FIRST SAMUEL

Chapter 6

*The Ark Returned to Israel*

**When the ark of the Lord had been in Philistine territory seven months, 2 the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, “What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us how we should send it back to its place.” 3 They answered, “If you return the ark of the god of Israel, do not send it away empty, but by all means send a guilt offering to him. Then you will be healed, and you will know why his hand has not been lifted from you.” 4 The Philistines asked, “What guilt offering should we send to him?” They replied, “Five gold tumors and five gold rats, according to the number of the Philistine rulers, because the same plague has struck both you and your rulers. 5 Make models of the tumors and of the rats that are destroying the country, and pay honor to Israel’s god. Perhaps he will lift his hand from you and your gods and your land. 6 Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did? When he treated them harshly, did they not send the Israelites out so they could go on their way? 7 “Now then, get a new cart ready, with two cows that have calved and have never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pen them up. 8 Take the ark of the Lord and put it on the cart, and in a chest beside it put the gold objects you are sending back to him as a guilt offering. Send it on its way, 9 but keep watching it. If it goes up to its own territory, toward Beth Shemesh, then the Lord has brought this great disaster on us. But if it does not, then we will know that it was not his hand that struck us and that it happened to us by chance.” 10 So they did this. They took two such cows and hitched them to the cart and penned up their calves. 11 They placed the ark of the Lord on the cart and along with it the chest containing the gold rats and the models of the tumors. 12 Then the cows went straight up toward Beth Shemesh, keeping on the road and lowing all the way; they did not turn to the right or to the left. The rulers of the Philistines followed them as far as the border of Beth Shemesh. 13 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. 14 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. 15 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. 16 The five rulers of the Philistines saw all this and then returned that same day to Ekron. 17 These are the gold tumors the Philistines sent as a guilt offering to the Lord—one each for Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron. 18 And the number of the gold rats was according to the number of Philistine towns belonging to the five rulers—the fortified towns with their country villages. The large rock, on which they set the ark of the Lord, is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh. 19 But God struck down some of the men of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy of them to death because they had looked into the ark of the Lord. The people mourned because of the heavy blow the Lord had dealt them, 20 and the men of Beth Shemesh asked, “Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? To whom will the ark go up from here?” 21 Then they sent messengers to the people of Kiriath Jearim, saying, “The Philistines have returned the ark of the Lord. Come down and take it up to your place.”**

**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 (see NIV text note on 5:6). It is likely that the rats were carriers of the disease, which may have been a form of the plague. (CSB)

**6:5** *Make models … and pay honor to Israel’s god.* 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 been yoked.* 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.

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** *harvesting 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.* See note on v. 3. (CSB)

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 (see NIV text note) 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 into 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 (see note on 4:3).

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 will the ark go up from here?* 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)