

“IChabod: Glory on a Cow-Cart”

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

1st Samuel 6

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When the work crew from Beth Shemesh saw the Ark of God’s glory coming up the road on a cow-cart, they had no idea.

They had no idea what had happened in the half-year since the Philistines captured the Ark. They did not know it had been displayed as a trophy of war, set at the feet of the Philistines’ victorious god, Dagon. Or how, the very next morning, Dagon’s statue had fallen on the floor. The next morning too, this time smashed to pieces.

The workers of Beth Shemesh had no idea of the epidemic. Whichever of the Philistine cities held the Ark, that city was afflicted. It was some sort of skin tumour, or it might have been bubonic plague. Nasty stuff.

They had no idea that the Philistines had grown desperate to be rid of the Ark. Eventually, they decided to send it on a riderless cart. They also sent a gift of small gold statues, shaped like the tumours that were infecting them.¹ These precious statues represented their affliction. Weird.

The Philistines still were not certain, however, that keeping the Ark was the cause of their sufferings. So they hitched the riderless cart to two cows. Two nursing cows! Instinct would make them want to turn back, to their calves. So if, instead, they kept going straight ahead, that would show they were guided by some unseen power.

The folks of Beth Shemesh knew none of this. They only knew that the Ark had been taken, God’s glory stolen, and God’s power defeated. Seven months later, they were still in shock.

¹ For a discussion about the number and nature of the gold offerings the Philistines fashioned, see V. Philips Long, “1 Samuel” in John H. Walton (ed), Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Volume 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 300.

Now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight. The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and there it stopped beside a large rock. The people chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. The Levites took down the ark of the Lord, together with the chest containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. On that day the people of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the Lord.

1st Samuel 6.13-15

New International Version

II

These people of Beth Shemesh still don't know much. Just that the Ark of God's Glory is now parked in Joshua's field. (Looks like it will be staying there a while, too. They've just burned the cart that bore it, and sacrificed the cows that pulled it.)

They do not know much. Just that the glory of the Lord — God's majesty, God's fullness — is now restored. What happened? No idea. But there it is, in Joshua's field.

They do not know much. Just that Philistines' power has been broken. How? No idea. But there is the Ark of God's Glory, delivered from Philistine hands.

They do not know much. Just that Dagon's majesty has been overcome. They have no idea about the Philistines' idol crashing in the night (twice). But there is the Ark of God, silently triumphant.

We can try fitting this into something we can understand. Maybe the statue fell (twice) because of seismic activity.² Maybe the outbreak of disease was just one of those things (that happened to follow the Ark around). And maybe, by strange misfortune the cows they picked happened not to have instincts for motherhood (both of them). Or, maybe we do not know much either. Just that the Ark of God's glory now sat in Joshua's field.

III

For some reason, God really wanted to get that Ark home, to its place among God's People. Is it too fanciful to imagine the Lord Almighty, Creator of the cosmos, had a moment of wondering why He had not made cattle with a little more giddy-up, as they lumbered along, pulling the Ark along on a journey that must have taken hours? Is it too

² <http://www.timesofisrael.com/eyeing-nepal-experts-warn-israel-is-unprepared-for-its-own-big-one/>

silly to picture the great “I Am” who led Israel through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud and fire, now asking from the back, “Are we there yet?”

What about this idea that God, who is beyond physical form and spatial limitation, was concerned with this one box that I’d have to squish myself to fit into? Or, that God who forges countless tons of gold a second by smashing stars, treasured this bit of gold-covered wood.

Apparently, God did.

Make no mistake. The Ark was not God. The Ark was not an idol, a thing to be worshipped. God is always infinite, always beyond, always un-contained, always free. Take away the Ark, and God is still God.

Yet, within the great scope of God’s dealings with humanity, for a time God chose to make this Ark the anchor of God’s glory, the dwelling of God’s presence, the radiance of God’s power, the seal of God’s saving covenant-promises to God’s People. Maybe, at least for a time, we needed God that way. We needed a physical representation of the mystery, a tangible touch of the transcendent.

Did we also need the Ark to be taken prisoner for a while?

Think back. The Philistines seized the Ark. Why did God allow that? Why did we need God’s glory to be vanquished? God’s power to be defeated? God’s promises to be doubted? Why did we need to experience God’s absence?

Is it because this journey taken by the Ark of God’s Covenant . . . This journey from glory to captivity (chapter 4, two weeks ago), through unseen reversals in the dark of night (chapter 5, last week), to vindication and homecoming from exile (chapter 6, today) . . . Is it because this journey taken by God’s Ark shows us something vital about God?³

IV

Remember, the Ark is not God! But the time came, when . . .

³ “Proclamation of this text concerns the character of God and the life of the community with this God. This two-stage reality of humiliation and exaltation, of bondage and freedom, of death and new life, and of obvious weakness and amazing power belongs to the nature of this God and of life with this God.” Walter Brueggemann, First and Samuel Samuel (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 46.

*Christ Jesus, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his own advantage.*

*Rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

God's Glory, being formed in a mother's womb and cradled in an animal's feed-bed. God's Glory, with height and weight, hair and fingernails. God's Glory, counting as more precious than all the gold in the cosmos the touch of a leper and the kiss of a sinner.

*And being found in human appearance
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

God's Glory processed into the city, not pulled by two cows, but riding a donkey and her colt. Not carried on a cart, God's Glory bore the wood of his own sacrifice. Not golden statues of tumours, the wounds of our afflictions were fashioned in his flesh. God's Glory, seemingly vanquished yet victorious. God's Presence, seemingly absent yet more present than ever. God's Power, revealed in captivity, humiliation, and death. God's saving Covenant-Promises . . . kept!

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow. . .
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.⁴*

Like the people of Beth Shemesh, Mary Magdalene has no idea. She sees him in the early morning and thinks he is the gardener. But then she hears him, and touches him. The same day, two disciples are walking along a road. He joins them. They have no idea who this stranger is. But then he breaks bread and they behold him.

Jesus, the Glory of God. Amen.

⁴ Philippians 2.6-11 (New International Version, adapted)