

POWER RELIGION

1 Samuel 4:1-11

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The elders of Israel said, “Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies” (1 Sam. 4:3).

For many Christians, the subject of the Ark of the Covenant holds immense fascination. The Ark was a gold box of acacia wood in which the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments were kept, and which represented the presence of God within the holy of holies inside Israel’s temple. The quest to find the lost Ark has become a cottage industry, especially among Christians absorbed with pre-millennial end-times schemes, spawning scores of books and videos. The Ark of the Covenant fascinates even non-believers, who consider it a talisman for accessing divine or magical power. As Marcus Brody, sidekick to Indiana Jones in the fictional movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, stated, “An army which carries the ark before it is invincible.”

1 Samuel chapter 4 begins a lengthy sequence known to scholars as “The Ark Narrative,” spanning 1 Samuel 4:1-7:2. Having focused so far on the birth and calling of Samuel to be Israel’s prophet and judge, he now disappears and is replaced by these three chapters that tell of the fate of God’s holy Ark. Here, in chapter 4, the Ark is presented as a focal point for “power religion,” that is, an idolatrous attempt to harness God’s power for our own purposes on earth.

A QUESTION NEEDING AN ANSWER

Having focused on the affairs of one small family, the family of Elkanah and Hannah, and then on the concerns of young Samuel, our vision is now broadened to consider the affairs of Israel as a whole. These affairs centered on the menacing threat of the neighboring Philistines, a sea-faring people who came from the Aegean isles. Descending on the coast of Palestine in the early 12th century B.C., the Philistines built five city states in an area roughly the same as the Gaza Strip today. The Philistines first appear in the during the judgeship of Deborah (Judg. 3:31). By the time of Samson, they have spread their influence inland and subjugated much of Israel. Samson waged bitter war against the Philistines until his betrayal and capture. Recovering his faith in the hour of his death, Samson regained his supernatural strength in order to pull down the pillars of the temple of Dagon. Dealing a major setback to the enemy, Samson killed himself along with all the Philistine lords and 3000 other people.

All this was recent history to the Israel of Samuel's time. Now the Philistines have regrouped and have begun making a push into the hill country of Ephraim, not far from Shiloh and the tabernacle. Chapter 4 begins, "Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek" (1 Sam. 4:1). Aphek was an Ephraimite town near the Philistine-Israel border; to counter this threat the Israelite army gathered at near-by Ebenezer. The account of the first battle at Ebenezer is as brief as it was depressing: "The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle" (1 Sam. 4:2).

Philistines are often considered to have been backward, barbarian people. In fact, they were as or more advanced than any of the nearby peoples, technologically, militarily, and administratively. As such they were a constant nuisance and danger to Israel. Gordon Keddie writes: "Their restless expansionism therefore afforded a perennial challenge to the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of God's covenant people... They were... the 'scourge of God', raised up to

chastise the backslidings of the Lord's people." Therefore, "Israel's relationship with the Philistines was a barometer of their relationship with God. When they experienced defeat, they saw it as the withdrawal of divine favour."¹

An example of this is provided by the first defeat at Ebenezer: "When the troops came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, 'Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?'" (1 Sam. 4:3). The elders realized that God is sovereign over all affairs, and they also understood that under the old covenant Israel's success or failure in battle was a direct sign of God's favor or disfavor. After all, when Joshua led the tribes into Canaan, it was God who gave them victory at Jericho. But when Achan sinned, it was also God who made the same army fail at Ai (Jos. 7:10). Experiencing this new failure, with four thousand lost in a single battle,² the elders turned their minds to God: "Why has the Lord defeated us?"

This defeat at Ebenezer fits in with the pattern displayed all through the book of Judges. In this dark period of Israel's history, there was a predictable cycle of events. First, Israel would forget the Lord and sin against his law. As a result, the Lord would give them over into the hands of their enemies. During this period of foreign oppression the people would sooner or later repent and turn back to the Lord. He then would send the next in the line of judges to bring victory and save them from their enemies. Before long, the people turned again from the Lord, engaging in even worse idolatry than before, prompting yet another judgment from God in the form of conquest and subjugation. This pattern continues under the wanton leadership of Eli and his sons.

Should we think that God's approach, known as "retributive justice", has changed in the New Testament, Jesus' rebukes to the church in the book of Revelation will set us straight. To the church in Ephesus, the exalted Christ wrote: "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent" (Rev. 2:5). To the Laodiceans, Jesus warned, "because you

¹ Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of I Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 61-62.

² Footnote on "thousands" issue.

are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth” (Rev. 3:16). Given God’s warnings against flagrant sin in all the Bible, the elders were right to seek an answer for the cause of God’s offense. Keddie’s comments regarding God’s rebuke to Israel is worth consider regarding the church today as well: “He called them to face the consequences of their sin so that they might change their ways and enjoy the escalation of diving blessing into a future bright with the redeeming love of their Father-God.”³

THE WRONG ANSWER: POWER RELIGION

Unfortunately, Israel’s elders did not ponder this question long enough. Nor did they go to ask Samuel, through whom God was now speaking as a prophet. Instead, they quickly turned to an action of their own devising that they thought would remedy the situation. “Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh,” they decided, “that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies” (1 Sam. 4:3). Quickly agreeing, “the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts” (1 Sam. 4:4).

There are two main ways to look at the Israelite’s action, one of which is more charitable and the other less, though both are condemning. More charitably, it is assumed by some commentators that Israel saw the Ark as a symbol of God’s covenant and therefore a pledge of his commitment to their success. John Woodhouse takes this view, arguing that “the elders were probably not so crass as to think of the ark in simple magical terms, as if its presence would itself bring God’s power to their side.”⁴ The other view asserts that this is precisely what the Israelites had in mind. In verse 4, the narrator describes God as “the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim.” The cherubim were the two golden images of angels atop the lid of the Ark. This description strengthens the idea of the elders’ belief that God’s presence and power were physically tied to the Ark. Remember that Israel’s history was replete with dramatic occasions when the presence of the Ark of the Covenant brought divine power

³ Ibid., 63.

⁴ John Woodhouse, *I Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 90.

for victory. The Ark was carried before the marching tribes of Israel in the exodus. Number 10:35 tells us that “whenever the ark set out, Moses said, ‘Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you.’” When Israel crossed the Jordan into Canaan, the Ark went before them as a sign of God’s promised victory (Jos. 3:10-11); in the great victory over mighty Jericho, the priests went before the Ark blowing trumpets and the walls of Jericho fell down (Jos. 6:4-13). It would be all too easy for the people to believe that it was the Ark that brought miraculous power rather than God himself – his presence merely symbolized by the Ark – who won Israel’s victories. Especially in a time when the people did not know the Lord (1 Sam. 3:7), it is practically inevitable that the people should think of the Ark as a divine power box. So the elders summoned to the rear for their ace-in-the-hole, the Ark that contained (they thought) the power of God for their use. Bill Arnold explains, “By fetching the ark, they want to ensure that Yahweh will indeed go with them into battle, and they think the presence of this religious symbol will ensure victory.”⁵

The exercise of religion in an attempt to manipulate or control God is common both in the Bible and in our contemporary world. Indeed, if there has been a recent generation when the kind of “power religion” practiced by the elders of Israel has been especially in vogue, that time must be now. According to the Bible, the purpose of our faith is that we might be brought to a saving knowledge of God (Jn. 17:3), that we might grow in holiness (Eph. 4:20-24), and that we might serve the Lord while we make our pilgrim journey through this difficult life into the glory he has prepared for us in heaven (1 Pet. 2:9). Knowing God, growing in holiness, and serving the Lord and his gospel are the Bible’s priorities for the Christian life. But what a far cry this view is from the motivation behind much popular Christianity and its presentation to the world.

An example is a businessman who sees little value in Christianity until he is told that God has the power to keep his company afloat. A sick person is told that God should be sought because he has power to heal. A student facing exams turns to God in prayer, because he

⁵ Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 94.

knows that God has the power to enable him to score high marks. A politician takes a sudden interest in God when a sufficient amount of pressure is applied by Christian constituents. Apart from what God can do, such people see little interest in faith or religion. In all of these cases, their actions consist of “human attempts to harness God’s power.”⁶ Ralph Davis refers to this approach to Christianity as “rabbit-foot theology”: “Our concern is not to seek God but to control him, not to submit to God but to use him. So we prefer religious magic to spiritual holiness; we are interested in success, not repentance.”⁷

A sure sign of those who practice power religion, or “rabbit-foot theology,” is an emphasis on religious and spiritual techniques. This is how the elders of Israel thought: they had a technology that would bring God’s power. They did not turn their hearts to God. They did not seek God to find what troubled him so much as to inflict them with defeat. They did not humble themselves and seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, only then looking after other things (cf. Mt. 6:33). We see a similar attitude in Christians and churches that engage in month-long prayer vigils, but never consult the Bible for how God would have them amend their ways. The reliance is on a method or strategy rather than on God in his truth and grace.

An illustration of power religion is seen in the contrast between the leaders of the First Great Awakening in America (mid-18th c.) and the Second Great Awakening (early 19th c.). The First Great Awakening arrived as an unexpected and mighty work of God as his Spirit attended the simple and faithful preaching of his Word. There was no particular technique or method to the First Great Awakening, and its leaders devoted themselves to personal godliness, to prayer for God’s will and for his sovereign grace, and to plain if fervent Bible preaching. This true revival was a sovereign outpouring of God’s Spirit that fundamentally changed the character of the American people. But in the Second Great Awakening the emphasis was shifted to the machinery of revivalism that has dominated our religious culture ever since: altar calls, numbers-driven fund-raising, and frequently bizarre and manipulative evangelistic tactics. Christians

⁶ Woodhouse, *Ist Samuel*, 85.

⁷ Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 43.

today have followed the Israelite elders' lead in seeking devices for seizing God's power instead of turning to God himself and humbling ourselves in seeking his grace.

The entry of the Ark of the Covenant into the army camp at Ebenezer is particularly telling: "And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God" (1 Sam. 4:4). The Ark was the sign of God's presence, and there as his attendants were the two men most offensive to God: the wicked sons of Eli. Inside the Ark were the tablets of God's law, which Hophni and Phinehas had brazenly broken even while serving as Israel's priests. This separation of God's holy requirements from God's blessings is characteristic of power religion; the whole point is to get God to serve us rather than for us to serve him. If the defeat in battle had not reminded them of their need to be right with God, the presence of the Ark of the Covenant should surely have done so. Seeing the Ark, Israel's hosts should have remembered God's law, considered their own sin, and cast themselves upon God's mercy symbolized through the mercy seat atop the Ark. The mercy seat was the lid where the sacrificial lamb's blood – looking forward to the cross of Jesus Christ – would be sprinkled to cover Israel's sin before God's sight. But, instead, Israel was so presumptuous of God's favor that they saw no danger in having the two law-breaking priests as escorts for God's holy Ark.

Such a cavalier assumption of God's blessing is especially common of nations during time of war. It is a little known fact that the German Army belt-buckles issued by Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime carried the inscription "Got mitt uns," meaning, "God is with us." In the American Civil War, both sides could be commended and condemned for their appeal to God's help. Southerners cried out for God's help while they closed their own ears to the cries of their Negro slaves. Northerners prided themselves as servants of God's will as they pillaged and burned their way through Georgia and South Carolina. The point is that if we are to seek God's mighty help in battle, we should seriously face God and seek to honor him by heeding the rebukes, corrections, and instructions found in the Bible.

This coming week America inaugurates a new President. Much of the furor has been over President-elect Obama's invitation for an

evangelical preacher to pray at the ceremony. The news media has fluttered with the opinions of various interest groups regarding this move, with the effect that Eugene Robinson, the homosexual bishop whose appointment has so divided the Episcopal Church, has been invited to pray at another event. The Bible tells us to pray for our leaders (1 Tim. 2:1-2). But does anyone consider what God thinks of the prayers that will be spoken for the new administration? How reminiscent it will be of Hophni and Phinehas arriving with the Ark of the Covenant if a Christian minister glibly prays for God's blessing, with no reference to repentance or appeals for divine mercy, on our new leaders who have publicly committed their administration to moral confusion, sexual perversity, and expanded freedoms for the murder of unborn children.

THE FAILURE OF POWER RELIGION

It is as unlikely that the elders of Israel gave any thought to what God might be thinking of their actions. They had the divine rabbit's foot, and "as soon as the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded" (1 Sam. 4:5).

The passage concludes with the results of Israel's resort to power religion without repentance before God. The first result was the false confidence of the Israelite army. Their "mighty shout," which echoed so loudly as to be heard in the Philistine camp two miles away, is reminiscent of earlier holy wars in which Israel had triumphed (cf. Jos. 6:5; Judg. 7:20). They believed that God was with them as before, when in fact God had not ordained the battle they were fighting, had not promised his presence, and would not act to protect them from their foes.

This arrival of the Ark had effects not only on the Israelites, inciting them to false confidence, but it also had its effects in the Philistine camp:

And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, "What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" And when they learned that the ark of the LORD had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid, for they said, "A god has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods

who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight” (1 Sam. 4:6-9).

The Philistines had heard of the Ark from the mighty power God exerted when the Ark led Moses and the Israelites from Egypt. They thought of the Ark in pagan terms, and in this case they were right. The fear of the Ark came upon them, just as the Israelites intended, but it was not a fear that came from God but rather the fear of a mighty tactical innovation, according to their superstitious thinking. Rather than flee in terror, they instead resolved to put forth their best possible effort. The Israelite’s exercise in power religion had merely incited a concentration of the Philistines’ moral courage: “Take courage, and be men, O Philistines... be men and fight!”

This episode shows that when it comes to manipulating or exciting the carnal passions of men, the world is adept as Christians, and even more able to muster worldly power. Unless our power in cultural and spiritual warfare is truly the might of God, directed by his Word, motivated by his grace, and animated by his Spirit, then the world’s power is easily able to overcome our religious pretensions.

The third result was the defeat of Israel in battle with calamitous effects: “So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers” (1 Sam. 4:10). Alarmed by the presence of the Ark, the Philistine attack swept the Israelite army away and captured the Ark of the Covenant. But in Israel’s defeat, God’s purpose was established in accordance with his prophecy to Samuel: “The ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died” (1 Sam. 4:11). So ended the rule of the house of Eli. Also ended was the prominence of Shiloh as the center of God’s covenant religion; in pursuit the Philistines overran and destroyed Israel’s religious capital. Psalm 78 explains: God “forsook his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mankind, and delivered his power to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe. He gave his people over to the sword and vented his wrath on his heritage” (Ps. 78:60-62).

Thus ended the era of the judges, just as God planned for the sake of the kingship he would establish through Samuel. For whatever Israel

and the Philistines might think, the capture of the Ark and the defeat of Israel's army did not signify the overthrow of God. The elders had thought that by bringing the ark they ensured that God would defend his honor; little did they realize that God intended to defend his honor by sending the Philistines to exact judgment on the household of his idolatrous people.

THE ALTERNATIVE TO POWER RELIGION

What is the alternative power religion? It is the religion of the Bible, which Martin Luther summarized as the "theology of the cross." Biblical religion is not a series of techniques for manipulating God's good-will or harnessing God's power. Rather it is a humble appeal for God's mercy and grace, which he has offered through the priestly ministry of his Son, Jesus. Indeed, it was because of the failure of Israel's priests, like Hophni and Phinehas, that God sent his own Son to save us from sin and restore us to his blessing.

The Ark of the Covenant presented a picture of Christ in his perfect work – fulfilling God's law for us and shedding his atoning blood – so that God's presence and favor are with us through our union with Christ through faith. This is why the modern-day quests to find the Ark are misguided: the Ark has been fulfilled in the coming of Christ. John the Baptist announced this when he said of Jesus: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn. 1:29). True religion is that which comes to God humbly and confessing our sin, trusting in the Lamb of God's precious blood, shed by Christ for sin on the cross, then seeking God's glory in our lives and seeking God's power that we might do his will and not our own.

Undoubtedly, you want God's power to help you with your struggles and trials, and in its proper place this desire is good and God-honoring. But have you realized that you must first deal with God himself? You must come before him on his terms, facing the demand for perfect righteousness that his holiness requires. This is the realization that the arrival of the Ark should have inspired, for the Ark was designed to house God's holy law and also to provide the means of cleansing through the shed blood of the lamb. Realizing this, the Israelite army might then have cried out not with loud cries of carnal enthusiasm but with laments for their sins and cries to God

for mercy, a sound far more terrifying to the world and to demons than the cheers which rang from Israel's camp. With Christ in our midst through faith in his cross, we truly can prevail in the holy war against Satan and sin, knowing with Paul that nothing in heaven or on earth "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

Israel's elders revealed their attitude in the use of a single telling word. They called for the Ark, trusting "that *it* may come among us and save us" (1 Sam. 4:3). They were trusting *it* to save them – their box, their God-machine. Is there an *it* that you are trusting in the place of God – some technique, some routine, some ritual, some spiritual approach of your own that in truth is designed to keep you from truly facing God? There is no *it*, no *thing*, by which we are saved – not even good things like our baptism, our church membership, or our knowledge of the Bible and theology. We are never saved by an *it* or a *thing*, but only by *him*: the sovereign God of justice and mercy, who requires us to repent and be changed, to believe and seek his grace. Are you wrestling with some struggle, some failure, some proof that you need divine power for your salvation? Turn to God for mercy and grace in Jesus Christ. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts," God says; "let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:7).