

“Ichabod: God’s Glory, Gone!”

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First in a series on the story of God’s Ark in 1st Samuel 4-6

1st Samuel 4

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For three Sundays, starting today, I am going to dive into a peculiar episode. It is in 1st Samuel, chapters 4-6. It is weird, and it is wise.

I

Imagine we are in a rugged valley. Up one side camps the Philistine army. The Philistines are relatively new to this land of Canaan, maybe a few generations. Their ancestors sailed in from islands in the Aegean and settled along Canaan’s coast. That is good land. They’ve built five fortress cities. They are expanding north, south and east, pressing against their neighbours. Especially Israel.¹

Up the other side of the valley is the Israelite army. We are generations after the Lord (through Joshua) led Israel into this Land of Promise. We are even longer after God (through Moses) brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt. And even longer after God (through Abraham and Sarah) began God’s rescue mission for all peoples of the earth, through this one tiny and unlikely people. God called and formed Israel within a precarious, contentious, and dangerous world. Because this is the real world, where salvation needs to happen.

For three centuries now, the tribes of Israel have lived in this hill country of Canaan. They’re holding on, barely. They are pressed from all sides, and battling within. They’re struggling to stay faithful to God. It’s been hard. It’s getting harder.

Across the valley the Philistines wait. Already there has been a battle. The Israelites lost, badly. Yet, they are confident! And the Philistines, who have the advantage, are worried.

II

The Israelites are deploying their ultimate weapon.

It’s a wood box, 52 x 31 x 31 inches. The gold covering is impressive. It is carried by poles that run through rings on either side. Inside are gathered the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, the rod that belonged to the first priest, Aaron, and a jar containing some of the manna God gave to sustain Israel in the wilderness. This is the *Aron HaBrit*, the Ark of the Covenant.²

Imagine the Ark as the wedding band that proves God’s relationship with God’s People. Imagine it as the footstool on which the Lord Mighty rests His feet, while sitting on the throne of the cosmos. The *Aron HaBrit* led Israel’s way through the wilderness. It led Israel into the promised land. And now, it has been brought to the front lines, to lead once again.

¹ On the Philistines, see V. Philips Long, “1 Samuel” in John H. Walton (ed), Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Volume 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 284f.

² Ibid, 283.

The Ark conveys God's *kabod*. *Kabod* means "weighty." When that person can walk in, and have everyone silence, turn and look, that person has *kabod*. When the forest trail opens you to a vista that leaves you stunned, you're beholding *kabod*. *Kabod* is glory. *Kabod* breaks you into awe, and freezes you in fearful, joyful wonder.

Above everything, God has *kabod*. The Ark centres God's *kabod*.

As it processes to the front, the Israelites feel its presence and ready for their inevitable victory. The Philistines sense it and steel themselves for certain defeat.

Battle begins. Armies crash. The results are decisive, beyond calculation or imagining.

III

Miles away, old Eli the high priest sits at the sanctuary. His sons are away with the army.³ Now he waits.

The news from the battle front races in. Every staccato syllable the messenger delivers shoots through the old man. "Battle, lost. Israel, broken. Your sons, dead."

Then, the kill shot: "God's Ark, taken." The seal of God's promise, the guarantee of God's presence, the pulse of God's *kabod* . . . has been trotted away, a caged captive, spoil of war, pawed by grimy Philistine hands.

Old Eli crumples off his chair. He falls, his neck snaps, he dies.

There's more.

Now Eli's daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife, was pregnant and about to give birth. When she heard the news that God's ARK had been captured and that her father-in-law and her husband had died, she doubled over and gave birth because her labor pains overwhelmed her.

As she was about to die, the women standing by helping her said, "Don't be afraid. You've given birth to a son!" But she didn't answer or pay them any attention.

She named the boy Ichabod . . .

1st Samuel 4.19-21a

Adapted from the Common English Bible

³ I chose not to highlight the story of Eli's sons. Priests like their father (priesthood was an inherited role in Israel), Hophni and Phinehas are foul characters. They brazenly steal from the offerings. They force themselves on women. Eli knows of their evil deeds, and does not approve. Yet he does nothing to stop them. So God has given word that both boys will die on the same day, and the legacy of Eli will end.

I-Kabod means “Where is the glory?”⁴ Gone! It’s not just that God has not saved them, not given them victory, not sided with them. God Almighty is banished, exiled into devilish hands, shamed, humiliated.

“Where is the glory?” *I-Kabod*. No child deserves that name.

But . . . no one can imagine this!

IV

The story does not end here. Thankfully, we have next Sunday, and the next.

Still, I am thankful that the story goes here.⁵

The faith of the Bible . . . the faith of Israel . . . the faith the Church that Christ Jesus has brought into God’s People . . . our faith does not shy away. We do not hide from times like this. Times of *I-Kabod*. We don’t run to them either. We don’t seek them out. Still, they have a way of finding us.

“Israel has fled from the Philistines. The army has suffered a massive defeat.”

A nightclub shot-up in Orlando. A hotel hit in Mogadishu. An airport attacked in Istanbul. A restaurant in Dhaka.

A century ago, the Battle of the Somme had just begun. On the first day, the Newfoundland Regiment was wiped out; Canada Day is also Memorial Day on “the Rock.” Later that year, my great-great-uncle Albert went missing in action. He was never given a grave.

Our faith, springing from this Book of God, lets us fall down, and cry into the silence, and wonder where God’s *Kabod*-glory has gone.

“Your husband has died. . . . Pains overwhelmed her.”

Friday, I was beside my Uncle Doug’s hospice bed. Cancer was taking the last hours of his life.

Thursday, Aleksa McWhirter died. She learned she had a brain tumour last September, the day she was to start grade nine at Centre Wellington High School.

It is the wisdom of that nameless theologian, who cried out, dying, having just birthed her soon-to-be-orphaned son, “*Where is the glory?*” “*I-Kabod?*” It is gone. Gone.

⁴ Walter Bruggemann, *Ichabod Toward Home: The Journey of God’s Glory* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 8.

⁵ *Ibid*, 22f.

What an awe-full wonder is God. God lets us cry out such things and counts them as faithfulness. God breathes these cries into the Psalm-singers, and the weeper of Lamentations, and the thunder of the prophets. And, the chronicler of this event, when God's People were vanquished, and God's Ark was taken hostage, and God's Glory was deported. This is told with no spin, no public relations clean-up. Just the straight goods.

What freedom this gives us! We don't have to pretend everything is okay. We don't have to fake faith. We don't have to spend ourselves on denial and cover-up. You can only force a smile for so long. Then you break.

This I know, for the Bible tells me so.

V

I told you this story is weird.

It's crazy! The Creator of the Cosmos, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, captured by the Philistines! Can we imagine this?

Can we imagine the Alpha and the Omega, the Before-the-Beginning and After-the-Completing, the World made flesh, nailed to a cross, stripped bare, and dead.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" cried out the Son of God.

Where is the glory? *I-Kabod*?

This is a Good Friday story, in July. *I-Kabod* happens anytime. Because it is a Good Friday story, *I-Kabod* is definitely a God-story, a Salvation-story. And because Saturday comes next, and Sunday is coming, we need not fear Friday.

Thanks be to God. Amen.