

Samuel: Called of God

Samuel is the last of the Judges and his judgeship lays the groundwork for the first kings of Israel. His rule begins immediately after the devastating battle in which the Ark is lost to the Philistines. Eli was judge and was responsible for calling Israel out to battle. It is instructive to review this battle since it sets the foundation for what is to take place during Samuel's judgeship.

The Lord had taught His people the importance of fighting the enemy in the mountains. Tactics for this type warfare was entirely different from meeting the enemy on open ground. Israel was taught that body armor was not needed for this type of warfare since ambushes, hit and run, and night action, depended on speed. Heavy armor and weapons would detract and weaken attacks.

We learn in I Samuel 4 that Israel, in an offensive move, set out from Ebenezer to attack the Philistines who are camped at Aphek. The foolishness of this attack is immediately evident. The Plain of Sharon is flat land and the site of many major encounters between armies. The Philistines were armed with heavy chariots and heavily armed infantry. Israel had neither. Samuel thought so little of the leadership he does not even bother to tell us the name of the commander responsible for the fiasco.

Prior to this, the Philistines successfully drove the Hittites out, and in major battles, confronted the Egyptian military. They were experts at this type of combat. Israel had no experience on open battlefields. Nor, did they possess the equipment necessary to compete.

As Israel faced the enemy, they would have seen a force of perhaps 15,000 men dressed in body armor, red feathered-topped helmets, round shields, spears and swords. No doubt the

force would have been divided into three groups in phalanx formation (drawn in a line), along with some heavily armed war chariots.

In contrast, Israel would have not been composed in a phalanx at this time for they were still a militia type organization. Warfare utilizing the phalanx would not be used by Israel for another 50 to 75 years.

If scholars were correct, the Philistines would have had their origins in Asia Minor, and perhaps Crete. Biblical passages (Jeremiah 47, Amos 9, Ezekiel 25 and 26) refer to the Island of Caphor (Crete) as the land of origin. The Philistines would have had plenty of experience in phalanx formation warfare even before coming to Canaan. The Philistine infantry are armed with two spears, a straight sword, and a round shield. Chariots, when used, are manned by three men, all armed with spears. The Philistines did not use bows. The infantry fought in groups of four. Two armed with shield and sword, and two armed with shield and spear. The Philistines wore heavy body armor covering the top half of the body. The infantry were designed to fight in hand-to-hand combat. They marched in unison.¹

The initial contact results in the loss of four thousand Israelites. The text implies that Israel breaks and runs, which is the conclusion drawn from the text saying 'the battle spreads'. Israel then compounds its error. Convicted that the Lord had caused the defeat they decide they are going to force God to fight for them. They treat God Almighty as if He is Baal!

Israel calls for reinforcements and demands that the Ark be brought to the battlefield from Shiloh some twenty miles away the next day the Ark arrives at the camp along with Eli's two sons Hophni and Phinehas. God had charged these two immoral sons with having sex with

¹ The art of Warfare in Biblical Lands, Vol. II, Yigael Yadin, International Press, p. 251.

women who came to Shiloh to worship. In addition, they robbed both the people and God of the sacrifices dedicated to the Lord.

Upon the Ark's entrance to the Israelite camp, joyous shouts fill the air. The Philistines were terrified upon hearing the commotion. Stories of God blasting the Egyptians with every sort of plague years passed through the ranks.

The Lord's tactic of instilling fear is so effective that three hundred years after the Exodus the Philistines are still talking about it.

4So the people sent to Shiloh; and they brought from there the ark of the covenant of Yahweh of Armies, who sits above the cherubim: and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. 5When the ark of the covenant of Yahweh came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again. 6When the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, "What does the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" They understood that the ark of Yahweh had come into the camp. 7The Philistines were afraid, for they said, "God has come into the camp." They said, "Woe to us! For there has not been such a thing before. 8Woe to us! Who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods that struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness (I Samuel 4:5-8).

Therefore, the Philistines were terrified. Encouraging themselves the Philistines prepared to fight. The result was a terrible loss of another thirty thousand Israelite warriors. The text does not say so, but it appears that the Philistines went into an all-out invasion of the country proceeding as far as Shiloh and destroying it. Archeological evidences support the fact of the destruction of Shiloh around 1050 B.C. by the Philistines.

The Philistines take the Ark. The two sons of Eli are killed in battle, and upon hearing the news, Eli falls over backwards, breaking his neck and dies.

There are several lessons in this tragedy that grip the heart. First, God is the commander; yet the Lord is not consulted about the battle whatsoever. Even the battlefield selection and tactics taught to Israel are ignored.

Warfare must be fought in the Lord's time, by the Lord's means, and at the place chosen by Him. He is not a man that can be manipulated or charmed into doing man's will.

Samuel, having walked with the Lord all of his life, with Eli's death is now set apart to lead Israel. Thereafter Samuel establishes a new place of worship at Ramah. Ramah is about ten miles north of Jerusalem and was his birthplace. Shiloh being destroyed by the Philistines in the aftermath of the battle.

After the loss of the Ark, the people are despondent for the first few months. Samuel calls for all of Israel to meet at Mizpah in order to call the nation back to the Lord. Samuel challenges the people once again to put aside the Baal and Ashtaroth idols and serve only the Lord. While Samuel is speaking to the assembly over a several day period, the Philistines hear of the gathering and gather to attack Israel.

Hearing of the Philistines' approach, the people start to tremble, for the Philistines are a fearsome sight. Just a short time before the Philistines had killed thirty-four thousand Israelite warriors in battle and stripped all armaments from the people.

Israel has no arms and no means of defense. Israel begs Samuel to pray for them and intercede on their behalf with the Lord. Samuel offers a sacrifice to the Lord as the Philistines are approaching.

The two attributes that most often determine the outcome of any battle is that of sight and sound. Both are used extensively in warfare to frighten the opponent into submission.

Psychological warfare is well advanced by this period. Now it is used to terrify the enemy.

The most important task of any commander is to make the enemy retreat. The most dangerous time on the battlefield is when one side breaks ranks and runs. This may be achieved by the fierce some appearance of the enemy or loud noise which breaks one's nerves or by combat. This is what happens on this battlefield. The Lord sends loud claps of thunder, throwing the Philistines into confusion, whereupon they turn and flee the battlefield. Israel chases the Philistines nearly eight miles west. The economy of words used by Samuel to describe the battle belies the wholesale slaughter that occurs.

This battle is a reinforcement of the importance of not running from the enemy. More combatants die while fleeing than in actual face-to-face combat.

Thereafter there was peace throughout Samuels's judgeship, even with the Amorites. The territory up to Ekron and Gath restored to Israel during this period.

However, the tactics of the Philistines change. It appears they push into Israel from the north through the area possessed by the tribe of Dan. Slowly they divest the Israelites of iron weapons so that by the time of Saul only Jonathan and Saul possess weapons of iron.

This is a crucial issue for Israel. Israel faced the iron weapons of the Philistines with soft bronze edged weapons, which could not stand up under the punishment of combat. One can 'hack' or 'smite' with bronze swords and knives but they would not hold a cutting edge. Regardless of the Philistines weapons, tactics, or force of arms they could not overcome the Lord.

Lessons learned

The Lord chooses the time and place of battle. When matters are taken into the people's hands then serious losses follow. In our own daily battles, how often, do we do this?

Some examples from a common list of vices topping the list is that of addiction. Anyone fighting addiction is tempted to take matters in their own hands when they choose to abstain as the choice of tactics. Abstinence is the chief manner chosen to combat addiction. However, it is doomed to failure. The apostle Paul warns his audience that abstinence is a human response that is ineffective with addiction. (Col. 2:23)

Anytime Satan can entice mankind into useless activity that has an appearance of wisdom then the battle is won. Samuel met the situation resolved not to determine how to deal with the enemy rather to put it into the Lords hands. The daily battles are won by inquiring first what the Lord wants done.

The most important lesson is that justice will win the day. Eli and his sons had spent a generation in adultery, idolatry, and undermining the will of the people. In one day, their lives forfeit, and their heirs were doomed to pay the price.

There is a price to pay for sin. Most often, the children pay the consequences. You take two selfish people who decide they just do not love each other anymore and divorce. The children pay the carrying to their graves the sins of their parents.

Another apparent lesson is poorly armed; frightened, poorly trained individuals meet the enemy. By the Lord's help, they won the day. The Lord delights in the weak, poor, and helpless.