost’s scholarship that the thesis remained largely unchallenged until the mid 70s. Hertzberg’s commentary, for

* An earlier form of this paper was submitted to the Australian College of Theology for the degree of M.A. (October 1994).

¹ L. Rost, *The Succession to the Throne of David* (ET M.D. Rutter and D.M. Gunn; Sheffield: Almond, 1982), p. 9.

example, makes only minor emendations.² But in the mid 70s three significant monographs on the AN were published.

In 1973 Franz Schicklberger published his analysis of the AN. He followed a path outlined by Vriezen and Schunk who argued, on the basis of vocabulary and style, that 2 Samuel 6 should be considered as distinct and independent, *not* the conclusion of the Ark's story in 1 Samuel 4-6.³ Schicklberger went on further to argue that 1 Samuel 4 predated 1 Samuel 5 and 6. He saw the theology rehearsed in 1 Samuel 4 as different from that reflected in the later chapters of the AN. His conclusion was that 1 Samuel 4 had come from a different hand and was, in fact, an old and relatively complete 'catastrophe narrative'. It had been written in the aftermath of Israel's crushing defeat by the Philistines. 1 Samuel 5:1-6:16 were built up around the catastrophe narrative to focus on the Ark which had been lost in the defeat, showing how it eventually returned to Israelite hands. The larger narrative 1 Samuel 4-6 was no cult legend. It had a cultic function, but not as a history. It was a biting polemic, written to counter an exaggerated Zion theology,⁴ and to combat the growing plague-god cult, which honoured Nergal Resheph, imported from Assyria during Hezekiah's time.

Two years later Antony Campbell's thesis was published. If Schicklberger's was a departure from Rost's pioneering work, Campbell's was a return to it. In a paper which came out a couple of years after his monograph Campbell picks up Schicklberger's 'extensive considerations' about the proper end of the narrative and counters each in turn. He finally appeals to the logic of the narrative which fails unless the last few verses of 1 Samuel 6 and 2 Samuel 6 are allowed to complete the action begun in 1 Samuel 4. Campbell saw all four chapters as a complete self-contained and independent

² One minor emendation is to view 6:5-9 as part of the ancient *hieros logos* rather than a later addition (H.W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* [OTL; ET J.S. Bowden; London: SCM, 1964], pp. 45-61; cf. Rost, *Succession*, p. 12).

³ A.F. Campbell, *The Ark Narrative, 1 Sam 4-6, 2 Sam 6: A Form-critical and Traditio-historical Study* (SBLDS 16; Missoula: SBL and Scholars, 1975), pp. 42-43.

⁴ Sennacherib's hasty retreat from Jerusalem had bolstered Zion theology. The AN was written to undermine that and to insist that it was Yahweh's nearness, especially through the Ark, which had saved the day; cf. R.P. Gordon, *I & 2 Samuel* (OTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1984), p. 31 and P.D. Miller, Jr. and J.J.M. Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord: A Reassessment of the 'Ark Narrative' of 1 Samuel* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins, 1977), pp. 1-6.

unit.⁵ He maintained a 10th century setting for the document but moved away from Rost's description of it as a cult legend. He demonstrated, instead, that it is a theological treatise which depicts the passing of one era and legitimates the new order centred in Jerusalem.⁶

Miller and Roberts together produced the third monograph. Again it represented a departure from Rost. They developed the suggestion made years earlier by Aage Bentzen that the AN could only be properly understood in the light of comparative material from the Ancient Near East.⁷ M. Delcor suggested certain fruitful leads in this area, but it was left to Miller and Roberts to produce anything like a thorough-going investigation.⁸ They side with Schicklberger over the status of 2 Samuel 6. Without it the narrative cannot legitimate a new order, the monarchy ruling from Jerusalem, so the emphasis is seen as the passing of the old order. More than that, the narrative deals with the judgement on the house of Eli because of its corruption.⁹ Thus Miller and Roberts follow Wilhelm Caspari and Richard Press in seeing certain verses in 1 Samuel 2 as necessary to introduce the narrative.¹⁰ The (extended) narrative is, clearly, more than the judgement upon the Elides, which is dealt with by the end of 1 Samuel 4. Miller and Roberts survey the comparative material and suggest that 1 Samuel 5 and 6 continue the story of the Ark's, more properly Yahweh's, fortunes and are a theodicy accounting for the Ark's 'loss' to and return by the Philistines. The treatise shows Yahweh's supremacy over the Philistine god.¹¹

These three studies all have a strong source-critical and form-critical bias. Their appearance coincided with the emergence of a new approach which was fast becoming 'the new orthodoxy in biblical studies'.¹² Historical critical studies were seen to have produced

⁵ Campbell even restored those verses which Rost had excised on various grounds so that within the canonical 1 Sa. 4:1b-7:1 and 2 Sa. 6:2-23 only 1 Sa. 4:18b and 6:5 were excluded as secondary additions; cf. Campbell, *AN*, pp. 165-78 and Rost, *Succession*, pp. 10-13.

⁶ Campbell, *AN*, pp. 193-210.

⁷ A. Bentzen, 'The Cultic Use of the Story of the Ark in Samuel', *JBL* 67 (1948), 37-53.

⁸ M. Delcor, 'Yahweh et Dagon', *VT* 14 (1964), 138-40.

⁹ Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, p. 69.

¹⁰ Rost, *Succession*, p. xlv; Campbell, *AN*, pp. 49-50. For Miller and Roberts the AN includes 1 Sa. 2:12-17, 22-25, 27-36 as well as 1 Sa. 4:1b-7:1.

¹¹ Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, p. 73.

¹² D.M. Gunn, 'New Directions in the Study of Biblical Hebrew Narrative', *JSOT* 39 (1987), 65. See also P.R. House, 'The Rise and Current Status of

something of a stalemate in biblical studies. This is reflected, to some extent, in our own survey of AN studies. In his rejoinder to Schicklberger and Miller/Roberts, Campbell has rightly noted that the perceived boundaries of the text are governed by the reader's understanding of its theological intention.¹³ Perhaps the new literary criticisms would provide a way around the impasse.

With canon criticism and the newer forms of literary criticisms there has been an emphasis on the final form—not the final form of any source document, so far as it is recoverable, but on the final form of the work as a whole. John Willis's paper is a good example. He examines the AN (1 Sa. 4-6) but does so within the context of 1 Samuel 1-7. He highlights the uniformity of the seven chapters. He suggests that 1 Samuel 4:1b-7:1 is an integral part of 1 Samuel 1-7, the second of three sections in a continuous narrative.¹⁴ Others have included more or all of 1 Samuel in their close or literary readings and studies,¹⁵ but since meaning is a function of context none have resolved the question of what the AN is concerned to say, although all but Willis assume that there was such a document.¹⁶ This paper sets out to provide an answer.

Literary Criticism of the Old Testament' in P.R. House, ed., *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992), pp. 3-23.

¹³ A.F. Campbell, 'Yahweh and the Ark: A Case Study in Narrative', *JBL* 98 (1979), 33.

¹⁴ J.T. Willis, 'An Anti-Elide Narrative Tradition from a Prophetic Circle at the Ramah Sanctuary', *JBL* 90 (1971), 298, 306.

¹⁵ Lyle Eslinger's close reading of 1 Sa. 1-12 was published in 1985 and was a deliberate attempt to re-evaluate 1 Sa. 1-12, and particularly 8-12, using strategies developed by the new (literary) criticisms; L.M. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1-12* (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), p. 40. The following year Peter Miscall gave us his own 'literary reading' of 1 Sa., claiming to have made it in a decisive departure from and challenge to historical criticism; P.D. Miscall, *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading* (Bloomington: IUP, 1986), p. vii. More recently, Jan Fokkelman has produced his own 'full interpretation based on stylistic and structural analyses' of 1 Sa. 1 to 1 Ki. 2, the fourth volume of which deals with 1 Sa. 1-12; J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, IV: Vow and Desire* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993).

¹⁶ Willis's arguments for uniformity and integrity, together with his suggested *Sitz im Leben*, rule out the possibility, *a priori*, of an earlier independent existence for his second section. Fokkelman is dubious about there being a separate precanonical AN but his argument is that *for the purposes of understanding 1 Sa. 1 to 1 Ki. 2* (and 1 Sa. 1-12 in particular) there is no value in asserting that certain chapters have come from an earlier source. He sees the chapters as being so fully integrated and embedded into their present context that they are not meant to be understood now apart from that context (*Narrative Art*, pp. 190-295). Eslinger is not concerned with the issue of

This paper assumes that there was indeed an AN which had an independent existence before being incorporated into a larger work now called 1 Samuel. The paper further assumes that it is worthwhile determining what that document might have been saying but recognises that the only access that we have to it is as it has been transmitted to us as an integral part of another document.

We shall argue that the likely extent of the AN is 1 Samuel 4:1b-7:1. We shall assume that if these verses form a coherent whole then we need not extend the narrative's boundaries to encompass any more material. However, in our view, that coherence must have come from within the narrational boundaries, from the material itself, rather than from the broader context in which we have received it.

II. Narrative boundaries

All authors have recognised that 1 Samuel 4:5-9 and most of 5:1-6:16 are part of the AN. This, then, is our starting point. The first question we must address is whether we should include any earlier material. When Schicklberger proposed that the above constituted the ancient story about the Ark's wanderings, he did so on the assumption that it was immediately appended to the remaining verses of chapter 4, which he dubbed a 'catastrophe story'. But, in doing so, he had to propose a new genre which is otherwise unknown. Why should anyone even *want* to cherish a 'disaster story' which consists only of the disaster itself (no dashing feats of heroism, no hint of resolution...)? Furthermore, 4:5-9 seem an unlikely exposition of, or introduction to 1 Samuel 5:1ff.; there should surely be at least a cursory note of the battle, mentioning the capture of the Ark.

We shall extend the boundaries of our precanonical narrative at least to 4:1b-6:16, but should we, with Miller and Roberts, look into chapter 2 for the beginning of the narrative? Miller and Roberts argue that their selections from chapter 2 are absolutely necessary for understanding the rest of the story. They claim that they not only introduce the main characters from chapter 4 (Eli, Hophni and

sources, only concerned to render a close reading of the first twelve chapters, which themselves make up a discrete sub-unit of 1 Samuel (*Kingship*, pp. 50-53). Miscall, *1 Samuel*, and R. Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part Two: 1 Samuel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), on the other hand, presuppose the existence of a previous AN.

Phinehas) but explain why Israel was defeated.¹⁷ In the AN that they propose, the deaths of Eli and his sons are God's judgement on the corrupt Elide house. Yet there is nothing in chapter 4 itself which *necessarily* demands this verdict. In chapter 4 father and sons are portrayed neutrally.¹⁸ If anything, Eli is painted positively as a judge of forty years' standing and as one who fears for the Ark/Yahweh even more than for his own sons. He may have lost his sight and be somewhat out of condition but his great age is presented as sufficient to explain that.¹⁹ As for their argument that the verses are necessary to introduce the main characters, we note that only Eli is fully characterised. In chapter 4 we see him as father and judge of Israel; we know something of his appearance as well as of his disposition—perhaps gentle (v. 16), certainly pious (v. 13). But Eli is no better introduced by attaching 2:12-17, 22-25, 27-36 to chapter 4 than he is by leaving them off. The same can be said for Hophni and Phinehas. In short, 4:1b may be abrupt but it is a satisfactory beginning for the document. We now turn our attention to its ending.

We cannot agree with Schicklberger that the AN ends at 6:16. Whilst it is true that the Ark has been returned to Israel by this point and the note of the Philistine lords' return signals their satisfaction with the test which the Philistine 'divines' proposed, 6:16 has not yet effected a complete closure. Whilst the reader may have been privileged to have seen the events which occurred in Philistine territory and then to have followed the Ark as it made its way to Beth-shemesh, within the narrative world the Israelites are still ignorant of these things and so of the answer to their burning question '*Why has Yahweh defeated us today before the Philistines?*' (4:3).

Campbell argues that 6:17-7:1 and 2 Samuel 6 are needed to complete the 'inner logic' of the AN. But Campbell is looking for a story of the Ark's restoration and return, a story which can only end when the Davidic monarchy is firmly established, with divine

¹⁷ Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, p. 62.

¹⁸ If Miller and Roberts see the 34,000 as innocently caught up in the judgement of Elide sin, we might just as well, and more economically, see Eli, Hophni and Phinehas as innocently caught up in Israel's sin.

¹⁹ If verses from 1 Sa. 2 were a part of the AN, we would expect that some negative nuances should have been carried over into chapter 4. It is not sufficient to suggest that these are to be understood from the larger previous chapter and to be imported into our understanding of this text.

backing, in Jerusalem and this will only come with 2 Samuel 6.²⁰ But if the AN tells a different story, then we may be justified in recognising a different ending.

Before Rost, Wellhausen had argued that although 2 Samuel 6 was similar in content to 1 Samuel 4-6, it was nevertheless from a different source.²¹ Campbell fails to deal adequately with the difficulties of maintaining 2 Samuel 6 as the conclusion for the original AN. Kiriath-jearim undergoes a name change to Baale-judah in what would be successive verses for the ANs proposed by Rost and Campbell. Campbell's solution is to read Baale-judah as two separate words meaning 'citizens of Judah' but there are no parallels to this use of בָּעַל in the OT. 'Citizens' is invariably found in construct with the name of a city and not with a tribe or tribal territory. He is also forced to repoint יִרְיָס, but this is also not without problems.²² He suggests that 1 Samuel 7:1 is too abrupt an ending, that it lacks the sense of a proper closure. But we will contend that whilst it *is* abrupt, it is, at the same time, an appropriate and an effective ending.²³

III. The story (1 Samuel 4:1b-7:1)

The AN makes up 1 Samuel 4:1b-7:1. It is composed of three sections which correspond to the chapter divisions. Miller and Roberts have recognised the importance to the narrative of the 'hand of Yahweh', which they call 'the key to what the narrative is really about'.²⁴ We shall argue, however, that power is of secondary importance and serves a more important theme, that of glory or better, holiness. The dominant issue in the AN is holiness. It is the story of a holy God who requires that his people be holy.

1. Section 1 (4:1-22)

Chapter 4 falls into two roughly balanced halves. The first (vv. 1b-11), details two encounters between Israelite and Philistine forces.

²⁰ Campbell, *AN*, p. 201. Similarly Rost needed his cult legend to end on more of a triumphant note than its lodging at Kiriath-jearim (Rost, *Succession*, pp. 9, 26-29).

²¹ Rost, *Succession*, p. xxv.

²² Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 33.

²³ On the question of ends see W.B. Crouch, 'To Question an End, to End a Question: Opening the Closure of the Book of Jonah', *JSOT* 62 (1994), 101-112.

²⁴ Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, pp. 49 and 56-58.

The second (vv. 12-22), shows the effect that Israel's second and more devastating defeat had on the nation.

(1.1) *Part 1 (4:1b-11)*. The scene begins with a short battle report.²⁵ We hear first of Israel's going out to meet the Philistines, then of the Philistines' setting out to meet the Israelites. The two sides are, perhaps, presented as more or less evenly matched. But when the sides do meet and the battle spreads, it is Israel which suffers all the casualties.

The narrativial use of the niphal verb וַיִּנָּחֵם and the preposition לְפָנֵי together hint that the Philistines themselves might not have been *entirely* responsible for the defeat. The narrator therefore anticipates the question of the Israelite elders as they ask, 'Why has Yahweh defeated us (*Qal*) before (לְפָנֵי) the Philistines?'²⁶ This is the first time that we hear anybody speak in the narrative, and what we hear is their response to a bitter defeat which has left 4,000 men dead on the battlefield. It is a significant moment in the development of the story and, whether or not the elders were looking for an answer to their question, the narrative will supply one. The question, then, 'sets up' the story which follows. It introduces the 'quest' with which the story is concerned.

Within the story, the elders provide their own solution to the problem. They decide that the Ark of the covenant be brought from Shiloh. There is something about the Ark's presence that will, in their view, secure victory for them over their enemies in the next round of battle which they anticipate. McCarter supposes that the elders' intention was 'to involve Yahweh directly in the hostilities'.²⁷ It is true that this is how the Philistines perceive their solution (v. 7), but the elders know that Yahweh has already been involved in the

²⁵ The LXX preserves a longer introduction as well as a note about the Philistines, both of which are said, by some, to have dropped out of the text by haplography. On one level, there seems little to choose between the two; to accept the longer LXX reading would be to lay the 'blame' for opening hostilities strongly within the Philistine camp. This illustrates the fact that to make any emendation is a serious matter. When the interpreter proposes a pre-text, an emended text, he ceases to interpret 'the text' but becomes the author of another, his own text.

²⁶ Against Miscal and Fokkelman. Fokkelman argues that the narrator does not back the elders' understanding of the Israelite defeat. Whether or not he endorses the manner in which they ask the question, the significance of the question to the narrative, as well as earlier hints from v. 2, suggest strongly that Fokkelman is wrong here (Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, p. 201; Miscal, *1 Samuel*, p. 27).

²⁷ P.K. McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (AB 8; New York: Doubleday, 1980), p. 109.

fighting, indeed, it was he who was responsible for their (initial) defeat. What the Ark *of the covenant* of Yahweh²⁸ will do is remind Yahweh of his covenant commitments to his people Israel and particularly of his responsibility to ensure *their* victory in holy war.

In verse 4 the narrator describes Israel's bringing the Ark into the camp but also offers a measure of interpretation. He describes it not simply as 'the Ark of the Covenant of Yahweh', which is what the people set out to collect, but as 'the Ark of the Covenant of Yahweh of hosts (צְבָאוֹת) who sits [above] the cherubim'. It is an early indicator of where we must look for the answer to the question '*Why has Yahweh defeated us today before the Philistines?*' Coming from the omniscient narrator, it is a trustworthy one. The answer has something to do with Yahweh, who is not *just* Israel's god. The expanded title for the Ark emphasises the majesty, power and authority of Yahweh, the heavenly king.²⁹ It is he who is being rudely reminded of his covenantal duties.

The Israelites' ignorance of the narrator's informed perspective is underlined by the reference to the Ark of the covenant of God/Yahweh (vv. 4c, 5) which comes into the camp.³⁰ They give a great shout (תְּרוּעָה גְדוֹלָה). The תְּרוּעָה is suggestive of holy war (particularly to the reader who has just been reminded that Yahweh is the Lord *of hosts*) and the suggestion is borne out by the earth's participating in the cry (v. 5c).³¹ Any doubts whether Israel would succeed second time around are swept away as we are taken to the Philistine camp and hear their anguish when they realise that Israel's god has joined them.³² That this is the same god who dealt

²⁸ Outside 4:3-5, the Ark's covenantal connection is not made explicit. The Ark is variously called 'the Ark of God (of Israel)' or 'the Ark of Yahweh'. What is being deliberately drawn out here, by referring to the Ark as 'the Ark of the covenant of Yahweh', is the covenant connection which will also be explored in vv. 4 and 5.

²⁹ R. de Vaux, 'Les cherubins et l'arche d'alliance, les sphinx gardiens et les trônes divins dans l'ancien orient' in R. de Vaux, *Bible et Orient* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1967), pp. 231-59, esp. 236-37.

³⁰ Without the benefit of the wider context of 1 Samuel, we should read 'Ark of the covenant of God' and 'Ark of the covenant of Yahweh' here, simply as stylistic variations. The former is perhaps chosen for v. 4c because of its greater dissimilarity to the expanded title v. 4b.

³¹ It is not too much to suggest that the earth was agitated (niphal תָּרַע), that there might be a slight shadow cast over Israel's confidence and enthusiasm. We have already seen that Israel's knowledge of their covenant partner is defective; they underestimate his holiness, which might be ominous if they are to be engaged in 'holy' war.

³² Some have seen in the use of אֱלֹהֵי in the Philistine comment (v. 7b) and their explanation (8b, c) an indictment against Israel's syncretism; cf. 7:3; e.g.

decisively with the Egyptians (v. 8c) keeps the holy war motif to the fore, and brings the impact of the crushing defeat home all the more powerfully (v. 10).

(1.2) *Part 2 (4:12-22)*. The second part shows us the effect that the news of the defeat had on Israel. We feel the impact of that news in the lives (and deaths) of two individuals. The passage shows us each in turn and so breaks down into two movements: the first concerning Eli (vv. 12-18) and the second his daughter-in-law (vv. 19-22).

Campbell treats the two units together on the basis of the pronominal suffix added to the word ‘daughter-in-law’ (נִשְׁתָּהּ). We should note, however, that the messenger is prominent in the first movement but is absent from the second. Furthermore, this second movement is not at all concerned with relaying the news; rather it portrays the expectant mother’s reaction to it. Having said that, the two movements are clearly linked.

(1.2a) *First movement (vv. 12-18)*. The first movement is concerned with bringing the bad news of Israel’s devastating defeat to Eli. Eli is watching to hear news of the battle’s outcome. Had he been able to see he would have known straight away from the condition of the messenger that the news was bad. Eli is blind and can only wait on his chair³³ and worry. Tension builds as we wait with Eli to hear from the messenger the news the whole city knows. Even though the Benjaminite hurries over to tell Eli (v. 14), for all his haste we have to wait almost until the end of the movement before we hear of the outcome from him (v. 17). When we do hear, we hear in quick succession of Israel’s fleeing from battle, the nation’s defeat, of the deaths of his two sons and finally, in climactic position,³⁴ of the Ark’s being taken.

Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, p. 205; Miscall, *1 Samuel*, p. 27. This might be a valid reading given a wider compass. But if we restrict our gaze to the AN then we cannot say that god (singular) is not intended, particularly as Dagon will be referred to as our אֱלֹהֵינוּ (5:7). The answer to the question ‘Why has Yahweh defeated us...?’ is not so easily given over.

³³ Spina follows Polzin and argues that Eli is depicted as a pseudo-king sitting on his throne (סֵדָה). The suggestion is strengthened by the otherwise unexplained reference to מִזְבֵּחַ (temple/palace) at 1:9. With the narrow limits of the AN we are safer to read סֵדָה simply as ‘seat’ and should not, therefore, take this passage as negatively nuanced against Eli; F.A. Spina, ‘Eli’s Seat: The Transition from Priest to Prophet in 1 Samuel 1-4’, *JSOT* 62 (1994), 67-75.

³⁴ אֲרֹן (and also) connects Israel’s flight and the slaughter of the people, and the slaughter of the people and the death of Eli’s sons Hophni and Phinehas, but is omitted before the final clause. This serves to set the final clause apart and to announce it as climactic.

For all the dead who lie on the fields at Ebenezer, including Eli's own boys, it is the capture of the Ark which is marked out as most significant for Israel. This is underlined by the note in verse 18 that it is at the mention of the Ark of God that heavy (כָּבֵד) Eli falls off his chair and dies. His fears for the Ark have been confirmed. The reason for Israel's defeat was *not* simply that Yahweh had forgotten his covenant responsibilities. The next section will introduce us to a key word and theme which will be developed to answer the question 'Why has Yahweh defeated us today before the Philistines?' The word is anticipated in the description of Eli as heavy (כָּבֵד): the word is 'glory' (כְּבוֹד).

(1.2b) *Second movement* (vv. 19-22). The expectant mother is not named. She is Eli's daughter-in-law and Phinehas's wife. The second movement begins with Eli (and Phinehas) still centre-stage. Our focus is then transferred from Eli and Phinehas (and his brother) to the woman. She is introduced into the narrative with reference to them but then they are mentioned with reference to her. Her father-in-law and husband are both dead. Our attention is moved from the male Elides to the woman, but as far as the narrative is concerned she is not important herself. She is only important inasmuch as she produces a child, a boy whom she names Ichabod.

At first we are not sure whether כְּבוֹד אֵל (Ichabod) refers to the Ark, the father-in-law, or the husband, or all three. But her dying words leave us in no doubt. Not only do they clear away any ambiguities, but as her *dying* words they are particularly noteworthy. The name is especially significant. The boy is called Ichabod for in the Ark of God's being taken away by the Philistines 'the *glory* has departed from Israel'.³⁵

Part 2 comes to a climax with the interpretative comment that the Ark's being taken away means that glory has departed from Israel. The nexus between departed glory and taken Ark needs now to be uncovered and will expose what glory has to do with our question (4:3b). At this stage it may appear that God has simply abandoned

³⁵ We agree with Klein, who suggests that the popular etymology of כְּבוֹד אֵל given in v. 22 is much more important (to the story) than any reconstructed one; R.W. Klein, *1 Samuel* (WBC 10; Waco: Word, 1983), p. 45. We prefer to translate גָּלוּת 'departed' even though it is the usual word for 'exiled' because to translate it 'exiled' would be to import too much theology to it. If the narrative could, without any shadow of doubt, be assigned to the exilic or post-exilic times, then we would be justified in translating it 'exiled'. But while there is any doubt we should remain with the theologically less loaded term. Against this see Klein, *1 Samuel*, p. 37 and McCarter, *1 Samuel*, p. 110.

his people; it may be that the covenant which bound him to them is no longer valid, or it may be that he has been defeated. The nexus is explored as the narrative progresses into Section 2.

2. Section 2 (5:1-12)

The verses of chapter 5 make up a single act though several movements may be detected. After the Ark's arrival at Dagon's temple, there is a movement out of the temple into the city and out of the city to Gaza and Ekron. We might divide the chapter according to its geography as we follow the Ark from Ashdod (vv. 1-8) east to Gath (vv. 9-10a) and north to Ekron (vv. 10b-12). But if Dagon heads the Philistine pantheon, as Delcor surmises,³⁶ then the chapter is better broken up into two movements, with the action in the Philistine Pentapolis (vv. 6-12) as the outworking of what has already happened in the temple (vv. 1-5).

(2.1) *Part 1 (5:1-5)*. The arrival of the Ark of the covenant in the Israelite camp presupposed a particular answer to 'Why has Yahweh defeated us...?' The narrator has already signalled that this was the wrong answer. Yahweh had *not* forgotten to honour his covenant commitments. The question, then, is still being asked by the reader and even more urgently now after the second, devastating defeat *and* the loss of the Ark, the departure of God's glory.

The arrival of the Ark in the Philistine camp represents the capture of a significant item of booty. The Philistine (chief) god who helped secure the victory over Israel and her god must be duly acknowledged.³⁷ Niphal verbs (4:11, 17, 19, 21, 22) give way to Qal (5:1, 2). The Philistines take the Ark of God³⁸ from Ebenezer to Ashdod (v. 1) and into Dagon's temple, where it is placed next to Dagon (v. 2). We have swung right around and now view events in a Philistine city, within a Philistine temple and even from a Philistine perspective (𐤓𐤕𐤕, v. 4a). From here Yahweh can acknowledge Dagon's superiority. How else can the Philistines have won so decisive a victory and taken so magnificent a trophy?

As well as a repository for the covenant documents, the Ark was always a symbol of Yahweh's presence amongst his people. In

³⁶ Delcor, 'Yahweh et Dagon', p. 147.

³⁷ Eslinger argues that the Philistines had decided to rely on their own human capabilities in the second battle (*Kingship*, pp. 171-73). But the placing of the Ark of Yahweh in Dagon's temple at his feet does not support this reading.

³⁸ This is how the Philistines perceive the Ark, not as a reminder of any covenant but as (the next best thing to) an image (Delcor, 'Yahweh et Dagon', p. 138).

response to the elders' suggestion, the Ark is brought to Ebenezer, but the subject of the verbs in 4:3e (יָבֹא, יַשִּׁיעֵנִי) is left unspecified. The subject might equally be the Ark or Yahweh. Indeed, we are *meant* to understand that what happens to the Ark happens to Yahweh. Similarly, when Dagon is mentioned in chapter 5 what actually happens, happens to his image. Yet we are meant to understand that what happens *really* happens to Dagon, the god. Image and Ark are brought together but the confrontation which takes place is between Dagon and Yahweh.³⁹

The Ark of God has been taken into the temple and is set beside (the image of) Dagon. Israel's god can be seen acknowledging Dagon. Yahweh had to honour victorious Dagon. But in the early morning it is Dagon who is found in a submissive position before Yahweh. The Ashdodites have to put Dagon back in his place but they are not at all sure that this will solve the problem. They rise even earlier the next morning⁴⁰ to find Dagon fallen on the ground before Yahweh. He is again acknowledging and honouring Yahweh. But there is more: Dagon has been dismembered. Once again a passive (כָּרְחַרְתָּ) indicates that Yahweh has been active behind the scenes. Dagon's head and the palms of his hands have been cut off. Dagon has been defeated.⁴¹ Yahweh has rightly and justly dispatched the usurper. As readers we have never been in any doubt about his pre-eminence. He is the one who sits enthroned above the cherubim (4:4). Nevertheless *within* the narrative the incident represents something of a turn around. Yahweh was evidently not defeated after all at Ebenezer.⁴²

The passage ends with a corroborative aside about current religious practices in Ashdod. Now Yahweh will follow up his destruction of Dagon by waging holy war on Dagon's people, the Philistines.

(2.2) *Part 2 (5:6-12)*. The Philistines had hoped to escape from the hand of Israel's mighty god (4:8). They now find that in their misunderstanding the nature of 'their' second victory at Ebenezer

³⁹ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, p. 254, against Campbell, who sees Yahweh's direct involvement commencing at v. 6.

⁴⁰ יַשְׁכְּמוּ מִקִּדְחָרְתָּ בַּבֶּקֶר is inserted in the text.

⁴¹ The severing of Dagon's hands may reflect the practice of mutilation which was commonly performed in the Ancient Near East; S.M. Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), p. 107; cf. *ANET*, pp. 234-38.

⁴² In retrospect we might even view the niphals in 4:11, 17, 19, 21, 22 as God's ordering events.

they have actually brought Yahweh's hands into their midst. As Dagon was punished, so the Philistines must be punished and punishment is, naturally, chosen to fit their crime. Yahweh will stretch out his hand against them. His hand will be severe or *heavy* (כָּבֵד) against them.

We follow the punishment as it affects three cities: Ashdod, where the temple was, Gath and Ekron, but we understand that the whole of the Pentapolis was affected.⁴³ The severity of the punishments⁴⁴ increases through the passage: tumours in Ashdod (vv. 6-8), extensive tumours and panic in Gath, which had volunteered to take on the Ark (vv. 9, 10a), and tumours on those who did not die and deathly panic in Ekron, which was 'volunteered' to take the Ark (vv. 10b-12). Some concerted action from the Philistines seems imperative before it is too late. Already the survivors in Ekron are calling out to heaven,⁴⁵ for though Yahweh's hand was heavy (וַיִּכְבֶּד, v. 6) it was very heavy (כָּבֵדָה מְאֹד, v. 11) against the Ekronites. The twice mentioned כָּבֵד frames the second part. Its other function within this passage is to remind us that Yahweh is defending his honour. He is waging holy war against the Philistines. The Philistines are no longer under any illusion. If there was any victory at Ebenezer, it was not one which was fought by them and won by Dagon. Dagon is destroyed. The Philistines are forced into an unconditional surrender. Yahweh has asserted his superiority in such a way as to prove that he was entirely responsible for the feint at Ebenezer.

כָּבֵד (5:6, 11) also functions within the narrative as a whole. It begins to open up the taken Ark/departed glory nexus introduced in 4:19-22. If glory (כְּבוֹד) has departed from Israel then it is felt in the Pentapolis as Yahweh's heavy (כָּבֵד) hand of punishment. Wherever (the Ark of) Yahweh has gone in the territory, he has brought punishments upon the inhabitants. The only way that the Philistines can escape his hand is to return 'the Ark of the god of Israel' to Israel (5:11b, c). But if Yahweh has not forgotten his covenant, and if it was he who engineered the outcome at Ebenezer, does that not mean that he has abandoned his people? Does he *want* to go back to Israel?

⁴³ 6:18. The details are most complete for Ashdod and we are supposed to fill in the details for the other cities; Campbell, *AN*, p. 96.

⁴⁴ See McCarter on עָפָל (Kethiv) and טָחַר (Qere) (*1 Samuel*, p. 123).

⁴⁵ Emending עֲרֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם to הַשָּׁמַיִם (v. 12c) with 4QSam^a, which suggests that the עַר after הָעִיר has been lost, perhaps through homoioteleuton.

3. Section 3 (6:1-7:1)

This section can be divided into two parts. The first chronicles the Ark's return to Israel (6:1-18). The second is only brief but contains the narrative's powerful climax (6:19-7:1). It shows how the Ark is to be received in Israel, and answers the elders' question (4:3b) that remains unanswered right up until the end.

(3.1) *Part 1 (6:1-18)*. The first part of chapter 6 effects the Ekronite imperative to 'send the Ark of Israel's god away: let it return to its own place' (5:11b, c). A plan must first be devised; this is the concern of the first movement (vv. 1-9). The plan is duly carried out in the second movement (vv. 10-16). A summary note at the end of the section (vv. 17, 18) completes and ends the Philistine involvement in the narrative and provides a lull, a breathing space for the dramatic climax (Part 2).

(3.1a) *First movement (vv. 1-9)*. The first verse introduces a temporal note which begins the third (and last) of the AN's sections. In it a reversal of fortunes is anticipated, as far as the Ark is concerned. The once prized booty is to be returned at the end of this section. All that we need are the details.

Verse 2 picks up the Ekronite decision (5:11b, c) to *send* away the Ark to its (own) *place* but by now this has become a national concern that 'we should *send* it to its (own) *place*'. The question is, 'How should it be done?' 'What shall we do for the Ark?' (v. 2b), which is rephrased 'How shall we send it to its place?' (v. 2c). The Philistines are *not* concerned to know *what* to do with the Ark. The clear links with 5:11b, c indicate that for a while now they have known that they need to send Israel's Ark back to Israel.⁴⁶ Nor is there ever any doubt that if the Ark is fittingly sent on its way then it will return to its own territory. What *is* uncertain is the proper procedure for sending it, so that it does not stay any longer and wreak any more havoc in the Pentapolis.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ The incongruence of the Ark's residence in Philistia is highlighted by the new and repeated references to it as 'the Ark of the god of Israel' (5:7b, 8b, c, d, 10d, 11b). This incongruence is clearly now felt by the Philistines.

⁴⁷ The rider in 6:9e, f is not an indication that there is any doubt in the Philistine minds about the outcome of the test, only whether it was a valid test which in principle, at least, allowed for either/or options. Miscall, *1 Samuel*, p. 33 and Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, p. 277, also assume that the priests and diviners were sure about the outcome. Eslinger, *Kingship*, pp. 204-212, suspects that they entertain some doubts but this ignores the fact that the indicators of a softening within the Philistines, which the priests and diviners know are the prerequisite for a safe return of the Ark, are all visible (audible) to them. The

The Philistine question receives a brief but emphatic answer. The Ark should not be returned empty but *must* be returned⁴⁸ with a guilt offering for him.⁴⁹ The Philistines are, of course, determined to see the Ark returned to its place and ask the experts about the guilt offering.⁵⁰ The diviners tell them what the guilt offering should consist of and there follows a rationale for their counsel. This, for us, is the most significant part of their advice, which goes on to detail just how the Ark and offering should be returned, since it explains why Yahweh's hand has been against them.

Yahweh's hand was 'heavy' (וַתִּכְבֶּד) and 'very heavy' (כְּבִדָּה מְאֹד) against the Philistines because they had not given him 'glory' (קְבוֹד).⁵¹ They had shown contempt for his holiness. They had tried to manipulate him to get him to serve their own ends. While the Ark was being moved around the Pentapolis they were continually trying to maintain the initiative.⁵² It is only in letting Yahweh be Yahweh that they can hope to be delivered from the hand of this mighty god. They must let Yahweh do as *he* pleases, and they must acknowledge that this is what they should have done all along; they must acknowledge their guilt. In short, they must acknowledge his *weight*; they must give him glory (קְבוֹד).

כָּבֵד again appears in the historical justification for the advice the diviners offer. The Egyptians' hardening (כְּבִדוּ, v. 6b) of their hearts is remembered, and the consequences of it, as the Philistines are exhorted not to harden (תִּכְבְּדוּ, v. 6a) *their* hearts. Such hardening had meant that Yahweh had dealt severely with Egypt. A reversal in

indicators are: the recognition that the Ark must return (rather than be returned) (5:11c), the heavenward cry (5:12c) and the Philistine reference to the Ark *of Yahweh* (6:2b). 6:2b is *not* the same question that the Ashdodites asked in 5:8c.

⁴⁸ The infinitive הָשִׁיב is used before the verb הָשִׁיבוּ for emphasis.

⁴⁹ The lack of distinction between the Ark and Yahweh again comes out here as 'it' (אֵתָּה) in v. 3c refers to the Ark, but לֵּו (v. 3d) must read 'to/for him'.

⁵⁰ That the experts seem surprisingly knowledgeable need not detain us since, within the story-world at least, God's honour was broadcast widely at the Exodus (Jos. 2:10, 9:9, 10; cf. Ex. 9:16).

⁵¹ As we have noted, the punishment fitted the crime.

⁵² The Philistines took the Ark as their plunder from a defeated Israelite enemy. They brought it to Philistine country and sent it around from place to place. It is only towards the end of the seven months that we have seen them yield and decide to let the Ark return (5:11c), to allow Yahweh to direct his own actions ('it will go' הָלַךְ, 6:8d); Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, p. 257.

the present context might mean that Yahweh would *lighten* his hand.⁵³

The reappearance of the key word/theme at this significant juncture, as the priests and diviners explain to the Philistines how they can be freed from Yahweh's punishment, must surely bear on the problem that the Israelites face of explaining not just one but two defeats. The reader has seen from the inside that Yahweh's heavy (כָּבֵד) hand was a result of the Philistines' not treating him properly, not giving him honour (קָבוֹד). Perhaps, then, the departure of glory (קָבוֹד) from Israel might have something to do with Israelite attitudes and action towards their god. These insights are, however, as yet hidden from (narrative) Israel, which remains outside, away from the action of chapter 5 and 6:1-9.

The remainder of the movement deals with how the Philistines should allow the Ark to return to its place in a way which honours God. A cart is commissioned especially to carry the Ark (v. 7a). Two cows are selected to pull it. That the cart is new and the cows have not yet been under a yoke means that both are suitable for such an occasion. Neither cart nor cows have been profaned by their being used for any lesser function. Whilst the cows are *ritually* suitable for their task,⁵⁴ *practically*, they are hopelessly unsuitable. Not only have they never been harnessed to pull anything before, but they are milch cows and their calves are to be left at home. Their maternal instincts ought to prevent them from performing the task, though, as far as the narrative is concerned, there is never any doubt that they will succeed.

(3.1b) *Second movement* (vv. 10-18). The second movement is transitional. The Philistines who ingloriously took the Ark at the beginning of the episode now see it return. Israel, which lamented its loss, in the persons of Eli and the unnamed mother, gladly welcomes it back. The movement closes with a reminder of the guilt offering that the Philistines returned with the Ark and mention of a stone⁵⁵ which is a witness (to this day) of what happened.

⁵³ 'To lighten' (קָלַל) (v. 5c) is an antonym for 'to be heavy' (כָּבֵד) (v. 6a, b) and 'to deal severely' (עָלַל) (v. 6c), as well as rhyming with the latter. In 6:5 and 6 we have then:

5b give glory	כָּבֵד	5c so that there be a lightening	קָלַל
6a but do not harden	כָּבֵד		
6b because hardening	כָּבֵד	6c leads to severity	עָלַל

⁵⁴ Nu. 19:2, Dt. 21:3.

⁵⁵ Emending the MT's אֶבֶן (field) to אֶבֶן (stone) with several MSS and versions, e.g. LXX ἑως λίθου; cf. 6:15b.

Philistine involvement in the narrative is ended in this movement. The Philistines carry out the instructions which their priests and diviners give them, careful all the while not to cause any more offence to Yahweh. The cows, not surprisingly, carry the Ark straight back to Israel, turning neither to the right nor to the left. At Beth-shemesh the cart is broken up and the cows sacrificed on it. With the five lords returning to Philistia, satisfied of the positive outcome of the test, there is now no more trace of their ever having had the Ark at all.

The Philistines have learnt their lesson. Their god lies executed. Their cities and fields have been devastated because of their rough handling of Yahweh. The Philistines have been forced to acknowledge Yahweh's might and 'weight' and to give him glory. They return quickly to recuperate, away from narrational view. Israel still does not know why it was defeated before the Philistines.

Verses 17 and 18 are an appendix to the second movement, as 5:5 was to 5:1-5. They create breathing space before the drama which will follow, the climax of the story. As well as slowing down the narrative they put (narrative) space between the Philistines and Israel, for what happens next is to be a private, Israelite affair, strictly between Israel and its God.

(3.2) *Part 2 (6:19-7:1)*. The four verses at the end of the AN effect a closure. Disaster strikes, but in its coming to grips with the latest setback Israel discovers what the problem has been all along. The question '*Why has Yahweh defeated us today before the Philistines?*' is at last answered.

A return to narrative style marks a return to the narrative proper after a short interlude (vv. 17, 18). Within the narrative Israel is still ignorant of all that has gone on in the Pentapolis. It is unaware that Dagon has been executed and that the Philistines have suffered terribly for their irreverence towards Yahweh. All it know is that the Ark had been taken and now it has been returned. Perhaps Yahweh has sworn fealty to Dagon. Perhaps he is now Dagon's vassal and has returned to represent him to Israel. It would certainly explain why the Ark was returned. It would also explain why the men of Beth-shemesh looked into it.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Since this incident has no parallels in the biblical material; though similar, the events of 2 Sa. 6 are in quite a different context. We must look elsewhere for an explanation of what took place. Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, p. 11, note that the return of a foreign god could be used to underline the superiority of the captors and illustrate the point with mention of Esarhaddon's returning Arab gods with his own and his god's (Assur's) names

The striking down of 50,070 men at Beth-shemesh must indicate that there had been some gross affront to Yahweh's honour. If the men of Beth-shemesh *were* looking into the Ark to see if it had been tampered with in any way, to see if Yahweh had returned as Dagon's vassal,⁵⁷ then this would be seriously to question Yahweh's unchallenged superiority, his place enthroned above the cherubim (4:4b). It would be to minimise, as it were, his 'heaviness', to diminish his glory. It would warrant such an outburst.⁵⁸

The men of Beth-shemesh recognise their mistake. With the Ark's return Yahweh has (symbolically) returned to Israel. He is, indeed, without equal in power. His honour has not been tarnished. Israel's only response can be to recognise his glory. It acknowledges his holiness, a broader term, which embraces glory but includes consideration of his and its moral stature. Yahweh had *not* abandoned Israel nor had he ignored his covenant with it. The direct route which the milch cows take (6:12a) indicates that he *wants* to be (wants his manifest presence to be) amongst his people. But Israel has underestimated Yahweh. It quickly jumped to the conclusion that Yahweh had forgotten his covenant commitments (4:3c). Whereas, in fact, the problem all along was that Israel had forgotten its own. The answer to the question '*Why has Yahweh defeated us today before the Philistines?*' (4:3b) is that Israel had reneged on the covenant. Israel fell before the Philistines because it could not stand before Yahweh.

The covenant demanded holiness from Israel but there is no one who is able to stand before Yahweh, the holy God. The narrative emphasises the point with a rhetorical question. It is a significant moment, the first time that we have heard anything from the covenant community since the Ark left Israel. This is now the Israelites' *informed* response to the loss of the Ark and to the initial defeat with which the narrative began. This is the climax of the narrative. The rest is denouement. 'Who is able to stand before

upon them. But they fail to make anything of this practice in their thesis because they think the MT well-nigh hopelessly corrupt and opt for a very different reading (p. 58).

⁵⁷ As Esarhaddon tampered with the images of the Arab gods (Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, p. 11).

⁵⁸ Eslinger sees the outburst as incomprehensible because he fails to recognise the difference between the seeing the Ark (וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת־הָאֲרוֹן, 6:13c) and the looking *into* the Ark (וַיִּבְחֲרוּ בָּהּ, 6:19b) and because he does not appreciate the reason for the Beth-shemeshites looking into the Ark (*Kingship*, pp. 217-23). Yahweh's complete sovereignty and omnipotence have been established by the omniscient narrator since 4:4b.

Yahweh, this holy (הַקֹּדֶשׁ) God?’ (v. 20b). The unspoken answer is ‘No one’.⁵⁹

The rest of the narrative completes the section and supplies the denouement. The Ark is removed from Beth-shemesh and taken to Kiriath-jearim. Men from the town came and consecrated (קִדְּשׁוּ, 7:1d) Abinadab’s son Eleazar to keep the Ark. The appearance of קִדְּשׁוּ ‘consecrated’, from the same root as ‘holy’ (קֹדֶשׁ, 6:20b) in the last verse of the narrative is an indication of how Israel might stand before Yahweh. Eleazar, in fact, will regularly need to stand before (the Ark of) Yahweh. He has been consecrated.⁶⁰

The narrative closes with a note about Eleazar. There is, with that note, an implied challenge. It is a challenge to be holy. As such the AN is a story which might apply to any period in Israel’s history, but the very close connection between Yahweh and the Ark would seem to indicate a date earlier than the exile, when the Ark was lost.

IV. Conclusion

We have found that the MT’s 1 Samuel 4:1b-7:1 forms a coherent story, which from beginning to end is concerned to explain Israel’s defeat at Ebenezer. Through the course of the narrative several possibilities, that Yahweh has forgotten about the covenant, that he was defeated, and that he has abandoned Israel, are set aside until finally, at the climax, we learn that Israel is to blame for the defeat. It has not kept itself holy. It has not maintained the distinctions that would mark it out as Yahweh’s own special treasure among the nations. There is, in the denouement, an implied challenge to Israel to return again to the covenant, to be holy, set apart for its holy God.

⁵⁹ The dilemma in v. 20c, ‘To whom shall he/it go up from here?’, presupposes and confirms that the unspoken answer is ‘No one.’

⁶⁰ To consecrate is the piel of קִדְּשׁ ‘to be holy’ (Qal). A stative (Qal) verb is regularly made transitive in the piel theme.