

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Samuel 6

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

First Samuel 6 narrates the return of the ark of the covenant from Philistine territory to Israelite soil after seven months of divine judgment upon Philistia. The Philistine priests and diviners, acting on their own theological instincts, devise a test to determine whether the plagues afflicting their cities are genuinely the hand of Israel's God or merely coincidental. They construct a new cart, harness two nursing cows that have never been yoked, place the ark upon the cart along with a guilt offering of golden tumors and golden mice, and send it toward Beth-shemesh. The unerring path of the cows — lowing as they go, turning neither to the left nor the right, returning to their calves not at all — vindicates the Philistines' worst fear: the hand of the LORD is real, sovereign, and operative. When the ark arrives at Beth-shemesh, the Levites receive it with burnt offerings and offerings. The five Philistine lords witness the event and return to Ekron. The chapter closes with a sobering and abrupt divine judgment: the men of Beth-shemesh look into the ark, and seventy of them are struck dead. The survivors ask the question that closes the chapter and opens the next section of the narrative: *"Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?"*

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to confront both His enemies and His people with the absolute, unmanageable holiness of His presence. The Philistines have treated the ark as a political and military trophy; the men of Beth-shemesh treat the returned ark as an occasion for curiosity and familiarity. Both errors receive divine correction. The chapter's intent is to produce holy fear — not terror that drives away, but the recognition that proximity to God is not a casual matter, that the LORD is not domesticated by culture, nationality, or religious heritage, and that His holiness is neither Philistine property nor Israelite entitlement. God is pressing this claim on the reader: *I am holy, and I will be treated as holy — not as a tool to be tested, a trophy to be stored, or a box to be inspected.*

Subject Sentence: The ark's return exposes the LORD's untameable holiness — to Philistia and Israel alike.

Primary Claim: God's holiness is not tribal property or religious heritage — it is an active, sovereign reality that demands reverence from every people who encounter His presence, enemy and covenant people alike. He will not be managed, tested, or handled casually,

and this chapter presses that demand with lethal seriousness upon both Philistia and Beth-shemesh.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature and purpose of the guilt offering (vv. 3–9)

The Philistine priests recommend a guilt offering (*ʿāšām*) — the same term used in Leviticus for reparation offerings made to the LORD by Israelites. This has generated interpretive discussion about whether the Philistines were offering a theologically coherent acknowledgment of sin or simply employing sympathetic magic — the ancient Near Eastern principle that you send back in golden form what the god afflicted you with, thereby appeasing the deity. Dispensational and broadly evangelical readings sometimes treat this as genuine theological recognition on the Philistines' part. A careful reading of the text supports a more qualified verdict: the Philistines are operating within their own religio-magical framework, but the narrative does not endorse their theology — it merely records their pragmatic response. The text's own interpretive comment is the test of the cows: the Philistines construct the test specifically to determine whether the LORD is actually responsible. Their guilt offering is better read as a superstitious hedge than as genuine repentance. The text does not present them as worshippers; it presents them as men who rightly fear a god they do not know.

The death of the men of Beth-shemesh (v. 19)

This verse has generated significant textual and interpretive difficulty. The Hebrew text reads “seventy men” in most manuscripts, though some ancient manuscripts and LXX variants read “fifty thousand and seventy men” — a number so large as to be implausible for a village. The majority of careful scholars, Reformed included (Tsumura, Bergen, Gordon), adopt the reading of seventy as the more historically and textually defensible figure, understanding the “fifty thousand” as a later scribal error or a corruption in transmission. More theologically significant is the question of why they were judged. The text says they “looked into (*rā'āh bē*) the ark of the LORD.” This phrase carries the force of gazing with curiosity or inspecting — not accidental viewing. The Levitical regulations were clear (Numbers 4:5–20): even the Kohathites, whose designated task was to carry the ark, were forbidden to look at the holy things on pain of death. The men of Beth-shemesh were Levitical priests (v. 15) — they knew the regulations. Their sin was not ignorance but presumption. Wesleyan readings that soften this event by emphasizing divine mercy and human weakness miss the text's own point: the narrator records this event precisely to underscore that covenant membership does not suspend holiness requirements. Reformed exposition rightly refuses to apologize for this verse; it is load-bearing for the chapter's central claim.

The ark as mere symbol versus genuine divine presence

Liberal-critical readings treat the ark throughout 1 Samuel 4–6 as a magical object whose “power” the narrator narrates unreflectively, with the modern interpreter’s task being to demythologize. This is a category error. The narrator is not narrating magic — he is narrating sovereign divine action mediated through a covenantally significant object. The ark is not magic because it is not the ark that acts; it is the LORD who acts in connection with His covenantally established means of presence. The Reformed reading — that God sovereignly and freely employs His own ordained means without being bound or captured by them — accounts for both the real power displayed through the ark and the judgment on those who treat it as a thing to be controlled or inspected.

Verdict: The Reformed reading that best accounts for the whole chapter identifies both the Philistines’ pragmatic fear-response and the Israelites’ presumptuous familiarity as twin failures before the same holy God. The chapter is not primarily about the ark’s journey — it is about the LORD’s holiness, which neither enemy nations nor covenant people can safely domesticate.

Key Canonical Support

- **Leviticus 10:1–3** — Nadab and Abihu are struck dead for offering unauthorized fire; Moses’ explanation (“Among those who are near me I will be sanctified”) directly illuminates why proximity to God is more dangerous, not less, for those who know His regulations.
 - **Numbers 4:5–20** — The explicit Levitical regulations for handling the ark, forbidding even the Kohathites from viewing the holy things, establish the legal background against which Beth-shemesh’s sin must be read.
 - **2 Samuel 6:1–11** — The death of Uzzah when he touches the ark during David’s attempt to bring it to Jerusalem directly echoes 1 Samuel 6; the same holiness principle operates; the same shock registers; the same question about proximity to God is raised.
 - **Isaiah 6:1–8** — Isaiah’s vision of the enthroned LORD produces the same foundational question as 1 Samuel 6:20 (“Woe is me, for I am undone”) — the holiness of God is not an abstract attribute but an overwhelming personal reality that produces self-assessment and demand for cleansing.
 - **Hebrews 12:18–29** — The contrast between Sinai and Zion includes the warning “our God is a consuming fire,” establishing that New Covenant access to God through Christ does not eliminate divine holiness but grounds our approach to it in Christ’s blood rather than in our own ritual carefulness. The same holy God; a different and final mediator.
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Aim: To confront readers with the active, sovereign holiness of God — producing the reverent fear that is the beginning of right worship, and exposing both the presumption of religious familiarity and the futility of treating God as manageable.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
6:1	The ark has been in Philistine territory for seven months	Time marker; connects to the plagues of chapters 5–6
6:2–3	Philistine priests and diviners consulted; they recommend sending the ark back with a guilt offering	<i>'āšām</i> — guilt/reparation offering; within their own magical framework
6:4–5	Five golden tumors and five golden mice specified — one per Philistine lord; “Give glory to the God of Israel”	The number mirrors the five Philistine city-states; “give glory” is recognition of power, not worship
6:6	Rhetorical question: “Why harden your hearts as Egypt and Pharaoh hardened theirs?”	The Philistines invoke the Exodus narrative as a warning — they know this story
6:7–9	The test devised: new cart, two nursing cows never yoked; if they go straight to Beth-shemesh, it is the LORD’s hand; if not, it was chance	Theologically crafted test; the “chance” hedge reveals their uncertainty
6:10–12	The cows go straight to Beth-shemesh, lowing as they go, turning neither left nor right; the five lords follow	The cows’ behavior is supernaturally precise — they do not follow instinct (nursing calves) but go straight
6:13–14	The men of Beth-shemesh are reaping wheat; they rejoice at seeing the ark; the cart stops by a large stone; the wood of the cart and the cows become a burnt offering	The wheat harvest is Pentecost season; the large stone becomes an impromptu altar
6:15	The Levites take down the ark and the chest containing the golden objects; burnt offerings and sacrifices are	Levites perform their designated role; appropriate cultic response

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
6:16	made The five Philistine lords see this and return to Ekron	The lords are witnesses; their return closes the Philistine narrative
6:17–18	Summary: the golden tumors and golden mice correspond to the Philistine cities and villages	Editorial note cataloguing the guilt offering
6:19	The LORD strikes seventy men of Beth-shemesh dead for looking into the ark	The great reversal: Israel is struck just as Philistia was struck; no immunity for covenant membership
6:20–21	The survivors ask “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?” and send messengers to Kiriath-jearim to take the ark	The question is the theological climax; the request to remove the ark reflects fear, not worship

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	6:1–9	The Philistines Devise a Return: Pragmatic Fear Before the Holy God
2	6:10–16	The LORD Vindicates Himself: The Unerring Journey to Beth-shemesh
3	6:17–21	The Holy God Strikes Again: Israel Has No Exemption

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The ark’s return exposes the LORD’s untameable holiness — to Philistia and Israel alike.

Primary Claim: God’s holiness is not tribal property or religious heritage — it is an active, sovereign reality that demands reverence from every people who encounter His presence, enemy and covenant people alike. He will not be managed, tested, or handled casually, and this chapter presses that demand with lethal seriousness upon both Philistia and Beth-shemesh.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe what it means to be “close to God.” (*Mind/belief*) The men of Beth-shemesh were Levitical priests — Israel’s closest ritual proximity to the divine — and they died precisely because proximity without reverence is not advantage but increased danger. The common contemporary assumption that closeness to God produces comfort and casualness is directly contradicted by this passage. Closeness to the holy God produces heightened accountability, not relaxed informality. Those who know the most about God — who have heard the most sermons, sung the most worship songs, served the longest in ministry — are not therefore safer in their familiarity; they are more accountable for the reverence their knowledge demands.

2. Examine where you have made God manageable. (*Affections/worship*) The Philistines built a test. The men of Beth-shemesh looked inside. Both moves reflect the same instinct: the desire to reduce God to something examinable, explainable, and therefore controllable. Ask where you have done the same. Where have you domesticated God’s holiness into a theology you are comfortable with? Where have you arranged your religious life so that the genuinely disruptive, demanding, and searching character of God’s holiness is kept at a safe distance? Where does the fear of the LORD actually operate in your worship, or has it been replaced by a cosier familiarity that the text would call presumption?

3. Stop assuming covenant membership suspends holiness requirements. (*Mind/belief*) The deepest shock of verse 19 is not the number seventy but the identity of the seventy — Israelites, at the ark’s homecoming, apparently in a moment of celebration. The Israelites in Beth-shemesh did not behave as though they were dealing with the LORD of Sinai; they behaved as though they were dealing with their ark. The same error recurs across Israel’s history and across church history: the assumption that belonging to the covenant community creates a zone of divine tolerance that outsiders do not enjoy. The text refuses this. God’s holiness is not modified by Israel’s election; election makes the demand more precise, not less. Christian belonging does not lower the standard — it provides the only sufficient Mediator for meeting it.

4. Let the question of verse 20 do its work in you. (*Affections/worship*) “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?” is not a rhetorical flourish — it is the text’s intended destination. The survivors are not asking academically; they are asking because seventy men just died in front of them. Let the question land with its full weight: *Who is able to stand?* Not “who understands God correctly?” or “who attends worship faithfully?” but who can actually stand in the presence of this holiness. The gospel’s answer — that Christ has stood in our place, absorbed the holiness we cannot bear, and now presents us before the Father in His righteousness — becomes unspeakably precious only when the question has first landed with its full weight. You will not treasure the Mediator until you have genuinely confronted the holiness He mediates.

5. Bring genuine reverence back into corporate worship. (*Will/behavior*) The application of this passage is not merely private. If the assembled community of Beth-shemesh — gathered around the returned ark, apparently in a moment of worship — could fall into presumptuous casualness, so can any worshipping community. Examine your congregation’s worship practices not for stylistic correctness but for genuine reverence: Is the LORD treated as holy in the gathered assembly? Is there space for the weight of His presence to register, or has the service been so engineered for accessibility and comfort that the holiness of God has no room to operate? This does not prescribe a particular liturgical form — it prescribes a genuine posture. Come before Him with preparation. Come with self-examination. Come knowing that you are approaching the God who struck seventy men dead for looking at the wrong thing, and who has made a way for you to approach Him through the blood of His Son.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First Samuel 6 establishes a non-negotiable theological baseline: the holiness of God is an active, sovereign attribute that operates independently of human manipulation, national identity, or religious familiarity. The chapter teaches that God’s holiness is not reducible to purity regulations or cultic categories — it is the essential character of the divine being that demands appropriate reverence from every creature that encounters it. The Philistines’ pragmatic fear and the Israelites’ presumptuous familiarity are twin exposures of the same error: treating the holy God as something manageable by human category. The chapter also teaches that God’s covenantal commitment to Israel does not soften His holiness requirements toward Israel — if anything, the Levites of Beth-shemesh who knew the regulations and looked anyway are judged more severely than the Philistines who operated in ignorance. The theological claim is stark: God will be treated as holy, and He will vindicate His holiness when He is not.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This passage functions within Reformed theology as a concrete narrative demonstration of the *holiness of God* that underlies the entire Reformed account of salvation. The question of verse 20 — “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?” — is precisely the soteriological question that the gospel answers. Reformed theology’s insistence that no human being can approach God on the basis of their own righteousness, covenant membership, religious heritage, or moral effort is not a theoretical claim — it is a claim illustrated in lethal color by the men of Beth-shemesh. The gospel’s answer in Christ — that He has perfectly mediated between the holy God and sinful humanity, absorbing the judgment that holiness demands and presenting His people as righteous before the Father — is the only answer that this chapter’s closing question will accept. The passage also grounds the Reformed

understanding of worship: because God is genuinely holy, worship is not primarily a human expression but a divinely regulated approach to the divine presence. The deaths in this chapter are not Old Testament severity to be set aside in the New Covenant — they are the permanent backdrop against which the mercy of Christ-mediated access must be read. Hebrews 12:28–29 applies the same holy God to the New Covenant community: “let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

Main Takeaway

The LORD is holy — genuinely, actively, unmanageably holy — and this chapter will not let you treat His holiness as either a Philistine problem or an Old Testament relic. The men who died at Beth-shemesh were not pagans; they were covenant people who forgot what kind of God they were dealing with. The question they asked in the moment of their fear — “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?” — is your question too. The gospel’s entire weight rests on the fact that the answer is not you, not your church attendance, not your theological precision, but Christ alone, who has stood where you cannot and who now brings you near to the God who would otherwise consume you. Come near — but come with reverence, and never stop being astonished that you can come at all.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the deaths as an embarrassing difficulty rather than the text’s theological climax.** The tendency in contemporary preaching is to spend disproportionate time defending or contextualizing the deaths of the Beth-shemesh men — apologizing for the text’s severity. This inverts the passage’s intent. The deaths are not the problem to be explained; they are the chapter’s central theological data. The preacher who must defend God’s right to judge people for disobeying His own clear regulations has already lost control of the passage. Let the text make its own case.
- **Framing the Philistines as heroes or proto-believers.** The Philistines show impressive pragmatic wisdom in this chapter — they correctly identify the LORD’s hand, they construct a clever test, they provide a guilt offering. It is tempting to present this positively as “even pagans recognize the true God.” But the text does not endorse their theology; it merely records their fear-response. They return to Ekron and resume their lives. This is not conversion; it is the recognition that one has been dealing with a god more powerful than expected, managed with appropriate ritual, and now hopefully dispensed with. Do not over-read Philistine wisdom.
- **Missing the structural parallelism between Philistia’s judgment and Beth-shemesh’s judgment.** The chapter is built on a deliberate parallelism: the same

God who struck Philistia strikes Israel. The same holiness that operated in enemy territory operates in covenant territory. Preaching that focuses only on the ark's return without following the narrative through to verse 19 will miss the chapter's governing claim. The journey home is setup; the deaths at Beth-shemesh are the point.

- **Extracting the question of verse 20 from its context.** “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?” is sometimes cited as a free-floating statement of divine transcendence, or used as a liturgical opener, or even applied evangelistically without its narrative context. Preached in context, the question carries the weight of seventy dead bodies. Do not allow it to float free of that weight — the more appalling the situation that generates it, the more gospel-illuminating the question becomes.
- **Applying the passage only behaviorally: “be more reverent in worship.”** While genuine reverence is a legitimate application of this passage, reducing the sermon to a call for more decorous worship behavior is a failure of the Bullmore discipline. The passage's claim is not “worship more carefully” — it is “you are dealing with a God whose holiness you cannot manage, and the only way to stand before Him is through a Mediator.” Behavioral application (reverence in worship, preparation for communion, etc.) must be tethered to this gospel-grounding, not offered as a free-standing moral imperative.
- **Skipping the textual difficulty of “seventy” versus “fifty thousand and seventy.”** Preachers who ignore the textual variants at verse 19 will either pass over the number in silence or cite the inflated reading without comment. Neither is satisfactory. A brief, confident acknowledgment that the text's most defensible reading is seventy, and that the larger number reflects a later textual problem rather than historical data, equips hearers to engage the text honestly and prevents the passage from being dismissed on grounds of historical implausibility.