

- e. The broad decline of Israel in the centuries following the conquest of Canaan was also reflected in the circumstances surrounding the tabernacle. During the time of Joshua's leadership, when the land was being divided, the tabernacle was installed at Shiloh near Bethel in the region of Ephraim. The name *Shiloh* is derived from the verb *shalah*, "to be at ease," suggesting both Israel's goal of secure, prosperous rest in the land and Yahweh's settled presence among His people. The tabernacle remained at Shiloh through the period of the Judges prior to the monarchy (cf. Joshua 18:1-8; Judges 18:31; 1 Samuel 1:1-3; Psalm 78:54-60), later being moved to Nob, probably during Saul's reign (ref. 1 Samuel 21-22).

The deepening apostasy within Israelite society following Joshua's death found a counterpart in the priesthood and the ministry of Yahweh's sanctuary at Shiloh. The text highlights this by its consideration of the priestly ministrations of Eli and his two sons. Their ministry occurred near the end of the time of the Judges (circa 1100 B.C.) when Samuel appeared as Israel's last judge and the point of transition into the monarchy.

- 1) These events are recorded in the beginning chapters of the book of First Samuel. The text portrays Eli's sons as vile, callous and brazen men – men who violated women at the entrance to the tabernacle and made a mockery of Yahweh's sacrifices, turning them into opportunities for extortion and abuse (ref. 1 Samuel 2:12-17). Though serving as His priests, they were devoid of all knowledge and fear of the Lord. For his part, Eli knew of his sons' blasphemous attitudes and actions and essentially looked the other way. Though the narrative has him rebuking them at one point (2:22-25), it emphasizes his unwillingness to hold them accountable. Eli feared his sons more than God (ref. 2:27-29, 3:10-13).

This circumstance and the Lord's reaction to it provided the occasion for Samuel's emergence as God's preeminent prophet at that time. Having been devoted to Yahweh by his mother, Samuel grew up under Eli's care serving God in His sanctuary. One night, as he was falling asleep, the Lord spoke to Samuel and reaffirmed to him the word of judgment He had previously revealed to Eli through another of His prophets (3:1-14; cf. 2:27-36). Eli and his sons had made a mockery of their priestly service and now Yahweh was going to judge them and their descendants.

- All three men would soon die – Hophni and Phinehas on the same day – as a sign of judgment upon Eli's house: From that time forward none of his male descendants would reach old age.
- And yet, in a fitting irony, Eli's house would continue to serve in the priesthood, but only for the sake of punishment. Beginning with Eli himself, his family's priestly service was to be a matter of overwhelming pain and sorrow as they would be compelled to watch Yahweh bring distress to His dwelling place.

At the same time, the curse upon Eli's house wasn't the Lord's final word: He was going to raise up for Himself a faithful priest who would act with integrity on His behalf. Eli's house was to be made desolate in humiliation, but the household of this priest would endure in faithfulness before Yahweh forever (2:35).

- Though many regard *Samuel* as the first referent of this promise, it is most explicitly associated with *Zadok* – a descendent of Aaron through Eleazar (Eli was a descendent of Ithamar) – and his appointment over Abiathar (of Eli's household) to serve as chief priest in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 2:26-35). Zadok's house continued to hold the high priesthood up until the destruction of the temple and the exile of Judah (2 Chronicles 31:10).
- But God's promise looked ultimately to a priest not associated with Aaron, but with Melchizedek. Jesus would come as the quintessential faithful priest performing all that was in Yahweh's heart and soul. Through Him, in turn, Yahweh would raise up an everlasting line of faithful priests walking before His anointed forever (cf. Jeremiah 33:14-22 with 1 Peter 2:1-10 and Revelation 5:1-10, 20:6; also Ezekiel 40:1-44:16 (esp. 40:45-47, 43:18-19, and 44:9-16) and 47:1-12 with Revelation 22:1-2).

- 2) The initial fulfillment of the Lord's woeful pronouncement came in the context of a particular battle between Israel and their Philistine adversaries. When the armies of Philistia appeared to prevail, the elders of Israel sent messengers to Shiloh with the appeal that the ark of the covenant be brought onto the battlefield. When the ark arrived, the whole camp of Israel let out a resounding shout of triumph, believing Yahweh's presence with them meant that their victory was assured (4:1-5).

Instead, the unimaginable happened: Israel was routed in battle, Yahweh's priests Hophni and Phinehas were cut down and the ark of the covenant was taken captive by the Philistines. When a messenger from the battlefield returned to Shiloh with the news, Eli fell over backward in his chair, broke his neck and died (4:10-18).

The Lord's promised affliction of His dwelling had begun, and the significance of it was declared to Israel by the name Phinehas' wife gave to her newborn son. When she learned of the loss of her husband and father-in-law and the capture of the ark, she immediately went into labor. And though her attendants sought to encourage her with the news of a male child, she would not be comforted. She understood the meaning of the tragic report brought to her: The glory had departed from Israel; thus her son would carry the name *Ichabod* – “no glory” (4:19-22).

The departure of Yahweh's glory signified the departure of Yahweh Himself. For, from the day the tabernacle was consecrated at Sinai, God had manifested His presence by His glory-cloud – His *Shekinah* – residing between the wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies (cf. Exodus 25:17-22, 40:33-35; Leviticus 16:2). The ark of the covenant was the ark of His presence; the capture of the ark meant Yahweh had gone into exile.

But since God's dwelling was inside the veil, it wasn't the ark's capture that initiated the condition of "ichabod"; it was its removal from the sanctuary. In effect, the glory began to depart from Israel the moment the priests carried the ark from its appointed place, *repeating the sin of the golden calf by seeking to manipulate Yahweh into granting victory*. What transpired on the battlefield only made obvious the Lord's departure.

God had promised desolation and degradation to Eli's house and distress upon His own dwelling, and the priestly ministration provided the point of connection between those parallel judgments. The priesthood at Shiloh was devastated by the deaths of Eli and his sons, but this tragic circumstance only punctuated the frightening fact that the glory had departed from Israel. For the moment, there was no one to minister before the Lord in His sanctuary, but the truth was that it didn't matter. The tabernacle was now nothing more than a religious shrine: Israel had removed the ark of Yahweh's presence from His sanctuary, and He testified to His departure from His sanctuary-land by delivering the ark to the Philistines.

The judgment that began with Eli and his sons would continue in some form through the final destruction of the theocratic kingdom in 586 B.C. Thus the return of the exiled ark from Philistia wouldn't put an end to the estrangement that its departure signified. The tabernacle would later be moved to Nob, but without the ark; the sentence of *ichabod* remained. Later, the affliction of the sanctuary was heightened by Saul's hand as he slaughtered Yahweh's priests and every living thing in Nob in an act of paranoid rage (ref. 21:1-22:19). Truly the house of Eli was living to see the distress of Yahweh's dwelling.

- 3) Following its capture, the ark remained in Philistine hands for seven months, during which time it was moved from city to city as the Lord punished those who possessed it. He struck the Philistines with tumors and other afflictions, putting His hand heavily upon them until they decided to return the ark to Israel (5:1-12). On the counsel of their diviners, the Philistines sent it toward Beth-shemesh on a new cart and included a box containing five gold tumors (images of boils) and gold mice as a guilt offering on behalf of the five Philistine princes and their cities (6:1-12).
- 4) As the people of Beth-shemesh saw the ark approaching, they exulted greatly and offered multiple sacrifices to the Lord. But when some dared to gaze into the ark, God struck the city with a great smiting and the ark was immediately sent to Kiriath-jearim (6:13-21).

- 5) The text gives no reason for the decision to move the ark to Kiriath-jearim, but historical data indicates that this place was an ancient sacred site. This, together with its proximity to Beth-shemesh, perhaps made it an appealing destination under the circumstances. Whatever the actual reason, the Scripture notes that the citizens of Kiriath-jearim were happy to take possession of the ark and they subsequently selected the house of a man named Abinadab to be its resting place (7:1-2).

*The most astonishing thing about this episode is that the ark was not returned to Shiloh and the tabernacle.* Again the text is silent as to the reason; what the narrative is concerned to communicate is that the ark remained estranged from its appointed place in the Holy of Holies. “Ichabod” continued though the ark again resided within Israel’s borders.

And so it would be for the next twenty years until the rise of King David and his conquest of Jerusalem. Even when the tabernacle was relocated to Nob from Shiloh, the ark remained in the house of Abinadab at Kiriath-jearim. Samuel, the last of Israel’s judges, would not reunite ark and sanctuary and neither would Israel’s first king. To the contrary, Saul acted to further fulfill Yahweh’s promise to distress His dwelling place in the sight of Eli’s house.

The profound significance of this circumstance (as well as its remediation by David) is easily missed unless it is viewed from the perspective of the tabernacle’s function in relation to the covenant.

- The covenant at Sinai defined and established the formal relationship between God and Israel as Father and son.
- The intimacy implied by this relationship was to be expressed by Yahweh’s presence in the midst of His people. Thus, fundamental to the covenant and its administration was the provision of a sanctuary and mediating priesthood (ref. again Exodus 25:1-8 and 29:42-46 with 15:17).
- Yahweh was present with His son in connection with His sanctuary, but specifically in relation to the Holy of Holies and its sole furnishing. The ark of the covenant was the ark of Yahweh’s presence. Without the ark, it didn’t matter if the duly appointed priests continued to perform their prescribed service within the tabernacle; under that circumstance their ministry was merely vain religious exercise inside an empty shrine.

Yahweh’s absence from His sanctuary indicated His estrangement from His son and a perverting of the covenant itself. Israel had relentlessly departed from its Father since the days at Sinai and now the Father affirmed that estrangement by His own departure. Nevertheless, Yahweh’s promise to Abraham would stand: He would bring restoration, but only through Judah’s royal seed; he would reunite the ark and sanctuary in the place the Lord had determined to put His name.