

Study Notes for 1 Samuel 4:1-22

WHEN THE UNTHINKABLE HAPPENS

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Setting

The story in 1 Samuel began with the barren womb of Hannah and the subsequent birth of Samuel. We then learned of the prophecy of the dramatic reversal of the leadership of Eli's house given twice: once by the 'man of God' and once through the word and vision given to the boy Samuel. The story now shifts dramatically from the family conflicts within Shiloh and the tabernacle to the national conflict between the Philistines and Israel. However the key themes of apostasy, arrogance, God's judgment and providence are still very much in view.

The story of the "ark of the LORD" is contained in chapters 4 through 6. This story can be viewed as three acts: the first (Chapter 4) contains the capture of the ark; the second (Chapter 5) describes the ark in exile with the Philistines; and the third act (Chapter 6) is the return of the ark to Israel (Waltke, 630). The first act can also be viewed as a story in three scenes: the first scene narrates the defeat of Israel by the Philistines including the deaths of Hophni and Phinehas; the second scene contains the messenger who escaped and ran to Shiloh resulting in great anxiety and tumult; and the third scene focuses on the deaths of Eli and his daughter-in-law and the birth of her son. Overshadowing the passage is the concern over the ark (the phrase "ark of God was captured" occurs five times in this passage) including its misuse and its departure from Shiloh.

Study Notes

Scene 1: The Battle(s)

4:1b In the second half of this verse (the first half goes with the previous story of Samuel) we learn about a serious conflict between the Philistines and the Israelites. The Philistines were the "Sea Peoples" who had migrated from across the Aegean Sea, settled along the coast of Palestine about 1200 B.C. and then assimilated much of the Canaanite religion and language (see 1 Sam. 5:2; 31:10). They were particularly skilled in metal work, which later would cause the Israelites a great deal of difficulty (see 1 Sam. 13:19-21). This is the first recorded battle between the Philistines and the Israelites but these sea peoples will continue to play a major part in Israelite history; they are mentioned nearly 150 times in 1 and 2 Samuel alone (Youngblood, 594).

It is difficult to tell from this sentence who started the conflict, but recall from the story of Samson (which had occurred earlier) that there was a great deal of animosity between them, and that the Philistines seemed to have the upper hand. The Philistines are camped at Aphik¹ which is an Israelite town north of Philistine territory so it appears again that the Philistines are the aggressors (Bonder, 44; although see Morgan, 5). Ebenezer² was also an Israelite town just a very short distance south of Aphik (both towns are about 20 miles directly west of Shiloh).

¹ An interesting NT footnote is that this is the town that Paul stayed overnight when he was arrested by the Romans and taken to Caesarea (Acts 23:31).

² Ebenezer will have a significant role later in the story when the Israelites defeat the Philistines there (1 Sam. 7). The name Ebenezer means 'stone of help' – see 1 Sam. 7:12. There is irony in the narrator using the name here because the elders expected help but did not receive it.

4:2-5 The battle begins and the Israelite troops are defeated losing 4000 soldiers. A group of leaders (called 'elders') are puzzled over the loss but they do not understand that it is the LORD that caused the defeat. Unfortunately they were so spiritually poor that their solution was to take³ the "ark of the Lord's covenant" as a means of forcing God to help them. Note the interesting title for the ark which emphasizes in their minds that the LORD must now be compelled to fight for them. These elders no doubt remembered how Joshua accomplished his great victory over Jericho where the ark had a prominent place (Josh. 6:2-20; Num. 10:35). The ark, of course, was no magic solution; if God had decreed for Israel to lose the battle no number of 'arks' would have helped (Youngblood, 595). However, Morgan states, "there is no soul-searching or prayer, merely pragmatism that seeks to solve the dilemma without consulting God" (Morgan, 5).

The reader at this point does not know how God will respond to their profane use of the ark but it is very popular with the people who think this is all a wonderful idea and cheer wildly (similar to Jericho's defeat; Josh 6:5,20) when the ark arrives at the camp site. The narrator is careful to point out as well that Hophni and Phinehas are the caretakers of the ark

4:6-9 As a direct contrast to the delight of the Israelites, the Philistines are in great fear and anxiety. They realize that the arrival of the ark was a great religious event and that "nothing like this had happened before" to them. It is very interesting that they had knowledge of some Israelite history and God's involvement with them. However they get it wrong on two counts: first they think of the LORD God as multiple gods ("mighty gods") and second they think the plagues against the Egyptians occurred the desert ("wilderness"). The general idea in their minds is that some god or gods, peculiar to the "Hebrews" (the use of the non-covenant name for Israel is important here), who is very strong and had helped the Israelites before, has now been recruited to help them again.

The Philistines response to the Israelites' religious solution was to increase their resolve; this is the natural human response to fear. They point out to each other the dire consequences of losing the battle and encourage each other to take courage (Bodner, 46). Ironically they do defeat the "Hebrews" but not because of their resolve, although this is how it looked on the surface (from a human perspective), but because this is what God willed.

4:10-11 As a result of their human resolve, the Philistines had a significantly greater victory this second time, killing seven times as many Israelite soldiers. Not unexpected by to the reader at least, Hophni and Phinehas are also killed and the Philistines capture the ark. Clearly the over confidence of the Israelites and the fear of the Philistines was greatly misplaced (Bodner, 46)

The ark of God was captured. This phrase is repeated five times in the chapter and becomes the focus of the narrative (1 Sam. 4:17,19,21-22). By all human observation, God appears 'weak' in his apparent inability to defend his honor.

³ Morgan writes, "The verb "take" is often used of seizing and plundering goods of others and even, as in the case of Dinah, rape (Gen. 34:2-4). That God allows this is shocking" (Morgan, 6).

Scene 2: Messenger back in Shiloh

4:12-16 After the battle, a “man of Benjamin” who escaped the carnage runs home in tatters⁴. The whole scene is amazingly descriptive. His news however is not good and in his haste seems to run right by Eli who is clearly anxiously waiting (or “watching”) for news. Although Eli is “watching” beside the road we are also told that he is very old (98 years old) and that he is now blind. We are also told that Eli’s “heart trembled for the ark of the Lord” (NASB, ESV). This may seem surprising since he knew his sons were in the battle and he also knew about the prophecies against them. When Eli hears the “tumult” in the city because of what the “man of Benjamin” described, Eli speaks up and the man hears him. The literal translation of Eli’s last recorded speech is “What is the word, my Son?” (English translations do not translate the Hebrew word *davar* (“word”)) The emphasis on “word” mirrors the prophecy of the “man of God” in Chapter 2 (Bodner, 48); also after the vision that the boy Samuel received Eli asks him “What is the word He spoke to you?” (1 Sam. 3:17 NASB). The LORD now did what he had said he would; this too is ‘good’ news.

Act 3: Death of Eli and his daughter-in-law

4:17-18 The “man of Benjamin”⁵ now relates the events to Eli; first he tells him of the great defeat (30,000 men killed), then he tells him of the death of his two sons and lastly the capture of the ark.

The mention of the ark causes Eli to fall backwards from the “seat” (throne) he is sitting on and as a result of his weight and age, breaks his neck and dies. This is a stunning turn of events. The narrator tells us that he was “heavy” possibly because of his eating the sacrificial meat before the fat had been burned off (see 1 Sam. 2:15-16; 29) (Bodner, 48). The news of the capture of the ark is therefore the catalyst which causes God’s word of judgment to be fulfilled.

The narrator ends the saga of Eli with the words “He had judged Israel forty years” (ESV). Going back forty years means that Eli would have been Israel’s spiritual leader during the dark times described in Judges 17-21. This final note therefore would further undermine Eli’s legacy (Bodner, 49).

4:19-22 The scene now shifts to Eli’s daughter-in-law and Phinehas’ wife. She is pregnant and when she hears the news that the ark was ‘taken’ by the Philistines and that her husband and father-in-law had died she goes into premature labor. As a result, she too dies but not before naming her newborn son Ichabod which means literally “inglorious” and stating “glory is departed (gone into exile) from Israel, for the ark of God was taken” (NASB).

This is the second birth narrative we have encountered so far in First Samuel. In the first, Hannah although initially barren, gave birth to Samuel. The contrast between Hannah and Phinehas’ wife, who is not given a name, could not be starker. Hannah, blessed by God, is given a son whom she names Samuel, has a husband and gives birth to 5 more children. Phinehas’ wife, on the other hand, gives birth to an orphan who had little hope of any future (see 1 Sam. 2:36). The words of the “man of God” who spoke the words of the LORD echo in the background: “Far be it from Me – for

⁴ It is interesting to compare this message of defeat with a future battle recorded in 2 Sam. 1:1-10. There also a man arrives in tatters and describes the Israelites’ defeat by the Philistines which also resulted in the death of two Benjamites: Saul and Jonathan.

⁵ Here the “man of Benjamin” is described as the “man who brought the news.” This “news” is bad news for Eli but good news for Samuel who will now take over the spiritual guidance of Israel.

those who honor Me I will honor and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed” (1 Sam. 2:30).

The passage ends as one of the darkest times in Israelite history. It would appear that the LORD God has abandoned Israel yet the reader knows that God has raised up Samuel and that through him there is still hope.

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