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UDK 26-243.5:82  
27-236.5:82  
27-277

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29162/ANAFORA.v6i1.6>

**Izvorni znanstveni članak**  
**Original Research Article**

Primljeno 12. travnja 2019.  
*Received: 12 April 2019*

Prihvaćeno 7. svibnja 2019.  
*Accepted: 7 May 2019*

## WHO CAN STAND BEFORE A HOLY GOD? LITERARY ARTISTRY AND THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION IN THE ARK NARRATIVE

**Abstract**

This article advocates for an interpretation of biblical stories that takes into account their nature and the way in which they are told. The argument begins with observing the predicament of the biblical interpreter in using contemporary historical and/or literary methods to interpret an ancient text expected to convey a theological message. It then offers a close reading of the Ark Narrative (1 Sam. 4:1b–7:1) which exemplifies how theological conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the story alone once its literary structure and dramatic development are identified.

**Key words:** Biblical interpretation, Biblical stories, Historical criticism, Literary criticism, Ark Narrative, 1 Samuel 4:1b–7:1

## Introduction

The use of ancient Hebrew stories in present-day Christian theological reflection ought to be an issue of concern to both the critic and the theologian. Typically, the so-called “hermeneutical gap” – cultural, linguistic, historical and geographical differences – that separate olden writings from twenty-first century readers poses a challenge to exegetists of biblical and non-biblical texts in equal measure. Consequently, methodologies that address this issue have long been developed and many a time the “bridging” of this gap has involved the promulgation of theories and conjectures that have less to do with the stories being interpreted and more to do with the concerns of the interpreters themselves. Moreover, for the biblical interpreter, the issue is further complicated by the assumption that, together with the historical and literary information given, there also ought to be a deeper theological meaning that biblical stories carry. There are at least two clear consequences to which such presuppositions lead.

First, the theological value of biblical stories retelling ancient Israel’s life is often seen as being contingent upon their truth-value as historical reports. This “historical” approach to biblical interpretation is based on certain assumptions about the way in which texts and language function. Language expresses ideas and facts that are familiar to the world and time of the author, and then the job of the interpreter is to establish links between the language of texts and the extra-linguistic contexts in which such texts were created. Only in this way the intention an author had in creating a text may be recovered; and since within this approach to interpretation finding what the author of a text meant is the basic condition to interpreting felicitously that text, the value of the meaning the interpreter finds increases or decreases in direct ratio to the amount of information pertaining to the referential context, that is, the extra-textual socio-historical milieu, the interpreter excavates. Consequently, within this approach, the work of interpreting a biblical story becomes an attempt to gather all available historical information for the purpose of re-constructing as precisely as possible the extra-textual socio-historical context within which that story was first told.

What happens, however, when such extra-textual contexts cannot be determined due to lack of extra-textual evidence? And what if the clues that the text provides to the extra-textual socio-historical milieu are not enough to reconstruct a faithful image of the world to which the story refers? What if the truth-value of a text cannot be determined despite the best efforts to reconstruct

the historical situation it describes? If such was the case, would not the confining of the significance of a story to its immediate extra-textual socio-historical milieu restrict the meaning potential that story has?

The alternative offered by many who would subscribe without hesitation to this critique of historical methodologies, and the second option to which reference was made earlier, is that biblical stories must be treated and studied as literary creations. The argument in this camp is that biblical stories are just that, stories, and that any theological meaning they convey is made available via the artistry of storytelling they display. Admittedly, this view represents a healthy shift toward a literary approach in the analysis of biblical stories, a methodology which has at least one clear advantage over historical analyses – it focuses the attention of the interpreter on the text itself rather than on the world behind the text. However, the literary approach also carries within itself the danger of over imposing on the text analyzed structures and patterns common to contemporary literature that are completely foreign to the world of the Bible. These ancient writings, that is, the Hebrew Bible, simply do not correspond exactly to literary types familiar to us today. Therefore, although in approaching the biblical material the contemporary reader will unavoidably draw methodologically on familiar patterns, attention should be given to how biblical narratives themselves suggest a mode of reading.

In the pages below I propose to do just that – to look at a story depicting a conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:1b–7:1) on its own terms, taking into account the fact that in ancient Hebrew storytelling the dividing line between the “historical” and the “literary” observed above is blurrier than the contemporary interpretive methodologies seem to accept. Undoubtedly, the narrative material in view presents itself to us as history. It reports events and remembers people from the past, and positions all these within a time-place framework. However, at the same time it exhibits characteristics specific to literary works – it brings together all the elements necessary in order to create a coherent story, e.g., characters, plot, and an ending. Thus, my proposal to remain faithful to the nature of the telling by analyzing it on its own terms will necessarily identify the manner of the telling and only subsequently note the theological conclusions to which it leads.

## The Story

The story selected for this hermeneutical exercise (1 Sam. 4:1b–7:1) has been established in critical scholarship as the first part of a so-called “Ark Narrative” (the second part being in 2 Sam. 6:2-23) (Rost 6-34) and represents literary material presumed to be one of the hypothetical sources behind the “Deuteronomistic History” (Noth 1-110). The episode refers to a particular period in the lives of the Israelites and their arch enemies, the Philistines. Specifically, it relates a series of events during which the “Ark of the Covenant,” the Israelites’ most sacred cult object, becomes intertwined with the lives of the Philistines in an unexpected way. Chapter 4 begins on the battlefield at Ebenezer, where the Israelite army is facing defeat at the hands of the Philistines. We are told how, in an attempt to change the fate of the war in their favor, the Israelites bring the Ark of the Covenant to the frontline and how the Ark is lost to the Philistines during the ensuing battle (vv. 1b-11). The story then continues by reporting the events that take place in Israel after the battle, the events that culminate with the death of Eli (4:18) and conclude with a sad comment placed on the lips of Eli’s daughter-in-law: “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured” (4:22 NRSV). In chapter 5, following the whereabouts of the Ark, the story shifts to the land of the Philistines. We learn how the Philistine lords move the Ark from Ashdod to Gath and to Ekron because of an epidemic plague of mysterious unspecified tumors (Eichler 157-165) that it brings wherever it goes. Moving the Ark around, however, does not solve their problem and in chapter 6 we read that the Philistine lords, by now at their wits’ end, return the Ark to the Israelites in an attempt to escape the plague that became rampant through their territory. Finally, between these two plots, which could be easily titled “The capture of the Ark” and “The return of the Ark” there is an interesting section at the beginning of chapter 5 which describes how the Ark is placed by the Philistines as a trophy in the temple of Dagon, their god, and how this action results in the destruction of Dagon’s statue.

This story suits well my purposes here: it is a self-contained narration and it is of manageable length. It is short enough to be tackled within the confines of an article and it is distinct enough within its literary context to justify its analysis without making reference to the surrounding material in the book of Samuel, to which it is only loosely connected.

## The Storytelling

If we were to employ modern concepts in order to describe the way the ancient author tells this tale, we would say that (s)he is both a “historian” and a “dramatist.” As a historian would do, the teller provides plenty of “historical” clues (Martin 132): facts, names, numbers, and most importantly, a sequence of events, presented in what appears to be the chronological order of their occurrence. These events are linked together in a simple plot, following a cause-and-effect logic, and the resulting narration has the appearance of a historical account that describes the development and resolution of a specific conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines. At the pinnacle of the story (5:1-5) (McCarter 25), however, the conflict takes on mythopoetic characteristics as it is no longer a battle between humans but a confrontation between gods. YHWH, the god of Israel, who, typically for Hebrew storytelling, is represented here by an inanimate object (Sternberg 111) – the Ark of the Covenant, utterly defeats the Philistines’ god Dagon. This conflict, we know from the larger narrative, is part of an on-going greater struggle for mastery involving on the human side the Israelites and the surrounding pagan nations and on the divine side YHWH and the other deities of the land.

Furthermore, as reflected in the basic structure of the narrative, in telling the story, its author acts rather like a dramatist. First, the sequence of events is arranged in such a way that actions revolve continuously around the Ark of the Covenant and its movements. In fact, due to this emphasis, the impression is conveyed that any and all actions reported are determined by “actions” of the Ark, which seems to be “the only ‘character’ who acts in the story” (Brueggemann 28). Second, the author chooses to narrate only certain crucial, exciting moments of the conflict. Unlike a historian, (s)he passes over most of what had transpired by simply remarking that: “the Ark had been in Philistine territory for seven months” (6:1). We are told only of circumstances directly related to the movements of the Ark, and this is done in the form of a play, i.e., in scenic narrative style, whereby episodes are providing snapshots of selected momentous aspects of the tale. These snapshots come together to form the larger plot, but it is left to the reader to fill in eventual temporal or spatial gaps that may exist between the scenes.

Most importantly, the conclusion to which the interlacing of the historical and dramatic elements leads is a theological one – although in the beginning the impression is given that this is a story about the defeat of Israel, by the time the author moves the conflict from the human to the divine plane the ques-

tions raised are clearly theological (Brueggemann 33-34, McCarter 109, Klein 45-46): Is YHWH present with Israel? Can YHWH save them from the Philistines? What does the loss of the Ark mean in regard to YHWH's supremacy and stance? The theological crisis ensuing after the capture of the Ark prompts the reader to ask questions about YHWH's nature, his power and his character. And the answer to these questions is gradually revealed as both the Israelites and the Philistines painfully learn about YHWH's sovereignty over humans and gods alike (Polzin 65). Thus, taking into account both dimensions of narration, the story may be outlined logically as a dramatic progression, which overlays the chronological sequence of events, leading not only to a historical resolution but also to a theological conclusion. As evident in the table below, there are three identical dramatic arches, corresponding to the three scenes presented in the story, which build toward three theological conclusions.

Sequence of Events	Dramatic Progression	Theological Development
The Israelites are dominated by the Philistines (4:1b-2)	Challenge	Who has the mastery among men and gods?
The Ark is brought to the battlefield (4:3-9)	Counter-challenge	
The Israelites are defeated and the Ark is captured (4:10-11)	Culmination	
The people of Shiloh cry, Eli dies, Ichabod is born (4:12-21)	Consequence	
“The glory has departed from Israel, for the Ark of God has been captured” (4:22)	Conclusion	
The Ark is placed in Dagon's temple (5:1-2)	Challenge	YHWH has the mastery among gods.
Dagon is found fallen face to the ground in front of the Ark (5:3a)	Counter-challenge	
Dagon must be lifted back to his place by humans (5:3b)	Culmination	
Dagon is found fallen and mutilated on the threshold of the temple (5:4)	Consequence	
Dagon's priests no longer step on the temple's threshold (5:5)	Conclusion	
The Philistines are infected with an unidentified plague (5:6)	Challenge	YHWH has the mastery among men.
The Ark is moved around in Philistine territory (5:7-10)	Counter-challenge	
The Philistines in Ekron demand that the Ark is sent back to Israel (5:11-12)	Culmination	
The Ark goes back to Israel. (6:1-12) The Israelites in Beth-shemesh mishandle the Ark, the Lord punishes the Israelites, the Ark comes to its final stop in Kiriath-jearim (6:13-7:1)	Consequences	
“Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?” (6:20b)	Conclusion	

## The Meaning of the Story

Building on the dramatic progression and the theological conclusions evidenced above, a theological interpretation of the story is both possible and necessary. In what follows, two competing views regarding YHWH's nature are outlined and in the process the theological conclusions proposed above will be substantiated.

### *Raising the Issue*

History shows that in ancient times the issue of mastery of one nation over another, and concomitantly of one god over another, was decided on the battlefield. It was there that the physical and spiritual resources of a people were pitted against those of another and the future servitude or mastery of each was placed in the balance. Similarly, in 1 Samuel 4:1b–7:1 the issue of mastery comes into especially sharp focus. The story begins with the battle between the Israelites and the Philistines, but as soon as the Ark is brought into the picture, in tune with theological themes developed throughout the surrounding narrative material (Blenkinsopp 354–366), the struggle becomes markedly larger – it also involves the deities of the two peoples. The whole issue of the battle (who will serve whom?) unfolds well in the words the Philistines tell one another: “Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews as they have been to you. Be men and fight!” (4:9 NIV). Yet, this is no conventional battle, for as soon as we get to the heart of the story – the defeat of Dagon, the god of the Philistines (5:1–5) – it becomes obvious that the question is which one of the gods will have the mastery. So then, mastery is the overriding issue of the story. This issue is raised from the very beginning and is to be resolved no other way but through further combat.

### *The View of Israel*

The Israelites are the ones who in the beginning start the battle. There is no other way to approach an issue of mastery. In fact, Israel has no choice but to fight. Any sign of weakness means future servitude. Therefore, seeing their defeat in the first stage, the Israelites had no choice but to bring the Ark into the battle. In other words, they are willing to put the mastery of their God, and their army, to a final test. Following the arrival of the Ark on the battlefield the Israelites are absolutely confident that they will be victorious. Therefore, they shout with enthusiasm, probably expecting that such a release of “old primitive energies for war” (Brueggemann 31) will bring about the same glorious result they had experienced under the walls of Jericho (Josh. 6:5, 10). However, the problem with their view is the assumption, implied in their gesture, that they

can manipulate YHWH's power as they manipulate his Ark. That is probably why God permits defeat and the capture of the Ark. Such a result is totally unexpected, and it raises a host of theological questions. The Israelites justified the first defeat by assuming that YHWH had been missing from the battlefield. However, this time the Ark was there, and thus, YHWH must have been there. Therefore, there remain only two explanations for the defeat, both of which lead to a theological crisis: (1) YHWH is weaker than the Philistines' god, or (2) YHWH permits such a loss. The narrator at this point gives no hint toward an answer. The second option will prove correct only as the plot develops.

Described in detail, the result of the loss of the Ark (for the narrator makes this very clear in v. 18) is the death of Eli, the one who had led Israel for forty years. This brings further pain and distress, so much so, that Eli's pregnant daughter-in-law goes into the labor and gives birth to a child before the normal time of delivery comes. And the scene closes with a theological reflection, which the narrator puts on the lips of the dying widow of Phinehas – as if he wants to point to a “dying” Israel. The affirmation she makes, “the glory has departed from Israel, for the Ark of God has been captured,” points to a hopeless, helpless, desolated Israel.

The story, however, does not end here. The Israelites have to learn the full lesson. Seeing what happens to the Philistines, the Israelites must have learned about YHWH's mastery over the Philistines, their enemies, but it takes another painful experience – the death of the people in Beth Shemesh – in order for them to understand that YHWH has absolute mastery. Only at this point do they stop treating the Ark as a means to manipulate God and his power and recognize his sovereignty and might. Finally, only now the right attitude of awe and worship before YHWH is expressed: “Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?” (6:20).

### *The View of the Philistines*

The Philistines also have to learn a lesson. Interestingly enough, in the beginning their view of YHWH appears to be more correct than that of the Israelites. They show fear and awe at the news that the Ark/YHWH has come to the battlefield, and this is expressively articulated in language that recalls the Exodus experience. It is as if they are the ones who were commanded to remember it and not the Israelites (e.g. Josh. 4). However, the attitude of the Philistines throughout the remainder of the story may be described as “doubt.” They doubt even what they themselves know and say about YHWH and thus they always seem to test him.



In the beginning, even though they know about YHWH's might (4:8), they still dare to fight. In their bold attitude one may almost hear the reproach Goliath brings to YHWH and the ranks of Israel later on (q.v. 1 Sam. 17). Upon what does their boldness rest? Upon the Philistines' skill and bravery to fight (4:9). Surprisingly, the outcome of the battle seems to prove them right. They are the masters now and Israel is subjugated. Moreover, the Ark is captured, so those "mighty gods" they were afraid of are also subdued. That must be the attitude and belief behind their act of placing the Ark in the temple of Dagon. However, the real struggle for the Philistines begins only at this point. First, Dagon proves powerless before the Ark. The ambiguity that characterizes their attitude is evident in the attempt to restore the statue of Dagon to its place, but when the head and hands of Dagon are cut off, we are left with no doubt as to who has the mastery among gods. A god that has no head and hands cannot see, hear or act, and a temple whose threshold has been desecrated is no longer of use to its worshippers. The Philistines understood this well, for by refusing to step on the temple's threshold they are, in effect, deliberately denying Dagon's power to protect.

Nevertheless, even after losing their temple, the Philistines continue to doubt. When the "hand of the Lord" intervenes they still "test" YHWH by sending the Ark from one city to another. Even when the plague is so severe that the decision to let the Ark return to its place is made, they still doubt whether it is the Lord who afflicts them (6:9). In the end however the Philistine lords must recognize YHWH's mastery for they see the calves going to Beth Shemesh; and since the Ark (the trophy) is returned, they implicitly recognize the mastery of the Israelites as well. That is clearly understood as they witness the Israelites rejoicing and sacrificing.

### *The Resolution of the Issue*

The issue of mastery debated in the story and the two views (Israelite and Philistine) developed throughout is finally brought to an end. However, the end appears to be different than what the characters presented in the story would have expected. The beginning of the story seems to present a weak, absent God. The Israelites and the Philistines, and even more, the reader did not expect that the Ark would be captured in the first place. And when this happens it creates a theological crisis which is solved gradually as the story unfolds. The struggle for mastery presented in this narrative is part of a larger on-going struggle that involves YHWH/Israel on the one hand and the Philistines/other deities on the other hand. Answering

the theological issues raised, the story depicts the total mastery of YHWH over his people, and over their counterparts, the Philistines and their god.

### **Conclusion**

The hermeneutical exercise presented above has had but one purpose – to undertake a reading of the story of the Ark without being overly dependent on any particular methodological stance, be it historical or literary. Thus, on the one hand, although the historical value of the story is by no means underplayed in the interpretation, the lack of historical data pertaining to the extra-textual context evidently poses no challenge in an analysis that focuses on the obvious dramatic development of the story and establishes its meaning from it. The meaning-making power of the biblical story in this case does not depend on the measure of historical proof the interpreter can access. On the other hand, the literary analysis offered has followed closely the sequence of events presented in the narrative and has identified the manner of the telling. And although in doing so I have drawn on familiar concepts and used these to explain the way the story is told, this has been done without superimposing on it literary structures and characteristics that would have been unfamiliar to the ancient story-teller. As such, the theological conclusions drawn are based on the story itself, its content and the manner in which it is told. This, I propose, ought to be the scope of interpretation, methodological preferences notwithstanding.

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# TKO MOŽE STATI PRED SVETOGA BOGA? LITERARNO UMIJEĆE I TEOLOŠKA IMAGINACIJA U PRIPOVIJESTI O KOVČEGU

## Sažetak

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